Strategies for Motivating Middle School Students

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Strategies for Motivating Middle School Students

Abstract
The study analyzed the strategies that were effective for motivating and engaging adolescent aged students. The study was conducted in a middle school located in a suburban school district in upstate New York. I interviewed twenty general and special education teachers, three school counselors, and one school social worker. This study illustrates that there is an array of strategies that educators and other school professionals can implement to motivate and engage adolescent learners in their classrooms. This study found that goal setting, growth mindset, student belonging and creating a positive classroom environment are among some strategies considered to be effective for motivating middle school students. Therefore, the strategies discussed in this study can be applied to middle school classrooms and can be used by teachers, counselors, and other professionals who work in middle school settings to encourage and foster an environment that motivates adolescent aged learners.

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Abstract

The study analyzed the strategies that were effective for motivating and engaging adolescent aged students. The study was conducted in a middle school located in a suburban school district in upstate New York. I interviewed twenty general and special education teachers, three school counselors, and one school social worker. This study illustrates that there is an array of strategies that educators and other school professionals can implement to motivate and engage adolescent learners in their classrooms. This study found that goal setting, growth mindset, student belonging and creating a positive classroom environment are among some strategies considered to be effective for motivating middle school students. Therefore, the strategies discussed in this study can be applied to middle school classrooms and can be used by teachers, counselors, and other professionals who work in middle school settings to encourage and foster an environment that motivates adolescent aged learners.
Introduction

At times, teachers can find it challenging to motivate middle school aged students. Adolescent learners often refer to the material being taught as ‘boring’ or ask the question: ‘why do we need to learn this?’ Teachers can find it hard to engage middle school students with the lessons they are teaching. Additionally, many teachers may find it challenging to motivate students to complete their classwork, homework, and other assignments as well. The purposeful implementation of motivational strategies can help students become engaged in their learning. Incorporating growth mindset values in the classroom is also a way to motivate students and prevent adolescents from developing a fixed way of thinking about their learning (Martin, 2015; You, Dang, & Lim, 2016). It is important that teachers implement effective motivational strategies in order to support their students (Mucherah & Yoder, 2008; Kelley & Decker, 2009).

In the course of this study, I evaluate the effectiveness of a variety of motivational strategies that can be implemented in many content areas. These strategies were evaluated by teachers and counselors of middle school students through a survey given in a junior high school located in upstate New York. Teachers and counselors assessed which strategies cause students to feel welcomed, engaged, and motivated to learn. Teachers were asked to take the survey, which was anonymous, and to honestly state if they thought the strategies presented to them were effective motivators for middle school students. The results of the survey were used to rate the overall effectiveness of each motivational strategy or technique.

I received permission from the administrator of the school as well as the teachers taking the survey. My role in this study was to create and administer the survey to
teachers and counselors and then evaluate their responses and use the data to assess which motivational strategies and techniques were considered most effective for middle school learners.

The results of this study illustrate that there are a myriad of strategies that are considered to be effective for motivating middle school students. The data gained from this survey allowed me to assess which strategies were considered to be effective for motivating adolescents through the responses provided. Strategies that include rewards, having a growth mindset, having students create goals for their assignments and overall learning, as well as strategies that involve communication and providing students and parents with feedback, are just some of the strategies considered to be effective for increasing motivation amongst adolescent aged learners.

**Researcher Stance**

My role in this study was a surveyor and analyzer. I administered the survey to twenty-four teachers and counselors who educate students in the middle school setting. After receiving all of the anonymous survey responses, I analyzed the data and evaluated the effectiveness of each motivational strategy presented.

I am currently certified in Secondary English Education, grades 7-12. I am presently enrolled in a program working towards earning a Master’s of Science in Special Education. While I am working towards this certification, I am also employed as an English teacher at the junior high school where I am conducting my study.

