Writing to the Edge: Motivating Reluctant Rural Adolescent Male Learners

Marcia Scott Wright
Kennesaw State University

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Writing to the Edge:
Motivating Reluctant Rural Adolescent Male Learners

Marcia Scott Wright
Kennesaw State University
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DEDICATION

When I was in the fourth grade, my father, Ken Wright, commandeered my bedroom for a study in order to write his doctoral thesis, an analysis of Henry Fielding’s works for the theater, pre-Tom Jones. Dad’s project left me with a deep appreciation of his scholarship and tenacity (and a greater capacity to get along with my sister, Terry). In those days, of course, students found it necessary to sit for long hours at microfiche machines, wait for borrowed books to arrive from far-flung libraries, scribble their papers by hand, and hire a typist to produce their dissertations in triplicate using carbon paper. My mother Dot cheerfully did his typing, so that part of the process, at least, was easy.

My father lived with me for the last seven months of his life and died peacefully at the age of 97 in the spring of 2013. He was interested in this paper from its inception, and to him I dedicate this work.

This dissertation is also dedicated to the other members of my family, to whom I wish to express my deepest gratitude. It has been a four-generation project stemming from my father’s devotion to continued learning; it includes my mother’s and my sister’s enthusiastic dedication to helping people; it incorporates the diligence I observed in my children, Daniel Widner and Jennifer Clark, as they worked their way through college paying their own bills; and it comes to rest on the bright promise of my four grandchildren: Alexander, Andrew, and Allison Widner, and Caroline Clark. It also embraces the good will of my daughter-in-law Karen and my son-in-law Tim, as well as loving memories of my daughter Brittany, who along with my mother and father, has shuffled off this mortal coil, but who nevertheless, I believe, celebrates this accomplishment with us.
Besides those of my family, I borrowed the energies and firm determination of many people in order to accomplish this goal. First, I would like to express my gratitude to my friends Patsy Hamby, Jason Pritchett, John Bradford, and Jennifer Grazer, all of whom became Doctors of Education while I was still buying books on my topic. Having entered the doctoral program at Kennesaw as a cohort of high school English teachers, we shared our frustrations, delights, and doughnuts in a monthly Saturday morning meeting at the university, growing from befuddled graduate students into scholars of expertise and confidence. They helped me see how important it was to keep going, and I admire them all tremendously.

I also want to thank my colleagues at the high school in which this study was conducted for their interest and cooperative spirits. Over the years we shared many laughs and sorrows, and I will always value their friendships. This study happened in large part because they cared about my success.

Lastly, I want to thank my dissertation committee for their encouragement and patience throughout this journey. The wry good humor of Dr. Darren Crovitz helped me to weather the storms of missed deadlines, while Dr. Angela Blaver gave meticulous attention to my methodology as well as additional insights into motivation. I especially thank Dr. Dawn Kirby for her kindness and friendship since we first met at the inception of our 2008 cohort. Without her personal enthusiasm and professional approach, I would have wandered away. She told us this project would not be easy, but that our professors would be there to help us. She was right on both of those counts, and much more.
ABSTRACT

WRITING TO THE EDGE:
MOTIVATING RELUCTANT RURAL ADOLESCENT MALE LEARNERS

by

Marcia Scott Wright

High levels of motivation contribute to significant learning for high school English students in rural school settings. The current qualitative study examined the attitudes surrounding the motivation of six rural high school students and their teachers. These students had been identified as reluctant learners and placed in a remedial writing class during their ninth grade year. The students, two 12th graders and four 10th graders, discussed their perceptions of the motivational practices used by their English teachers and other teachers, revealing what they did and did not find to be personally motivational in the classroom. This study also investigated the attitudes and practices of the four teachers who taught these students English, comparing the teachers’ motivational teaching practices with the students’ perceptions. Data were collected through interviews, focus groups, classroom observations, and a student survey. The findings indicated that the teachers’ motivational teaching strategies and attitudes, though reflective of current research on productive methods to motivate learners, had little influence on the success of these students, who produced products below their level with little academic effort. Recommendations stemming from this study include building intrinsic motivation by promoting student autonomy, challenging students to explore their own interests, incorporating engaging interactions with reading and writing, and holding students to a high standard of achievement.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Signature Page</td>
<td>ii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Copyright Page</td>
<td>iii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dedication</td>
<td>iv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgements</td>
<td>v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>vi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter I: Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter II: Review of Literature</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter III: Methodology</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter IV: Findings</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 1: Teacher Participants</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 2: Student Participants</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 3: Motivational Strategies Used by Teachers</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 4: Student Responses to Motivational Strategies</td>
<td>102</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter V: Conclusions and Implications</td>
<td>109</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>References</td>
<td>135</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix A: Student Assent Form</td>
<td>149</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix B: Parent Consent Form</td>
<td>153</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix C: Teacher Consent Form</td>
<td>155</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix D: Student Survey</td>
<td>157</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix E: Student Interview Questions</td>
<td>158</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix F: Teacher Interview Questions</td>
<td>159</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix G: Student and Teacher Focus Group Questions</td>
<td>160</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix H: Open Codes</td>
<td>161</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Ten boys slouch into my classroom for a nine-week course on Communications Skills. They have been in 9th grade at my high school for a full seven months, and are about to finish up their 9th grade year—or at least some of them are. A few have been so unsuccessful in English, math, social studies, or science the first semester that they are projected to remain in the 9th grade for another year unless a parent becomes involved and insists on summer school to make up the deficit.

The boys all congregate in the back desks as far from me as possible, sitting slumped on their lower backs, looking hopefully for friends or girls. Some of them recognize and nod to each other, but the girls do not materialize; the few assigned to a similar remedial class are in other sections. Several of these young men have legs so long they have to sit sideways. One has legs so short that he can actually swing them. With an unbroken voice filled with disapproval, he asks, “What is this class about?”

“It's for us to work on your writing skills,” I answer in my friendliest tone, “and other ways to communicate.”

“I can communicate just fine,” snarls a big boy to his neighbor. “See this fist? Don't make me use it.” The other boy laughs and pushes him away.

“I don't need no writin' class,” growls the one on the left. “I never write nothin' and don't never plan to.”
“There’s a test you have to pass in 11th grade if you want to graduate; since you didn’t pass your eighth grade writing test, they figured you need some extra practice,” I explain. “That’s why you were scheduled for this class.”

“I need out,” states the one on the right in a frightened tone, sounding as though he’s fallen into a snake pit. “Get me out of here.”

“No choice,” I say.

“Anyway, who plans to graduate?” Laughter and agreement ensue. They are in this together.

“Well, I ain't doing nothin,” says Lefty, sliding even further down in his chair and folding his arms with finality. “It's a waste of my time. Nobody writes nuthin’ these days, 'cept maybe textin’, and my mom took my phone away last week.”

Amid murmurs of “stupid” and “need to see the principal,” I wonder how I will ever engage their interest enough for them to put a pencil to paper.

In the fall of 2007, I was excited about the potential of our school’s new addition: 20 classrooms in a dedicated 9th grade wing, where the newest students to our school would be separated from the rest of the school’s students for English, math, science, and social studies. In addition to holding my drama classes in the main building, I looked forward to seeing more of the teachers of these other 9th grade subjects, and in meetings we agreed that we would be better able to welcome these freshmen, nurture them, and give them the best start we could devise. No more loitering in the other halls with the upper classmen, learning obscene language and how to be tardy; the students would be supported by the collaborative efforts of their 9th grade teachers. Leaving my original classroom, the older students, and American literature courses was a difficult decision;
but I had already been the sole teacher of the Honors Nine English classes, so it reasonably followed that volunteering to teach English exclusively to 9th graders would simplify my teaching duties. I packed my gear and moved to the new wing along with two of my language arts colleagues, two social studies teachers, three math teachers, two science teachers, and several facilitators of special needs students. The upper classmen were forbidden to visit us, and the hall seemed very quiet.

During my six years in the 9th grade building, I found inspiration for my professional practice from the young people who came from our two middle schools. The Honors program attracted that diligent, friendly student who loves reading during vacations, who writes with insight and fluidity, and who forms opinions, in many instances, independently of local culture. As school began each August, I looked forward to the challenges and joys these students in my three Honors Nine English classes would bring. In the classrooms of my two neighboring language arts colleagues, the rest of the 9th grade English students also seemed to thrive on their engaging assignments, connections to popular culture, and lively class discussions. Having constructed a curriculum guide some years prior based on the state’s Performance Standards (now the national Common Core Curriculum), the 9th grade teachers adhered to it while we worked through the short stories, poetry, epics, Shakespearean plays, and novels common to the 9th grade experience. Supported by skilled teachers with high expectations for student success, most of our students moved into 10th grade with little difficulty.

Approximately 40 students each year, however, came to us ill-prepared for success in high school, and we enrolled these students in Communications Skills, a remedial writing course. Sometimes these students had passed 9th grade English in the
first semester, sometimes not; and some took Communications Skills concurrently with regular English Nine during the second semester. This class was created, as I told the students, to provide additional writing support to those who had not passed their 8th grade writing exam, and although it was labeled an “elective,” the students were usually surprised when the class appeared on their schedules, since “elective” in this case did not mean “I have chosen to take this class.”

Often these students struggled with more than just writing. Hostile or apathetic attitudes, lack of motivation, disruptive behavior, limited study skills, and difficult home lives frequently contributed toward their lack of success (Finn, 2009; McLaren, 1998). These students often illustrated the declining interest in learning that some young people, particularly boys, experience as they move through the grades. Losing the early enthusiasm that most young children experience toward school, adolescents in the high school often find academic tasks tedious and annoying (Brozo, 2010; Gallagher, 2009; Smith & Wilhelm, 2006), allowing their learning to decline through boredom, apathy, and poor attendance.

Through the years, my Communications Skills classes afforded me the opportunity to acquaint myself with these students, who were mostly male between the ages of 13 and 16. I observed these students to be acutely aware of their surroundings but rarely focused on the book or paper before them and to possess strong opinions they absorbed from the nightly news, family talk, and each other, but without the knowledge to support these views. They entertained me with verbal stories of their skills and interests but could not possibly write any of that down in an organized paper. They told me they loved Construction Skills because it was full of noise and dangerous tools, but I
could not persuade them to read longer than 20 minutes at a time. My Communications Skills students were bright, energetic, friendly, and completely non-cooperative. They never had paper, rarely had a pencil, and specialized in conversations that had nothing to do with writing.

“Do we gotta have this class to graduate?” George asks me on the second day of class.

I open my mouth to say, honestly, “No,” but Ross interrupts. “She already told you, ‘Yes, ’Dummy, yesterday. The test, remember?” I don’t correct this misconception; I want them to put forth some effort.

“So, what if we fail in here?” George asks.

“You won't fail,” I say with confidence, pretending that has never happened in this course. “You'll turn in all your assignments, and I'll show you where you need to fix things.”

They are right to look skeptical at that vague and optimistic statement.

“What are you interested in?” I ask them on a daily basis, but they look at each other and shrug.

“Nuthin’ at this school,” they reply with emphasis and slide farther down in their desks.

“So we’re in here because we can’t write, right, Ms. Wright?” asks Simon one day with mischief in his eye. “We need extra help in here? It’s like a remedial course fixing our problems?” He pauses as he works on his joke. “This is like—rehabilitation!”
“Rehab! Writing rehab!” shouts Trevor, turning to Simon and sharing a loud high-five and a long laugh. I hope the other students find the humor in that label as hilarious as they do.

The second week, in an attempt to pique their interest in this class’s activities, which so far they have systematically resisted (“I can’t think of nuthin’ to write about.”), I construct an assignment that instructs them to select a place they enjoy visiting or would like to visit. Pretending their financial resources are unlimited, they are to plan an itinerary with which they thoroughly explore this place and then present their findings to the class. They receive this assignment enthusiastically; however, they all want to feature their uncle’s leased deer-hunting acreage in South Georgia and brag about the antics they engage in there, which seem to involve a lot of beer and blood. So I quickly modify the assignment to have them choose a location outside the contiguous United States.

Using the classroom computers, they cut-and-paste their way through Alaska, Italy, and Monaco in a matter of 30 minutes, padding their papers with pictures of snow-capped mountains, magnificent buildings, and ancient art they could not later identify.

“What is this lake?” I ask. “What region of France is it in?”

I receive a blank stare. “I have no idea. It was just a pretty picture on the website,” Trevor tells me. “Look at those girls in those bathing suits.”

“Who painted this landscape?” I ask George. “You should know if you’ve included it in your report. Its purpose is to inform me and the class about Italy.”

George cannot answer my question, but he is honest. “I just put it there to take up space,” he says. “Some old guy way back.”
Based on their inability to provide any details about their papers, I try to address their detachment. “You don’t seem to care about your destinations,” I say. “I thought you’d be interested in the place you chose. It was your own decision!”

“We ain’t never gonna git to any of these places,” they reply in chorus. “Ain’t no point to this. This travelin’ stuff ain’t are thang. We ain’t never gonna use this stuff.”

Two weeks into the class I realize that the students are turning in paragraphs that look like half a page, but which are actually composed of 30 or fewer words. They are printing in very large letters and stopping an inch before their pencils reach the faint red margin line on the right side of their notebook paper. Most of them are turning in some thoughts on the topic of the day, but they are just barely doing so.

They are still mad, too.

“I could have passed that freakin' test last year,” says Kyle, glumly considering his socks, “but I was pissed off at my English teacher, so I didn’t even try. He really hated me, and I felt the same way about him.”

“Like he cares you got put in here,” jeers his friend. “He’s hasslin’ another group of eighth graders by now and forgotten all about you.”

“I don’t see why we have to learn to write anyway,” gripes Trevor, who is often the center of attention in the class. “Nobody writes for their job.”

“Your dad is the sheriff,” I point out. “I'm sure he writes for his job.”

“Naw, his secretary does all that stuff,” he responds. “He never writes a thing. I won’t use this. Just like math.”

They spend the next ten minutes discussing the frustrations of the new math curriculum, which nobody seems to understand, because of, they say, the “weird”
teachers they have. The day before, the litany of complaints featured the “sucky lunches they serve here,” and they couldn't solve that problem either; but the conversation took up class time, so they thought it was well worth the effort.

Trying to help them build the habit of writing every day, I manage to distribute that day’s journal topic, which features a short literary selection upon which they are supposed to reflect. They settle down, we read the handout together, and they finally begin to write after I provide pencils from my desk and separate two who will not stop whispering. “Anyway,” I say, “today you need to write to the edge of the paper.”

Progress on their paragraphs stops, and they look up, startled into silence.

“See this line?” I say, pointing to the faint right-hand red ink on a sheet of notebook paper. “It marks the margin on the back side. It's not telling you to stop there on the front. That’s the left margin line bleeding through from the back. See? Write all the way to the edge.”

After an electric pause, a cacophony of protests fills the air as pencils are flung down in disgust and boots clonk the floor.

“That's not what they said at the middle school!”

“I'm not!”

“That's stupid! They've always told us to stop here at the line on the front, right here!”

“You said if we write down to the second hole we can get a hundred!”

“That's if you don't make any mistakes,” I say over the din. “And this is the high school, where we write to the edge. The red line is for the other side of the paper. You can't get credit for a paragraph that is only 25 words because you're only writing in the
center of the page. Look at this! Four words to the line! How can you say anything significant in 25 words? Write to the edge today!”

The grumbling subsides. A thoughtful silence descends as the students contemplate their papers, and I go back to my desk in the unaccustomed quiet.

“I got them,” I think smugly, settling down to address a lesson plan. But after a peaceful minute or two, I hear a gentle ripping sound, little bits of paper being torn from a larger page.

“I'll write to the edge,” says Trevor in a quiet voice that sounds inexplicably happy. They all look over at him, watch for a minute, and their faces light up. They like what they see.

“Me, too,” answers Simon, not so quietly.

Additional ripping noises begin to interrupt my concentration.

“Great idea!” shouts another. Rip, rip.

“Look, Ms. Wright! My writing’s to the edge now!”

The whole room is filled with paper-tearing noises, and I watch in disbelief as every boy removes the portion of his page that is to the right of the red line, gently easing it off inch by inch without damaging the rest of the sheet. After a few more minutes of pencil-scribbling, in great satisfaction they clean up the paper scraps from the floor and turn in their assignments, certain that their papers are acceptable. There's no more writing on their papers than usual, still only 25 or 30 words, but the words are indeed reaching to the edge, which is now as evenly deckled as expensive stationery.

I have a very hard time suppressing laughter, and my only thought is, “They got me!”
Motivation in the New Educational Context

The Common Core Georgia Performance Standards (CCGPS), adopted in the summer of 2011, are comprised of five areas in which language arts teachers are mandated to instruct students: Reading for Literature; Reading for Information; Writing; Speaking and Listening; and Language, which includes grammar and vocabulary (Georgia Department of Education, 2013). In order to prepare for college or a career, students graduating from high school are expected to be able to accomplish the following, paraphrased from the Georgia DOE website:

- Employ strong, thorough, and explicit textual evidence in their literary analyses and technical research.
- Understand the development of multiple ideas through details and structure.
- Track the development of complex characters and advanced elements of plot such as frame narratives and parallel storylines.
- In writing, reflect the ability to argue effectively, employing the structure, evidence, and rhetoric necessary in the composition of effective, persuasive texts.
- Construct college-ready research papers of significant length in accordance with the guidelines of standard format styles such as APA and MLA.
- Build strong and varied vocabularies across multiple content areas, including technical subjects.
- Employ rhetoric and figurative language, purposefully construct tone and mood, and identify lapses in reason or ambiguities in texts.
- Recognize nuances of meaning imparted by mode of presentation, whether live drama, spoken word, digital media, film, dance, or fine art.
• Demonstrate confident familiarity with important foundational documents from American history and from the development of literature over time.

• Graduate with the fully developed ability to communicate in multiple modes of discourse demonstrating a strong command of the rules of Standard English.

Students will learn to “identify lapses in reason or ambiguities” in texts they read in class? “Purposefully construct tone and mood?” “Demonstrate confident familiarity with foundational documents?” “Recognize nuances of meaning” in presentations and art? These tasks can probably be accomplished by our Honors students by the time they graduate, but Writing Rehab students, if they even grasp the terminology, will pigeonhole these concepts in the same niche with their foreign countries assignment (“We ain’t never gonna use this stuff.”). Motivating reluctant learners, students who are capable of working at a higher level but who won’t, is a challenge faced by every teacher.

Incorporating these standards, with their necessary classroom discussion, instruction, and practice, presumably assures success in the eight End-of-Course Tests currently required for graduation, plus the Georgia High School Writing Test in 11th grade. In April 2011, the Georgia Department of Education (GADOE) rescinded the requirement that during the 11th grade year, students must pass an additional test in each academic field in order to graduate. The GADOE kept only the Writing Test and the end-of-course tests (EOCTs) as standardized test requirements for receiving a diploma. However, even with this standardized testing regimen somewhat mitigated, test preparation remains an important part of weekly classroom activities. Teachers reserve the computer labs for on-line testing practice, thus reducing time that might be better spent with activities featuring exploration, analysis, and critical thinking, the kinds of
Writing to the Edge

activities preferred for students such as those in a class like Communications Skills (Brozo, 2010; Finn, 2009; Ravitch, 2010). Although some teachers and administrators believe that test practice is effective for increasing the passing rate on the standardized End-of-Course tests that reluctant male adolescent students must face (M. Wright, personal communication, June 2013), that practice does not necessarily enhance their critical thinking skills nor encourage them to become self-directed learners responsible for much of their own progress through school. Also, practicing a multiple-choice test on a computer may not have much effect toward attaining the higher-level academic goals mandated by the Common Core national standards for English language arts.

