THESIS TITLE: Motivating Young Adolescents: Perceptions of Students Matter

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Analysis of Motivation in Young Adolescents

by

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Abstract

Valuable information can be obtained through authentic and effective voice work with students. This information can lead to the understanding of how to motivate at risk young adolescents. Focus groups of low academically achieving students were interviewed to gather perceptions of school climate, the classroom environment, and their teachers. The organizational development method of appreciative inquiry was adapted to the interview questions. This allowed the participants to focus on positive change and systems currently working. A coding approach was applied to the interview data to find relationships among themes. Research sought to find what pathways best cultivate student achievement and motivation. Findings center on building school identity, connectedness, and support systems. The role of the teacher is important in fostering a sense of connectedness and building a strong support system for at risk students. Strong student - teacher relationships build upon the mechanisms that help lead students towards finding their identity within school and establishing a strong support system.

**Keywords**: motivation, young adolescent, appreciative inquiry, student teacher relationship
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CHAPTER 1 - INTRODUCTION

Strong teacher collaboration is a powerful tool that is becoming a trend in successful schools. Teachers plan lessons, teaching units, common assessments, learning targets and objectives as part of the collaborative process. Despite these efforts, there are still teachers whose students perform better academically than other teachers of the same content area. What factors impact the learning results of students that stretch beyond lesson planning and effective teaching techniques? The psychology and mentality of young adolescent students explain why differences in teacher effectiveness may occur.

Middle school children are developing many different areas of their brains during the young adolescent years. For young adolescents, the years in middle school mark a time of rapid growth and development (Dorman, 1981). This rapid growth impacts the needs of these young learners. Their dynamic social, emotional and academic needs can have a drastic effect on their performance in the classroom (Wentzel, 1997). Consequently, these needs can create a dynamic and fragile relationship between teacher and student. A deeper analysis of this relationship may reveal specific factors that improve or impede a student’s ability to be successful in the classroom. These factors may not be related to a students learning ability and thus may receive little attention in any teacher education programs.

The literature on the relationship between student success and non-academic factors reveals that there is a crucial dynamic between teacher and student in the classroom. This dynamic relationship affects how a student perceives their teacher, and the overall learning environment. The student-teacher relationship is the foundation that affects different aspects of the classroom and learning. This relationship impacts the motivational levels of learners as well
as their perception of feedback from their teacher. A strong relationship between teacher and student can overcome the challenges that even at risk students bring into the classroom.

**Statement of problem**

Many different teaching practices claim to be effective, but what good are these practices if students are not motivated to participate in them? The best teaching practices are rendered useless if other factors impede the desire to learn and be academically successful in the classroom. The research by McHugh (2013) demonstrates the importance of cultivating a strong relationship with students. Unfortunately, current theories regarding student relationships tend to focus on teachers during short observation periods and are frequently adult centered rather than student centered (Hamre & Pianta, 2010). Part of building a strong relationship with students requires understanding students’ individual perspectives on school. Without a more student centered focus, it is no surprise that many students report that schools are not responsive to their needs (Matthews, 2010). Thus, without integrating the thoughts, feelings, and perceptions of the learners that walk into our classrooms every single day, many teachers fail to incorporate a very important factor in teaching, the students.

**Purpose of study**

This study examines the dynamics of motivation and climate in students who are performing below average academically. The purpose of this research is to learn about the perceptions students have about the learning environment they inhabit. It will aim to categorize what factors about schooling impact their levels of motivation and success most directly. The research will help build upon the research developed by Matthews by directing students towards discovering more what motivates them towards higher levels of success shared in the work by
Usher. Students will be at the center of the work in this study which will provide a stronger scope on the individual perspectives of the learners.

**Definition of terms**

1) **Appreciative Inquiry**: A research approach that seeks to facilitate change based on participants actual experience of best practice. It places an emphasis on what works rather than giving priority to problems in current practice (Giles, 2008).

2) **At Risk Students**: A category of students who have a high probability of poor developmental or school outcomes (Werner, 1986).

3) **Climate**: The student’s perceptions of school experiences and the relationship with their teachers (Smyth, 2006).

4) **Collaboration**: The practices of multiple individuals that occurs through the complex network of relationships and interactions among staff members of an educational institution. (Scribner, Sawyer, Watson, & Myers, 2007).

5) **Motivation**: The desire to do or achieve something. Generally defined as intrinsic or extrinsic. Intrinsic motivation stems from the desire to do something because one truly wants to or sees the value in doing so. Extrinsic motivation is the idea that one will do something because of the result that is produced (Usher, 2012).

6) **Social Economically Disabled**: A term given to students from low income, low parental education households (McHugh, 2013).

7) **Student – Teacher Relationship**: The positive or negative interactions between teacher and student. A strong student – teacher relationship would indicate that the student feels cared for and nurtured by the teacher (Witherspoon, 2011).
Literature Preview

In the history of education, students have not been seen as an integral stakeholder in the process of reforming the educational environment (Harper, 2000; Seitz, 2005). The undercurrent of this study will strive to implement more student voice into classroom practice and teacher preparation. It will take the information gained from student voice and merge it with the current understanding and research of the importance of student-teacher relationships. Studies that aim at strengthening the understanding of this relationship have found the information valuable at producing interventions with students who are dissatisfied, alienated from school or labeled as at risk (Witherspoon, 2011). The process of appreciative inquiry should direct the students towards finding what current teaching practices and aspects of school climate drive their levels of motivation. Other studies involving this method and process have found it to be an approach that enables dialogue that is restorative, generative and hope filled (Bushe & Coetzer, 1995).