**Review of the Literature**

**The Role of Transitions in the Classroom**
Often, during classroom instructional time, or transition time between classes, students’ engagement is lost. Stevenson (2015) writes, “One common characteristic of students with academic and behavior problems is failure to engage in requested tasks promptly” (p. 206). Therefore, it is pertinent that teachers make it a personal goal to ensure that students are not wasting time during transitions, particularly since the top detractor from non-academic behaviors is transition time from one classroom activity to another (Stevenson, 2015). Transition time can detract from engagement and can distract students from the general classroom routines and rituals (Stevenson, 2015). Researchers have found that teachers are able to lessen the amount of transition time that students take by demonstrating what expected behaviors look like in the classroom and hallway setting (You et al., 2016). Furthermore, when teachers are well prepared and feel confident with what they are teaching, students’ confidence in their own abilities will increase and thus students will begin setting higher goals for their own self-achievement in those classes (You et al., 2016). Likewise, if a teacher wants his students to demonstrate consistent behaviors he should demonstrate consistency as well. Any consistency that can be applied to a student’s day can lead to student success (You et al., 2016).

**Intervention Strategies to Increase Motivation and Engagement During Transitions**

 Teachers need to implement transition strategies that work for their own unique classroom population (Stevenson, 2015). Presently, work is being done to examine the use of interventions to reduce delays in classroom transitions, many of which require little training and minimal disruption to the routines and rituals of the classroom (Stevenson, 2015). One way that teachers can engage their students in their classroom is starting with a greeting at the door as students enter the classroom. Davis and Forbes
(2016) explain: “Acknowledging each student every day, whether a simple ‘hi’ to ‘what are you going to write about?’ are part of the micro-acts that foster connections to a classroom culture, creating an interconnected space in which collective respect is motivating”. Similarly, Stevenson (2015) explains that teacher greetings are essential and by providing a welcoming phrase to students upon their arrival to the classroom, teachers are signaling to the students that it is time to learn in an environment where they are welcome and need to follow routines.

Teachers also need to demonstrate positive behaviors and have mindsets that encourage and welcome students (You et al., 2016). Researchers found that “teachers’ behaviors have been shown not only to influence students’ academic achievement, but also their academic motivation” (You et al., 2016, p. 225). Hence, when students recognize that their teacher is trying to motivate and engage them, they will also be more motivated to learn. The relationship between teacher and student is one of the key elements for student success within a classroom. It is clear that teachers should work on including methods and strategies that encourage a positive rapport between student and teacher (You et al., 2016).

**Student Belonging in the Classroom**

It is essential for middle school teachers to foster environments where all students feel that they belong (Wall & Miller, 2015). Teachers need to place a “…focus on belonging…and thereby [offer] a foundation upon which student motivation could flourish” (Wall & Miller, 2015, p. 71). When students feel that they belong and are accepted by their teacher, they will be more motivated to do well on assignments and other classwork because they want to prove themselves and live up to their teachers’
expectations. Students need to feel that they are accepted and respected by their teachers. On the contrary, if pupils do not feel like they belong or are welcome in the class, they will not be motivated to do well or to participate in the classroom environment (Wall & Miller, 2015).

Wall and Miller (2015) conducted a study that shows that when middle school teachers emphasized belonging and focused especially on students’ academic belonging, they were able to create a learning environment that was both challenging and relevant. It is fundamental for middle school teachers to create welcoming, motivating classroom environments that encourage all of their students to learn and feel accepted. When students are in a safe learning space where they are able to make mistakes and grow, it enables them to learn and be motivated (Wall & Miller, 2015). Clearly, teachers need to connect with others and therefore have a classroom culture that encourages mutual respect and collaboration with both teachers and students (Davis & Forbes, 2016).

**Goal Setting and Self-Efficacy**

Middle school students thrive on goals; therefore, it is imperative for them to establish a manageable goal and then work towards achieving it (Stevenson, 2015). This goal setting process engages and motivates learners. Stevenson (2015) writes:

Planning and goal setting have been used across a variety of academic and behavior interventions. Planning and goal setting have also been shown to significantly increase students’ ability to monitor their own progress, set appropriate goals, and engage in cycles of self-regulated learning. (p.208)

Therefore, it is necessary for teachers to implement lessons on goal setting as an intervention strategy in order to engage and motivate their adolescent students. By having
students work towards a goal, they automatically become more engaged and motivated. In contrast, while teachers can create goals for students, it can be more beneficial for students to create their own goals. Researchers have found that “participation in goal setting promotes self-efficacy, enhances motivation, and develops skills that enhance self-regulation…students who set their own goals demonstrated greater self-regulated learning and confidence in goal attainment than students with goals assigned” (Stevenson, 2015, p. 208). Thus, Stevenson (2015) shows the essentialness of using goals to help with increasing student motivation. Additionally, it is important for teachers to have a high sense of self-efficacy because they are able to be more creative in their work and develop more meaningful experiences for students in their classrooms. When students see their teacher being positive and enthusiastic about the content, some students will model that behavior and thus be motivated to learn and feel included in the classroom content (Thoonen, Sleegers, Peetsma, & Ort, 2011).