Research (McCombs & Pope, 1994) indicates that without some form of intrinsic or extrinsic motivation, or some combination thereof, learning generally cannot happen. Some researchers conceive of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation as lying on the same continuum; extrinsic motivators, common in the early years of schooling, may include colorful stars on a child’s satisfactory daily work or the reward of a small prize at the end of the week (Pink, 2009). Intrinsic motivation is motivation to engage in an activity for its own sake and may produce greater learning and achievement than does extrinsic motivation (Schunk, Pintrich, & Meece, 2008). Students’ intrinsic motivation can be affected by challenge, curiosity, control, and fantasy, and students have a need to believe that they can exert some control over the outcomes of their learning (Schunk et al., 2008). The self-determination theories of Deci and Ryan (2008) suggest that students who are given greater autonomy in school activities may learn to be more self-directed and that intrinsic motivation to learn will thus increase. Schunk, Pintrich, and Meece (2008) suggest that extrinsic and intrinsic motivations have separate continuums, and that a
person may experience differing levels of each type of motivation at any given time, according to the situation and the perceived goals. They continue as follows:

Activities are intrinsically motivating when they challenge students’ skills, present information or ideas that are discrepant from students’ present knowledge and beliefs and that appear surprising or incongruous, provide students with a sense of control over outcomes, and involve learners in fantasy and make-believe through simulations and games that present situations not actually present. (p. 269)

Research suggests that for many students the early eagerness for learning they bring to the initial elementary years fades into disinterest by fourth grade (Gallagher, 2009; NCTE, 2005; Quate & McDermott, 2009). Researchers have attempted to analyze the intrinsic motivation that babies and young children display when they are given the freedom to explore the world of their immediate surroundings (Pink, 2009), and indeed Dewey himself was a strong proponent of allowing exploratory freedom in schools that could lead students to develop motivation, which he defines as the “realization of intelligent purpose” (Dewey, 1938, p. 32). The current trend in standardized testing is of major concern to many classroom teachers and curriculum leaders (Gallagher, 2009; Ravitch, 2010) who wish to promote pedagogy similar to Dewey’s, engage the interests of students, and help them build the habit of life-long learning (McCombs, 1991) that will serve them well in later life. Systematic learning strategies can promote the growth of self-regulation (Schunk & Zimmerman, 1998), which has been linked to increased motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2008; McCombs & Pope, 1994; Zimmerman, Bonner, &
Kovach, 1996), and possessing those skills could promote the further success of students long after high school. Yet research indicates that many teachers may be unfamiliar with the particular strategies available to help develop internal motivation in students (Hardre & Sullivan, 2008) and that many teachers feel frustrated that some students do not respond to their efforts. Although the teachers at Magnolia Cove appeared to have confidence in teaching strategies they used to help motivate their students, these strategies largely seemed to be extrinsic motivators and fell short of supplying help for all of their learners. They worried about the students they could not seem to reach, as evidenced in this workroom conversation:

“They won’t turn in homework, and I have to hand out zeros right and left! I feel bad when that happens.”

“Me, too. I don’t know how to motivate them to study for tests or even read a simple short story outside of class. They make their own bad grades by not doing homework, and it’s hard to be sympathetic.”

“I have three who sleep through class, every day. Is it my job to keep them awake?”

Research suggests that students’ motivation to succeed may be enhanced when educators encourage their students through social support, help them develop their will to learn, and help them utilize their cognitive skills through instruction and practice (McCombs, 1991). Students who experience a positive emotional climate in school may be able to discover their natural inclination to “grow and develop in positive ways” (McCombs, 1991, p. 123), displaying enhanced volition by using their common sense in a learning environment that is responsive to their individual needs and interests. Some
researchers (Hardre & Sullivan, 2008) indicate that even teachers who perceive themselves as holding a high sense of efficacy in motivating students admit that they do not have systematic knowledge and tools for diagnosis and intervention, that they use “reasoned guessing” (Hardre & Sullivan, 2008, p. 2072) to help students, but that they may often attempt these interventions without theoretical or other foundational knowledge.

Motivation in a Rural Setting

The issues confronting schools in a rural setting are distinct from those faced by urban systems (Hardre & Reeve, 2003; Hardre & Sullivan, 2008). The isolation brought on by long distances to competition venues, the lack of near-by opportunities for employment and post-secondary education, and the absence of parents who must spend extra hours commuting to work serve to complicate life for students in a rural community. Because the school in which this study occurred is the only high school in the county, competition between local schools was necessarily non-existent; and while some of the school’s athletic and academic teams successfully competed with teams from beyond the county line, those long journeys absorbed valuable instructional and leisure time. Further, finding experts to help develop the talent of students in the county was sometimes a difficult task. For example, students in my theatre classes at the time of this study had only recently gained access to a male voice teacher for private lessons, and a recent school board decision that prohibited school employees charging fees to teach students in private settings threatened to shutter the only dance studio in town (Personal communication, April, 2013). Still, Csikszentmihalyi (1990) claims that children who are exposed to positive opportunities for enrichment at a young age are more likely to seek
and accept other challenges in school and in their personal lives as they grow older. Parents and teachers who seek to build motivation in young people may find many opportunities to do so in a rural setting, in many instances with fewer complications such as traffic jams and crowded learning venues.

At the time of this study, Magnolia Cove High School was a more modern facility with less crowded conditions than most of the other schools in the region. For example, during the two decades I taught at the school, the total enrollment increased by only 24 students per year, to total 1,300 in the fall of 2012. In addition to the 20-classroom 9th grade wing built in 2007 onto the original 1998 building, the county added a gym complex and an 840-seat auditorium in 2009 to enhance the programs for performing arts and basketball and to promote the school as a community facility. Funds were annually apportioned to make certain that the school’s technology configuration continued to expand, with six rooms dedicated as computer labs, continuous teacher support for new technology applications in the classroom, and professionally produced programs that facilitated on-line attendance and grade keeping. With these efforts by the local school board and county elected officials to build and maintain an excellent facility, students experienced advantages not enjoyed by other rural schools in the area, such as a state-of-the-art theatre space and rapid Internet access.

The county in which this study was conducted is defined by the Census Bureau as part of the metropolitan area of a major Southern city; however, the population of the county stood at 29,500 as of April 2012, and the average commute to work was 30 minutes (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012), greater than the commute of the average resident of the state. Yet, a large percentage of the high school’s student population took advantage
of the opportunities and resources provided by their parents and the school, finding post-secondary options that were accessible and affordable. In 2008, the latest year for which figures are available, 40% of the school’s 263 graduates planned to attend college, 13% planned to attend technical school, and 19% were already employed (Personal communication, August 21, 2012).

Post-secondary options near Magnolia Cove included either enrolling at the local campus of the state’s two-year technical college system, or being faced with a drive no shorter than one hour to the east, south, or north, and nearly that far to the west. No four-year institution lies within the county line. Thus, Magnolia Cove students may not witness how an older brother or sister attending college might remain motivated to accomplish assignments for advanced classes, or perhaps decide to get a job to help with expenses. Actually witnessing that older sibling’s success in college or a career could be of great benefit for building motivation in the younger person.

Another liability of growing up in a rural setting is that young people may lack the benefit and support colleges often bring to a community: diverse cultural activities; the expertise of faculty who may offer private lessons and tutoring; opportunities to participate in more challenging aspects of performing arts and academic work; or workshops and seminars that develop wider interests (Hardre, Sullivan, & Crowson, 2009), and as a by-product, greater motivation to learn. Additionally, professional people who have found success can be excellent motivational role models for young people.

At the time of this study, the number of American students attending rural schools was reported to be 9.6 million, a number estimated as approximately 23% of our nation’s schoolchildren (Rural School and Community Trust, 2013). Over the past several years,
many researchers have focused on the success, or lack thereof, of students in urban
settings (Finn, 2009; McLaren, 1998; Smith & Wilhelm, 2002; Smith & Wilhelm, 2006),
but fewer studies have been generated by researchers interested in the rural portion of the
nation’s school children (Hardre & Sullivan, 2008) and few of these studies utilize
observed classroom practices. This study aimed to provide insights into the motivational
attitudes and instructional practices of teachers in a rural high school, what their students
believed about those attitudes and practices, and how those practices may have
influenced the students’ academic achievement.

Research Questions

This research project attempted to examine the following questions:
1. To what extent do language arts teachers perceive themselves to be motivators of
   student learning for reluctant rural adolescent male learners?
   1a. what strategies do language arts teachers claim to use to motivate
       reluctant rural adolescent male learners?
   1b. what motivational strategies are observable for reluctant rural male
       adolescent learners in the language arts teachers’ practices?
2. To what extent do rural reluctant adolescent male learners perceive their language arts
   teachers to be motivators for success in language arts?
   2a. what strategies do reluctant rural adolescent male students claim are
       effective motivating strategies in the language arts classroom to keep
       them engaged in learning?
   2b. what motivational student behaviors are observable in the language
       arts classroom?
An investigation of these questions generated themes concerning how the teachers at this rural high school attempted to help reluctant male students find motivation to learn, and how their reluctant male students perceived these attitudes and strategies. The students themselves provided suggestions for pedagogy that could possibly promote greater engagement of their interest in learning. However, none of the observed strategies or suggested practices appeared to promote the building of self-efficacy (Zimmerman, Bonner, & Kovack, 2006). Students who struggled with daily assignments in high school were generally supported with a positive classroom environment and teachers who cared about their success, but they were not taught specific strategies that could lead to greater self-efficacy and intrinsic motivation to learn.

Definition of Terms

For the purposes of this study of male students:

- *reluctant learner* is defined as one whose grade point average is at or below passing and who is considered by his language arts teacher as capable of higher academic achievement. This student may display disengagement, boredom, lack of preparation, disorganization, disruptive behaviors, or a combination of these. Further discussion of “reluctant learner” is addressed in the Literature Review.

- *adolescent learner* is defined as a high school student.

- *motivation* is defined as behaviors that result in activating, directing, and persisting in the accomplishment of a desired goal (Alderman, 2008). Motivation is often a hybrid of extrinsic and intrinsic motivations, which may function on one continuum or on separate continuums (Schunk, Pintrich, & Meece, 2008). Further discussion of this concept is located in the Literature Review.
literacy is defined as the knowledge and use of any form of communication, encompassing the multi-modal forms found in written and oral language, art both published and performed, and that expressed through electronic means such as the Internet and social media (Gee, 2000; Rycik, 2008). Today’s students access personal skills in multiple forms of literacy both at home and at school. Further discussion of a modern view of literacy is found in the Literature Review.

Origin of the Study

Watching my reluctant students in Communications Skills struggle with their daily writing assignments helped me realize that my teaching practices seldom incorporated strategies to promote motivation in my students, and that I did not know enough about how to motivate them. I simply expected them to do their work because that is what students are supposed to do, and I had few strategies to teach them how to want to do that. I did not know then that the volition to learn can be developed, and that by increments and continued successful experiences in the classroom, a student’s intrinsic motivation and agency to achieve may be increased. Additionally, by the teacher conversations in the workrooms, I knew that my colleagues also felt baffled by these students.

Knowing little at the outset of my doctoral studies about the pedagogy of motivation as it leads to self-efficacy and self-regulation, I pursued those avenues of scholarship to increase my understanding of how those ideas could lead to better classroom practice. I continually watched my Honors 9th grade students to gain insight into how they became and stayed motivated to achieve the rigorous assignments I gave
them, which began with the reading and analysis of four books the summer before they came to the high school.

Occasionally, I would ask these high-achieving students, “How do you get so much done?” and they would respond that they “just kept at it” until they were finished. They were motivated by their goals of pleasing their parents, earning good grades for going to college, and preparing for a lucrative career. They were competitive. Some of them also seemed to love learning new things just because it was fun. They brought in their favorite books, music, and websites for me to admire and never seemed to run out of ideas to discuss.

I wanted to know why, then, the students in Communications Skills, who oftentimes displayed just as much intelligence as these Honors students, so obviously lacked the motivation they needed to succeed at even the simplest writing assignment. I wanted to know what I could do to help them. Perhaps the attitude of the student in Writing Rehab was an outcome of earlier interactions at a school where teachers awarded high grades for inadequate work. Perhaps the student had been disappointed by chronically poor performances on assignments for which he had not yet developed the skills, and was now afraid to try. Perhaps it was a simple matter of boredom, facing lessons which had no perceivable connection to his life. I wanted to know if the other English teachers in my school had developed specific strategies for helping their unmotivated students, and if they held greater understanding of these students. As a caring teacher, I wanted to discover any other practices I might develop to help these students grow into a more productive mindset toward school, which could then lead them to greater success in their activities after high school.
CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

A Modern View of Literacy

The definition of literacy has undergone a significant change over the past 15 to 20 years and thus has a much broader meaning and scope than in the days of the “3 R’s” (Alvermann & Hinchman, 2012; Christenbury, Bomer, & Smagorinsky, 2009; Rush, Eakle, & Berger, 2007). No longer do educators consider literacy as simply the ability to read the printed word or to write one’s name; instead, theorists today consider the concept of literacy as the engagement of one’s comprehension in an unfamiliar text and the possession of the ability to take a critical stance toward that text (Lankshear & Knobel, 2006; Stevens, 2008). The present-day “semiotic perspective” (Christenbury, Bomer, & Smagorinsky, 2009, p. 7) holds that literacy involves the ability to make meaning from any human construction composed of signs, and that literacy is grounded in social interaction within a local culture, a perspective that suggests which usage is important and which is not (Brandt & Clinton, 2002; Gee, 1996; Heath, 1983). The ability to build meaning, whether private or cultural, from a wide array of complex constructions, is essential to claiming that one possesses literacy.

In reference to the continuing development of information and communications technologies now of such great importance in schools, recent theorists have coined the terms “multiliteracy” and “multimodality” (Leu, Zawilinski, Castek, Banerjee, Housand, Liu, & O’Neil, 2007), suggesting the complexities of design and composition involved in
the process of creating and making meaning from these new approaches. Thus, the full set of experiences and attitudes that students may bring to a social interaction influences the meaning they make from any text: written, heard, spoken, viewed, acted, or otherwise experienced (Alvermann & Hinchman, 2012; Lankshear & Knobel, 2006; NCTE, 2005; Scott, Parr, & Richardson, 2008). The concept of literacy has expanded in recent years to include a much wider connotation of communication than in previous years, and thus to make much greater demands on students’ attention, skills, and comprehension. Following is a brief look at several important views of how literacy might enrich the lives of today’s high school students, particularly reluctant male adolescents.

Freire: Connecting literacy to action

Literacy in the modern classroom is often strongly related to the practice of social justice, arising from the work of Paulo Freire (1970). During the 1960’s, the government of Brazil assigned Freire to conduct classes in reading for impoverished Brazilian agricultural workers. Freire found that the workers’ academic progress was influenced positively when he began to connect their lessons to situations in their lives as farmers and citizens of the country. Not only did they learn to read and write, but they also learned to take an active interest in the position they occupied in their society (Freire, 1970). During their lessons, Freire and his students explored issues of social justice that impacted their lives, increasing their understanding of their own society while increasing their literacy skills, and connecting their emerging literacy to a meaningful and beneficial outcome.

In ensuing years, through the World Council of Churches and other organizations concerned with education, Freire continued his literacy work in other countries struggling
with oppression such as Guinea-Bissau and Nicaragua (Freire & Macedo, 1987). From these experiences, Freire developed his idea that learning should be directly connected to the world of the learner, reflect personal relevance, and suggest possibilities for affecting change toward an improved life (Freire, 1970; Freire & Macedo, 1987). Freire and his colleagues promoted the idea that literacy could bring a better balance of power through an informed citizenry.

Although the reluctant male adolescents in a rural high school may not qualify to be termed “informed citizenry” at the outset of 9th grade, teachers may find that significant engagement and growth occur when lessons are connected to social issues. For example, teacher Erin Gruwell (1999) inspired reluctant, at-risk high school writers during the early years of her career by providing them with knowledge and experiences they had never encountered in their crowded urban lives, changing the outlooks of many by her persistent efforts to help them see beyond the chain link fences of their own neighborhoods. She sought to help these students make a personal connection to real life that resulted in their taking significant action on behalf of others. So too, may teachers bring issues of social justice to a rural setting to increase the awareness of their students of the social issues confronting many teens in different times and places.

**Vygotsky: Connecting literacy to social context**

In addition to Freire, other theorists have come to accept a much broader application of literacy than simply the ability to read texts or sign one’s name. These theorists have connected literacy skills with the surrounding culture of the classroom and school. The sociocultural constructivist theories of Vygotsky (1978) emphasize the social environment in which a child learns. The culture of the learner provides the context
through which interpersonal, cultural-historical, and individual interactions are experienced and constructed (Schunk, 2008). Thus, in the view of the sociocultural constructivist, school is organized around the context of the child’s culture, and learning is a “process of acculturation into an established community of practice” (Duffy & Cunningham, 1996, p. 175). Vygotsky developed the important learning theory he calls the zone of proximal development (ZPD) which he describes as follows:

. . . the distance between the actual developmental level of a child as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 86)

The ZPD represents the amount of support a child would need from a teacher, a parent, or from a more able peer to accomplish tasks for which he or she currently has neither sufficient knowledge nor sufficient skill (Schunk, 2008). With initial support, the child may increase his or her knowledge and skills to a level at which the support might be gradually withdrawn, allowing the child to becomes self-directed as the new learning is incorporated “under his conscious control for his own use,” becoming “self-regulated and independent” (Duffy & Cunningham, 1996, p. 183).

Duffy and Cunningham (1996) explain Vygotsky’s (1978) idea that when children work within their zones of development, they each create a cognitive partnership with the teacher, and that when children grow to incorporate the learning by bringing it under their control, they then impact the surrounding culture. Schunk (2008), however, believes that Vygotsky overstates the importance of the cultural environment in learning, pointing out that children acquire many concepts about “the way the world operates” (Schunk, 2008,
p. 244) before they have had much interaction with their culture outside of the home. These theorists agree, however, that a child's learning changes not only the child but also the context in which the learning takes place.

Sociocultural constructivists believe that with its potential connections to the social context of the learner, literacy may exert a practical, immediate, and beneficial impact on one’s life and on the lives of others whose voices may be only a distant murmur of need (Shor & Pari, 1999). These connections may be instrumental in building motivation to learn. In modern classrooms such as at Magnolia Cove High School, students may find that literacy functions as a tool to help create meaning within one’s social context, ideally leading to a wider view, greater understanding of one’s position in the world, the realization of one’s full potential, advancement in life, and ultimately greater prosperity (Friere, 1970; Friere & Macedo, 1987; Shor & Pari, 1999).

Unfortunately, the typical modern high school language arts classroom, with its teacher-led focus and emphasis on standardized testing, frequently fails to reflect this view. In many cases these ideals, rather like the Common Core standards, may seem unattainable.

Educators concerned with the whole student, however, may find the ideas of the social constructivists compelling (Christenson, 2009; Gallagher, 2009; Ravitch, 2010). According to Friere and Macedo’s (1987) outcomes, students who acquire socially-relevant, skillful critical literacy in multiple ways of expression could potentially develop the desire and abilities to affect positive change in their communities and in the world. As schools compete for money and status via standardized-testing scores, which may reflect only part of the student’s academic achievements, the disconnect between the national curriculum standards and the student becomes more pronounced (Gallagher, 2009;
Ravitch, 2010). Emphasis on fact-based, mandated subject matter, in addition to being demotivational, may cause students to miss the valuable connections to their culture and social surroundings that relevant learning has the potential to create.

_Rosenblatt: Connecting literacy to thoughtful response_

As the proponents of critical literacy espouse reading and writing as a way to connect the student with the wider world, so Louise Rosenblatt promotes literacy as a way to connect the student to his or her inner world as well as to help make meaning for the world in which the student lives. Her seminal work, *Literature as Exploration* (1938), and her wide array of subsequent articles and books (Rosenblatt, 2005) have wielded great influence on teachers seeking to help their students make personal connections to literature in the classroom. Rosenblatt (1978) distinguishes two stances a reader may be motivated to assume when responding to a text (Church, 1997): the efferent reading stance, which one assumes when motivated to acquire information, and the aesthetic reading stance, which one assumes when motivated to respond to a text by transacting with it, acquiring inward self-knowledge by making personal connections to the text. Rosenblatt’s transactional theory (1978, 1988, 2005) suggests that to make meaning from a book or other literary text, students may benefit from incorporating their personal experiences and opinions to help make connections (Rosenblatt, 1938). Instead of simply reading the text to glean a view of its literary structure or its author’s social commentary, the student using Rosenblatt’s theory of reader response (1938) pauses periodically in deliberate consideration of any personal meaning the text may hold for him or her (Church, 1997). The student is then able to make an emotional connection to the text that
in some way influences his or her thinking on a more permanent basis, constructing lasting meaning from the text.