Preview of Methodology

Two focus groups comprised of middle school students were created for this study. One group consisted of students with a cumulative grade point average below 1.0. The other group contained students with a grade point average between 1.0 and 2.0. The students for each group were selected randomly based on their availability during research times. Once selected, the students participated in an audio recorded session with the researcher. The questions in the focus group centered around a philosophy entitled “appreciative inquiry”. Using this approach in questioning the students would establish a focus on what current practices strengthen student-teacher relationships. An appreciate inquiry approach maintains a positive approach to improving teaching, rather than looking at eliminating ineffective behaviors or systems.
Significance of study

This study provides an example of how including student voice and personal perception can assist in identifying critical issues facing at risk populations and perhaps guide reforms of teaching practice. It establishes the effectiveness of including student’s thoughts and opinions in shaping the teaching philosophies of educators. Recently, studies have observed the nature of student – teacher relationships in the classroom but because the majority of this research focuses on adult-centric observations, adolescents unique and personal experiences with school are overlooked (McHugh, 2013). The research presented here provides a unique look at the current mindset of at risk adolescents and works to demonstrative how important student-teacher relationships may be in reaching out to this population. Teachers may find the need to improve their sensitivity to the perceptions of young adolescents as a result of this research. Improving this sensitivity will allow a shift in teaching pedagogy towards a more student centered approach.

Limitations of study

The findings in this research are limited to a small population of students from a single school in Southern California. Interviews were conducted with small groups of students who had struggled academically. The research methodology focused on female Latina middle school students who represent a growing minority group.
Research Questions

1) What is revealed regarding motivation, through student voice work and data regarding student perceptions of the classroom, school climate, and their teachers?

2) In what ways does the information gathered from the voice of at risk students help guide practices that would improve the relationships between students and teachers?

3) What model represents an effective approach to improve academic motivation for at risk students?

Summary

The aim of this research is to obtain insight into the minds of young adolescents regarding their learning environments. The students involved in this research are categorized as “at risk” students, meaning they have a lower probability of succeeding academically. What can be learned about these student’s perceptions of their academic environment and how can this information be used to improve education as a whole? Recent studies have demonstrated the strong effect perception has for the mind of a young adolescent (Wubbels, 2002). To understand this perception, focus groups will be an effective approach to providing forum for students to share their thoughts. Other findings in the literature reveal the importance of understanding how students perceive their learning environment.
CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

At most schools, students do not feel as though they have an influence on their own education (Smyth, 2006). Not involving students omits an important voice in the educational process. Investing the voice of students informs educational stakeholders how our students think, what they feel, and their perceptions of the school environment. Measuring the strength of student–teacher relationships through teacher observation does not provide a holistic measure of how strong those ties are. What can we learn regarding our teaching practice, motivating the young adolescent mind and building stronger student-teacher relationships from students themselves? How might this approach be strengthened through the appreciative inquiry process?

Building the framework for this study requires a review of related literature. The connection between student voice work and appreciative inquiry to strengthen student motivation in the context of education is supported in this review. The literature reviewed here will outline the main components underlying the methods in this study which include: school identity and trust, student–teacher relationships, student voice, and appreciative inquiry. Linking these concepts will build a research method gear towards understanding how to form effective teaching practices and philosophies.

Reaching Students At Risk for Academic Failure

Academically low achieving students are generally treated differently in the classroom by their teachers. There are lower expectations for these students and are given fewer opportunities to interact and participate in classroom activities. As a result these students make less effort to gain teacher attention and gradually withdraw from the classroom setting (Smey-Richman, 1989). This often neglected population of students is an important group to study the voice of because their attachment towards school is low. Acknowledging the relationship between school
membership and motivation is important. Educational research has found that most students need a sense of school membership to be successful (Wehlage, 1989). These students are lacking that sense of membership that can help direct them towards academic achievement. Students who disengage from school do so because they lack a sense of belonging and do not value school (Finn, 1989). Researchers have demonstrated the need for students to feel a sense of belonging to school in order to be successful. As students sense that they are members of school, they are willing to become more fully engaged in learning and put forth the necessary effort. For students whose families do not provide academic support, a sense of membership in school is essential for the development and maintenance of academic motivation. (Goodenow, 1993). Without a sense of school membership, students are at an increased risk of withdrawal from school and fail to complete their graduation requirements (Piciullo, 2009). Understanding the perception that these students have towards school climate and their instructors will valuable insight for education. This insight will contribute to the knowledge and learning practices geared towards motivating students considered low achieving.

**School Identity and Trust**

There are discrepancies in achievement amongst some children. These discrepancies are especially apparent in students who come from disadvantaged backgrounds. Evidence consistently shows that children from these backgrounds tend to be less successful than their peers (Bankole, 2010). Trust theory and school membership theory may explain what accounts for why these students are less successful. These theories explain how students come to identify with school and develop a sense of belonging. Areas of research involving these theories explain that students who fail to identify with school often display a loss of motivation, behavior problems, and potentially even dropping out from school (Finn, 1989). How connected a student
feels to a school is an important indicator of academic success. Goodenow (1992) defined a sense of belonging as the feeling of being supported, accepted, and included by people belonging to a social environment. The relationships that students have with adults are considered to be most important factor in keeping a sense of academic engagement and belonging for the student (Mitchell, 2008). Identifying with a school depends on a sense of belonging and acceptance for the student. This belonging and acceptance appears to be dependent on student – adult relationships that are established in a school (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Smith, Hoy, & Sweetland, 2001; Hoy & Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 1999). These relationships are dependent upon trust, which is essential in creating an atmosphere where students, who have traditionally failed, are performing to expected academic levels (Byrk & Schneider, 2002; Fuller, 1994; Smith, Hoy, & Sweetland, 2001, Hoy & Tschannen – Moran, 1999). The concept of trust between student and adult depends on the students’ perception that the adult is a) benevolent. b) reliable c) competent. d) honest and e) open (Hoy & Tschannen – Moran, 1999) Various definitions and facets of trust are discussed in the literature, however, benevolence is the most common underlying element. (Goddard, Shalloum & Berebitsky, 2009; Hoy & Tschannen-Moran, 1999). It is more specifically defined as “…the confidence that one’s well – being or something one cares about will be protected by the trusted person or group” (Hoy & Tschannen – Moran, 1999, p.187) Thus, the measure of a student’s trust in a school and surrounding adults may be connected to the element of benevolence.