Students who are self-effacing are more motivated and engaged because they are actively involved in their learning (Kelley & Decker, 2009). Researchers have found that “being efficacious is a significant predictor of academic achievement, because efficacious students are more metacognitive, which in turn leads for a better performance” (Kelley & Decker, 2009, p. 468). In order to increase self-efficacy, teachers can scaffold instruction and help students reach their potentials, which consequently enables students to experience success (Wall & Miller, 2015). Kelley and Decker (2009) as well as Wall and Miller (2015) exemplify the importance of teachers helping students build their self-efficacy, which in turn increases student motivation.
Teachers should utilize a variety of motivational techniques that students can apply to their lives outside of school (Mucherah & Yoder, 2008; Kelley & Decker, 2009). Research has shown that “…students who were highly motivated were more persistent in their school work and chose challenging tasks compared to their counterparts who were less motivated…motivation to read was positively correlated with reading achievement and overall academic achievement” (Mucherah & Yoder, 2008, p. 215). Students who are not self-motivated and do not demonstrate efficacy are not truly engaged in the learning and often face failure and struggle (Mucherah & Yoder, 2008). On the other hand, students who do demonstrate self-efficacy are more motivated to learn (Kelley & Decker, 2009). Kelley and Decker (2009) further note that “highly efficacious students are more likely to engage in challenging activities and to be more successful when faced with difficulty” (p. 468). In order to meet the needs of all their students, both at higher and lower levels, teachers should use differentiation within their lessons (Kelley and Decker, 2009). In comparison to Kelly and Decker (2009), Hodges and McTigue (2014) also agree that “differentiation is not only critical for meeting each student’s academic needs but also builds self-efficacy, increasing motivation and attitude toward schooling” (p. 156). This allows for individualized instruction that motivates students. When students are motivated and engaged, they acknowledge they are responsible for their own learning (Kelley & Decker, 2009).

**Literacy Centers as a tool for promoting Self-Efficacy and Self-Regulation**

Literacy centers are a framework of brief, independently orientated activities that are small group led and focused on teaching specific standards (Hodges & McTigue, 2014). For middle school teachers, literacy centers directly align with adolescent literacy
because they are dynamic and encourage collaboration among peers (Hodges & McTigue, 2014). Using literacy centers to teach self-regulation and efficacy can be a useful strategy for teachers. Additionally, according to Hodges and McTigue (2014), self-regulated learning skills are developing and becoming essential to new literacies, which demand greater facility with such skills unlike traditional literacies. Self-regulated learning is conceptualized as a goal-directed process where individuals utilize and cultivate their use of specific methods or strategies to accomplish their own unique personal goals (Cleary & Kitsantas, 2017).

As articulated by Cleary and Kitsantas (2017), “self-regulated learners typically possess a strong repertoire of cognitive and regulatory strategies, including help seeking, elaboration, environmental structuring, and planning” (p. 92). Hodges and McTigue (2014) as well as Cleary and Kitsantas (2017) agree that literacy centers allow autonomy for students, letting them monitor their own individual pacing and success while also working collaboratively with their peers. Task interest has also been shown as an important predictor of achievement with adolescents as well as the importance of making learning meaningful for students (Clearly & Kitsantas, 2017). Literacy centers provide teachers with the opportunity to create meaningful lessons for students; therefore, encouraging self-regulation and self-efficacy (Hodges & McTigue, 2014).