Researchers and teachers believe that incorporating Rosenblatt’s transactional theory (1978) as a way of responding to texts opens a student’s understanding of a text, allowing it to enrich his or her life and affecting a change in the reader (Gallagher, 2009; Kirby & Crovitz, 2013; Langer, 2009; Rosenblatt, 1978; Rosenblatt, 2005; Smith & Wilhelm, 2006). Noting the importance of responding personally to literary and other types of texts, Kirby and Crovitz (2013) write:

“Transactional texts—fiction, nonfiction, poetry, informational, visual, nonverbal, and a broad range of others—are at the core of contemporary schooling and life. We want our students to notice the abundance of texts that they encounter daily. Beyond mere noticing, however, a primary goal for us is that our students transact with texts as they read them, write them, and respond to them” (p. 250).

With the many selections of adolescent literature now available to students, finding a novel with which to craft a personal connection may be a simple matter of a visit to the school library. During their 9th grade year, the two seniors in the present study were introduced to the Hunger Games series (Collins, 2008) by their enthusiastic English teacher and went on to read the second and third books in the series, clearly making a personal connection that endured. Not only did the action-filled stories grip their imaginations, but they learned to appreciate the struggles of some of the characters. Research (Brozo, 2010) suggests that books filled with action and adventure such as Collins’ appeal to reluctant readers and writers, often on a personal level. Students may
find increased motivation to learn when they are given opportunities to explore new ideas and other worlds through literature to which they can make a personal response.

*Street and Gee: Connecting literacy to everyday use*

Brian Street and James P. Gee position literacy as social practice, connecting the student’s literacy worlds, the everyday use of literacy, across school and home (Gee, 1996; Street, 1995). In the school of thought termed New Literacy Studies (Street, 2003), Street, Gee, and others (i.e., Moje & Lewis, 2007) see the acquisition of literacy skills as an avenue to Discourse with a capital “D,” defined by Gee as the stance a person assumes as part of daily living, or the communities of language practitioners of which one becomes a part, which may vary from situation to situation. For example, during the course of one day, a teacher could function smoothly as a member of her students’ academic Discourse in her classroom at work, as a member of the Discourse of friends and colleagues in the teacher workroom at lunchtime, perhaps in a social setting such as an exercise class after work, and later at home as a wife and parent. Gee (1996) and Street (1995) believe that literacy as social practice blurs the boundaries of literacy usage, promoting the uses and meanings of literacy across contexts such as school, social communities, and home. Literacy as a social practice is seen as a continuum rather than as a dichotomy between academic language and home language. Street (1995) states the following:

> A social practice approach to literacy in use pushes us towards recognizing the considerable overlap across these boundaries as people, texts, and practices track through different settings and scenes: Children move between home and school; teachers and facilitators bring 'sedimented'
features of their background and 'habitus' to bear on their educational practice. (p. 5)

Learners “take hold” of literacy (Street, 1995, p. 15) and make it their own, using it as they see fit and to their own purposes, which may not always be those of school. Situated learning occurs across time and space in specific social contexts. The development of academic literacies in school directs our attention to the broader and more socially based uses of literacy which in many instances occur outside of school to assist learners in constructing meaning.

Helping students learn to utilize their varying literacies by encouraging their individuality may increase motivation in some reluctant learners (Alderman, 2008; Dweck, 2006; McCombs, 1994). In some situations, teachers of adolescents (Smith & Wilhelm, 2002; 2006) have seen students respond to both classical and contemporary writing in the way that Rosenblatt suggests may occur in her transactional theory of literacy (Rosenblatt, 1938; 1956; 1978; 2005). However, some students, although they may become engaged from time to time with contemporary literature, may react to the classics as did many students in Rosenblatt’s day, determining to remain aloof from any significance presented in the work and refusing to make any personal connections (Jago, 2011; Rosenblatt, 1938). Contemporary as well as classic literary works often hold little present-day cultural relevance or personal interest for reluctant male adolescents, some of whom may deal with low reading skills and distractions by non-academic issues in their lives (Gruwell, 1999; McLeod, 1987; Smith & Wilhelm, 2002). Additionally, many students, instead of spending time engaging in meaningful literacy practices, must spend valuable instructional hours preparing for multiple-choice tests that reflect little of the
Learning accomplished in that particular year of language arts and that hold no personal connections whatever (Gallagher, 2009; Langer, 2009; Ravitch, 2010). Concerned teachers struggle to craft relevant, rigorous, and valuable lessons that tap into the interests of their students (Alderman, 2008; Alvermann & Hinchman, 2012; Jago, 2011), and that support the growth of student motivation and its resultant learning.

Relevance, rigor, and connections, however, are not always occurring in language arts classrooms. In a 2007 policy research brief, The National Council of Teachers of English points out that national reading scores for 12th graders had remained flat since the test was initiated in 1971, and the most recent scores from 2011 indicate that, while scores for 4th graders have increased slightly since 2009, those for 8th graders have not improved (NCES, 2013). The Carnegie Council on Advancing Adolescent Literacy (2010) considers reading instruction for students in 4th through 12th grades as an extremely important addition to the national curriculum and advises that the increase over the past decade in text complexity, graphic representations, and conceptual challenges have necessitated on-going instruction at the upper levels of education.

*Lankshear & Knobel: Connecting literacy to technology*

A large portion of teaching today involves issues of modern technology (Lankshear & Knobel, 2006). In addition to helping students increase their understanding of how they fit into their social context and leading students to greater self-awareness, today’s teachers may be frequently confronted with the task of teaching technical skills that include the use of computers and issues of Internet access in the classroom (Lankshear & Knobel, 2006). Teachers may find that an important part of their responsibilities involve helping their students learn how to filter non-pertinent
information, how to be wary of sites inappropriate for their age, and how to glean information through all the distractions inherent to the Internet (Alvermann & Hinchman, 2012; Gee, 2000; Lankshear & Knobel, 2006; Scott, Parr, & Richardson, 2009). With students who consider the keyboard tedious and irrelevant, or who struggle with low reading skills, teachers may find that helping students develop skill with technology is a challenge. Yet, teachers who allow students to use electronic media to tap into their individual interests and experiences for assignments may provide their students an incentive to persevere, resulting in personal growth in self-management toward greater achievement (Conley, Friedhoff, Sherry, & Tuckey, 2008). Because of the widespread interest found among youth concerning Internet gaming sites and virtual social connections, teachers of reluctant learners may discover that students are more enthusiastic about learning with modern technology than with traditional print media.

_Motivation in Education: An Overview_

Throughout the previous portion of this literature review, the term “reluctant learner” has been used to signify a student who lacks motivation to succeed even though he may possess intelligence enough to do so. Motivation in adolescents continues to intrigue psychologists and educators; without it, most significant learning cannot happen. Schunk, Pintrich, and Meece (2008) define motivation as “the process whereby goal-directed activity is instigated and sustained” (p. 4). Many educational settings incorporate primarily extrinsic goals and rewards, which are initiated by an outside force such as a parent or teacher, and which may lack the power to sustain student long-term or habitual efforts toward success (Dweck, 2006; Sansone & Harackiewicz, 2000). Intrinsic motivation, on the other hand, comes from within the learner, may be situational, often
Writing to the Edge 33

depends upon the learning environment, may be fostered by a growth mindset, and may provide a foundation upon which the student may build interest and engagement in the learning goal (Alderman, 2008; Bandura, 1996; Bong, 2001; Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Deci & Ryan, 2008; Dewey, 1938; Dweck, 2006; Pink, 2009; Sansone & Harackiewicz, 2000; Schunk & Zimmerman, 1998). Intrinsic motivation may be influenced in part by gradual but continual success in classroom activities, by self-management, and by the creation of goals that are important to the learner.

The social-cognitive theory of self-efficacy holds that attitudes toward learning are influenced by a variety of environmental factors, such as the socio-economic level of parents, parenting style and home environment, parents’ perceived ability to support their children academically, peer and teacher interactions in the early grades, and the student’s own perception of his or her mental ability (Bandura, 1996; Dweck, 2006; Schunk & Zimmerman, 2000; Vygotsky, 1986). Over time, students may become discouraged at school by negative interactions with teachers or peers, engaging in learned helplessness, whereby the student attempts to disguise his perceived lack of ability by avoiding work in class and failing to ask for help (Alderman, 2008). Students with high self-efficacy, however, may exhibit characteristics of self-confidence, a can-do attitude, and persistence in the face of difficulty. Early positive experiences at home and in school may influence the ways by which a student proceeds and also may provide a foundation for self-confidence. With a high sense of self-efficacy, he or she may choose to challenge him- or herself academically for the personal objective of learning; low self-efficacy may lead the student to decline to participate based on past disappointments and a developing fear of failure (Alderman, 2008; Dweck, 2006; Schunk, Pintrich, & Meece, 2008). These
researchers also hold that teaching a child strategies to help develop motivational behaviors at an early age is beneficial not only to early home life but also to success at school.

Thus, based on early experiences in the family and initial years in school, students may develop a particular mindset that facilitates or hinders learning (Dweck, 2006). A student may repeatedly fail at a particular task such as reading or math and come to believe that he or she is simply not as smart as classmates and that nothing can be done to improve his or her intellect. No matter how hard he or she tries, the student believes that success is not possible and will then find fewer reasons to strive for excellence in academic assignments. Dweck (2006) terms this way of thinking a “fixed mindset” (p. 10) and states that students who perceive themselves this way may find little or no motivation to try. On the other hand, a student who exhibits a “growth mindset” (Dweck, 2006, p. 12) has learned through successes and failures that everyone experiences mistakes, which is an acceptable outcome when one is learning (Dweck, 2006; Pink, 2009). A growth mindset nurtured by parents and early teachers may facilitate an increase in a student’s sense of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1986; Sansone & Harackiewicz, 2000; Vygotsky, 1986). Drawing on Vygotsky’s (1978) theory of sociocultural constructivist learning, teachers may foster student motivation by presenting and supporting challenging exploratory tasks carried out in the positive social environment of the classroom. With peer and teacher support in this social setting, less-confident students may have a greater chance of gaining the knowledge and skills they need to become more independent and successful.
Identifying the Reluctant Learner

“Reluctant learners,” also identified as “disengaged students” or “underachievers,” have undergone wide study in recent years in several disciplines, including psychology, sociology, and education (Casey, 2009; Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Grobman, 2006; Schussler, 2009; Scott, Parr, & Richardson, 2008). Of particular concern are adolescent students who have fallen behind their peers in literacy; lacking self-efficacy based on insufficient skills in reading, writing, and other forms of self-expression, these students may find that learning grows increasingly more difficult as they move through middle school and into the high school years (Alderman, 2008; Bandura, 1996). Such a student is the focus of this study.

The definition of “reluctant” or “disengaged” learner remains elusive and subjective, varying by researcher, environment, age of the student, and the objective of the research (Alderman, 2008; Alvermann & Hinchman, 2012). Some assume that the reader already knows what characteristics are possessed by a student in a particular study and do not define the term at all before embarking upon a discussion of remedies (Bernaus & Gardner, 2008; Schussler, 2009). Others simply claim the student seems to have “given up” (Landsman, Moore, & Simmons, 2008). Still others suggest a more complicated involvement of factors that may include family history, upbringing, the student’s self-perception, the teacher’s classroom style, and whether the student attributes success to external factors beyond which he or she has no control, seeing success as constant and thus unattainable (Alderman, 2008; Bong, 2001; Dweck, 2006; Figg, Rogers, McCormick, & Low, 2012; O’Brien, 2012). A student who pursues approval, praise, or a good grade as his or her primary reason for completing classroom tasks is
focusing on a *performance goal* and is likely to be disappointed and easily discouraged if that goal is not attained. In contrast, a student who completes an assignment as a *learning goal* may find joy and gratification in the attainment of the skill or knowledge based on the value of the learning itself and the inner satisfaction that attainment brings to the student (Aldermann, 2008; Dweck, 2006; Sansone & Harackiewicz, 2000). This motivation may facilitate learning of all kinds and make the next task a welcome event. Motivation to learn for the sake of learning is the motivation lacking in students featured in this study.

According to one researcher (Sanacore, 2008), students who lack motivation in school have several commonalities, among them low self-esteem, low self-efficacy, and learned helplessness. They do not complete tasks; they avoid challenges; and even though they are deemed capable of excellence by their teachers, they often produce just enough work “to get by” and “do not seem concerned about achieving in school” (Sanacore, 2008, p. 40). These students may be heard to say they don’t care about their grades or that the teacher should make the lessons more interesting. Over the years, researchers have compiled several lists of classroom strategies that purport to help these disengaged learners (McCombs, 1991; Quate & McDermott, 2009; Sagor, 2003; Speaking of Teaching, 1998). Among these strategies may be found assignments that feature flexibility, creative connections to relevancy, and timely feedback, all strategies beneficial to learners at every ability level, but particularly to reluctant adolescent learners.

*The Challenges of the Rural School Setting*

Many distinctive challenges exist in a rural school setting. Some rural adolescents may find it difficult to finish high school or continue into post-secondary educational
settings in the face of low parental expectations or limited family resources (Ehrenreich, Reeves, Corley, & Orpinas, 2012; Hardre, Crowson, DeBacker & White, 2007; Hardre & Sullivan, 2008; Irvin, Farmer, Weiss, & Meece, 2011). A family living at a low socio-economic level may expect the adolescent to find an after-school job, or the student may desire to work for personal gain, further compromising his or her success with issues of fatigue and lack of time to study, and producing the additional burden of finding and paying for transportation to and from the job (Ehrenreich et al., 2012). Students identified as reluctant learners wrestle with these issues and the further complication of possessing low motivation to participate in school.

In a rural community, attending college or a technical school may necessitate a student’s re-locating far from home, yet close family and community ties and financial constraints may make this departure extremely difficult (Irvin, Farmer, Weiss, & Meece, 2011). The bond an adolescent feels toward the community involves not only place but also people. Students and teachers are able to build long-term relationships outside of the classroom through community activities such as town festivals and church. Additionally, the school may act as a community center where parents meet regularly at sporting and arts events to build friendships and offer support to each other’s children (Irvin, Farmer, Weiss, & Meece, 2011). The close associations such tightly-knit communities engender may further deter students from seeking greater employment opportunities or post-secondary educational prospects outside of the county and far from home.

With a smaller tax base, a rural county may have difficulty attracting and paying experienced teachers or retaining those who do come, thereby affecting the academic success of some learners who may find themselves in the hands of inexperct teachers.
Students who are continually exposed to inexperienced or less expert teachers find that their academic success may be compromised (Adamson & Darling-Hammond, 2012; Darling-Hammond & Sykes, 2003; Hardre & Sullivan, 2008). Additionally, in a rural school setting, funding for books, equipment, and supplies; for non-academic programs such as sports, theater, and music; and for support personnel such as graduation or literacy coaches may not be available to counties in which many residents earn a low wage.

*Rural Education and Adolescent Males*

Helping young men who live in a rural environment feel more motivated toward learning in school may involve individualized strategies tailored to each student. Friendships, interesting subject matter, enthusiastic teachers, involved parents, and extracurricular activities all contribute toward the student’s sense of commitment to school (Brozo, 2010; Hardre & Sullivan, 2008; Langer, 2009; Sagor, 2003; Schoenbach & Greenleaf, 2009; Smith & Wilhelm, 2006). Factors that may inhibit success in school include high aggression, rules that are perceived as unfair or inconsistent, unstable relationships with peers and family members, and financial difficulties (Ehrenreich, Reeves, Corley, & Orpinas, 2012). In one study, students who decided to stay in school until graduation cited the extrinsic motivators of concerned and involved adults, monetary rewards for passing performance, and the potential to be drafted into a lucrative sports arena (Ehrenreich et al., 2012). Since most school systems, while they may contain supportive adults, do not provide the other two extrinsic motivators mentioned in the above study, alternative strategies for motivating adolescent male reluctant learners in a rural setting may be generated within the school environment, particularly in the
classroom, where a caring teacher wields the greatest influence (Alderman, 2008; Daniels & Arapostathis, 2005; Deci & Ryan, 2008; Noddings, 2005). Within the national curriculum standards for each academic subject, and particularly in elective courses, teachers may allow students a great deal of autonomy, which according to researchers is highly useful for increasing motivation (Daniels & Arapostathis, 2005; Smith & Wilhelm, 2006). For example, a class in language arts lends itself well to producing and fostering student interest, with its opportunities for individualization, exploration, discussion of difficult ethical questions of right and wrong (Christenbury, 2008), informational reading, and critically analytical writing. Students may become involved with active learning such as producing plays from literary selections or creating presentations in the form of skits to elucidate current or classic issues to one another.

This body of research suggests that motivation will be high and academic success will be within grasp when students find themselves invited to consider useful and interesting topics by reasonable, flexible adults who consider the well-being of their students more important than the grades the students may earn (Christenbury, 2008). Such tasks will call for abilities that the student already has developed or can develop within the course of the assignment (Alderman, 2008; Czikszentmihalyi, 1990; Hardre & Sullivan, 2008; Landsman, Moore, & Simmons, 2008; Sanacore, 2008). With teacher and peer support in a collaborative environment, reluctant students may find encouragement to engage in meaningful learning by building the self-regulatory skills and strategies that lead to greater motivation.
CHAPTER III
METHODOLOGY

In order for students to achieve, they must be motivated to learn. Motivation is considered to lie on a continuum, and may be a hybrid of both extrinsic and intrinsic motivating factors depending on the desired goal of the learner (Alderman, 2008; Schunk, Pintrich, & Meece, 2008). When students are confronted with tasks that are too simple for their abilities, they become bored, but a task that entails skills not yet developed may appear too difficult and cause anxiety (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Pink, 2009). Vygotsky (1978) theorizes that with support from a teacher or peer who has greater expertise, a student may be challenged with an assignment that lies slightly above his perceived abilities but within his or her zone of proximal development (ZPD), and that meeting this challenge will serve to help the student develop new skills and knowledge. Dweck (2006) emphasizes the importance of a growth mindset, which leads the student to believe that with some effort he or she can acquire the skills and knowledge to accomplish the task at hand. Skillful leadership from teachers may promote the kind of engagement, academic learning, and enjoyment of school that will help develop intrinsic motivation in students (Schussler, 2009; Smith & Wilhelm, 2002). The purpose of this inquiry was partially to discover how teachers in one particular setting exercised that leadership to enhance student learning.

A qualitative study lends itself well to a consideration of motivation in the English language arts classroom. Because quantitative studies, which are based on statistical findings, focus on empirical data producing measurements, and do not entail
the use of interviews and other data that might reveal what people have to say, I
determined that a qualitative approach would be of more benefit in revealing the goals of
this study, wherein I sought to discover actual practices and attitudes concerning
motivation (Creswell, 2007). Further, with a qualitative study I could feature the affective
domain with observations and impressions of phenomena, constructing meaning
pertaining to the research questions. Qualitative research promotes deep understanding of
a social setting from the perspective of the participants, emphasizing exploration,
discovery, and description (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008). Because I wanted to discover
what the students and teachers thought and experienced concerning motivation in their
classrooms, listening to what they said and observing their actions were the best ways to
accomplish my goals. I sought to gain understanding of their individual perspectives
concerning motivation by placing myself as an observer within the social settings of their
classrooms and through discussions and interviews. Therefore, I chose a qualitative
approach rather than quantitative or mixed methods.

Using a constructivist approach, which according to Merriam (2009) underlies a
“basic qualitative study” (p. 22), I sought to understand the meanings that students and
teachers assigned to events involving motivation in their English language arts
classrooms. As a qualitative researcher with a phenomenological perspective, I was
concerned with understanding the teachers and students from their own frames of
reference and “experiencing reality as they experience it” (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998, p. 7).
From an etic stance (Creswell, 2007), I sought to develop concepts, insights, and
understandings from patterns in the data I collected and inductively drew conclusions
about these patterns, using analytic memos, field notes, and other types of journaling
Writing to the Edge 42

(Merriam, 2009). Understanding the perspectives of teachers and students in relation to motivational practices helped to clarify the reasons behind what had and had not been effective in my own teaching, particularly where my reluctant male learners were concerned.