**Student – Teacher Relationships**

An important factor in understanding the impact of trust and school identity on learning is the perceptions of relationships with teachers. The research has shown evidence that student perception of their relationships with teachers impact achievement (e.g. Connell & Wellborn,
1991; Furrer & Skinner, 2003; Stipek, 2002; Wentzel, 1997). Furthermore, an examination of students’ self-reported sense of relatedness to social factors of the school environment including parents, teachers, and peers found that the strongest indicator of academic success was the student’s relationship with their teachers (Furrer & Skinner 2003). The study presented evidence that the student-teacher relationship could overcome detrimental relationships with peers and parents in terms of achievement. When students have a strong relationship with their teachers it builds upon the perception that one is connected with a school site. A study by Wehlage (1989) found that there is a strong correlation between the strength of the relationship between student and teacher and school identification. School identification takes place when students have established a bond between themselves, the adults, and the norms of the school (Wehlage, 1989). Wehlage (1989) goes on to state that the strength of the bond between students and school personnel depends on the extent to which the student feels supported. Teachers that cultivate strong relationships with their students are able to maintain higher levels of student motivation. The relationship between teacher and student is further defined by four factors; a willingness to listen, holding students to high standards, challenging them to do their best, and treating them with respect and equality (Deiro, 2003; Caputo, 2004). In an educational psychology study, conducted by Kathryn Wentzel in 1997, researchers found that when adolescents perceived their teachers as caring, their motivation to achieve was higher (Wentzel, 1997). Adolescents’ perceptions of pedagogical caring is what kept their motivational levels high. Students described these teachers as having democratic interaction styles, high expectations, and providing of constructive feedback.

Understanding and embracing student backgrounds is a vital piece to keeping students motivated and successful in the classroom. A recent article published by Elise Trumbull, found
that the motives students have for achieving may be very different. The individual differences amongst differing student groups may impact a student's view of achievement and motivation (Trumbull, 2011). Despite these differences, teachers still need to set high expectations for the students they teach. In a related article centered on students’ goals, motivation, and learning ability, Svinkicki (2005) found that a student’s level of motivation is affected by their life outside of the classroom. There are different cultural and family values that students bring into the classroom that affect their reasons for learning and striving to achieve (Svinkicki, 2005). Despite what difficulties students face outside of school, teachers who believe that these challenges can be overcome are found to be more effective in their educational practice. As suggested through research, the student perception of whether or not teachers care about them is an important factor in academic performance (Goldstein, 1999; Noddings, 1984; Wentzel, 1997). Other education professionals have noticed similar trends in what keeps students motivated in school. When students know and feel like their teachers care about them, they are more willing to work and strive for academic success. In a recent study by McHugh (2013) found that the interpersonal relationship between student and teacher can fulfill developmental needs that students have.

Fulfilling this need helps students engage in class content, and builds higher academic success. (McHugh, 2013)

Teachers who spend the time to analyze how their students view the instructor, learning environment, and overall perception of learning find more success with their students. How students view their teacher is a significant factor in motivation and student success. Through surveys and questionnaires, a study by Brok in 2010 found that certain teacher characteristics were more favorable for learning and cooperation in students (Brok, 2010). According to the research conducted, students prefer teachers who exude dominance in the classroom but are still
cooperative. How students perceive their instructors and classroom environment affects the dynamics of daily learning and academic achievement. Research in the international journal of education found that a student’s view of their teacher and the strength of the relationship with that teacher affect his or her ability to receive feedback and praise (Wubbels, 2002). The previous literature established that the teacher-student relationship was important for motivational levels. This article reveals that the teacher-student relationship affects the dynamics of this relationship in the procedures of fostering a learning environment. Teacher feedback, whether negative or positive, is an essential part of developing expectations for students both academically and behaviorally. A student’s perception of this feedback, based on the strength of the relationship between teacher and student, is a vital component to achievement.

**Student Voice**

As school populations become more increasingly diverse, it becomes important to reform the educational landscape into productive learning institutions. One way this has been accomplished is through the implementation of student voice work. Student voice work involves placing students as equal partners in school based reform and providing opportunities to participate in decision making (Mitra, 2003). Definitions to student voice work may vary, but it requires that students work in collaboration with school personnel to influence policy and curriculum (Cook-Sather, 2002). Unfortunately, the lack of student voice has led to disconnect between students and school. It has also increased the student dropout rate (Smyth, 2006). If implemented effectively, authentic student voice work helps students feel more connected and engaged in school (Libbey, 2004). An important component to the student voice work is that it shifts the concept that only adults know what is best for students regarding change and reform (Flasher, 1978). The research conducted by Matthews (2010) investigated the effect of
systematically implemented student work by school administrators; on student achievement, motivation, and performance on state assessments. Matthew’s work utilized The Organization Support for Youth Engagement Tool, which allowed the gathering of information regarding the degree of youth engagement in decision making and leadership. The data analysis revealed that students felt respected when given the opportunity to participate in conversations regarding school decisions. Students also reporting feeling attached to the school were motivated to achieve and had better relationships with staff (Matthews, 2010). The findings in the Matthew’s study provide the rationale as to why including student voice is important for increasing academic motivation and school reform. Establishing student focus groups will provide students the opportunity to communicate their thoughts and take ownership over school change. Student focus groups will produce results through a more student based approach, rather than adult centered.

