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**Perhaps the decision of some students not to engage in learning mathematics in school is deliberate.**

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A perceived lack of engagement of many students in middle years mathematics classes provides a challenge for educators. In this article we report a project that investigated students' perceptions of the extent to which their own efforts influence their achievement at mathematics and their life opportunities. We conducted 2 hour interviews with over 50 students, as well as collecting other data. The results suggest that a student's orientation to learning mathematics is not predicted by their achievement. Even students who were confident, successful and persistent exhibited short-term goals. It seems that classroom culture may be an important determinant of under-participation in schooling. (Authors' abstract)

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