The purpose of this study was to identify and analyze the experiences of underachieving male adolescents in a rural high school setting and how these students may or may not have been motivated by their teachers to learn in a language arts class. Dewey states that to study education is to study experience, and to study experience is to study life (Dewey, 1938). From the stance of observer and interviewer (Ely, Vinz, Downing, & Anzul, 1997), through detailed observations and conversations with teachers and students concerning the phenomenon of motivation in their language arts classrooms, I built an observational case study (Merriam, 2009; Wiersma & Jurs, 2009) and worked in an analytical mode (Ely et al., 1997) to discover the effects that teacher practices had on students and how those practices influenced their academic motivation. My goals included an increased understanding of the reluctant male learner and the discovery of more effective strategies that I could use in my own classroom to motivate reluctant learners.

This research study was informed by several philosophical assumptions (Creswell, 2007) that underpin qualitative methodology to generate a better understanding of the learning processes of underachieving adolescent males. The assumptions for this study included the following:

- The perceptions of teachers concerning their motivational practices may not be reflected in reality.
• Students may perceive these motivational strategies, if any, completely differently from how teachers perceive them.

• Case study and ethnography necessitate an approach that is flexible and personal; thick description is required for a thorough understanding and interpretation of the data as it is gathered and sorted to produce meaning (Geertz, 1973). Thus I assume the stance of observer/narrator in this study.

This study was designed to help discern what motivational strategies, if any, language arts teachers at Magnolia Cove High School implemented to encourage and engage underachieving male students. Additionally, in this study I sought to discover what these underachieving male students said motivates them in language arts, in the wider school setting, and beyond the school itself.

The Setting

This research study occurred in the high school where I was a faculty member at the time of the study. I have given the school the pseudonym of Magnolia Cove High School. It is situated in a rural area of a Southern state, approximately 50 miles north of a large metropolitan area. This school, built in 1998 and comprised of 1300 students with approximately 90 faculty members, is the only high school in the county. The students generally come from four local elementary schools and two local middle schools. The single post-secondary option within the district consists of one technology/career two-year institute that offers a variety of certifications and associate’s degrees in business, technical services, and health sciences, and which also offers core classes that enable a student to begin earning a four-year degree close to home, with the idea of enrolling in a larger institution when these are completed.
The student participants in this study were selected as a unique sample (Merriam, 2009), on the basis of having been assigned to Communication Skills during the spring of their 9th grade year, thereby meeting the designation of “reluctant learner” as defined in this study. These students also had to be included in an English class at the time of the study in order to provide opportunities for me to conduct observations. I was able to discover 10 students as potential participants, to whom I delivered the requisite permission papers. Six of these students returned the papers, all of whom were members of two different English classes that met during my planning period. Because the two seniors were in the same class, and the four 10th graders were in the same class, I had the opportunity to compare what the seniors said to what the 10th graders said about the same motivational strategies, and to examine the activities and outcomes of the two groups compared to each other.

In addition to the six students, this study also includes the two teachers of these six students as well as two more colleagues who taught the senior students in earlier years. The teachers provided opportunities for me to observe their teaching practices and gave me interviews in which we discussed their ideas of motivational practices. They told stories of times when a lesson worked well and times when one did not, and what they learned from these experiences. Since I was a long-time member of the faculty at this school and rapport between us had been established for many years, I had no problem requesting and gaining access to their classrooms and students. Additionally, several times over the course of the study other faculty members volunteered to watch my own students during a period when I had class so that I could observe another teacher. Data
from these observations served to give me a wider perspective and round out my understanding.

Methodological Orientation and Research Questions

The purposes of this study were three-fold:

- To discover what motivates underachieving male students in their language arts classes;
- To discover what language arts teachers claim to implement as motivational strategies for reluctant male learners;
- To observe what the teachers actually do in their classrooms in an attempt to motivate these students.

Further components emerged as the study progressed, in accordance with the structure of qualitative research and its “deeply interpretive” nature (Ely, Vinz, Downing, & Anzul, 1997, p. 160). As the researcher, I was alert and open to additional possibilities for inquiry, for exploration, and for clarification. For example, I expanded my questions to the student participants after the first interview, keeping to the protocol but asking the students for more clarification, to explore ideas that they presented during discussion.

In order to accomplish these initial research purposes, I formulated a short written survey to administer to each student participant, which focused on their experiences in previous language arts classes and in other classes they chose to consider (see Appendix C). Using these written responses to inform my questions further, I interviewed three of the students individually and conducted two focus groups in which we explored teaching strategies that I then looked for during the classroom observations (Bogdan & Biklen,
2007). Their responses helped me recognize activities led by their teachers that they had claimed were motivational and helped to inform my conclusions.

Through a series of interviews and focus group sessions similar to those I conducted with the students, I gathered information from the four teachers concerning their perceptions of motivational strategies for their reluctant learners. Using an electronic voice recorder to capture their conversations, I then transcribed the files into a Word 2010 document and coded the transcriptions both openly and axially (see Appendix D). I then analyzed the data to determine what the teachers believe about motivating strategies for underachieving male students.

This research project examined the following questions:
1. To what extent do language arts teachers perceive themselves to be motivators of student learning for reluctant rural adolescent male learners?
   1a. what strategies do language arts teachers claim to use to motivate reluctant rural adolescent male learners?
   1b. what motivational strategies are observable for reluctant rural male adolescent learners in the language arts teachers’ practices?
2. To what extent do rural reluctant adolescent male learners perceive their language arts teachers to be motivators for success in language arts?
   2a. what strategies do reluctant rural adolescent male students claim are effective motivating strategies in the language arts classroom to keep them engaged in learning?
   2b. what motivational student behaviors are observable in the language arts classroom?
Negotiating Access

The principal, the personnel director, and the superintendent of my county system were already aware of my research, because I had conducted a pilot study with this same focus. When requesting permission to conduct that research in compliance with county policy and procedures, the two administrators in the central office expressed interest in the results of my study upon completion. Therefore, I was easily granted permission to conduct this study.

Once I had determined in which classes the student participants were located, I asked each of their teachers if I might include them in my study. Each teacher readily agreed to my requests for observations, interviews, and a focus group session (Creswell, 2007). I interviewed the students first, as it was nearing the end of the year, conducted the classroom observations, and interviewed the teachers after the students had left for the summer, during the school’s post-planning days.

Because ethnographic research is field research conducted in the natural situation (Weirsma & Jurs, 2009), I produced thick descriptions (Geertz, 1973) of each classroom setting, observing first-hand the actions and conversations between teachers and student subjects as a researcher (Merriam, 2009). My stance was therefore what Weirsma and Jurs (2009) term “privileged observer” (p. 283), one who has access to the relevant activity of the study but does not assume the role of participant.
Data Collection and Analysis

In the first step, each of the six students wrote brief answers to a survey concerning their thoughts about motivation. They were asked for a definition of motivation and to describe a time or event in which they were highly motivated. They also were asked to make suggestions of how their English teachers could help motivate them in their classrooms. The students returned answers that were very brief, which I asked them to elucidate during their interviews. After collecting the student surveys, I used an electronic voice recorder to document the student interviews, transcribing and coding them as I looked for meaningful themes (Ely, Vinz, Downing, & Anzul, 1997). I also conducted classroom observations over a period of six weeks, recording the sights and sounds along with my impressions of events in a researcher’s journal (Creswell, 2007). As I typed these recordings, notes, and observations on a personal computer into Microsoft Word 2010 and analyzed the classroom interactions in their original context, my understanding of the dynamics of motivation for these underachieving male students increased. An important part of recording field notes is also recording observer comments, wherein the researcher captures her reactions, inferences, and interpretations while the classroom interactions are occurring (Merriam, 2009; Weirsma & Jurs, 2009). Transcribing the data shortly after the observation was conducted and adding analytic memos to the field notes enabled me to remember and document specific interactions along with my reactions to participant exchanges, ensuring that these important aspects of research were not diluted or compromised during subsequent observations.

As the field data was typed with observer comments, placed in the context of the classroom interactions, and saved in several electronic modes, I attempted to tease out
themes and big ideas that appeared to be occurring (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). At the end of the data collection process, I had laid much of the groundwork toward analyzing and drawing conclusions about motivational strategies and attitudes of Magnolia Cove High School students and teachers. I employed open and axial coding to investigate emergent themes within the data and to make sense of these data inductively and comparatively (Merriam, 2009). As the attitudes and actions of each student and teacher were recorded and coded, I identified themes and additional avenues I wanted to explore in subsequent observations and interviews (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). I was able to do a cross-case analysis of the seniors and the 10th graders, comparing results between the two groups, revealing a broader perspective and possibly greater generalizability (Merriam, 2009).

Since the nature of qualitative research is recursive and emergent (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Creswell, 2007; Merriam, 2009), I looked for further strategies for manipulating and understanding the data, as well as new avenues to explore, as I progressed. I also looked for components of the motivational process that appeared to be missing from the discussions and observations, such as specific strategies teachers might use for individual students.

Benefits and Limitations

Although 30% of America’s schools are located in rural areas, fewer than 6% of research studies have included rural students (Hardre & Sullivan, 2008). Researchers believe that studies focusing on urban students are not always generalizable to rural settings, since many of the issues that I discussed in the literature review are not applicable to urban students. This study attempted to fill a gap in the research concerning strategies teachers may use to engage disengaged learners. The qualitative approach
Writing to the Edge

enabled me to build insights about this aspect of rural education that has importance to educators of high-school aged students as well as to those who teach in a post-secondary setting. Additionally, the basic tenants of motivation are relevant to all ages in all settings, and this study could inform motivational practices in other educational situations.

Because it is anchored in real life, case study “offers a means of investigating complex social units consisting of multiple variables of potential importance in understanding the phenomenon” (Merriam, 2009, p. 50). Particularly with cross-case analysis, an interpretation of shared themes is helpful in understanding the data gathered in each classroom. As other researchers have shown, student motivation is dependent on several differing factors that can be positively influenced by supportive teachers (Alderman, 2008; Schunk, Pintrich, & Meece, 2008). Finding indications of these factors for rural underachieving adolescent males may prove beneficial to other practitioners and policy-makers.

One limitation of this study may stem from my position as a long-time member of the faculty at this high school. Over many years, I have developed friendly relationships with each of the four teachers who participated in this study, and I believe I have been able to avoid any unduly favorable conclusions. The teachers were asked to give member checks to their interviews (Merriam, 2009), and they reported no discrepancies with their impressions of the conversations, saying that ideas were recorded and transcribed accurately.

Another bias may have occurred as I observed and interviewed the students, all of whom were my own Communications Skills students in previous years. Part of my
educational philosophy consists of the idea that students are unique individuals, that teachers should develop as much of a relationship as is appropriate and possible with students, and that every effort should be made by the teacher to encourage that student in all areas of life, not only in literacy. When I was their teacher, I enjoyed each of these six students very much. I found them entertaining, kind, and interesting. As with the teachers, however, I believe I was able to observe their behaviors for this study objectively and analyze their ideas without bias either favorable or unfavorable. The rapport I had already established with these students allowed us to open honest discussion immediately in the research venue, as they already knew I had their best interests uppermost in my mind and there would be no negative consequences to their honesty.

*Accommodations*

With accurate transcriptions checked by participants, classroom observations, focus group discussions, and written surveys, the data collected for this study is triangulated for accuracy and validity (Merriam, 2009). In addition to offering the transcriptions of interviews to the subjects for review, I discussed my study’s progress and findings with faculty and other colleagues at a respected university.

To preserve anonymity, I asked participants to select a pseudonym, or I assigned one myself. I also assigned a pseudonym to the school. The recorded interviews will be kept for one year and then erased from the electronic recorder on which I captured them, and the transcriptions of those interviews and focus groups are kept in two places: on the researcher’s password protected home computer and on a flash drive which is under lock and key.
Uniqueness of the Study

A productive study of motivation should include the voices of students from every possible situation (Smith & Wilhelm, 2002; Smith & Wilhelm, 2006). This study of underachieving male adolescent learners in a rural setting adds to the body of literature that examines how educators may promote greater academic and personal success for all students, not only for those who struggle with competency and engagement in English class. Often overlooked in scholarly studies and literature, these rural students have added their voices to the body of research examining motivation in a high school setting. Regardless of where their classrooms were situated, these students may now be heard by educators in every setting.

Accessing the perspectives of teachers and students not located in an urban setting may generate additional ideas for motivational strategies and further research. With valid conclusions illuminating the problem of student motivation, this study may bring insight to the professional practice of those who work in urban as well as in rural areas (Hardre, Crowson, Debacker, & White, 2007; Landsman, Moore, & Simmons, 2008). The problems inherent in a rural setting, which often involves limitations to further educational opportunities and better jobs, may be mitigated by developing interventional strategies for motivating this group of students toward a more active response to learning (Irvin, Hannum, Farmer, de la Varre, & Keane, 2009). With greater success in school, these students may find it somewhat easier to find their way in the local community and beyond.
CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

The Research Setting

Magnolia Cove High School (a pseudonym), the setting for this research, was the sole high school in a rural county 50 miles north of a major metropolitan area in a southern state, serving students in grades 9 through 12. In addition to the high school, the school system consisted of four elementary schools and two middle schools serving a total student population of approximately 4,500. The present building was constructed in 1998, with an addition consisting of 20 classrooms opening in 2007; an 840-seat auditorium, arts wing, and larger gymnasium were opened in 2010. At the time of this study, the SACS-accredited school employed 94 teachers and administrators, plus three counselors, a media specialist, a technology specialist, two campus officers, custodial staff, office staff, and other support personnel. All of the 88 teachers were fully certified in their teaching areas, and 60% had attained a Master’s degree or higher (Georgia Office of Student Achievement, n.d.). The average number of years in the profession for teachers at the school was 17.8 (Georgia Office of Student Achievement).

At the time of this study, the school had a student enrollment of approximately 1,300, and student body demographics consisted of 93% Caucasian, 1% African American, 3% Hispanic, 2% multi-racial, and less than 1% Asian and American Indian (Georgia Department of Education, 2013). Although the other schools in the county were served as Title I schools, with 40-50% on free and reduced meals, the high school was
not. The 2008-2009 report for the Southern Association of Schools and Colleges, which accredits the county’s schools, stated that the county’s poverty rate was 12% (SACS Report, 2009), but at the time of this study that figure was placed at 20% (Federal Education Budget Project). Per capita student expenditures fell at the current state average of a little more than $10,000 (Federal Education Budget Project). The pupil to teacher ratio was 15:1. At the time of the 2009 SACS Report, there was no large industry within the county, and the school system was the largest single employer.

The daily schedule for this high school consisted of four 90-minute classes for each semester, called the “4x4 block.” In December students received final grades for all of their first-semester classes and were enrolled in different classes beginning in January, enabling them to earn eight credits per year. Students were encouraged to take a mixture of academics and electives, and credit recovery was offered at the end of each semester to enable students to earn credit for a class in which their grade fell between 67 and 69. At the time of this study, all students were required to pass a state high school writing test, and they were tested in the core subjects of English, math, science, and social studies during the final weeks of those classes. They were also given additional chances to pass those end-of-course tests if they were not successful on the first attempt. The school offered honors and Advanced Placement courses in English, social studies, math, and science. Points were added to the students’ final averages to compute their class standings when they had enrolled in these challenging classes. Recently, the school had placed greater emphasis on teaching students identified as gifted, requiring all faculty who taught honors and Advanced Placement to pursue an endorsement for teachers of gifted students provided by the state education department.
In addition to being endorsed by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, the county school system participated in the Georgia Assessment of Performance on School Standards (GAPSS) as its process for continuous improvement. The high school had undergone this process, conducted by peers from another school district, two months preceding this study, as reflected in the thorough state of facility repair and cleanliness, and the many classroom decorations, creative student work, and state and national standards posted prominently throughout the school. At the end of the 2012-13 school year, the GAPSS assessment was returned and announced at a faculty meeting as complimentary to the school (Personal communication, May 1, 2013). This assessment was deemed necessary to help the faculty and administration prepare for its SACS review the following year.

Researcher Bias

This researcher was employed by the school under study for 21 years as an English language arts and theatre teacher. I graduated in 1971 as an English major with a Bachelor of Arts degree, and when my children were older I enrolled in a teacher education program as a post-baccalaureate student, becoming certified to teach at the secondary level in 1991. Volunteering in the classroom of a friend while my youngest child attended nursery school nearby, I became acquainted with the county school administration and was subsequently hired at Magnolia Cove High School as an English teacher in 1992. I have taught English at most levels, including honors 9th and 10th grade English and remedial classes in writing. In 2001, I received my Master’s degree in Secondary English with a concentration in Rhetoric and Composition and earned my Specialist’s degree in 2004.
After two years of teaching, I agreed to sponsor a theatre club, producing and directing two or more plays each year, as well as managing the region One-Act Competition for the past two years at Magnolia Cove. I encouraged my students, both beginning and advanced, to write and produce their own skits and one-act plays, and encouraged them to perform many of these pieces in an annual spring showcase for parents and members of the community. Because students’ interest in drama was high but there was no class offered, I asked for and received permission from the school board to construct a class in theatre arts in 2004, as part of my work for my Education Specialist’s degree in Curriculum and Instruction.

In addition to constructing the curriculum for my drama classes, which expanded from one class in 2004 to two classes in 2009 and three classes in 2013, I also developed the curriculum for a class designed for students who needed remediation in composition, extracting standards from a variety of sources, including the state’s English language arts curricula in their various stages of modification before the adoption of the national Common Core Standards in 2011. This class, termed “Communications Skills,” was designed for students entering 9th grade who had not passed the Eighth Grade Writing Assessment, one of four composition tests given to all students in the state to measure progress and competency in grades 3, 5, 8, and 11.

One advantage of teaching in a small county with one high school is that connections may be built throughout the community to enhance relationships and forge loyalties (Hardre, Sullivan, & Roberts, 2008). Many times I found the younger brother or sister of a former student enrolled in a new class of English or theatre, and I was interested to hear how that older sibling was progressing in college or on the job. I
believe my primary objective as a teacher is to help every student grow toward his or her
total potential, and that creating appropriate relationships with parents and students
facilitates that goal. I believe that opportunities to support my students must be
deliberately sought and nurtured.

I have been honored several times in my career. In 2009 and in 2013, drama
students chose me as their STAR teacher, a recognition bestowed on outstanding students
and teachers by the local Optimists Club, based on the 10 highest SAT scores in any
particular year. The winning students select their teachers to honor. Additionally, I was
named as the state high school English Teacher of the Year in 2009 by the state English
Teacher’s Council, as well as named a National Teacher of Distinction by the National
Council of Teachers of English that same year.

My passion for a pedagogy that supports the success of all students regardless of
socio-economic status or level of intelligence has led me to this study. I am a strong
proponent of critical literacy and its ability to foster expanded thinking about one’s
position in the world (Friere, 1970). I also believe that social justice should be a more
prominent component of classroom activities, research, and discussion. My commitment
to these ideas supports this study, as I attempted to discover what students identified as
reluctant learners have to say concerning practices in the English language arts
classrooms at my school and how the teachers could make the subject matter more
accessible to those students. Giving students a voice in their education is an important
part of promoting social justice and the academic success of students (Christenson, 2000;
Daniels & Arapostathis, 2005; Smith & Wilhelm, 2002). The students in this study
responded in a positive fashion when they were invited to participate, indicating that they
were interested in the study’s outcome; however, the results reveal that they did not have a clear idea of what motivation entails or how their teachers could help them.