**Appreciative Inquiry**

The foundations for the focus group questions implemented in this study rely on a methodology termed “appreciative inquiry”. The concept was developed by David Cooperrider at Case Western Reserve University (Cooperrider and Srivastva, 1987). Companies around the world are engaged in experiments and processes that utilize the philosophies of appreciate inquiry. There are a number of case studies that report the use of appreciative inquiry as a path to improvement within a system. Different types of companies such as NASA, Avon, British Airways, and BP (Watins & Mohr, 2001). Appreciative inquiry leaves deficit approaches and instead focuses on the affirmative processes for organizational development (Whitney, 1998). The appreciative inquiry model assumes that solutions to problems already exist within an organization and focuses on what is working instead of what is not working. It is a cooperative
search for the strengths, passions and factors that hold the potential for change within a system (Ashford & Patkar, 2001). Unfortunately, organizations have learned how to be deficient and problematic, becoming experts in focusing on the “wrong”. Appreciative inquiry instead allows organizations to focus on achievements rather than problems (Ludema et al., 2001). It is important to choose the positive as the focus of inquiry because the choice of focus determines the unfolding process. Otherwise the focus will be on obstacles that have caused the current situation (Watkins & Mohr, 2001).

In education, a lot of planning focuses on what is deficient instead of a more positive outlook. Appreciative inquiry addresses a system’s needs and finds solutions in past successes (McKenzie, 2003). Within the context of school improvement and reform, appreciative inquiry has found be effective (Schiller, 2003). There are several prime examples in the field of education where the appreciative inquiry process has been used to produce positive change within the school setting. An urban school in Chicago serves as a prime example of how appreciative inquiry can be utilized to promote positive cultural change and improve the learning environment (Pratt, 2003). Another project aimed to enhance student participation in creating strategic priorities within the school through a focus on strength based systems. They were able to involve all stakeholders in the appreciative inquiry process (Hinrichs & Rhodes – Yenowine, 2003). Rickettes and Willis (2003) demonstrated the effective of integrating structured EL (experimental learning) activities and initiatives in conjunction with the appreciative inquiry process is a powerful learning combination for schools. In attempt to build upon student trust and involvement in school, some schools have found the applications of appreciative inquiry useful. School administrators have found appreciative inquiry a useful method of including students in the consultative process of education decision making processes (Willoughby & Tosey, 2007).
There are some basic guiding principles to the appreciative inquiry process. The values of appreciative inquiry are reflected in five core principles (constructionist, simultaneity, anticipatory, poetic and positive). There are also five generic processes (discovery, ream, design, delivery and definition) (Watkins & Mohr, 2001). The first four stages of the processes form what is known as the 4D cycle of appreciative inquiry and it forms the framework for the majority of appreciative inquiry applications. The cycle can repeat if needed (Ludema et al., 2001).

1) Discovery – Using appreciative interviews to discover the best of what is.

2) Dream - Sharing and presenting dramatic enactments of what might be.

3) Design – Drafting possibility statements to design an ideal future of plan of action.

4) Deliver – After ideas have been communicated, this stage requires the planning and implementation of required actions.

The study presented in this project will focus on the first step of the inquiry process. The principles of appreciative inquiry were used to design the focus group questions. The data analysis of the appreciative interviews will provide information towards answering the research questions outlined in Chapter 1.

Summary

Utilizing the practices of appreciative inquiry will help formulate ideas needed to possibly reform current educational practices. Merging the appreciative inquiry model with the philosophy of incorporating student voice in the reform process can serve as a powerful tool. For school leaders, this merge will serve to strengthen current approaches to understanding student achievement. Providing the opportunity for students, especially those labeled as “at risk”, to be
listened to will help teachers and educational leaders understand the motivational drive of these students. Incorporating the main philosophies of the voice work research will also reveal how important the dynamics of student-teacher relationships are for these learners. The literature reviewed in this section demonstrates the importance of listening to the voice of these students as a method of providing a more democratic medium for these students in the school process.

Blending the work of these different areas should inform teachers, instructional leaders, and other stakeholders of the school community how to shape and mold current teaching pedagogy. How to further understand the importance of student-teacher relationships from the perspective of students under the scope of appreciative inquiry will be explained through the research methodology.
CHAPTER III : METHODOLOGY

Introduction

The following thesis research used two focus groups based on selecting a critical population of low performing, female Latino students. Question design and implementation were based on an “appreciative inquiry” approach. Data were analyzed using an “open coding” approach, and codes were organized into meaningful themes (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). Understanding the relationship between these emergent themes was further advanced using the process of “axial coding” (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). This research design was applied to find how teaching practices could be improved, through student voice, under the appreciative inquiry lens. The following research questions guided the study:

1) What is revealed, regarding motivation, through student voice work and data regarding student perceptions of the classroom, school climate and their teachers?
2) In what ways does the information gathered from the voice of at risk students help guide practices that would improve the relationships between students and teachers?
3) What model represents an effective approach to improve academic motivation for at risk students?

Design

The category of this research is qualitative and will be implemented in the form of a case study. A case study will allow for the study of a small group of students in order to obtain relevant data about our school, the students, and the staff.
Participants

The data collected for this study derived from two different focus groups using a critical population of female Latino students at risk for academic failure. The three students in the first focus group were included based on their grade point average scores (i.e. lower than 1.0). The two students in the second focus group had slightly higher GPAs (i.e. between 1.0 and 2.0). These students are considered academically “at risk”, and therefore reflected a critical population. All participates in the research study were seventh grade female Latino students who are English speakers. The ability to understand and speak English was required for this research.