The Benefits of Extrinsic and Intrinsic Motivation in the Classroom

Extrinsic motivation implies something is being done that includes a view of an outcome that is as distinct from the action itself, such as getting a reward for performing the task (Peetsma & Van der Veen, 2015). When giving students optional assignments it becomes necessary for teachers to provide incentives and this has been illustrated in the
study conducted by Mucherah and Yoder (2008). The researchers found that “schools provide external rewards to students who participate…Rewards range from extra credit points, certificates of recognition, breakfast with the principal, and coupons to restaurants” (Mucherah & Yoder, 2008, p. 216). These external regulators mean that behavior is controlled by the factors that are clearly outside of the individual (Peetsma & Van der Veen, 2015). Hence, extrinsic rewards can be very motivating for students but the study also found that extrinsic motivators can become problematic when students begin to expect a reward anytime they do something that is challenging (Mucherah & Yoder, 2008).

Juxtaposed to extrinsic motivation is intrinsic motivation, which signifies that something is being done due to inherent interest in the action or performance of the task being completed (Peetsma & Van der Veen, 2015). Giving students intrinsic motivators such as verbal praise or feedback can be a very effective way to intrinsically motivate students (You et al., 2016). These interjected regulators mean that students’ behavior is motivated by an internal pressure, not an outside source and students identify the value of the goal they have personally set and recognize the importance of taking the necessary steps to reach the goal (Peetsma & Van der Veen, 2015). You et al. (2016) write, “students with high intrinsic motivation tend to prefer difficult tasks to easier ones and tend to persist in solving the tasks they chose” (p. 224). Therefore, students who are intrinsically motivated want to be challenged by the material being taught. When students have intrinsic motivators they are naturally inspired to learn and automatically want to complete tasks and do well.
Teachers can also use feedback to establish intrinsic motivation within their students (Wall & Miller, 2015). Emphasis of feedback should be on “...students’ learning for the sake of learning, and increasing their expectancy for student success” (Wall & Miller, 2015, p. 71). This finding correlates to the works of You et al. (2016) with their illustration of how the teacher’s motivational behavior and mindset plays a significant role in the lives of their students; when a teacher has a positive mindset and intrinsic motivation, his students will observe those behaviors and thus be more motivated to learn as well.

**Using Social and Emotional Learning Programs to Increase Motivation and Engagement**

Social and Emotional Learning Programs (SEL) is a method that helps students develop the skills they need for life, skills such as social behaviors, appropriate problem solving skills and how to manage their emotions (McBride, Chung, & Robertson, 2016). McBride et al. (2016) write, “In schools, SEL interventions have been used to reduce a variety of negative behaviors and increase positive development for youth” (p. 372). These programs include specific and targeted aspects of learning within the curriculum's content that encourages and fosters the development of positive social, emotional, and behavioral strategies which provide struggling students with strategies needed to appropriately interact beyond the structured walls of a school environment (McBride et al., 2016). Thus, SEL programs are teaching students skills they will need for life. Social and Emotional Learning programs correspond to the research from Orthner, Jones-Sanpei, Akos and Rose (2013) as they found it important for teachers to make their material relevant “…so students can establish a link between the content they are learning
and either their environment or their expectations for their future” (p. 27). Thus, it is important for students to see connections between the materials they are learning now and how that learning will impact their future. McBride et al. (2016) illustrates that teachers can demonstrate how a strategy students are learning can apply to students’ future academic or work careers, therefore “…students who engaged in the program experienced preventive effects on population-level rates of aggression, social competence, and school engagement… there is evidence of indirect effects on the reduction of anxiety and depression or emotional distress” (McBride et al., 2016, p. 372).

Orthner et al. (2013) and McBride et al. (2016) both agree that programs like SEL can help reduce concerns with adolescents who struggle with anxiety and depression while also giving students the strategies they need to be successful in real life.