Several biases had to be diligently avoided in reaching the results of this study. All six students who participated were students in a class I taught when they were 9th graders, and I established a good relationship with each of them at that time that continued into the timeframe of the study. I found these students to be lively and amusing, and I enjoyed their company, which led me to proceed with the utmost caution and objectivity in analyzing the results of interviews and observations. Additionally, because the participating teachers and I had been colleagues for many years and considered ourselves friends, I was aware that bias toward them could have caused me to perceive their classroom practices more favorably than I would have without these positive collegial and personal relationships. These teachers granted me access to their classrooms without hesitation and expressed excitement about learning the results of the study. In this regard also, I have exercised the utmost caution to prevent favorable bias toward these teachers from clouding the results of the study, and I believe I have succeeded.

Data Collection

Research data, including classroom observations, teacher and student interviews, teacher and student focus groups, and written responses to a student survey, were collected during the spring semester at Magnolia Cove High School at the end of the 2012-2013 school year. The student participants were selected based on having been placed by administrators in Communications Skills, a class for students who had not passed the Eighth Grade Writing Assessment that is given to all students in the state. Using this criterion, I initially identified ten male students who could be included in the
study. Because a collaborative professional community had been fostered for many years in the English department prior to the initiation of this study, I was readily granted access to the classrooms of the teachers of these students in order to conduct observations of teaching practices and student behaviors. Four students who were invited to participate did not return the required permission papers. Thus, this study focuses on the behaviors and ideas of six students and four teachers at the school at which I was a practitioner.

I conducted individual 30-minute interviews of three students, a 30-minute conversation with two seniors, and a 35-minute focus group featuring four 10th grade students. The two teachers of the six student participants readily agreed to allow me to conduct individual interviews and focus group sessions during their language arts class periods. One student was a member of my advanced theatre class as well as a member of the 10th grade language arts class, and he joined the other three 10th grade students for their focus group session during their language arts class time. The two seniors met with me during their class time as well as after school. Due to the pressures of end-of-year testing, projects, and presentations, the individual teacher interviews and teacher focus group were conducted during post-planning days. Two of the four teachers had one student apiece who had been assigned to Communications Skills during the students’ 9th grade year, and these teachers also welcomed me into their classrooms. However, the students in their rooms failed to bring back their signed permission forms. Because these two teachers, Ms. Rivers and Ms. Chiba, had taught one or more of the six student participants during a previous year, I included observations from their rooms in my data for this study.
From the recorded interviews and focus group sessions, I transcribed the data into Microsoft Word 2010, placing notes in the margins as I analyzed the transcriptions using open coding (Merriam, 2009). I also coded my field notes of classroom observations and impressions I had formed while watching the student participants interact with their teachers. The activities I observed included project research, presentations, individual and whole-class direct instruction, and both teacher-focused and student-focused lessons. Interactions between teachers and students were generally positive and supportive but on occasion did include disruptive or inconsiderate behaviors that generated conflict between a teacher and an individual student. The initial 91 codes (see Appendix G) included teacher/student interactions, student/student interactions, teaching strategies, students’ responses to classroom activities, the attitudes of teachers and students, and outcomes of instruction. I then examined the data several more times using axial coding to select the “core phenomenon” (Creswell, 2007, p. 64) from which the findings stemmed thematically. Themes emerged as I immersed myself in transcribing the interviews and conversations and in writing scenarios based on these interactions with students and teachers. Themes based on the data included positive teacher attitudes toward motivating reluctant male learners in their English classes, strategies incorporated by teachers to motivate the reluctant male learner, student perceptions of positive motivational practices, and students’ responses to motivational practices in the classroom.

The English Teacher Participants

Four English teachers agreed to be observed and interviewed for this study, teaching students in 10th, 11th, and 12th grades. Each of these teachers was responsible for managing school activities that extended beyond their classrooms and that involved many
additional hours spent with students in other settings. None was approaching retirement age, and all presented a personable and friendly demeanor to students and colleagues.

Ms. Chiba (all names are pseudonyms) had been teaching for five years, having worked for eight years as an event planner at a metropolitan university before obtaining her Master’s degree in professional writing along with her teaching certification. Magnolia Cove was the first school at which she had taught. She grew up in a nearby small town and had extensive knowledge of the community. Her two young children attended an elementary school a few miles away in the same system. Ms. Chiba taught Honors 11th English and 12th grade English. She had assumed many functions to assist students in the school, and with Ms. Hall, sponsored the student council, held elections for class officers, and organized the annual senior prom. Ms. Hall worked closely with Ms. Chiba in these extracurricular activities, teaching Honors 10th grade English and 12th grade English. Since being hired at Magnolia Cove 13 years ago as a new college graduate, she completed her Master’s and Specialist’s degrees. These two women, both in their early 30’s, worked together as a team not only on their extracurricular activities, but also in lesson planning.

Ms. Rivers had been teaching for approximately 28 years, most of them at Magnolia Cove. Born and reared in the community, she attended the school as a student and was voted Miss Magnolia Cove when she was a senior, marrying her high school sweetheart, who was voted Mr. Magnolia Cove that same year. While her own children were students at the school, she was active as a chaperone and auxiliary corps instructor for the marching band. She was a significant contributor to the drama program when her son was a member of the program. After handing over the sponsorship of the yearbook to
another teacher, Ms. Rivers pursued her Master’s degree, garnering the Graduate Student of the Year Award at her metropolitan university. At the time of this study, she functioned as chair of the English department, coached the cross country and track teams, and conducted classes in a local exercise club. Ms. Rivers taught 11th and 12th grades.

Mr. Jones had spent 15 years in another school system in the state before being hired to teach at Magnolia Cove five years prior to this study. In addition to being the yearbook and journalism teacher, he taught 10th and 11th grade English at the time of this study. He was the father of four young daughters, three of whom were enrolled in the county school system. I observed his 4th period 10th grade class, where there were four former students from a Communications Skills class I had taught the previous year.

The following chart provides a summary of the teachers observed in this study, the number of years in the profession, the grade levels at which they taught, and their extracurricular involvements:

Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teacher</th>
<th>Years Teaching</th>
<th>Grade Level of Observation</th>
<th>Extracurricular Involvement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ms. Chiba</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Co-sponsor of Student Council&lt;br&gt;Co-sponsor of Senior Prom&lt;br&gt;School Council Teacher Rep</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms. Hall</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Co-sponsor of Student Council&lt;br&gt;Co-sponsor of Senior Prom&lt;br&gt;School Development Team member</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr. Jones</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Yearbook Adviser&lt;br&gt;Newspaper Adviser</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms. Rivers</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Coach, Cross Country Team&lt;br&gt;Coach, Track and Field&lt;br&gt;Department Chair&lt;br&gt;School Development Team member&lt;br&gt;Community fitness instructor</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Student Participants: Seniors Trevor and Simon

The two seniors, Trevor and Simon (both pseudonyms), had been members of my Communications Skills class as freshmen nearly four years previously and were looking forward to graduation ceremonies in the month this study concluded. Both found their passion in athletics at Magnolia Cove and hoped to stay involved with athletics in post-secondary settings. Trevor and Simon attributed much of their success to the coaches and teachers who encouraged them to complete their academic work while training for athletic competitions. Just before the initiation of this study, Trevor had been recognized for setting a state record for the pole vault, and Simon planned to pursue a football scholarship at an out-of-state university. Both young men displayed confidence in their abilities, though not necessarily in academics, and they stated they were happy to participate in this study. Both boys, already having attained the age of 18, signed their own permission forms.

In Communications Skills during their 9th grade year, both of these students enjoyed displaying behaviors that could be characterized as somewhat disruptive. By his own admission, Trevor found putting his thoughts on paper a mysterious activity, and although he was able to express his opinions clearly in oral discussions, he was unable to write them in any organized fashion. His frustration with his perceived lack of skill in writing translated into teasing and criticizing the other students, which he did with dry humor that served in many instances to cloak his disrespect for other students, who seemed content to allow him leadership of the class in this rather negative way. Trevor initiated the paper-ripping episode described in the introduction to this study.
In a similar fashion, Simon’s friendly personality and high-energy story-telling appeared favorably distracting to his classmates as he entertained the class with his humorous activities present and past. However, literacy strategies I suggested he use to put those stories into writing continually fell short of enabling him to practice his self-expression on paper. Not only was he unable to see the point of writing his stories, whereby in his opinion they lost much of their humor and impact, but he also insisted, as did Trevor, that writing was not a skill he would need in his future.

**Student Participants: 10th Graders Drake, Larry, Zeus, and Jim**

Four of the student participants, Drake, Larry, Zeus, and Jim (all self-selected pseudonyms) were enrolled in the same 10th grade language arts class taught by Mr. Jones. One of the four, Drake, was repeating 10th grade English after having repeated 9th grade English the previous year, and he considered himself a junior. I had taught all of these students in Communications Skills classes: Drake two years previously, and the other three during the previous spring semester. All four students, like Trevor and Simon, had failed to pass the Eighth Grade Writing Assessment and had been involuntarily assigned to Communications Skills the second semester of their 9th grade year. I had found them all generally non-disruptive and friendly in class even while they produced very little in the way of writing assignments, similar to the habits of Trevor and Simon.

Only one of these 10th grade students, Larry, participated in athletics, and although his slender physical build precluded his playing on the varsity football squad, he said that he enjoyed working out in practice during the season. Jim had found his passion in the drama program, where he excelled as a set builder and in back-stage management during our productions, even volunteering his mother as a painter on her days off. Jim
had been a member of my Honors 9th grade English class the previous year but had not advanced to Honors Ten English because his average was too low at the end of the semester (school policy requires a score of 88 or higher). Drake and Zeus did not claim to be part of any extracurricular teams or clubs. Jim, Drake, and Zeus all indicated their interest in video games, which they played at home. During their time in Communications Skills classes, they each exhibited the disinterested demeanors and disengagement behaviors typical of reluctant learners: Larry dozed at every opportunity, Drake insisted that he didn’t understand the assignments so would not attempt to do them, Zeus declined every offer of help and thus worked at the minimum, and Jim distracted himself with his own writing projects, staying busy but chronically off task and failing to submit required assignments. Aside from these non-productive characteristics, I did not consider any of the 10th grade students as a behavior problem when they were 9th graders in Communications Skills.

The following chart provides a summary of the students observed in this study and the overall achievement outcomes of their language arts classes during the semester of this study:

*Table 2.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student Name</th>
<th>Grade Level</th>
<th>Outcome of Semester</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Trevor</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Pass, graduated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Simon</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Pass, graduated after submitting missing assignments in extra time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drake</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Fail (2nd time)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jim</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Pass</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Larry</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Fail</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zeus</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Pass</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Characteristics of Reluctant Learners

Finding a definition of “disengaged student” or “reluctant learner” in the research literature has proven to be a difficult task. Some researchers use personal stories with descriptions of feelings such as “resisted,” “killed my interest,” or “grades were important, but doing the work wasn’t” (Quate & McDermott, 2009, p.1). Some do not define the terms at all but seem to assume that a teacher instinctively recognizes a disinterested student as one who is capable but who does not perform at his potential (Bernaus & Gardner, 2008; Schussler, 2009). Eager young learners are depicted who experience declining engagement as they work through their years of school until teachers find themselves facing teens who lack interest in nearly every aspect of learning and who choose to perform barely above the level of passing, if there (Finn, 2009; Quate & McDermott, 2009; Smith & Wilhelm, 2002). Teachers who care for their students’ well-being (Noddings, 2005) strive to discover the methods of promoting motivation by which those disengaged students may be moved toward greater engagement in their learning communities.

Researchers interested in promoting greater motivation for disengaged students ask questions similar to the ones asked in the English workroom of Magnolia Cove High School: “How do I get the kids to care about their learning? How can I get them to do the work? How can I get them to come to class on time and to bring their books and paper and pens and agenda and homework?” (Quate & McDermott, 2009, p. 5). Because meaningful learning cannot take place without the desire to learn, helping a disengaged student find interest in subject matter is central to producing changes in attitude that lead to greater engagement and mastery of the material. No matter how the term “disengaged
“learner” is defined by research or by an individual, the attitude of the teacher is considered by many to be the critical difference between a student’s success or his failure (Corsco, Bundick, Quaglia, & Haywood, 2013; Darling-Hammond & Sykes, 2003; Martin, 2006; McCombs, 1994; Sanacore, 2008). These researchers state that when teachers attempt to build motivation in reluctant learners, either as a whole-class strategy or in individuals according to each student’s needs, the students are more likely to achieve academic progress as well as personal growth.

Positive Teacher Attitude toward Motivating Reluctant Male Learner

One of the four major themes that emerged from the data was that the teachers in this study were very interested in supporting their reluctant male learners. In a series of individual interviews and focus groups, the teachers at Magnolia Cove indicated that a disengaged student causes them much concern and that they engaged in strategies to help rectify that disinterest. The teachers could readily describe what, to them, a “reluctant learner” looked like, and their knowledge of those characteristics allowed them to begin working with that student early in the semester. For example, Ms. Hall defined “reluctant learner” as one who “would be sleeping, and staring off in space, and doodling, and reading, and that kind of thing” (M. Wright, Transcription of interview, June 5, 2013). When asked if that student might be disruptive, Ms. Hall said, “Most of the time, I don’t find them to be disruptive. They just seem to kind of disconnect, and don’t really want to participate in anything.” (M. Wright, Transcription of interview June 5, 2013) Ms. Rivers added the following view of her reluctant learners’ characteristics:

Ah, let me count the ways [laughs]. Let’s see . . . sleeping in class . . . [She assumes a male-sounding low voice and a thick country accent.] ‘Ah hate
I hear that comment frequently. Not completing work, not asking questions when they don't understand something. A motivated student, if they do not understand, will ask a question for clarification. A non-motivated student won't bother with it. It couldn't matter less to them. . . . Grades are not a big deal. Won’t complete assignments. Won’t read . . . and with writing assignments [Reassumes male voice with accent], ‘Ah don’t know wut to write. Ah cain’t write about that . . . Wut d’ya want me to say?’ [Reassumes own voice.] And they won’t even attempt to go any further . . . sometimes they just put their head down and go to sleep. Sometimes they have more fun stirring up trouble. (M. Wright, Transcription of interview, June 3, 2013)

When discussing how they recognize their reluctant learners, each teacher was able to give specific details about behaviors that signify disengagement in their classes, similar to Ms. Rivers’ list. Asked to provide, in contrast, a description of the behaviors of a motivated student, they were also able to state clearly those characteristics in concrete terms, describing the students’ productive approaches to class participation, completion of homework, attention to a high quality of work, and possession of a cooperative spirit. Thus the teachers demonstrated that they were aware of the characteristics of reluctant learners and had a positive approach to helping the students overcome these tendencies.

Strategies Incorporated by Teachers to Motivate Reluctant Learners

The teachers at Magnolia Cove stated that it is an important part of their job to nurture and support their reluctant learners, and they incorporated several strategies to help achieve this objective (M. Wright, Transcription of focus group, June 4, 2013). Each
of the four participants related instances of interventions they had orchestrated in support of a student who was struggling, ranging from individualized instruction on a difficult paper to locating a well-fitting dress for prom (M. Wright, Transcription of focus group, June 4, 2013). Each believed that establishing a personal interest in a student who is disengaged is valuable to both the student and the teacher. The teachers demonstrated their personal commitments to their students’ success in the following conversation from a focus group discussion:

Ms. Chiba: I had a student who graduated a couple of years ago, and every time I go into Kroger, he stops me to talk. They enjoy that. It’s kinda dorky and cheesy, but they actually like for you to be a part of their personal life, a little bit; you don’t want to overstep any bounds, but they like to know that you’re there.

Ms. Hall: Yeah, my husband, I remember when we first started dating, he would be surprised. I remember one night we were at the store, at Home Depot, and these two boys start yelling my name and he’s like, ‘What is going on?’ But it’s because they enjoy that.

Ms. Rivers: Right.

Ms. Chiba: You know what, though, also helps? Is calling home that first—honest to God, people have told me this and I never really believed it—calling home that first week that you get a new kid, and introducing yourself. That makes a tremendous amount of difference.

Ms. Rivers: Then the parent is your ally before trouble has ever started.

Ms. Chiba: That makes like a crazy amount of difference, and for the kids to know that you actually are going to do that and also, if a kid is out for a couple of days,
and if you call to check in on them, and say, 'Hey, what’s going on with you? Just checking to make sure you're okay!'

Ms. Hall: I’ve done that.

Ms. Chiba: And if you know where they work?

Ms. Rivers: Go there.

Ms. Chiba: You go there, and that makes a difference because they see you outside of school, and they feel special and important, to know an adult, and to be able to talk, and be like, ‘Hey...’ (M. Wright, Transcription of focus group, June 4, 2013)

Ms. Rivers, who also coached the cross country team, was particularly adept at engaging her students in appropriate personal relationships, finding that extracurricular activities facilitated establishing rapport with students. In his interview, the senior Trevor gave a significant amount of credit to Ms. Rivers for helping motivate him to excel at the pole vault and continually reminding him about his academic work. In a similar vein, Ms. Hall and Ms. Chiba coordinated elections for class officers and student council for all four grades and also produced the annual senior prom. These additional activities enabled them to become personally acquainted with students they may not have had in their classes. Mr. Jones was the faculty advisor for the yearbook, allowing him to develop positive relationships with students in a setting that promoted student choice and collaborative planning for a common outcome. Each of these teachers had immersed himself or herself in the life of the school beyond the classroom, which research shows is often beneficial in helping to motivate students (Noddings, 2005). In a recent survey (Carlson, Martinez, & Lasater, 2013), at-risk students in a remedial setting stated that
teachers who appeared interested in them as individuals and who demonstrated caring behaviors toward them were instrumental in increasing their engagement with academic assignments, and these teachers also promoted in the students a greater sense of well-being.

The teachers at Magnolia Cove understood that a personal relationship is not always possible with every reluctant student (“Not everybody clicks, just like with adults,” said Ms. Hall in her interview), and that sometimes a student needed time to develop engagement with a particular teacher or class. In their interviews, three of the four teacher participants in this study related instances in which they watched a student start the semester resistant to every effort of the teacher but who, after some time elapsed, responded to the teacher’s personal attention. One student of Ms. Chiba’s willingly modified his chronic use of inappropriate language in the classroom at her respectful request delivered in the hallway. Ms. Hall told of a student who came back to thank her for her caring approach to his difficulties during an earlier year. The teachers also acknowledged that sometimes a student would decide to remain disengaged in spite of their best efforts. Mr. Jones mentioned a student he had tried to encourage whose ability to “do voices” was unfortunately not sufficient to engage him in learning before he left the school without his diploma. In each instance, these teachers invested personal time and energy into their reluctant learners. Ms. Rivers relates the following story:

That lack of interest? It always depends on the kid, and you try different things; try to find out what they’re interested in, and talk to them. I specifically try to target that kid to build a personal relationship, will even look him in the eye, ask him, ‘What’d ya do this weekend?’ and let them know that I have a personal
interest in their life, and it seems like they’re more willing to do what I ask them to do. I’m thinking of one student in particular that I had this semester in fourth block—at the beginning of the semester he was pretty surly, and if I called on him, he practically growled at me, but then during class work time, seatwork time, whatever, when I was walking around, I made a point of, every day, talking to him about something I’d seen that he was interested in, and by the end of the semester he was one of my best l’il teacher-pleasers. I think sometimes that letting them know you care, and you don’t just dismiss them? Not every time, but sometimes it works. (M. Wright, Transcription of interview, June 3, 2013)

Ms. Rivers did not relate exactly what hook she used that finally engaged her “surly” student nor how she instinctively connected that perfect current event, issue, or interesting cultural idea to this particular learner. McCombs (1994) and Noddings (2005) state that experienced teachers pay close attention to their students, habitually and automatically collecting the sort of information they feel could help their students when the need arises. The teachers in this study stated that demonstrating appropriate personal interest in their reluctant students was beneficial in helping those students become more engaged (M. Wright, Transcription of focus group, June 5, 2013), and these teachers made it their business to discover the ways they could best support their reluctant students.

Observations of her teaching practice corroborated Ms. Rivers’ claim that she takes a personal interest in her students. Ms. Rivers walked among her students checking on their progress as they worked in groups or independently, drawing their attention to their work or engaging them in conversations about their lives. With choice of topics and
group members for the project at hand, Ms. Rivers utilized a student-centered strategy in this classroom activity, telling one student group, “It’s strictly up to you. How would you like to present your project?” (M. Wright, Transcription of observation April 30, 2013).