Students were selected for the study through the counseling department. Computer software generated a list of students who met the selection requirements of the study. Research participation forms were given to all candidates whose teachers gave approval for their students to partake in the study. The research participation forms required parent consent as well as student assent to the research parameters. Students were reminded that their participation was voluntary and all information shared was to remain confidential. All identifying information was kept confidential throughout the research process.

Setting

The study took place in a quiet, private classroom on a middle school campus in Southern California. This allowed students to feel comfortable during the interview questions. During the 2012-2013 school year, the school served approximately 850 students and employed 43 teachers. The school district contains a total of 23 schools: 17 elementary, 5 middle schools and 1 continuation school.

The protocols used in the case study design were conducive to the study for two reasons:
1) There are several questions regarding the classroom and school environment. Being in the classroom allowed students to think about the classroom setting in their responses.

2) The researcher was a teacher of a different grade level than the students. This allowed the participants to answer the questions without feeling as though it would have negative consequences. It also provided the research subjects an opportunity to share their insights with a teacher who would be a part of their schooling the following year. Thus creating a stronger sense of student voice and democratic involvement for the research participants (Matthews, 2010).

Instrument

A classroom was the setting for the focus groups. Institutional Review Board approved consent and assent documents were created for the students and their parent or guardians. The following questions were used in the interview process. They incorporate important elements of “appreciative inquiry” in that the project questions emphasize strengths and successes rather than focusing only on needs or improvements that need to be met. In writing appreciative inquiry type questions, a focus on the positive is important. Otherwise subjects will focus on obstacles, malfunctions, and problems they face (Watkins and Mohr, 2001). The following eight appreciative inquiry based questions were asked to students in the focus groups:

1) Looking back over the year, can you name a time where you had a positive experience here at school? An experience where you were glad you were at school, experienced a lot of fun, or just happy to be a part of this school. What was happening? Who was involved?

2) What do you feel is working for you at this school? What motivates you to do well in school and want to keep coming? What are things we should keep continue doing?
3) Think back to the classes you have had at this school, which class was your favorite? Why was it your favorite class?

4) If you could make some changes to this school, what would you do?

5) How can teachers help and support you to be more successful at school?

6) Describe a time you were proud about a class project or homework assignment. Why were you proud?

7) What are some things that teachers do that help you succeed? That help you want to enter a class and be there?

8) What environment is important to you in a classroom, for example, furniture, decorations, etc.?

In order to record the participant’s responses, the computer software Garageband was utilized. Microsoft word was used to produce the transcripts.

**Procedures**

The nature of this study utilizes qualitative data analysis to find correlations between student voice and educational teaching practices. The following section is an outline of the procedures implemented to collect the data necessary for this research project.

**Participant Recruitment**

All the participants in this study were from one middle school in Southern California. Students selected for research were notified through the counseling department. Letters for parent consent and student assent were hand delivered to the students, notifying them of their participation. Once the letters of consent and assent were returned students were notified by the researcher of their selection for participation. When focus groups were ready to be conducted,
students received passes from the office notifying them of when to report to the research classroom.

Focus Groups

Students were reminded at the beginning and end of the inquiry sessions that their responses would be kept anonymous and to not discuss any of the participant’s answers outside of the group. A document with each question was given to each participant during the focus group for clarity. The researcher asked one question at a time and allowed time for students to respond if they opted to. At the end of the session the question document was collected from the participants.

Timeframe

The duration of each focus group was 45 minutes, the length of one class period. A week before the interviews, the researcher took five minutes to brief the participants on the research process. Students were thanked for their participation the day after the research questioning.

Ethical considerations

There are some concerns about the participants in this study because they are minors. Parental permission, as well as permission from the students, will need to be obtained to reduce risk. Because students at this age may be concerned with the perception of their responses among their peers and staff, students will be assured that their identities and responses will be kept confidential. The timeframe to complete this study was one month because school was not in session after this time.
Analysis

The basis for the data analysis used in this study was a coding process. Coding is a process that involves analytic procedures aimed at creating categories and their properties as a method of analyzing data. An important piece to the process is the act of asking questions and making comparisons (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). Following the protocols outlined by Strauss and Crobin (p. 56), the data from the transcripts was read line by line. During this time of data immersion, conceptual and theoretical themes, ideas and categories were documented. The themes generated for analysis were pre-existing and emergent. Pre-existing themes were based on the research questions outlined in chapter 1. The following were pre-existing themes for coding:

1) Teacher interaction

2) School identity

3) School climate and environment

4) Relevance

Emergent themes were generated after data immersion. After generating themes, the data was reexamined to find connections between categories and subcategories. An important aspect of this stage of coding was to focus on three aspects of any observed phenomenon:

1) Situations that cause a phenomenon to occur.

2) The response individuals have to what is happening.

3) The consequences or results of the action or inaction.
The main goal of using these coding strategies was to find a relationship between categories, their subcategories, and what can be discovered from the data. The final step in the coding process was to visualize the data through the axial coding process. This allowed connections to be made towards understanding conclusions that could be made regarding the research questions.

Summary

This chapter explained the methodology used in this qualitative study of student motivation and voice work through focus groups. Eight research questions were designed with a positive focus based on the philosophies of appreciative inquiry. The study participants were middle school students randomly selected based on grade point average criteria and availability. Axial coding was used to analyze the transcripts and find correlations among significant themes based on participant’s responses. The following chapter presents the data and analysis of the themes involved in this research.
CHAPTER IV: DATA ANALYSIS

This chapter presents the results and analysis of data for the research questions presented in the methodology. Data analysis started with open coding techniques followed by axial coding. The themes generated for the coding process emerged in two stages. Stage one was based off pre-existing themes, shown in Figure 1, derived from the research questions. The themes examined were: importance of teacher interactions, student perceptions of school and classroom environment, and peer interactions. The purpose for the coding was to find relationships between the variables and their effect on student motivation. After data immersion, several emergent themes were added as part of the analysis (Figure 2).

