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Students who are encouraged to write about their own lives during school are more likely to understand the importance of education and school's relevance to their lives, suggests a recent study in the *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*. In addition, the students' critical thinking and writing skills often improve.

Four main findings were produced during the study. Firstly, students were more willing to write descriptive and analytical paragraphs when they had images to study and respond to. Secondly, students wanted respect and appreciated teachers who showed they see each student as an individual; this respect was built most often through one-on-one interaction. Thirdly, students were more willing to write if they were able to share their work with others, especially the younger members of the community. Finally, students found more success in writing when they had longer periods of time to work and time to collaborate with their peers.

Researchers Kristien Zenkov and James Harmon conducted the study, the Through Students' Eyes (TSE) Project, during which urban high school students were instructed to take pictures of different aspects of their lives and then produce written reflections on the images during one-on-one sessions with adult mentors. The researchers learned that by incorporating the students' lives into the lesson plans, the students would see the relevance of school in their daily lives.

Zenkov and Harmon say that the emphasis on testing in schools is a major problem because it prevents students from becoming interested in the writing process itself. Through their interactions with students, they realized that students see their

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school life as separate from their everyday life, rather than as intertwined. In the project they decided to “*ask* [students] why school matters, rather than tell them,” says Zenkov. “Then [students] might learn why it matters more to them.”

According to recent data from the Children’s Defense Fund, an organization that compiles and analyzes census data from various federal, nonprofit, and educational organizations, 6.5 percent of 16- to 19-year-olds in California are not enrolled in school and are not high school graduates. It also reports that the average freshman high school graduation rate is 69.9 percent. These numbers suggest that changing the way students view school and its importance in their lives may increase the number of youth who remain in high school and graduate.

Dr. Priscilla Myers, Director of the Master of Arts Program in Reading at Santa Clara University, agrees that the work done in TSE has further applications within the educational system. “We have got to make schools meaningful and relevant to kids,” she says. “So the minute you put a camera in their hands and you say I want to know what *you* think, and they go out, and they capture the essence of what’s important to themselves – now they have a real reason to write.” She also notes that once students have something to write, they will read, and other students will be interested in what they write and then read too. “That’s the foundation of literacy,” she says.

Previous research has been done on the impact of visual images on student learning. In a study published in 2003, researchers Anne Nielsen Hibbing and Joan L. Rankin-Erickson found that using images improved students’ reading experiences and understanding of the material. They also determined that if students were able to create

images in their minds as they read, then their understanding of the information increased. Similarly, students who produced images during TSE were able to make greater connections between their lives and school as well as improve their analytical thinking and writing skills.

During the study which was conducted with multiple groups over a three-year period, students were instructed to answer three questions with their images: what are the purposes of school; what helps you succeed in school; and what gets in the way of your school success. Students worked with adult volunteers to choose and reflect on their images, and then they went through an editing process which increased their writing progress. Students also shared their images and reflections with each other, creating another chance for feedback.

Zenkov is a professor at George Mason University, Fairfax, Virginia, and Harmon teaches at Euclid High School, Euclid, Ohio. Combined, they have over 30 years of teaching experience.

“As an English teacher, what I’ve gained is the understanding that that one-on-one time with kids talking about writing is *so* important,” says Harmon. “I’ve only been teaching English for three years, but I’m starting to adjust my classroom practices based on what I’ve learned in this project. I’m incorporating more one-on-one conferences; they have the most impact in student’s achievement in writing.”