**Making Learning Meaningful and Interesting for Students**

It is clear that for adolescents, in order to feel that the work they are doing is meaningful, they must believe that it is important and beneficial to themselves as individuals (Kelley & Decker, 2009). Kelley and Decker (2009) explain that students must perceive that the tasks they are doing are important and “children who feel that they have control over achievement outcomes do better in school and persist in the face of difficulty…if students are to remain engaged in a task, they must perceive it to be important” (p. 469). Thus, teachers need to make connections between what they are teaching and future careers and life choices students will experience. When students are given a choice over their learning, they feel that they have control over the output of their work and that their work can reflect their personalities, leading to students being more motivated when completing projects and assignments (Darrington & Dousay, 2015).
Likewise, Orthner et al. (2013) state that by incorporating items such as “…additional career examples in core classes” (p. 35) teachers can positively increase student engagement, especially at the adolescent level when students are thinking about high school and future career choices (Orthner et al., 2013). Relevance with learning and multimodal works is essential when creating classroom experiences that are authentic and meaningful to students and these types of activities have a huge motivational impact on students’ level of learning (Darrington & Dousay, 2015). Corresponding to the work of Orthner et al. (2013) and Kelley and Decker (2009), Wall and Miller (2015) demonstrate that in order for students to be motivated and engaged it is essential that teachers of adolescents include:

- elements of a developmentally responsive middle school: curriculum that is meaningful to students; instruction that responds to the needs, interests, and learning styles of diverse students; a safe, caring, and supportive environment; and structures that support meaningful relationships and learning. (p. 62)

Therefore, it is necessary to create learning environments for students that are supportive and encourage student motivation and engagement.

**Impact of Formative Assessment on Student Motivation**

Formative assessment, unlike summative assessment, is expected to improve students’ motivation and achievement since; “Formative assessment emphasizes the learning process and closing the gap between students’ current situation and the desired goal” (Yin, Shavelson, Ayala, Ruiz-Primo, Brandon, & Furtak, 2008, p. 339). Therefore, students are encouraged to process the information as well as increase their levels of confidence, as they begin to realize the importance of incremental intelligence.
Additionally, Yin et al. (2008) state that “formative assessment is expected to encourage the motivational beliefs hypothesized to promote conceptual change, such as task goal orientation, incremental intelligence beliefs, self-efficacy and interest” (p. 340). When students are goal orientated and have data from formative assessments to depict how they are progressing with their goals, it facilitates concentration as well as orients the students towards mastery of the content (Thoonen et al., 2011). When teachers combine effective teaching with effective formative assessment implementation, either formally or informally, students’ motivation and achievement increases as they are getting clear feedback about their progress. Formative assessments also provide educators with the opportunity to quickly gauge students’ level of mastery and understanding with the content being taught and allows them to quickly adapt and modify their teaching as needed (Yin et al., 2008). Therefore, formative assessments are an essential way for teachers to foster motivation and goal setting in their classrooms.

**Emphasis on Progress, Not Perfection in the Growth Mindset Classroom**

It is important for teachers to place an emphasis on individual student progress and growth so students are not competing with their peers and instead focusing on individual growth and achievement (Martin, 2015). Martin (2015) writes, “…although many students may not outperform peers, they can outperform their previous efforts; similarly, although many students may demonstrate acceptable comparative achievement, there is often room for further individual growth” (p. 133). Therefore, it is essential for teachers to focus on student’s individual progress and not compare them to their peers.

Similar to the work of Stevenson (2015), Martin (2015) explains that if students create individual goals for themselves, they will become motivated and encouraged when
they are able to achieve past their previous levels of achievement and therefore these growth goals may demonstrate a master orientation since they are self-referenced and self-improvement based. Hence, applying growth goals to their own learning allows students to demonstrate their own individual progress and be in competition with themselves and not their peers. Martin (2015) states that “individuals with an incremental view see academic and non-academic outcomes as something that can be addressed through cognitive, emotional, and/or behavioral modification” (p. 133). Therefore, it is essential to create growth goals with students as well as develop a classroom that focuses on growth mindset strategies to encourage students’ motivation and engagement.

**Methodology**

**Context**

The study took place in a middle school located in a suburban school district in New York State. I currently work in this district, and I had the opportunity to administer my survey to colleagues. My research involved middle school strategies for motivating adolescent students. The survey given to my colleagues assessed the effectiveness of the strategies as well as the number of participants who use and apply the strategies with their middle school students in their classrooms on a regular basis.

**Participants**

All of the participants involved in my research were professionals who are certified to work with adolescent students. All of the participants work with middle school level students on a daily basis. My participants included fourteen general education teachers, six special education teachers, three counselors, and one school social worker.
Method

The purpose of this study was to determine which motivational strategies worked best with middle school students. The responses to the “yes” or “no” questions on the survey determined which strategies could be assessed as being the most effective and frequently used strategies for motivating middle school students. The data from the surveys was gathered during the second semester.