In an interview, she explained how she goes about acquainting herself with the students at the beginning of the semester:

Ms. Rivers: I start off every semester with an information sheet: I don’t just ask them their names and their numbers and that sort of stuff, I ask what are you interested in? What do you like to read? What do you like to do in your spare time? I get to know them. Who’s an athlete? Who’s a cheerleader? Who likes to read? Who’s in the band? All the different things that they do. I ask questions.

Researcher: You ask questions. And do you do that mostly on paper or orally also?

Ms. Rivers: Both.

Researcher: Do the other students pay attention to that, when you’re questioning them out loud?

Ms. Rivers: Yes, and they frequently join in the conversation and describe other students.

Researcher: Do you take notes so you remember?

Ms. Rivers: Nooo, no.

Researcher: Really? You just remember?

Ms. Rivers: Not at the very beginning, it takes a little time. But the more I get to know them, the more I talk to them? [Her inflection rises questioningly, seeking
agreement. I nod.] *And the older I get, the longer it takes me to remember it all* [laughs], *but that happens* (M. Wright, Transcription of interview, June 3, 2013).

With a realistic view of their students, the teachers realized that they will not always be successful in establishing these relationships, but they knew it was still important to demonstrate a caring approach. They admitted that in some cases, a reluctant student may decide to leave school in favor of a night school program or to seek employment. In fact, for a student who is chronically unsuccessful in the regular high school setting, the teachers suggested several alternative routes, such as attending the local evening school, participating in a work-study program, or seeking a General Education Diploma at the technical school in town. Because of the rapport many teachers established with students, even those students who did not complete their education at Magnolia Cove often returned to the school to greet their former teachers, who were always happy to hear of the progress these students had made in life and possibly admire new babies.

During classroom observations, the four teachers in this study demonstrated their concern for their students in several ways that involved teaching strategies. Mr. Jones approached each student individually to check on the progress of their Dracula projects, addressing each student with words intended to encourage him or her to complete the assignment. Ms. Hall allowed students to self-select their groups for work on a current-events presentation designed to utilize and demonstrate satire. By the time in the semester (late spring) that this study occurred, she had developed a history with each of her students and used humor to push them into higher-level thinking as they planned their projects on computers in the media center. Individualized instruction, collaborative
writing to the edge

75
groups, self-selected topics, and flexible due dates were some of the supportive teaching strategies either observed in the classrooms of these teachers or discussed in interviews.

These teachers also gave their attention to other students who were not in the observed class period. Several times during the course of an observation, a student from outside the classroom interrupted a teacher’s instruction. During an observation in Ms. Chiba’s 11th grade classroom, the following event occurred:

As Ms. Chiba works through the handout [containing topics likely to be found on the up-coming End-of-Course Test in America Literature], calling on students to answer questions, a student from her 12th grade class comes to her locked door and knocks to be let in. [I know him from Communications Skills class his 9th grade year and remember his entertaining personality and attention-seeking methods of conversation. He was instrumental in helping Trevor and Simon rip the edges off their papers that day. I remember that throughout his high school career, he has struggled with writing and other types of academic work and that the previous summer I was his teacher in Unit Recovery for 11th grade English. I am happy to know that he’s about to graduate.] ‘He’s come to discuss his pretty-awful grade,’ Ms. Chiba tells her students, waving at the senior in the hall through the window in the door. ‘Don’t let him in!’ [Classroom doors are kept locked during class for safety considerations.]

I cannot hear him, but she answers, ‘No. Come back fourth,’ [which I know to be her planning period] ‘I’m busy.’ Turning from the door, she remarks, ‘He’s like a cockroach infestation. If I let him in, he’ll never leave.’ She resumes reading from the worksheet, moving to the next question. The student in the hall calls to her
again, apparently dissatisfied with waiting until 1:30, and she walks over to talk with him again. ‘Okay, lunch, then,’ she answers through the door. ‘Come back third.’ Throughout this exchange, she wears a mild expression on her face, smiling and relaxed. She resumes her lesson with her 11th grade class and the 12th grader moves away. (M. Wright, Transcription of observation, May 17, 2013)

In this interaction with a student from another class, Ms. Chiba demonstrated that she was willing to interrupt her current class’s instructional time to set up a meeting with him and to utilize her lunch break to discuss the student’s needs. Ms. Chiba illustrated to her 11th grade class that she was willing to make herself available to help when a student requested assistance.

In many ways, therefore, the four English teachers demonstrated an attitude of concern for the well-being of their students and that they were willing to invest extra time and energy in promoting the success of these reluctant learners. Research suggests that a rural setting such as the one in which Magnolia Cove is situated provides much stronger support for the development of personal relationships than does an urban or suburban setting, as the students often have known their teachers for many years in different environments, such as church, community sports, and other social settings (Hardre, Sullivan, & Roberts, 2008). According to these researchers, this ability for students and teachers to develop personal relationships with one another is one of the greatest strengths of the rural school setting. In addition to building relationships, the teacher participants also incorporated supportive teaching strategies to encourage their reluctant male learners as evidenced by classroom observation data. However, strategies to
increase self-efficacy, agency, and a shift toward more intrinsically generated motivation were not observed or discussed.

The following chart provides a summary of the motivational strategies observed or discussed with the teachers in this study. An O indicates that the strategy was observed in the classroom; a D indicates the strategy was discussed in an interview or in the focus group session:

Table 3.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teacher Personal Strategies</th>
<th>Teaching Strategies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>O, D Friendly relationships</td>
<td>D Challenge at appropriate levels</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>O, D Use of Humor</td>
<td>O Explicit instructions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>O Enthusiasm</td>
<td>O Flexible collaborative groups</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>O, D Patience</td>
<td>O Lengthy assignments in short increments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>O, D Involvement in school life</td>
<td>O, D Individual support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D Involvement in community life</td>
<td>O, D Positive classroom environment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>O, D Relevant topics of study</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>O Student autonomy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>O, D Use of technology</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Student Perceptions toward Motivational Strategies*

The six students in this study reacted in differing ways to the strategies their language arts teachers incorporated to help them become more motivated to succeed in English. Not all of the students perceived the teachers’ attempts to build an appropriate personal relationship as desirable. Additionally, because most of the students defined motivation solely as an outside force which acted upon them rather than as a combination of external and internal factors (M. Wright, Student survey, March 2013), they did not consistently recognize classroom teaching strategies as helpful to their learning.
The students held varying opinions about the level of engagement they experienced in English class as well as in other types of classes. Trevor and Simon, the seniors, found their passion and motivation in athletics and used that engagement to give impetus to some of their academic work. As noted earlier, Trevor and Simon gave credit to their coaches and teachers for supporting their academic obligations during their athletic activities. In an interview, Trevor noted that during his first year of high school, he made a conscious decision to put forth as little effort as possible to pass his classes, and only when a coach invited him to play football and track did he begin to pay attention to his academic work:

**Researcher:** Do you think you’d have done academically as well if you hadn’t had your track and field going on?

**Trevor:** Probably not. ‘Cause I just got lazy. I’m really lazy.

**Researcher:** Well, I remember when I had you in 9th grade and you didn’t know anything about track and field then. You were like, ‘I ain’t doin’ this . . .’

**Trevor:** Yeah. It’s like, when I was in middle school I played football, I mean that’s what—I had straight A’s, honor roll, gifted, like that, and then high school I thought I’m just gonna take a break—you know, this sucks, it’s stupid, I’ve done this for eight years, I’m tired of it, I’m just gonna be lazy.

**Researcher:** So then what motivated you to get back into your athletic activities?

**Trevor:** I played football my 10th grade year. Coach Brown, we was in the weight room, you know like warming up, we were going through the hurdles, like the hurdle drills, and he said, ‘You should come out for track, come hurdle,’ and um, got me back into sports all ‘round—no, I take that back, I did wrestle, freshman
year, I was the varsity 130, and the wrestling coaches didn’t care about grades all that much. . . I was gonna do just enough to get a straight 70 all through high school and pass. (M. Wright, Transcription of interview, May 24, 2013)

Although he was unclear about his reasons for deciding to play football again, Trevor gave credit to his first high school football coach for inspiring him to work harder in class. Trevor defined motivation as “your drive to do something” (M. Wright, Student survey, March, 2013), and he said that as he progressed through his classes in high school, he encountered additional coaches and teachers who were willing to invest personal interest in his success. He described one such involvement in the following excerpt:

**Researcher:** So, Ms. Rivers gave you extra help last year with your writing?

**Trevor:** Yeah, she tried a bunch to get me to write some extra papers and help me, like, perfect ‘em and critique ‘em and all that stuff, and like I didn’t always do that. She’s give [sic] me some pointers, and stuff like, and now, today, we got an assignment in class, and she says to send it to her and she’ll, you know, tell me what’s wrong with it and what to fix . . . Mrs. Hall does too, though; [he paraphrases] she’s always [saying] ‘If you don’t do this you’ll fail, if you don’t do this you’ll fail. You gotta graduate, you know . . .’ (M. Wright, Transcription of interview, May 24, 2013).

Trevor and Simon agreed that their teachers helped generate motivation for them to work harder by giving them the specific consequences of their failure to produce an assignment. When asked how teachers could increase the development of motivation in their students, Trevor jokingly stated, “Lie to them! Tell them it’s 80% of their grade,
even if it’s not!” (M. Wright, Transcription of interview, May 24, 2013). Simon laughed and agreed.

The seniors described how the instructional strategies of teachers they had experienced in the past might have helped them pass those classes. For example, they praised the engaging approach of their 9th grade English teacher, Mr. Gibson, saying that his commitment to topics they were studying made them feel more interested (“If it wasn’t for him, I wouldn’t have read the whole Hunger Games series,” stated Simon [M. Wright, Transcription of interview, May 24, 2013]). They reported that they enjoyed the “fun” Coach Roberts generated in health class (M. Wright, Transcription of interview, May 24, 2013), and they agreed that among their favorite teachers were also Ms. Baker and Mr. Endicott, both in the social studies department. “Cool, very cool,” Simon said of Ms. Baker, although he could not be more specific when pressed. “We got along. She loves her job, you can just tell.” They particularly admired Mr. Endicott, saying:

**Simon:** He’s really straightforward.

**Trevor:** Yeah, he’s straightforward, tells it like it is.

**Simon:** He basically says, ‘If you don’t do this, you’re gonna fail,’ so you always did your work in his room.

**Trevor:** With him, there is no highway. (M. Wright, Transcription of focus group, May 21, 2013)

The senior students admitted that, regarding their athletics, they loved working hard and were motivated by their physical successes. Simon stated,

*If I had to pick one thing [as enjoyable in school], it would have to be sports.*

*That’s kept me going,* that has a lot to do with it for me, *is playing sports,* having
something there that’s kept me going” (M. Wright, Transcription of interview, May 13, 2013).

Trevor agreed, stating:

I’m really hard on myself when it comes to sports. I want to be the best that I can be and if I could have done better, I beat myself up. You can always do better, can’t ever do enough, ya know? Yeah (M. Wright, Transcription of interview, May 22, 2013).

The primary motivational factor supporting the seniors’ goal to graduate appeared to be the drive to increase their physical development and prowess in order to pursue athletics in college, with academic learning taking a secondary position. Trevor and Simon seemed to suggest that their intrinsic motivation to excel in athletics was much stronger than any external motivators during their years in the classroom. The enjoyment they experienced through their sports activities outweighed their aversion to academic work. Although both students reported that their parents always expected them to graduate, they did not relate any instances of parental involvement in their efforts to complete academic work. On the contrary, both students reported that their attendance records indicated multiple absences. The seniors also stated that for them, externally motivating influences included teachers’ offering extra help and providing reminders that failure to complete assignments would result in failure of the class and failure to graduate. These seniors relied on their internal motivation to excel in athletic engagement, and on external reminders from teachers that academic work was important.

The 10th grade students also claimed that their engagement in most classes was low, but they put less emphasis on a teacher’s personal interest as a motivating factor.
Like the seniors, they stated that if a topic were interesting, they were more likely to be motivated to complete a project or homework. However, unlike the seniors with their passion for athletics, the 10th graders could not state exactly what they were interested in, aside from playing video games. They observed that while failing a class was not desirable, they could gain that credit relatively quickly in night school or in credit recovery at the high school with only a few more hours’ seat time. In fact, Drake expressed a preference for the individualized work pace at the evening school over class activities during the usual school day (M. Wright, Transcription of focus group, May 22, 2013).

When questioned about the effectiveness of motivational teaching strategies used by their language arts teachers, the 10th grade students responded that group work, choosing their own topics, and working on the Internet for research were all motivational to them. They also responded positively to selecting their own group members and methods of presentation. However, these students produced little evidence in their classwork that these strategies were effective in increasing their motivation. They continued to resist challenge and submit work their teacher considered below their ability levels (M. Wright, Transcription of interview, September 9, 2013).

The 10th graders differed from the seniors in their attitude toward mandated topics in English class. Trevor and Simon insisted that the teacher was responsible for keeping homework to a minimum by budgeting class time carefully and that the teacher should possess the expertise to construct engaging lessons, whatever the topic may be. The 10th graders suggested that with some topics required by the Common Core national and state language arts standards, their teachers could not always keep a lesson from being dull,
and that the teacher must sometimes teach lessons in which even he or she had no interest. In the following focus group conversation, the 10th graders indicated an understanding of the dilemma given teachers by a mandated curriculum:

**Researcher:** So in English class, [let me read you] some factors; you tell me what’s important [to your motivation to learn]. Should it be fun?

**Jim:** It’s imperative that English is fun. [General laughter.]

**Researcher:** Has that happened with you pretty much, or not?

**Jim:** For the most part.

**Drake:** It has its days.

**Zeus:** Yeah, it has its days. [All agree.]

**Researcher:** [In some surprise] So, it’s not teacher-specific, but it’s topic-specific, right? [They agree.]

**Drake:** None of it’s really the teacher’s fault, they kinda have to teach--

**Jim:** There’s things they have to teach.

**Teacher at the copier:** Amen! We have to teach what we have to teach. [General laughter] (M. Wright, Transcription of focus group, May 22, 2013)

The 10th grade students appeared to exhibit a more relaxed attitude about motivational strategies their teachers used than did the seniors. The 10th graders did not appear to expect the incorporation of their personal desires by their teachers as did the seniors, and the 10th graders appeared more understanding than the seniors about unappealing lessons. However, the 10th graders seemed to be aware of several motivational strategies that they thought would be helpful although none of those strategies involved developing greater self-efficacy or agency to facilitate learning.
Student Response to Motivational Strategies Implemented by Teachers

Although the 10th grade students were able to express their opinions about what might help them be more motivated in English class, in the end they did not respond with an increased level of academic work when their teacher implemented some of those very ideas. In the same manner, the seniors were unable to describe a time when they were motivated to learn in an academic class. When asked to relate a time when a lesson engaged their interest, the seniors looked at each other, laughed, and shrugged. A long pause ensued.

**Researcher:** What I’m looking for is what makes you motivated to learn.

[Another long pause occurs.] **Has that ever happened?**

**Trevor:** I don’t know.

**Simon:** Yeah.

**Trevor:** I’ve got to be really interested in it or I’m not motivated that much.

**Simon:** Me too. (M. Wright, Transcription of focus group, May 21, 2013)

It appeared that a teacher’s personal interest and extrinsic motivators such as constant reminders may have generated enough support for these seniors to proceed successfully through the system, but that no teaching strategies to help a student develop intrinsic motivation for academic learning were being implemented. In addition to physical education and weight-training classes, both students indicated that they were engaged in classes in which they could move around freely rather than sit in desks, and their favorites were construction and culinary arts (“You actually get to get up and cook,” said Simon.). They both indicated that for the other classes they simply did what they had to do in order to pass.
The 12th grade students appeared to possess personal reasons for completing academic work: their desire to proceed to post-secondary settings to pursue their athletic talents. The 10th grade students demonstrated much less drive. Two of the 10th grade participants, Larry and Drake, were not sufficiently engaged in Mr. Jones’s class to pass it. Among other omissions, Drake did not submit his Dracula project, having saved it somewhere on a school computer but failing to remember which one; and Larry did not come to school on the day of their final exam. Mr. Jones reported later in a follow-up interview that Drake was eligible for the summer credit recovery class but that Larry was not, having garnered only 55 points over the semester as his final grade (M. Wright, Transcription of interview, September 9, 2013). It would appear that Mr. Jones’s personable approach to teaching and his attempt to present what he thought was an interesting, contemporary unit involving the Dracula story failed to motivate these two students.

Observations in the English classroom of Ms. Hall, where seniors Trevor and Simon finished their last few weeks of school, served to indicate the lack of strategies to increase student agency but indicated the presence of strategies she used to help build appropriate personal relationships with students. The following events demonstrated her commitment:

*In the media center, Ms. Hall reviews the literary terms pertinent to this project on satire, using humor to interact with her students. She pays careful attention to their activities on the computers as they prepare for their current events satirical presentations later in the month. Using her knowledge of their activities during the early part of the semester and at the recent prom, she*
demonstrates that she cares about their success with encouraging remarks
designed to encourage them toward a greater depth of knowledge (Quate &
McDermott, 2009; Schunk, Pintrich, & Meece, 2008). When one student states, “I
have no idea where to find information on this topic,” Ms. Hall politely asks,
“Well, can you pick another idea? What has your group found, so far?”
The student answers her questions thoughtfully and returns to his investigation.
Ms. Hall has placed Simon and Trevor in separate groups but has arranged the
groups so that an engaged and motivated student manages each one. Trevor is
observed taking orders for the research from the leader of his group and being
engaged in finding information on his computer with help from the stronger
student. [Earlier in this study, he had stated he prefers being a member of a
learning group run by a competent student who cares about the grade, as then he
will be assured of an ‘A.’] Simon, who has been absent for several days, is
listening to others in his group plan their project while simultaneously working on
his missed assignments. I remember that he has mentioned in an interview earlier
that he will have to come in after school the week before graduation to finish his
work, but that he is confident he will be able to earn his diploma when he has
completed all his missed assignments.

Most of the students appear to be engaged in preparing their projects.
They work quietly and with apparent enthusiasm, showing each other what they
have found on the Internet. Some take notes and others can be heard making
plans for the presentation of their chosen topic through the lens of satire,
assigning roles for their newscasts. Across the bank of computers, Trevor
becomes engaged in a lively conversation with another student about his pole vault record, and Ms. Hall brings his attention back to his group by calling his name and pointing significantly at his screen. The bell rings before Simon has finished his missing assignments in English. He has contributed little to helping plan his group’s presentation but has engaged in the conversation of his group when asked (M. Wright, classroom observation, May 2, 2013).

Ms. Hall’s seniors, one month from graduation, supported one another in this cooperative activity, assuming responsibility for conducting research or producing ideas to further the production. As is often the case, the motivation to excel lay at different levels among the students, with the stronger students making logical decisions for the best ways to advance the projects, and the students who appeared less interested contributing ideas and opinions only when asked.

In Mr. Jones’s classroom, in contrast, universal student engagement was not the case. Using his LCD projector and the white board, Mr. Jones spent the greater part of a class session discussing the plot and characters of Bram Stoker’s Dracula (1897) in preparation for the final project of the year. Although his presentation was fast-paced and informative, drawing on contemporary sources for information and popular culture for modern connections, many of the students appeared to be disengaged from the lesson. Students on the perimeter of the room were observed using their electronic devices for private activities: Some were texting, two watched movies on their iPads, and several were engaged in playing various games on their smartphones. Jim busied himself with his open laptop, occasionally glancing up at Mr. Jones, who continued to lecture. Zeus and a girl across the aisle were holding hands and talking in low voices while Larry dozed with
his head on his desk. Drake appeared to be paying attention passively, with no note-taking, which at any rate had not been suggested by the teacher. Of the 28 students, approximately six demonstrated interest by asking questions during the lecture.