Figure 1: Pre-existing themes regarding student motivation based off research questions outlined in methodology.

![Diagram](image.png)
Figure 2: Pre-existing and emerging themes regarding student motivation based off research questions outlined in methodology and initial data immersion.

Research question one directed the coding process towards themes related to student motivation. Codes derived from the coding process centered on student perceptions of school climate, the classroom and their teachers. The themes generated from the responses regarding school climate help understand what motivates “at risk” students towards academic and personal success. Using a pre-defined theme approach helped bring into focus what specifically about the school climate and setting worked for these students.
Data Presentation and Analysis

When students were asked to reflect on their past educational experiences and describe some of the positive moments they had, student one mentioned “The spirit day...because it was creative and I liked seeing people with costumes on” (Student one, personal communication, June 4, 2013). Another student mentioned a similar school activity, “I liked the day where we had to wear a team...like the Chargers” (Student two, personal communication, June 4, 2013). These two students mentioned school activities that allowed them to express their individuality and a sense of connectedness to the school. These activities allowed students to feel connected and established a sense of identity with the school which is an important factor for academic success. Part of this school identity relied on peer relationships, student two mentioned peer participation as part of what was successful. Students who have social bonds at school are more likely to accept school and conform to the rules associated with schooling. Those who exhibit a high degree of social bonding tend to identify with the school (Wehlage, 1989). This is further evidenced when student one states, “We got to show something that we liked and we helped our school team” (Student one, personal communication, June 4, 2013). These students value the opportunity to express their own individuality while building upon their identity and connectedness with the school and their peers. Finding ways for students to express their individualism, while providing the opportunity for them to find their school identity, motivates these individuals. Student four mentioned an instance when a majority of the school population was expressing their school identity by stating, “I liked when everyone was loud and enjoying themselves” (Student four, personal communication, June 6, 2013). Student four is stating the importance of their peers being demonstrating a sense of involvement and trust in the school. Research indicates that the quality of peer relationships is associated with important educational
outcomes including: social adjustment in school, academic performance, and general self-regard. These relationships are related to student’s development and can have lifelong influences (Ma, 2006). Building positive surroundings for these students is important to maintain high motivational levels with regard to schooling. The positive environment and channels created through the opportunity for self-expression and school identity appear to motivate these students. When finding ways to motivate students considered academically or socially at risk, establishing a strong connection to their peers and the school is an important task. Building upon this connection establishes a stronger sense of trust in the school as an organization. Consequences of this trust include increased cooperation and internal control of normative values (Bryk & Schneider, 1996). This increased cooperation and control of values build a foundation that will help educational leaders and teachers direct these students towards more successful academic experiences.

Research question two required a focus on themes centered on the relational dynamic between student and teacher. To analyze this dynamic, research focused on codes regarding each participant’s interactions with their instructors or perceptions of their teachers. The purpose was to find methods geared towards improving the relationships between students and teachers.

The subject of teacher benevolence was mentioned several times in the focus groups as an important motivational factor. Specific instances in the coding process revealed the impact of fostering a strong teacher student relationship. Research participants were asked to explain what teacher qualities and characteristics would help them succeed. One participant responded by expressing their desire for their teacher to be kind. She went on to state that being a kind teacher is important because students will reciprocate through listening and expected behavior in return (Student two, personal communication, June 4, 2013). A participant in a separate interview
stated that when she felt cared for by the teacher she liked the teacher and therefore the class. Liking the class resulted in paying attention and exerting more effort (Student four, personal communication, June 6, 2013). Evidence from research on elementary and middle school students has documented the significance of student’s perceptions of support and caring from parents, teachers and peers to positive aspects of motivation. Perceived support from teachers has been related to student’s pursuits of aspirations to behave responsibly, educational goals, self-concept, and values. (Felner et al., 1985). When students perceive that they are cared for by their instructor they tend to pursue responsible behavior as a response. It appears that students reciprocate the perceived caring as a result of a stronger self-concept and a valuing of educational goals. Embracing these goals and values are essential to building higher levels of motivation for these students. “Knowing that somebody likes you helps you concentrate better and makes you want to learn” (Student four, personal communication, June 6, 2013). “It also gives you the confidence to want to learn” (Student five, personal communication, June 6, 2013).

Adolescents from lower socioeconomic class and minority backgrounds face heightened levels of stress. However, studies have shown that social support contributes to an individual’s ability to withstand stress. (Cassell, 1974; Dean & Lin, 1977). The perception of a caring teacher provides the social support needed to motivate these students identified as “at risk”. This is further evidenced when student four responded to the perception of a caring teacher, “You want to impress them. And it feels good when someone with a college degree thinks you are doing a good job.” (Student four, personal communication, June 6, 2013). Building the perception of a caring teacher may require effort and work beyond teaching practices. Effective teachers tend to focus on the interpersonal relationships and dealings with students, link education with student values and encourage autonomy more than control (Hardre & Sullivan, 2009). When teachers are
relational with students it helps construct the support systems needed to deal with the stress of low socioeconomic situations. This support system is reliant on parents, teachers and peer relationships. A sense of social belongingness and support is believed to lead to the adoption of valued goals and objectives (Cornell & Wellborn, 1991; Ford, 1992). Without the perceived sense of support through a caring teacher, the support systems and values of education will be difficult for a student to adopt. Leading students towards educational goals and values rely strongly on the relational dynamic between student and teacher.