Procedures

When conducting my study, I first received permission from the participants by providing them with a letter explaining what my research entails and why I was administering the survey. Faculty members who wanted to participate signed a consent form. Next, I distributed a manila folder labeled “Motivational Strategies Survey”. Inside the folder was the survey. Each participant received this folder. Participants were given two weeks to complete the survey and then anonymously placed it into my school mailbox. Nothing was labeled with the participant’s name, as the survey was completely anonymous.

Once I received all the surveys, I analyzed the responses and observed similarities and differences within the responses provided. I analyzed which strategies were considered most effective as well as assessed participants’ responses to the short answer questions where they stated additional strategies not specifically stated in the “yes” or “no” question section. While analyzing the survey data, I made lists of the responses provided and compiled the data into a spreadsheet and charts, using Microsoft Excel.

Informed Consent and Protecting the Rights of the Participants
In order to receive consent, all of my participants signed a consent form. To protect the rights of the participants, no identifying information will be made public. All of the participants’ responses were anonymous and placed in my mailbox by the participants once they had completed the survey responses. All information will be kept in a locked, secure location for three years and will then be destroyed.

Data Collection

I collected data by surveying general and special education teachers, school counselors and a school social worker. The data included ten “yes” or “no” questions as well as two short response questions where participants were asked to write about additional strategies they used. I used my own self-constructed survey and analyzed the data once all of the surveys had been submitted.

Data Analysis

I read through all of the responses to the survey questions and recorded how many participants responded “yes” or “no” to each of the ten survey questions. I then organized the data I recorded into charts and spreadsheets on Microsoft Excel. I recorded notes based upon the written response questions and made notes on what strategies the participants said they found to be effective for motivating middle school students in their classrooms. I also made tally marks next to any strategies that were repeated throughout the participants’ responses. Based upon the responses from the survey questions and the data I analyzed, I looked for trends and similarities amongst the responses to assess which strategies could be deemed most effective for motivating middle school students.

Findings and Discussion

Findings
Study participants were asked if they feel greeting students at the classroom door was an effective strategy for making adolescent students feel welcomed. Twenty-four out of twenty-four teachers agreed that this strategy was effective. Furthermore, four of the participants added that asking students something more personal, such as how their athletic game went, and wishing them a good rest of the day as they left their classroom, were also effective ways to make students feel welcomed in their classrooms.

Twenty-four out of twenty-four participants responded with ‘yes’ when asked if a teacher’s mindset and attitude impacts the overall classroom mood. Participants also noted that encouraging a growth mindset and fostering this mindset through purposeful activities also beneficially supports a classroom mood that encourages students to take further academic risks and feel as though they are a part of a classroom community. Participants shared that they felt a teacher’s mindset and fostering of independence and positive peer relationships made for a positive classroom climate and culture. Twenty-four out of twenty-four participants also responded with ‘yes’ when asked if they feel their attitude and mindset have an impact on students’ motivation. Participants agreed that how they present themselves does have an impact on how motivated their adolescent students will be and how much effort they will put into classroom assignments and activities.

All participants responded with ‘yes’ when asked the question: Do you feel that having a positive attitude and mindset have a positive impact on student belonging in the classroom? Participants noted in the short response section of the survey that when adolescents feel accepted by their peers and teachers, it increases student engagement, motivation, and academic success. Therefore, twenty-four out of twenty-four participants
also responded with ‘yes’ when asked if they focus on creating a welcoming classroom environment throughout the course of the school year. Seven out of twenty-four participants made a note about how they made their classroom environment more welcoming through the use of brightly colored décor and decorations. These include posting or displaying student work samples, pictures of students, and class mission statements with student signatures. Hence, the survey shows that creating a welcoming classroom environment is a highly effective strategy for motivating adolescent aged learners.