A later visit supported the initial impression that many of the students in this 10th grade class were disengaged. During my second visit, the students were given a page of questions from a WebQuest that was projected onto the white board, and Mr. Jones was helping them write the correct answers on their papers. Sitting close to Zeus, I observed him become distracted by a boy nearby who had fallen behind on the worksheet and who persisted in asking Zeus questions, causing him also to fall behind the class in recording the answers. General confusion and disarray surrounded several of the students during this lesson because they were not listening to their teacher, and again several were observed to be engaged in activities that involved their electronic devices and were not focused on the WebQuest at all. Mr. Jones told me later that the worksheet activity was intended to help the students understand the Dracula legend so they could make connections in their projects among the myth, the book, and contemporary manifestations of the vampire legends. However, the general inattention the students were giving their teacher may have been an inhibiting factor in their understanding of the lesson. Although the 10th grade students had claimed that a contemporary topic and use of electronic media were both motivational teaching strategies, in this situation these strategies appeared to have no positive effect.

Later in the month, I observed the outcome of the class’s Dracula projects. Having been given a choice of topics and delivery modes, some of the students presented the book’s themes compared with other literature, one built a model of Dracula’s basement
tombs from office supplies, and several managed to connect an aspect of the book (without having read it) with a popular television program or recent movie. The four students in this study, however, declined to challenge themselves even though Mr. Jones had devised a detailed rubric and attached two weighty assessment values to the project. Jim constructed a densely written PowerPoint featuring the various types of vampirism, cutting and pasting unsupported information from the Internet without any graphics or references, which he presented to the class by reading every word of every slide. When another student asked a question, he was unable to answer it, nor could he explain why he did not include any pictures, simply shrugging his shoulders in answer to Mr. Jones’ query. Zeus focused his PowerPoint on a contemporary vampire-themed movie, as did Larry. As mentioned previously, Drake claimed his work was saved on a computer that he subsequently could not locate, and although he was reminded several times by Mr. Jones that he needed to find it or begin again, Drake never submitted any work for this unit. This zero added to the five zeros he had previously earned for failing to submit work for an earlier unit prevented Drake from passing the class.

In an interview conducted after the school year had ended, Mr. Jones expressed his disappointment that his students were not more engaged in the Dracula unit. He believed that drawing on the contemporary interest in vampires would motivate his reluctant students more than it actually did, and although he gave generous grades for the work they produced, many of the students failed to achieve a passing score. “It worked better several years ago when we had time to actually read the book,” he stated. “And this class was a challenge from day one. Very hard to motivate” (M. Wright, Transcription of interview, September 9, 2013).
Student Responses to Motivational Strategies

Researchers acknowledge that many students of high aptitude demonstrate low motivation in school (Hardre, Huang, Chen, Chian, Jen, & Warden, 2006; Hidi, 2000; Sanacore, 2008), and they agree that complex interactions between internal and external factors determine how a student faces learning tasks (Pintrich, 2003; Schunk, Pintrich, & Meece, 2008). Conditions at home, self-perceptions, prior learning experiences, peer relationships, and physical well-being all contribute to a student’s level of motivation to learn (Alderman, 2008; Deci & Ryan, 2006; Hardre & Sullivan, 2008; Quate & McDermott, 2009; Sagor, 2003). Researchers suggest that several conditions must exist in the classroom before significant learning may occur, such as teachers’ attempts to meet the emotional needs of a student and the presentation of activities that provide relevance to the student’s current or future interests (Hardre et al., 2006). Schussler (2009) states that for students to become intellectually engaged, they should experience three pervasive elements in the classroom:

1. Opportunities for students to succeed
2. Flexible avenues through which learning may occur.
3. Respect as learners because teachers convey the belief that students are capable of achieving academic success. (p. 115)

Vygotsky (1978) and Csikszentmihalyi (1990) indicate that students are most responsive to classroom activities that provide a challenge situated at the far edge of their current knowledge and skills. Calling this challenging position in learning the “Zone of Proximal Development,” Vygotsky (1978) demonstrates that students who are given support for a challenging task situated at the edge of their developmental levels are more
likely to accept the opportunities to learn than if the tasks were too easy or too difficult for the students’ skill levels. Csikszentmihalyi (1990) names this challenging experience “flow” (p. 52) and describes the optimal experience as one that will produce some anxiety while it also produces a sense of hope that, with support and practice, the task may be conquered. Researchers state that activities that challenge students’ skills while supporting the development of those skills may help a student to develop a level of intrinsic motivation (Alderman, 2008; Deci & Ryan, 2008; Deci & Dweck, 2006; Dweck, 2006; Schunk, Pintrich, & Meece, 2008), as the competency and self-efficacy of the learner increases with successful practice. Teachers may be able to build students’ self-confidence along with motivation by constructing activities that are situated in the zone of proximal development.

In a focus group session, the English teachers at Magnolia Cove acknowledged that there is little they can do to orchestrate a more organized or supportive home life, if that is indeed a student’s need; but they recognized that in addition to cultivating a warm relationship with reluctant male students, they could organize their lessons in the classroom to promote the engagement of these learners in activities that could be meaningful to present interests or future goals. The teachers recognized that differences exist between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, but they seemed to be unaware that motivation lies on a continuum, and that frequently the reasons for a student’s participation are based on a combination of the two. For example, in discussing the success of Trevor, the senior who earned the state record for the pole vault, the following conversation ensued:
Ms. Hall: Well, one of the students we talked about yesterday, Trevor, was only motivated to get a diploma, that was his only motivation, unless it was pole vaulting, and then there was other motivation, but he only cared about getting that diploma, and that was the only thing that made him work. He would tell me that, you know, ‘I want that,’ and he was constantly badgering me about what his average was. Once he got to a 70, he wanted to make sure it was over a 70. So, you know, that was his motivation, so sometimes it’s not truly an internal motivation. That’s more to me extrinsic, because he wanted that piece of paper, more than he wanted, you know, that fact of making it.

Ms. Rivers: The reason he wanted that paper is that pole vaulting is his motivation. He wants to go on to college and pole-vault there.

Ms. Hall: And that’s true; that’s intrinsic there.

Ms. Rivers: That pole-vaulting was his motivation. He wanted that diploma so he could continue to do that in college (M. Wright, Transcription of focus group, June 4, 2013).

Ms. Rivers, who was one of Trevor’s track and field coaches, taught Trevor English during his 11th grade year, and she had offered to help him with his papers in Ms. Hall’s 12th grade English class, in which he was enrolled at the time of this study. Trevor admitted that when he was in Ms. Rivers’ class, he did not always accept the help she offered on his writing assignments even though he was well aware that he needed the extra support (M. Wright, Personal interview, May 21, 2013). The four English teachers revealed (M. Wright, Transcription of focus group, June 4, 2013) that to encourage their reluctant learners they used differentiated teaching strategies that included collaborative
self-selected grouping, choice of topics and delivery modes, and rubrics to guide students into the specifics of the assignment (Sagor, 2003; Tomlinson, 2001). They also acknowledged that differentiation does not always suffice to engage their reluctant learners.

They continued to offer their students opportunities to learn, however, by incorporating Common Core standards and a classroom atmosphere that generally appeared inviting. For a unit on the novel, Ms. Chiba gave her seniors a choice of books from a larger list, and the freedom for each reading circle to present the book to the class in the delivery mode of their choice. Ms. Rivers provided a range of possible topics from which her students chose their next writing focus for their memoir project portfolios (Kirby & Crovitz, 2013). As noted earlier, Ms. Hall provided her students the freedom to select their own groups and topics for their presentations of a current issue examined through the use of satire. Mr. Jones allowed his students to choose the focus and delivery mode of their Dracula projects.

Although research indicates that students often enjoy a sense of challenge (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Dweck, 2006; Smith & Wilhelm, 2002), the teachers in this study knew that their reluctant learners did not always espouse that view. During the interviews and focus groups, the teachers indicated that even giving their students choices (Christenbury, 2008) does not guarantee they will become engaged or that the engagement will be sustained through the duration of the activity. For his 10th grade students, Mr. Jones had constructed his last unit of the year as a comparison of the novel *Dracula* (Stoker, 1897) to the use of the vampire myth in popular culture, incorporating
several Common Core Standards, including speaking, use of electronic media, and literary criticism. He shared his views concerning the challenge of the project:

*I felt that using Dracula as it relates to some modern cultural things would be fun for them the last days of school, but it didn’t exactly work like that. I’d intended to read them the book, and when I’ve done that in past classes, it’s always worked really well. This time, though, there wasn’t time, and the kids didn’t really get the novel just listening to me talk about it. Then, too, there’s so much popular stuff about vampires right now, it was easy for them to get some junk from the Internet to throw up on a PowerPoint, you know, and then have no idea what they were talking about. For some of them, it didn’t turn out like I’d hoped it would. And the grades were much more generous than I should have given, but I didn’t want to ruin their averages at the end of the year* (M. Wright, Transcription of personal interview, September 9, 2013).

Mr. Jones was disappointed that his attempt to challenge his students with what he considered an interesting and contemporary topic did not come to fruition. Even though before beginning the project he had given his students a detailed rubric, some of the students chose to minimize their participation with incomplete or inaccurate work. While several of the presentations were completed with care, the four reluctant 10th grade learners who are subjects of this study did not become engaged in the activities. Although Mr. Jones was fully aware that some of the students submitted work below their abilities, he gave generous grades to prevent a further drop in averages at the end of the year. He noted that in several instances, the students’ projects did not deserve such a high grade and that he was surprised at their lack of engagement, apparently not realizing that the
students had no investment in the project since they had not read the book. Yet in an effort to help his students, he graded the projects leniently.

Ms. Rivers expressed a similar experience with the writing assignments of her juniors during their memoir projects. Using events and ideas from their own lives, her students were expected to produce thoughtful and significant personal writing (Kirby & Crovitz, 2013) that demonstrated not only the correct conventions of writing processes but also a modicum of growth toward self-realization. She described the project in the following excerpt:

**Ms. Rivers:** With the 11th graders, every semester I do the memoir project because they’re always claiming they don’t know what to write about, but when you write about yourself, you are the expert on yourself, and I think especially at the beginning, they really enjoyed writing about themselves. The first piece we do is the name piece, where they have to talk to their parents and find out who got to name me, what does my name mean, why’d you name me that, what else did you think about instead of that name, what are my nicknames, how did I get them, and because they’re writing about themselves, it’s important to them. That was motivational, the memoir thing. And part of that too, was the writer’s workshop, because what we do, after they have written their rough draft of whatever memoir piece we’re working on, I break them off into groups of three or four, and we go outside of the room, and they go off in their little groups and read to each other, and make suggestions, do some peer editing, such as that, so—it’s fun for them. It’s motivational to get out of these four walls and go sit under a tree.
**Researcher:** And you said that at the beginning of the memoir project they seem to be more motivated, but then, do they get tired of it?

**Ms. Rivers:** Toward the end of the semester, they seem to lose interest,

*I think. I don’t know.* (M. Wright, Transcription of interview, June 3, 2013)

Like Mr. Jones, Ms. Rivers could not discern why her students lost interest in an activity that had been designed to garner enthusiasm. Both of these teachers had constructed what they thought were relevant lessons for their students that incorporated a significant amount of autonomy, assignments they designed to challenge students situated at every level of competence. However, they found that their expectations were not realized for reasons that were not clear to them. Mr. Jones recalled a time in his previous teaching position in an urban school system when his Dracula projects were quite successful in engaging students’ interests, but he admitted that the class had read the book. Ms. Rivers stated that oftentimes the success of a lesson depends on the time of year in which it is presented as well as on the attitudes, personalities, and current concerns of the students in the class. “If somebody has a big fight that morning with her mother on the way to school, and brings that into class, your lesson can fall to pieces,” she remarked (M. Wright, Personal interview, June 3, 2013). It may not be possible for even a skilled teacher to predict the outcome of a teaching unit, since the climate of a classroom may vary from day to day, even after weeks of promoting and building positive interactions among the students and between the students and the teacher.

Research indicates that reluctant students may experience more motivation to participate when a class features non-traditional methods of learning (Smith and Wilhelm, 2002), beyond work from a book or worksheet. Simon and Trevor clearly found
their motivation to succeed in the classes that enabled them to build their physical stamina and prowess. They both stated that their favorite classes were ones in which they could move around or create a product that was useful. Likewise, the 10th grade students, when asked to give advice to upcoming 9th grade boys, listed their favorite classes:

**Researcher:** So, what classes would you recommend [that] a new boy student should take as a 9th grader?

**Jim:** Drama, really fun, different than most of the other classes. When not acting, having fun. I like that.

**Larry:** Construction, ‘cause it’s pretty fun ‘cause you learn how to build stuff and use simple tools around the house.

**Researcher:** So you think it’ll help you in later life?

**Larry:** Yes.

**Jim:** Not to take your turn, but with drama, if you do set work, you get to use tools as well.

**Researcher:** That’s right.

**Drake:** Probably culinary. It’s fun, helpful around the house. Learning to cook, it’s good for you, cook for myself. They don’t let 9th graders in, though.

**Zeus:** I have to agree with Larry about construction; helps you build character, learn a trade, how to be a person—be all you can be using tools.

**Researcher:** When you do a project in construction, are you motivated to do a good job with that?

**Zeus:** Yeah, because they grade on precise measurements, so you have to be close to perfect.
Drake: I’m actually in there right now. I just got done building my birdhouse.

Zeus: Yeah, that was fun.

Researcher: Okay. So all of you are saying that you like classes where you’re up and doing things [All agree with nods.] and where you self-manage [All agree.]

(M. Wright, Transcription of focus group, May 22, 2013).

The 10th grade students clearly expressed interest in succeeding in construction class, in theater technology, and in culinary arts. They liked the outcomes of their work in these classes in which they produced a practical and useful product, such as something to eat or a birdhouse they might hang in the back yard. Researchers cite the benefits to student motivation of activities in classes such as these (Alderman, 2008; Dweck, 2006; Schunk, Pintrich, & Meece, 2008). Classes that engage students with producing a product allow students to do more than sit in desks with paper and pen; the classes include social interactions, a sense of fun, and hands-on learning, all cited by researchers as efficacious in the promotion of motivation.

In contradiction of research underscoring the benefits of challenging students beyond their current capabilities in order to produce growth (Bandura, 1999; Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Deci & Dweck, 2006; Deci & Ryan, 2008; Dweck, 2006; Schunk, Pintrich, & Meece, 2008), the male participants in this study very clearly expressed negative opinions toward challenging lessons. By their own analysis, the two seniors thrived on physical challenges and put themselves through hours of training to ensure success on the football field and on the track. The 10th graders admitted that they liked to challenge themselves in areas that held high personal interest, such as playing
their favorite video games, but they reported little that produced intrinsic motivation in school. In their focus group conversation, the 10th grade students stated the following:

**Researcher:** How about challenging? Do you guys enjoy a challenge in English?

**Jim:** As I said before, it depends on what it is. [All agree.]

**Zeus:** If it’s a three-inch packet . . . [All are nodding.] . . . challenge declined. [All laugh.]

**Researcher:** How about if it’s something that you’re interested in? Are you good to explore new areas?

**Drake:** I was about to say that, like, what you’re interested in? Like video games, I always like a challenge on those, but when it comes to actual work, it depends. [All agree.] (M. Wright, Transcription of focus group, May 22, 2013.)

The conversation lagged at this point: The students sat in silence, no one volunteering any additional information about challenging assignments or their personal interests. A series of questions then ensued concerning activities an English teacher might give students to engage them in discerning their personal interests. Would they participate in an on-line discussion? Would they research and write about a person who had become an expert in the area of their interest? Would they write a paper about their particular interest? Every answer was the same:

“It depends.”

“It depends on what the topic is.”

“It depends on how long the paper has to be.” (M. Wright, Transcription of focus group, May 22, 2013)
The students seemed unable to recognize or describe any interest they had that could be used for an exploration in school, should they be given the freedom to do so. The students may have expected their teachers to discover how to inspire them to participate in class discussions and turn in assignments, without having thought through what they themselves actually would like to do, if given a choice. The seniors, Trevor and Simon, motivated through their desire to pursue athletics in post-secondary settings, learned to complete most of their assignments in order to pass their classes and graduate, whether they found the subject matter interesting or not. The younger students, however, claimed at the time of this focus group session in late May that they expected to pass Mr. Jones’s English class (M. Wright, Transcription of focus group, May 22, 2013), but apparently two of them misjudged the depth of their academic needs and lacked the motivation to realize that goal. They held an unrealistic view of the effort required to finish the class’s requirements.

Mr. Jones made it quite clear over several weeks that Drake and Larry needed to finish their projects, yet these two students did not respond to his reminders. Jim, who had shown himself capable of honors-level work, created a project that did not fully demonstrate his abilities. He had learned the previous year in my Honors 9 English class how to compose and deliver an effective PowerPoint presentation, yet this year he merely copied non-supported information from the Internet and placed it on dark, ill-designed background graphics with little knowledge of what his own slides then contained. Mr. Jones’ lenient grading policy for this project may have been instrumental in the students’ lackluster participation. Coupled with their lack of understanding concerning the book Dracula, resulting in part from not being given the instructional time to read the book,
and their lack of self-efficacy, and without being given strategies to develop more intrinsic desire to succeed, the students were unable to demonstrate significant learning.

*Teaching Strategies: The Difficulties of Motivating Reluctant Learners*

The English teachers at Magnolia Cove High School habitually incorporated many strategies to help motivate reluctant learners without always observing the desired results: increased student engagement and performance. Even though oftentimes the teachers used appropriate personal connections, relevant topics, collaborative groups, and other researched-based strategies, many times student interest continued to be low. Student performance was observed to lag behind teacher expectations in many aspects of learning, reflected in lack of engagement, grumbling over assignments, poor attention to detail, and disinterest in classroom activities (M. Wright, Transcriptions of observations April 30, May 2, May 17, & May 18). One female student in Ms. Chiba’s class asked me, “You’re studying motivation? In here? You’ve certainly come to the wrong place for that.” (M. Wright, Classroom observation, May 17, 2013). In their focus group (M. Wright, June 4, 2013), teacher participants admitted that they could not always motivate a student who was resistant.

The following chart provides a summary of the research-based motivational strategies employed by the teachers in this study and the apparent effects of the strategies on the engagement of these students:
Table 4.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Motivational Strategy</th>
<th>Effectiveness for 10th Graders</th>
<th>Effectiveness for 12th Graders</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Challenge at appropriate levels</td>
<td>No effect. Participants worked at low level; claimed to dislike challenge in academic subjects.</td>
<td>Some positive effect. Participants claimed to dislike challenge in academic subjects but helped produce project.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>of readiness</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Explicit instructions (use of rubric)</td>
<td>No effect. Participants did not access information on rubric.</td>
<td>Some positive effect. Participants followed rubric somewhat.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flexible collaborative grouping</td>
<td>Not observed.</td>
<td>Positive effect. Teacher deemed projects successful.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lengthy assignments presented in shorter increments</td>
<td>No effect. 50% of participants did not submit project; other projects showed little thought.</td>
<td>Not observed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One-on-one support</td>
<td>No effect. Participants did not seem to access teacher’s offer to help individual projects.</td>
<td>Some positive effect. Participants seemed to respond in some instances to offers of individual help.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive classroom climate</td>
<td>Some effect. Participants appeared to enjoy class but did not engage in group discussions or respond to teacher’s jokes.</td>
<td>Some effect. Participants logged several absences but engaged in friendly exchanges with teacher and peers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relevant topics of study</td>
<td>No effect. Participants appeared disengaged from project topics.</td>
<td>Positive effect. Participants appeared to enjoy satiric newscasts and performed well.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student autonomy</td>
<td>Negative effect. Despite being allowed choice, participants submitted projects that showed little thought.</td>
<td>Positive effect. Participants seemed to enjoy working with peers on self-selected topics.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use of technology</td>
<td>Some effect. Participants engaged electronic devices for information about their topics.</td>
<td>Some effect. One participant conducted research on a media center computer.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The two seniors, Trevor and Simon, apparently discovered a passion for athletics that served as their motivation for working hard enough to pass other classes in which they were not particularly interested. In addition to their physical training classes, both students admitted to enjoying courses that incorporated physical activity and a concrete outcome, such as cooking and construction, which they stated were fun. When asked how
he accomplished work in a class not to his liking, Simon shrugged and stated, “Well, I just go in there and I do it. I think, ‘Just another day of all this work.’” (M. Wright, Transcription of interview May 21, 2013). Simon did not appear to enjoy academic learning but was ultimately successful through perseverance, through the external motivator of parental expectations, through the interventions of professionals at the school, and through his intrinsic motivation for athletic advancement, which supplied the external motivation for the completion of his academic work.

