Teaching students to care about academic success requires more than deep knowledge of academic content and a clear understanding of effective pedagogical strategies—although both are essential. Truly effective teachers combine knowledge about content, pedagogy, and motivation to create learning environments that both allow and encourage students to thrive. It is also important for teachers to be aware of and attentive to their own waxing and waning motivation.

While research tells us much about how to create motivating learning environments for young adolescents (Daniels, 2011; Cushman, 2008), we (a teacher educator at a public university and a principal in an urban middle school) wondered what middle school teachers had to say about their own motivation. We issued an invitation to participate in a research study to teachers at five middle schools that served students with wide diversity in terms of language, ethnicity, and socio-economic status. Recognizing that most respondents would likely be motivated practitioners already, we felt it would be valuable to delve deeply into what they had to say about their own motivation. We issued an invitation to participate in a research study to teachers at five middle schools that served students with wide diversity in terms of language, ethnicity, and socio-economic status. Recognizing that most respondents would likely be motivated practitioners already, we felt it would be valuable to delve deeply into what they had to say about their practice, their students, and their teaching environment. Unsurprisingly, thirty-one of the thirty-two participants (we interviewed all teachers who responded to our invitation to participate) self-reported as being highly motivated, and our conversations were rich, varied, and informative.

We learned that much of what affects adolescents’ motivation to learn also influences teachers’ motivation to teach. The teachers in our study talked about the curricular, logistical, and relational factors at work that positively and negatively influence both teacher and student motivation. The focus of this article is on relational factors, those that are more immediately within a teacher’s control, because motivation researchers Ryan and Deci (2000) remind us that it is important to recognize what we can control and to let go of what we cannot.

Understanding the Whole Child

Academic learning does not exist in a vacuum. Adolescents’ emotions are frequently close to the surface, and pedagogical strategies that take this into account can be more effective. The middle school teachers that we talked to saw a connection between delivering rigorous instruction in their content areas and building strong relationships with their students, and their motivation was tied to how well they created class climates that fostered interactions, built relationships, and developed collaborative skills.

Ann, in her forty-third year, commented, “It’s amazing that every year I come back and think ‘This is going to be a great year.’ I’m always thinking, ‘What’s the newest stuff? What can I improve on?’ The kids give it back in such large chunks. That’s what keeps me going—the connectedness I have with my classes and the joy I get from watching them learn.”

Emily, in her twenty-fifth year, said, “I think motivated teachers care about the whole child; not just the academic side of it but also the emo-
tional side of it. I know for me that alters how I am on any given day.” She continued, “What makes you 100 percent effective is if you’re aware that the child is more than just this person who will be cranking out the work.”

Research explains that feeling connected to others increases intrinsic motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000), that the relationships among teachers and students matter as much as pedagogical expertise (Daniels & Arapostathis, 2005) and that student voices should be listened to (Cook-Sather, 2006). First-year teacher Emma described the intersection of all three when she said, “I guess a motivated teacher is someone who doesn’t get beaten down by the students they are working with or the other teachers that are on campus. They don’t really give an ear to all of the negative comments. I think motivated teachers, despite anything, work hard to help their students.”

The motivated middle school teachers to whom we talked recognized that academic achievement is paramount, but they also learned about their students, understood their nonacademic needs, and appreciated the uniqueness of this age group. The teachers who talked with the most passion were the same ones who appreciated young adolescents the most, and the enjoyment they gleaned from their students created the motivation to teach, which created a perpetuating cycle of positive engagement. Ann worked to “create something that is less a classroom and more a learning environment. Everyone makes mistakes, and I want the kids to know that we are all going to grow together because they learn as much from each other as they do from me. We get into critical thinking and understanding that it is important to listen to each other. We make a requirement that we are going to respect and listen to each other.”

Yesenia (with ten years of experience) identified compassion as a companion trait to respect. She said, “A motivated teacher shows compassion to each individual student. You get to know the student; you get to know what they like or what you can do to get them to do work. Sometimes it’s just talking to them to find out what’s going on at home.” Because Yesenia worked in a high poverty middle school, her interview was permeated with references to the students’ physical and emotional needs. She said she was highly motivated to help her students achieve academically but also understood the other factors standing in their way. For example, “Is there anything I can do to help? I can just tell by the way they dress. If they need something, I’ll go buy them a pair of socks or some shoes. Just making a bond, I think, really motivates kids.”

Emily, at a different high poverty school, echoed Yesenia’s remarks when she said, “You are just a moment in their time, but you could make it a positive moment or you could hurt them. Think about what you say and be careful about what you are doing.”

Although many of their comments do not specifically address teacher motivation, they indicate that motivated teachers truly care about their students and want what is best for them academically, socially, and emotionally. Perhaps it is the opportunity to, as Joran says, “engage with a group of kids every day in a way you would not be able to do anywhere else” or because “effectiveness means making connections with kids,” as Hypatia Alexander notes.

Ann said, “Knowing your subject matter is important, but I don’t think it’s nearly as important as the environment and the kids trusting me and feeling as though I’m going to do the best I can for them. And I require them to do the best they can for me. Some days they won’t, but I keep coming back to them. Every day is a new day.”

To truly understand the whole adolescent, motivated teachers often do the following:

- Greet students at the door to show that each one is seen “as a person, not just a grade.”

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*Voices from the Middle*, Volume 23 Number 1, September 2015
• Expect that all students can achieve. Some just need more time and/or scaffolding.
• Tell the students that every day is a new day. Regardless of how poorly they behaved during the last class period, each day is an opportunity for an attitude adjustment.