The elements of the classroom have a significant effect on the motivational levels of young adolescents. Student four expressed the desire to have a teacher who has awareness of the classroom environment and establishes a safe place for students to learn (Student four, personal communication, July 6, 2013). In educational research, there is an underlying premise that students must feel safe in the classroom in order for learning to take place. A cornerstone to this learning is the importance of student discipline. (Barth, 2004). The participating students in this research expressed the desire to be in a safe environment where the ability to learn was uninhibited. The ability to learn and stay motivated to educational values was linked to teacher’s competence in classroom management. A common reoccurring theme regarding the classroom environment was the subject of peers. A significant correlation exists between academic achievement and a strong emphasis on education that is shared by students, their parents, and peers (Fuligni, 1997). Being connected to peers is part of identifying with the school and building a positive surrounding. Part of harboring a feeling of belonging relies on a sense of being included and courage by others (teachers and peers) (Goodenow, 1993). Student five mentioned the importance of sitting next to someone that they could trust and rely on for help. I do a lot better when my friends are there (Personal communication, June 6, 2013). Student four
elaborated on this thought by mentioning that sometimes they sit next to students who threaten their feeling of a safe classroom environment (Student four, June 6, 2013). In focus group one, student two mentioned that working with the right classmates allows them to help and motivate each other (Personal communication, June 4, 2013). Both of these students are building upon the idea that the classroom environment plays a big role in the success and motivation levels of students. These students express a desire to be in a safe and supportive learning environment. When students sense a feeling belonging engagement is maximized. School is perceived as a community when students experience a sense of belonging or personal relatedness (Osterman, 2000). Opportunities for positive social interactions with peers are an important process for school wide engagement (Falls, 2005). Notice that these students mention positive peer interactions as part of an educational scope. As part of their academic engagement and pursuit of education, they desire positive peer interactions in the classroom. A strong emphasis that is shared by students, parents and peers is strongly correlated with academic achievement (Fuligini, 1997). Part of keeping these low academically performing students motivated towards schooling is ensuring positive peer interactions. Negative situations that occur because of peers is a concern to these students who already struggle academically. Keeping these students motivated will require an emphasis on a safe environment that allows the opportunity for positive interactions with peers and the teacher. These peer interactions build a higher degree of social bonding and ultimately an identity with the school.

An important theme that emerged through data immersion and the coding process was the subject of relevance. An important contributing factor to the academic success of students is how relevant school is to their lives and individual goals. The participants mention several times the desire for classroom content, climate and teacher interaction to be relevant to their lives. When
asked what would drive her to do well in school, student one mentions several important factors. She mentions the desire to go to college, obtain a good job, and the encouragement she obtains from school assemblies regarding future schooling opportunities and career paths (Personal communication, June 4, 2013). Educational studies suggest that effective teaching and learning environments provide authentic learning experiences that establish personal and real world relevance (Trigwell, K. & Prosser, M. 1991). Student two mentions that when a certain teacher mentions the future and college often, it serves as motivation for her (Personal communication, June 4, 2013). Student two mentions that the same teacher (one discussed previously) speaks about the significance of schooling and future very often, almost daily. This has served to motivate her and work harder in that class (Personal communication, June 4, 2013). It is evident from the research regarding building relevance into classroom content is effective at motivating students. Coding procedures found this theme to be prevalent as a motivating factor. The combination of being perceived as a caring teacher helped build upon educational goals for this student. These educational goals and values this student constructed through a higher concept of herself allowed the acceptance of the relevance building the teacher was shaping in the classroom. Thus given a safe classroom environment, a kind teacher, helped lead the student towards stronger connections with school and seeing the significance of the educational values the staff strives to teach.

A summary of coded theme and analysis are found in Table 1.
Table 1. Summary of student responses.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant Response</th>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Analysis</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Spirit Day</td>
<td>School Climate</td>
<td>School connection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enjoyment of School by peers</td>
<td></td>
<td>Sense of identity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Peer Relationship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Individuality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kindness</td>
<td>Teacher Interaction</td>
<td>Student is reciprocating behavior</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being liked by teacher</td>
<td>Support System</td>
<td>Pursuit of responsible education goals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being cared for by teacher</td>
<td></td>
<td>Higher self-concept</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Safe Classroom</td>
<td>Classroom Environment</td>
<td>Support system</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trust of classmates in close proximity</td>
<td>Support System</td>
<td>Unrestricted learning environment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conversations regarding future education</td>
<td>Relevance Support System</td>
<td>Overcome stress outside of school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Summary**

This chapter outlined the data and analysis to the research questions: how can the understanding of student perception and voice of at risk students regarding school climate, the classroom and their teachers improve student motivation. Another question was whether this information could help improve the relationships between students and teachers. The process to interpreting the data gathered from case study interviews involved different coding systems. The final chapter will serve to present interpretations, implications of this research, and recommendations on further research.
CHAPTER V: RECOMMENDATIONS

Introduction

A lot of research exists regarding motivation and young adolescents. There are currently many theories and conclusions regarding which methods are best for raising the motivational levels of students (Wentzel, 1997). Conversations regarding student motivation are important in the context of education. They provide an important framework in efforts towards school improvement, reform and success. In the pursuit of educational reform and organization change, different institutions take different approaches. Most of the time effort is spent focusing on what is not working and what could change for the better. In most institutions however, there are plenty of successful systems already at work (Watkins & Mohr, 2001). The principles of a method titled “appreciative inquiry” bring these positive and successful systems info focus through interviews and conversations. These interviews and conversations center on what works, what can be, and the processes for affirmative development (Whitney, 1998). Appreciative inquiry can be a powerful tool for change in schools. However, the focus for change usually center around the adults of educational institutions. Adult centered change and action can work but it tends to ignore an important population of schools, the students. This study combined the elements of student voice work and appreciative inquiry to study young adolescent motivation from a different angle. The first research question asked, how can the understanding of student perception and voice of at risk students regarding school climate, the classroom and their teachers improve student motivation? The second question addressed whether the information gathered from the voice of at risk students could help guide teaching practices towards improving the relationships between students and teachers. This chapter will discuss the
summary of findings, interpretations, the implications and limitations of the study, and future research recommendations.