Another strategy that proved to be extremely effective for student motivation was goal setting. When asked if they give students the opportunity to set their own goals, all twenty-four of the participants responded with ‘yes’. Additionally, with the next survey question: “Do you feel goal setting has a positive impact on student motivation?” all participants answered ‘yes’. Participants agreed that middle school students were further motivated when they set a goal for themselves and evaluated what steps they needed to take in order to complete the goal. Several participants noted that they spend time teaching students how to use the S.M.A.R.T. goal setting strategy, as well as assisted students in analyzing how they would accomplish the goal they had set. Lastly, when it came to the final goal setting strategy question that was included in the survey, twenty-three out of twenty-four participants agreed that student-set goals are more motivating than teacher-set goals when it comes to adolescent learners.

Twenty-two out of twenty-four participants agreed that literacy centers promote self-efficacy amongst middle school students, with one participant responding with ‘no’ and one participant not providing a ‘yes’ or ‘no’ response to the survey question. In
addition to the literacy center strategy, when asked if they felt literacy centers encouraged more student motivation, twenty-two participants responded ‘yes’ whereas one participant responded ‘no’ and one participant did not answer the question. Three participants also noted that students were more motivated when given choices with their learning. Five participants in the survey noted that when given choices, students were more engaged in their work. Moreover, literacy centers offer the opportunity for teachers to provide students with a choice in a structured, beneficial way.

Discussion

Based upon the surveys that were administered, greeting students at the door seems to be an effective strategy that makes students feel welcomed. Participants noted that having a brief, personal conversation with students about how their day is going leads to students feeling more accepted and welcomed into their classrooms. A common theme throughout the participants’ responses and comments included methods and techniques for creating a welcoming classroom space through the use of seating arrangements, décor, and routines. The survey results from this strategy relates to Davis and Forbes (2016) as well as Stevenson (2015), who articulated that greeting students at the door is an essential piece of classroom culture and climate.

A common theme throughout the study was the role of teachers’ mindsets and attitudes. Teachers need to have a positive attitude and mindset and model motivated behaviors for students within their classrooms. Participants also agreed that a teacher’s positive mindset and attitude positively impacts students. Wall and Miller (2015) emphasize the importance of student belonging in the classroom and that teachers need to create a classroom environment that is both challenging and relevant. Likewise, teachers
having a positive mindset relates closely to You et al. (2016) who conveys the impact that a teacher’s mindset can have on his students.

Additionally, participants stated that they feel goal setting has a positive impact on student motivation and the majority of participants believed that students were more motivated when given the opportunity to create their own goals. The survey results in this portion of the study relates closely to Stevenson (2015), Thoonen, Sleegers, Peetsma and Ort (2011), as well as Kelley and Decker (2009) who emphasize that by having students work towards a goal, they are automatically more engaged and motivated.

Lastly, the majority of participants saw a correlation between literacy centers and their ability to promote self-efficacy and student motivation. The participants stated that students thrived when they were given choices with their learning experiences. Also, participants noted that literacy centers provide the opportunity for teachers to differentiate materials to meet the needs of all learners within their classroom setting. This leads to a greater sense of belonging. Hodges and McTigue (2014) agree that differentiation is critical for meeting each student’s academic needs as well as increasing their self-efficacy. The results of this study also relate to the work of Cleary and Kitsantas (2017) who agree that literacy centers are essential for creating self-regulated learners.

**Conclusion**

The study focused on strategies teachers could implement to increase motivation and engagement for middle school aged students. One strategy was using transition times as effectively as possible. As evidenced by Stevenson (2015), You et al. (2016), and Davis and Forbes (2016), it is pertinent for teachers to make transitions effective. Additionally, students need to feel a sense of belonging and acceptance within their
classroom environments. This was demonstrated by Wall and Miller (2015) who stated that when students feel that they belong and are accepted by their teacher, they will be motivated to do well on assignments and other classwork, since they want to prove themselves and live up to their teachers’ expectations. The work of Stevenson (2015), Thoonen et al. (2011), Kelley and Decker (2009), Mucherah and Yoder (2008), and Hodges and McTigue (2014), also depict that the strategy of student centered, manageable goals effectively engages and motivates adolescent students as they value having something to work for. Cleary and Kitsantas (2017) as well as Hodges and McTigue (2014) show that the use of literacy centers promote self-efficacy engagement and motivation.