Class Climate
When the teachers acknowledged the inherent risks present in learning and worked to mitigate those risks, they felt that their students learned more, which contributed to their own motivation. George said, “You have to have a place where everyone is included. You have to have that plus less lecturing and more allowing them to make their own mistakes and learn from them. Kids need to feel safe raising their hand and getting the wrong answer because they know that’s part of the process.”

The teachers we talked to were not only motivated by the high achievers but also by the adolescents who persevered through challenge. Emily said, “What motivates me to keep going are the people that I’m in the room with. It’s rare that I get discouraged if kids don’t have something all of the time as long as they are trying.” Joran said, “I’m motivated when kids know that it’s hard or they know they don’t know it, but they’re willing to work to get it. That’s really motivating.” Emily also said it is not necessarily the students who struggle who can be “de-motivating” but instead, “The most discouraging thing about teaching is the teachers who give up on kids.”

Motivated teachers are interested in both their content and their students. Veronica explained, “My passion is in science, and I like sharing it with kids. I will have a bad day, and then some kid will just surprise me. When you are trying to reach a kid and he answers a question, it is amazing. This kid actually knows what I am talking about!”

Similarly, Hypatia Alexander said it was motivating when students come back to visit five or ten years later and talk about what they learned. She noted that being comfortable with delayed gratification was important for remaining motivated about teaching. “A lot of the art of teaching means you might not know in the moment that you did it right.”

The teachers were intentional about what they focused on and how they measured their success. Emma said that she was careful about what she chose to listen to during the course of a school day. “We can choose to focus on the bad things that happen each day or we can choose to focus on ‘Wow, that person wrote a paragraph that I actually understood instead of being unclear all the time.’ It has to do with who you surround yourself with and what you focus on.”

To create productive class climates, motivated teachers often do the following:
• Give immediate and specific feedback about behavior AND academics. This helps students understand what they did well so they know to repeat it while simultaneously naming undesirable behaviors so they know what to avoid.
• Teach students that successful people ask for help when they need it. Celebrate questions so students understand that asking for help or clarification is an indication of intelligence and will lead to success.

Collaboration with Colleagues
Collaboration with colleagues was another way in which teachers nurtured their motivation. Emily remembered “a new teacher who moved to my track and said, ‘Give me all your stuff.’ I already loved what I was doing, but when you are working with someone else who has the same passion and same philosophy . . . the things that we did were just unbelievable.”

Beyond the interpersonal needs of connection and relatedness, the teachers said that interacting with colleagues in professional ways increased their motivation. Lesley said, “When I go once a month to the San Diego Science group, that is what keeps my sanity. We get pounded with test scores, so going to groups like this is..."
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Motivating learning environments develop through daily attention to our interactions with students, collaboration with colleagues, and focus on a productive class climate... they remind us of the power of a steadfast commitment to building relationships with students and colleagues.

When it comes to motivation, life, and learning, relationships matter.

They send out articles, and we have emails going back and forth talking about ways we can improve how we teach our students.”

To build collaborative relationships with colleagues, motivated teachers often:

- Join and/or become more engaged with professional organizations.
- Encourage administrators to ask individuals or teams to share successes at faculty meetings.
- Create informal collaborations with colleagues to share ideas and try out new strategies.

Final Thoughts

Motivated middle school teachers recognize the myriad forces at work in the lives of young adolescents. The teachers who talked with the most passion about their craft were the same ones who appreciated young adolescents the most, and the enjoyment they gleaned from their students created more motivation to teach. None of the teachers we talked with was immune from the challenges that educators face, but all made the conscious choice to apply what they knew about content, pedagogy, and motivation to remain excited about teaching and learning. While we did not independently verify that their comments were true, the passion with which they spoke about their craft suggested deep awareness of their students’ strengths, needs, and desires.

Motivating learning environments develop through daily attention to our interactions with students, collaboration with colleagues, and focus on a productive class climate. While the ideas that teachers suggested in our conversations are not necessarily buzzworthy, they remind us of the power of a steadfast commitment to building relationships with students and colleagues.

When it comes to motivation, life, and learning, relationships matter.

References

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English Journal Awards

Paul and Kate Farmer Award: The Paul and Kate Farmer English Journal Writing Award honors current, on leave, or former secondary teachers who authored the best articles published in English Journal during the previous school year (between September and July). This year’s recipients are Chris Gilbert, for “A Call for Subterfuge: Shielding the ELA Classroom from the Restrictive Sway of the Common Core” (November 2014), and Jennifer Rossuck, for “My Year of Sports” (September 2014). Honorable mentions go to Michael Hoffman, for “Peer Response, Remixed: Authentic Peer Response through Audio Technology” (March 2015), and Alyssa Niccolini, for “Precocious Knowledge: Using Banned Books to Engage in a Youth Lens” (January 2015). Chris Gilbert also won the Farmer Award in 2013.

Edwin M. Hopkins Award: Every other year, the Edwin M. Hopkins Award recognizes outstanding English Journal articles written by authors who fall outside Farmer Award eligibility guidelines. Although usually announced during even years, 2014 Hopkins Award awardees will be honored in 2015. This year’s recipient is Heather E. Bruce, for “Subversive Acts of Revision: Writing and Justice” (July 2013). Honorable mentions go to April Brannon, for “Love That Poem! Using Imitation to Teach Poetry” (November 2012) and Gregory Shafer, for “Political Language, Democracy, and the Language Arts Classroom” (November 2013).

2015 Farmer and 2014 Hopkins Award recipients will be recognized at the NCTE Annual Convention during the Secondary Section Luncheon on Saturday, November 21, 2015.