Findings

Final analysis of the themes through coding found two main pathways to building higher levels of motivation for at risk students. The first pathway was building a sense of school identity and connectedness. In the literature review it was stated that lower achieving students often lack a sense of membership towards the school. A strong sense of school membership is important because it can direct students towards educational values and academic achievement. In the case of the participants of this study, several factors lead to the establishment of this school membership and sense of connectedness. These factors include: a strong relationship with their teacher, the perception that their teacher cares for them and the opportunity to establish a personal identity within the context of school activities and peers. The subject of teacher interactions was the most prevalent theme in the data. Positive interactions with the teacher led to stronger student-teacher relationships. It also formulated the sense that the teacher was a caring individual. For these students, the teacher was an important factor in leading students towards a sense of school identity and connectedness. The teacher helped these students value school which in turn fostered academic motivation in that specific class. Students revealed that they wanted to do better in the classes where this connection was strong.

The second pathway to motivating for these students was establishing strong support systems for them. Strong support systems came in the form of teacher encouragement and motivation for some of the participants. Appreciative inquiry questioning led the students to reveal that when the teacher was supportive, incorporated relevance into the classroom, caring and encouraging towards the students, they felt more motivated to try at school. Teacher
interaction becomes an important factor in both school connectedness and building support systems for these students. The participants found encouragement to pursue academics beyond middle school valuable and relevant. However, this encouragement had to come from a teacher they perceived as caring, and with whom they had a strong relationship with. Participants admit that they are more willing to listen to teachers who appear to care about them. Students also mentioned sitting next to peers they trusted and wanting the classroom to be a safe learning environment. These factors build towards a strong support system for these students who struggle academically. Providing at risk students with a strong academic support system helps neutralize some of the stresses these students bring to school. It also provides systems of support that low academic achievers may not receive at home. A general model towards building motivation for at risk students is summarized in Figure 3.
Implications

The research presented in this project provides insight regarding motivating at risk young adolescents. It adds to the present research regarding motivation by incorporating two tools towards educational reform. The two tools used in conjunction for this research was appreciative inquiry and student voice work. Using this approach provided the opportunity to find valuable insight from a group of students that are generally neglected in school settings. This insight will build towards the philosophies and mechanisms used to understand the minds of young adolescents.

The results of this research point to two important mechanisms in building motivation for low academic achievers. In progressing towards successful school environments, school leaders should invest time and resources incorporating student voice in the process. This will allow a model for motivation to take shape at their respective school sites. The model should focus on what pathways will build needed support systems for students. These support systems should incorporate positive peer and adult relationships for all students. The other focus should be on methods to building school identity and a sense of connectedness for all students, especially low achievers. Discovering student perceptions while building strong supports centered on these two systems will help establish higher levels of motivation for all.

Limitations

There were some limitations to the methodology implemented in this study. The students that were able to participate were limited due to time constraints and availability. A small amount of participants resulted in some limitations due to a small sample size. A larger sample size would allow for a more accurate representation of this middle school’s student population.
While the at risk student population offers important insight towards motivation, students of other varying grade point averages would add the depth of educational knowledge. The selection procedures for this study resulted in all female students. Including male students would be a more accurate representation of the student body. This study was conducted at only one middle school. Consequently, the results may not be common to all students in the middle grades.

Future Direction

The data analysis in this study builds upon some important work regarding motivation in young adolescents. Increasing the sample size would be very beneficial towards understanding the work in this area further. A larger sample size that includes other school districts would help build a sample population more representative of the overall population of middle school students. Studying schools of varying student populations, demographics, sizes and locations would add to the growing knowledge of motivation, student voice work and appreciative inquiry in education. To further the insights gained in this study, research could expand into the other elements of appreciative inquiry. Divulging further into these elements would allow the construction of important knowledge regarding what teaching practices are best for motivation and strong student teacher relationships.

Conclusion

This study examined the perceptions of young adolescents regarding school climate, their teachers, and the classroom. Links were found through coding analysis regarding student motivation and student teacher relationships. The study analyzed appreciative inquiry interviews of two focus groups composed of student participants. Important implications regarding student motivation towards the goals and values of education were analyzed through data immersion.
Student acceptance by their peers, their teacher, and the school helps build the sense of connectedness and identity towards school. This identity and connectedness leads to higher levels of motivation for most at risk students. Without including this student population as part of the process towards school improvement and reform, we limit the amount of steps we can take towards more successful educational institutions.
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Appendix A

Appreciative inquiry response sheet for participants
1) Looking back over the year, can you name a time where you had a positive experience here at school? An experience where you were glad you were at school, experienced a lot of fun, or just happy to be a part of this school. What was happening? Who was involved?

2) What do you feel is working for you at this school? What motivates you to do well in school and want to keep coming? What are things we should keep continue doing?

3) Think back to the classes you have had at this school, which class was your favorite? Why was it your favorite class?

4) If you could make some changes to this school, what would you do?

5) How can teachers help and support you to be more successful at school?

6) Describe a time you were proud about a class project or homework assignment. Why were you proud?

7) What are some things that teachers do that help you succeed? That help you want to enter a class and be there?

8) What environment is important to you in a classroom, for example, furniture, decorations, etc.?