Intrinsic and extrinsic motivation are also proven to be effective in the research of Peetsma and Van der Veen (2015), Mucherah and Yoder (2008), You et al. (2016), and Wall and Miller (2015). It is illustrated that the teacher’s positive mindset and intrinsic and extrinsic motivation causes his students to observe his behaviors and thus be further motivated to learn as well. According to McBride et al. (2016) as well as Orthner et al. (2013), Social and Emotional Learning programs decrease a variety of negative behaviors and provide students with the strategies they need to be successful in life. Lastly, Kelley and Decker (2009), Darrington and Dousay (2015), Yin et al. (2008), Stevenson (2015), and Martin (2015) state the importance of making learning meaningful for all students through the purposeful implementation of formative assessment and having a growth mindset to provide middle school students with the tools they need to track and monitor their growth and progress. This causes students to become engaged and motivated about their own learning as individuals.
The findings of this study impact general education teachers and special education professionals. It is evident from this study that teachers need to incorporate a variety of motivation and engagement strategies into their classroom environments and lesson plans. Teachers need to be open to trying many different motivational strategies so they can decide which strategies work best for their students. Educators should also consider attending professional development workshops and other seminars to learn about additional strategies they can implement to increase engagement and motivation with their students. By being aware of the motivational and engagement strategies, teachers can create classroom environments and lessons that foster a sense of achievement, belonging, and growth.

This study contains limitations. One of the limitations was time. Since the study had to be completed within a certain amount of time, I did not have a larger participation pool, and the pool only included one middle school. In the future, I would interview other teachers from different districts in order to collect and analyze further data. Also, this study did not ask questions regarding the effectiveness of strategies in restrictive settings. In the future, I would collect this data so I would be able to measure which strategies are most effective in general education settings, co-taught settings, resource rooms, and self-contained classrooms.

Based on the findings of my study, I also have more questions. This study opens the door for further investigations regarding motivational and engagement strategies. For example: Which of these strategies is most effective for special education settings? Which of these strategies is most motivating and engaging for reluctant learners? Which
strategies work best in suburban school districts versus rural and/or city ones? Therefore, more studies need to be constructed to address such questions in the field.
References


Appendix

Survey Questions:

Please answer the following questions. Circle your response.

1. Do you think greeting students at the door causes them to feel welcomed in your classroom?
   
   Yes  No

2. Do you feel that a teacher’s mindset and attitude impacts the classroom mood?
   
   Yes  No

3. Do you feel your attitude and mindset have an impact on student’s motivation?
   
   Yes  No

4. Do you feel that having a positive attitude and mindset have a positive impact on student belonging in the classroom?
   
   Yes  No

5. Do you focus on creating a motivating and welcoming classroom environment throughout the course of the school year?
   
   Yes  No

6. Do you give students the opportunity to set their own goals?
   
   Yes  No

7. Do you feel goal setting has a positive impact on student motivation?
   
   Yes  No

8. Do you feel that student-set goals are more motivating than teacher-set goals?
   
   Yes  No

9. Do you feel that literacy centers (where students have a specific space to work collaboratively or independently to meet literacy goals) promote self-efficacy (one’s belief in one’s ability to succeed)?
   
   Yes  No
10. Do you feel literacy centers encourage more student motivation?

Yes  No

**Please answer the following short response questions.**

11. What aspects, if any, of classroom culture (making students feel welcome, creating a space where all students feel comfortable, creating a space that empowers students, etc.) do you focus on throughout the year?

12. What strategies, if any, do you use to motivate students?
Survey Question Answers:

Do you feel that student-set goals are more motivating than teacher-set goals?

- Yes: 25
- No: 5

Do you give students the opportunity to set their own goals?

- Yes: 25
- No: 5

Do you feel goal setting has a positive impact on student motivation?

- Yes: 25
- No: 5

Do you feel that a teacher’s mindset and attitude impacts the classroom mood?

- Yes: 25
- No: 5

Do you feel your attitude and mindset have an impact on student’s motivation?

- Yes: 25
- No: 5

Do you focus on creating a welcoming classroom environment throughout the course of the school year?

- Yes: 25
- No: 5
Do you feel literacy centers encourage more student motivation?

Do you feel that having a positive attitude and mindset have a positive impact on student belonging in the classroom?

Do you feel literacy centers encourage student motivation?

Do you feel literacy centers promote self-efficacy?
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