Trevor avoided completing assignments in classes he did not like, producing only enough to earn a passing grade and relying on more capable peers to manage the details of group projects and presentations. The teachers of these students constructed lessons that featured the strategies researchers recommend for student engagement: utilization of contemporary topics, collaboration with peers, promotion of autonomy by allowing for student choice, and challenging opportunities for academic growth (Alderman, 2008; Bernaus & Gardner, 2008; Brozo, 2010; Dewey, 1938; Dweck, 2006). Yet, these reluctant learners still found little motivation for more than the minimum engagement in their English classes, accessing their passion for athletics as the external motivating factor for doing the work given by their teachers while remaining disengaged from any real interest in the subject matter, and thus generating little observable or reported intrinsic motivation to learn in language arts classes.

The students in 12th grade claimed that a personal relationship with a caring teacher helped them to be motivated, yet neither student appeared to capitalize on that relationship outside of their sports contexts. Trevor stated that Ms. Rivers and his other track coaches repeatedly reminded him that he had to keep his grades up in order to be
successful in his athletic goals. However, Trevor admitted that during the previous year he did not take advantage of Ms. Rivers’ offer to help him with his writing, and both he and Simon were reported by their English teacher to have several absences and missing assignments. Simon stated that he was being helped by his teachers and a counselor to make up assignments he was missing so that he could graduate, but he could not supply the name of the counselor and was vague about what assignments he still owed, just able to say that they involved culinary arts and English. Although these adults had offered to facilitate his graduation by supplying the support he needed to complete his work during extra days at the school after the rest of the graduating class was finished with final exams, Simon remained somewhat baffled about his route to graduation. However, he cheerfully accepted this situation and remained hopeful that his plans for college would come to fruition (M. Wright, Transcription of interview, May 13, 2013). Simon had not found the internal motivation to modify his approach to learning in classes other than those that engaged him in physical activity.

Similar to the teacher of the two seniors, the teacher of the 10th grade students, Mr. Jones, attempted to apply his knowledge of adolescent behaviors to his teaching practices. Having constructed a unit based on contemporary interest in the vampire myth, allowed research on a variety of electronic devices, graded leniently, and extended deadlines, Mr. Jones was disappointed that his reluctant learners did not challenge themselves to a higher level of knowledge and participation. Although the four students in this study claimed in the focus group (M. Wright, Transcription, May 22, 2013) that contemporary issues, use of electronic devices, reasonable grading practices, and flexible due dates were all conducive to their learning in English classes, these adolescent males
displayed none of the interest and engagement that their teacher had hoped the project would generate. The students, disconnected from the assignment by not being given instructional time to read the novel and therefore lacking any complete knowledge or understanding of the novel, and having no emotional investment in the characters (Rosenblatt, 1978), produced projects that did not demonstrate depth of literary knowledge or familiarity with the protocols of satisfactory presentations, areas that are mandated on the current state and national curriculum for that grade level. Additionally, they were not corrected by their teacher when they delivered disorganized and unsupported information with graphics either too difficult to read or not in evidence, and they were allowed to speak with mumbled diction in a manner that did not engage their listeners.

Like the seniors in this study, the 10th graders did not depend on personal relationships with their English teachers to advance their motivation or success in class, a somewhat ironic situation given the importance attached by their teachers to developing appropriate personal relationships with reluctant students to increase their motivation. These students were not observed asking their teacher for extra help in constructing their Dracula projects, and most of the students in Mr. Jones’ class did not respond to his jokes and other attempts at humor to engage them during class discussions. These young men appeared somewhat reluctant to discuss the idea of developing an appropriate personal relationship with their teachers, as the following focus group conversation illustrates:

Researcher: *What about that personality where the teacher wants to get to know you better, and takes an interest in you personally? Does that ring a bell with anybody? Do you care about that, any of you?
Jim: Ummm . . . it depends. [Spoken carefully]

Researcher: [laughs] On what?

Jim: I mean, like, some teachers, personality-wise, you just don’t get along with them. In those cases, no. But in other cases, I’m fine with it.

Researcher: Okay. So it’s like any other relationship, is it?

Jim: Pretty much.

Zeus: You just don’t want to get overwhelmed with it, like following you around, stalking you.

Researcher: [laughs] I would hope that could never happen.

Drake, Larry, and Zeus, the 10th graders, were not able to express their ideas about motivation clearly, and they made much less specific statements about what they believe defines motivation than those made by Trevor, Simon, or Jim. In answer to the question, “How do you define motivation?” Drake wrote, “Something to wake up for, father figures, etc [sic].” Larry wrote, “To move somebody to do something.” Zeus wrote, “Something or someone trying to get you to do something.” (M. Wright, Student surveys, March 2013) All three of these 10th grade students seemed to see motivation as an outside influence that operates on a person to create or force an action, rather than as an internal drive to achieve an important personal goal. McCombs and Pope (1994) state that motivation and learning are positively impacted when teachers give their students information about some of the learning functions of their brains and explain the personal agency by which the students may learn to create and direct their own thoughts, supporting greater academic success. These researchers suggest that teachers may support their reluctant students by giving them explicit information on how motivation is
engendered and actual classroom practice in how to self-monitor positively their learning attitudes and activities.

Responding to the question, “What is your definition of motivation?” in his student survey, Jim demonstrated that he understood, at least partially, the nature of intrinsic motivation. He wrote that motivation is “The reason anyone does anything” (M. Wright, Student survey, March 2013). In a somewhat playful manner, Jim explained how motivation works for him when he stated that he is motivated “all the time,” causing this researcher to pause and look at him skeptically, remembering his lack of participation in Communication Skills and Honors 9 English the previous year. Jim then explained why he did not always do his work as a 9th grader in the following interview excerpt:

**Researcher:** Okay now, you said you define motivation as ‘what causes people to do things that are thought out, when plans are made.’ You said that most of the time there’s a reason. Now tell me a time in which you were highly motivated.

**Jim:** Hmm. Can’t really think of anything off the top of my head because I’m always motivated to do what I’m doing.

**Researcher:** Ha! Always?

**Jim:** Always. I’m a motivated person.

**Researcher:** Hmm. All right, let me see. [Pause for re-grouping of thoughts.] So you are ALWAYS motivated?

**Jim:** I am always motivated.

**Researcher:** What if somebody asks you to do some assignment that you don’t want to do?

**Jim:** Well, then I’m [hesitates] motivated not to do it, because [hesitates]
motivation isn’t always doing something. I mean, if you don’t want to do something, that’s a motivation towards not doing it. Which is still doing something, more or less. Uh, so, yeah, I really am motivated all the time whether I want to do something; not motivated to do it; I’m motivated to NOT do it. (M. Wright, Transcription of interview, May 13, 2013)

Jim’s personal concept of motivation suggested that he considers aversion to a task to be internally motivated. Thus, arguing for a beneficial change in attitude initiated by an effort to develop wider and deeper interests might merely elicit the smile with which he delivered his opinion. Jim, the only student participant who did not chronically struggle with grades, was able to articulate more clearly than any of the others how his performance was influenced by the motivation he continually experienced. With Jim’s words and actions, he suggests that a student labeled as being “reluctant” may be a reluctant learner selectively and oftentimes by choice. Teaching strategies that focus on motivating students extrinsically may not always have the desired effect of increasing student self-efficacy and academic achievement.
CHAPTER V

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

This qualitative study examined the attitudes toward motivation of six rural high school students identified as reluctant learners through a remedial writing class they were assigned their 9th grade year. The students, two 12th graders and four 10th graders, discussed their perceptions of the motivational practices of their English teachers and other teachers, revealing what they did and did not find motivational in the classroom.

This study also investigated the attitudes and practices of the four teachers who taught these students English, and compared the teachers’ motivational teaching practices with the students’ perceptions. Data were collected through interviews, focus groups, classroom observations, and a student survey. The recorded conversations were transcribed and coded, both openly and axially, for emerging themes, as were the field notes and observations conducted in the classrooms. Participants checked the accuracy of the transcribed interviews, which were examined for commonalities and also for possible discrepancies between what was stated by the participants and what was actually observed in the classrooms.

In qualitative research, interpretive analysis allows the researcher to evaluate the responses of participants in order to increase understanding and clarify attitudes and themes, thereby facilitating the construction of meaning in a study (Creswell, 2007; Merriam, 2009). Using this constructivist approach, I examined the teacher practices that students experienced in their English classes and worked in an analytical mode to
interpret how these practices influenced the students’ academic motivation (Ely, Vinz, Downing, & Anzul, 1997). I examined the ideas concerning motivation of two students in 12th grade English who were approaching graduation and four students in a 10th grade English class. These conversations and observations provided a wide range of data with extensive results and interpretive potential. In a similar vein, gaining access to the classrooms and ideas of four English teachers regarding their attempts to motivate reluctant learners provided a view of the extent to which strategies promoting motivation in their English language arts classes were effective. Thus, a constructivist approach, whereby I assigned meaning to activities, statements, and opinions of the participants (Merriam, 2009), enabled me to interpret findings and draw conclusions about the processes of motivating these reluctant rural male learners.

Student Participants

The students identified for inclusion in this study were selected on the basis of their assignment to a remedial writing class as 9th graders. During the spring of their 8th grade year, all students in the state are given a standardized state-mandated writing assessment. In the county in which this study took place, any student in the two middle schools who did not earn a passing score on this test was assigned to Communications Skills in 9th grade in an attempt to prevent failure on the state-mandated high school writing test administered to all 11th grade students. Because research indicates that males generally experience a greater decline than females in their interest toward formal learning as they advance through school (Brozo, 2010; Gallagher, 2009; Smith & Wilhelm, 2006), and because a significantly greater number of boys were enrolled in my Communications Skills classes than girls, I decided to focus on males for this study.
As I learned while teaching that class, the male students assigned to Communications Skills were capable of bright ideas and engaging conversation, could tell a story in a humorous and logical manner, and enjoyed many aspects of school. They were involved in garage bands, regularly hunted deer with family members, and paid close attention to vintage trucks. Because they had shown themselves capable of pursuing a variety of interests, their resistance to classroom reading and writing only served to increase my professional and intellectual curiosity in exploring the same questions during this study that I had asked as their teacher. I wanted to learn how to facilitate their submission of well-crafted assignments that demonstrated actual learning, how to discover what they were really interested in (since they did not seem to know themselves), how other teachers motivated reluctant learners such as these, and how schools could encourage similar students more efficiently and reliably. Therefore, I formulated research questions that would address these concerns, questions that are not limited to one school or one subject, but which are asked at one time or another by responsible teachers in every classroom. While this study provides insights into these questions, it also demonstrates that the pathway to motivating reluctant learners may be blocked by various obstacles, may take different turns from day to day, is unique to each student, and may result in a disappointing outcome.

**Teacher Participants**

The four teachers who participated in this study were veteran teachers with years of teaching experience ranging from 5 to 28. Three were female, one was male, all were Caucasian, and their ages ranged from the early thirties to fifty. These teachers generally demonstrated adequate knowledge in their subject area, supported extracurricular
activities with both time and energy, illustrated with humorous stories that they enjoyed their students, and paid attention to administrative details. They displayed their commitment to their profession by obtaining advanced degrees: Two had obtained their Masters and two had earned their Specialist degrees. Three served on high school leadership teams and school committees; one produced the yearbook and the school newspaper; one coached track and field and taught fitness classes in the community. Each of the teachers reported maintaining friendly contact with students whom they encountered at out-of-school venues.

The Rural Setting

A primary factor in the development of this study was the rural setting in which these students and teachers were located. Magnolia Cove High School was the only high school in the county; many parents and grandparents of current students were once members of the student body there, and these adults maintained a loyalty to the school manifested in high attendance at sporting events and passionate opinions about the management of the school. Portraits of each graduating class dating from the year of the school’s inception hung in the lobby. Some parents and grandparents had grown up with the teachers and administrators, having attended the same schools themselves, and many enjoyed the positive personal relationships that are deemed by researchers as beneficial to rural student academic successes (Hardre, Sullivan, & Roberts, 2013). The teachers claimed that the rural setting enhanced their ability to build an appropriate personal relationship with reluctant learners, since the teachers often saw these students outside of the school in locations such as at town festivals and in church.
Although researchers who focus on rural students suggest several factors that may make education difficult for students living in a rural setting (Ehrenreich, Reeves, Corley, & Orpinas, 2012; Hardre, Crowson, DeBacker & White, 2007; Hardre & Sullivan, 2008; Irvin, Farmer, Weiss, & Meece, 2011), the students in this study did not cite any drawbacks to living in a rural area. The two seniors, who spent much of their time traveling to other schools to participate in sporting events, did not mention the inconvenience of long distances, nor did the one student heavily involved in the theatre. Encouraged by their parents, the two seniors had applied to out-of-state colleges to pursue their athletic interests and stated that they looked forward to leaving home. Therefore, the rural setting had no apparent bearing on the lack of motivation found in these students.

**Evolving Themes**

From the transcriptions of observations, focus groups, and interviews, a lengthy list of codes was engendered and then collapsed into several general themes (Merriam, 2009). Themes that emerge from these data include positive teacher attitudes toward motivating reluctant male learners in their English classes, strategies incorporated by teachers to motivate the reluctant male learner, student perceptions of positive motivational practices, and students’ responses to motivational practices in the classroom.

**Teacher attitudes and strategies**

The teachers demonstrated that they understood both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation by using personally engaging techniques such as humor and empathy to conduct interactions with students. They incorporated teaching strategies that, according to research, are identified as extrinsically motivational (Alderman, 2008; Schunk,
Pintrich, & Meece, 2008). However, they did not seem to incorporate strategies designed
to build student confidence and agency that could increase a student’s intrinsic
motivation to learn, nor did they appear to understand that motivation might function
along a continuum.

During the course of the study, the students displayed varying responses to the
teachers’ attempts to provide interesting and engaging lessons and of the six student
participants, three did not earn a passing grade in their English classes. Additionally,
teaching strategies that the students reported as potentially motivational in their English
classrooms were largely ineffective in helping them. These strategies included choice of
topics, choice of delivery modes, use of the Internet for research, collaborative learning
groups, and incorporation of contemporary issues, all observed by the researcher in the
classroom. Yet, the students remained largely unmotivated to turn in any assignments that
were indicative of purposeful insight and organization, and they demonstrated throughout
the study that they were not engaged in significant learning in their English classes (M.
Wright, Transcriptions of observations April 30, May 1, May 20, May 22, 2013). Some
of the students indicated that they held their teachers responsible for constructing
assignments that they would find interesting enough to complete, and some students
indicated that they did not know what topics they would find interesting enough to
explore, even when given a choice. Some students also indicated that they often made the
choice not to participate, deciding selectively what activities they would complete. It
appears that strategies to increase extrinsic motivation may not always be sufficient to
engage learners who choose to remain unmotivated.
Strategies that teachers incorporated and student responses to them include the following:

*Challenge: Students see no personal benefit*

Motivation to learn is often enhanced by challenge (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Dweck, 2006; Pink, 2009; Vygotsky, 1978). Many students thrive on challenging assignments that lie on the edge of their understanding and abilities, yet which the student perceives as attainable with support from a teacher or a more able peer (Alderman, 2008; Schunk, Pintrich, & Meece, 2008; Vygotsky, 1978). As the student practices an unfamiliar task with support, he or she will move toward independence related to the task and may experience an increase in self-efficacy, which promotes both mental and social growth (Bandura, 1999; Schunk & Zimmerman, 1998; Vygotsky, 1978). Csikszentmihalyi (1990) developed this idea into an explanation of the condition he calls “flow,” describing the optimal experience as one that provides “action perceived by the individual as equal to his or her capabilities . . . . Enjoyment appears at the boundary between boredom and anxiety, when the challenges are just balanced with the person’s capacity to act” (p. 52). However, both groups of students in this study agreed that they did not welcome challenge in the English classroom (M. Wright, Transcriptions of focus groups May 21 and May 22, 2013). Trevor and Simon, the athletic seniors, stated that they enjoyed challenging themselves physically, and two of the younger students cited playing video games as an enjoyable challenge; but all of the students indicated that they preferred to be told the answers in English (M. Wright, Transcription of focus group, May 22, 2013). Observations of their performances in class bore out the validity of these statements: Several of the students in this study were seen making no effort to complete
assignments that called on several higher-level skills, including analysis and synthesis of information.

Relevancy: Students see no personal connections

Rosenblatt (1978) states that much of the reading and writing done by a student should leave a lasting impact that causes a transaction, or change, in that person’s thinking. Transacting with a text such as a novel, short story, poem, nonfiction, or visual is “at the core of contemporary schooling and life” (Kirby & Crovitz, 2013, p. 250), and providing relevant texts is considered an important goal of effective teaching. As Tomlinson (2000) states, “Students learn best when they can make a connection between their interests and life experiences” (p. 7). Standards-based practice may seem to inhibit lessons that contain relevance to individual students’ lives (Newkirk, 2009; Ravitch, 2010), but differentiation strategies may provide teachers the knowledge and skills to plan meaningful activities that involve students’ self-expression and engagement in learning (King-Shaver & Hunter, 2003; Scott, Parr, & Richardson, 2008; Tomlinson, 2001). The teachers in this study attempted to present lessons that were indicative of the standards as well as connected to issues that they thought might be important to the lives of adolescents. Indeed, observations in the 12th and 10th grade English classrooms indicated that many students in each class were interested in working on their projects.

Generally, however, the students in this study continued to be largely disengaged. Neither Simon nor Trevor was observed taking an active position in helping to create their group presentations featuring satire, and the 10th graders produced Dracula projects that, in their teacher’s view, fell far below their capabilities (M. Wright, Transcription of interview, September 9, 2013). With little cultural relevance and no personal connections
to a novel they had not read (Freire, 1970; Rosenblatt, 1938, 1978), and without the support of group members who could bring a greater facility with expression and research technology (Vygotsky, 1978), these students were left with little reason to invest time and energy in the assignment. Although their teacher utilized several strategies the students had claimed to find motivational, such as some autonomy, the use of technology, and sufficient time to complete the assigned project for the unread book at school rather than as homework (M. Wright, Transcription of focus group, May 22, 2013), none of these facets of instruction served to motivate the student participants to a higher degree of effort with their Dracula projects.

Additionally, Mr. Jones’ loosely structured Dracula project assignment of Mr. Jones may have impacted student success. Although he claimed to have produced a rubric (not observed by the researcher), he was not observed giving oral instructions concerning his expectations on the projects, nor was he observed teaching PowerPoint delivery procedures. During the presentations, he was observed asking few clarifying questions of the students and did not correct any errors; he simply rewarded their work with high marks regardless of the quality. Failing to hold his students to a high standard of academic achievement (Alderman, 2008), Mr. Jones may have allowed his students to produce work that was not indicative of their abilities.

Social literacy practice: Students see no relationship

Researchers suggest that literacy is often situated in social practice (Gee, 1994; Street, 1995) and that students frequently use the literacy of education to connect school and home, blurring the boundaries between those settings as they “take hold” of literacy (Street, 1995, p. 15). Literacy as social practice, occurring across time and space,
incorporates a broader use for literacy skills, that of making meaning in one’s social context (Lankshear & Knobel, 2006). In this study, the use of motivational classroom strategies such as collaborative groups and the use of technology, intended to help the student connect his personal interests with his classroom work, seemed to provide little benefit to these reluctant learners. Although the students agreed that these strategies would help them to be motivated in their English classes, when these strategies were observed being used the students generally did not respond with greater engagement. The connection between social practice and school literacy, for these reluctant students, appeared to be weak or nonexistent, as their low grades demonstrated. As Trevor and Simon told me when they were in 9th grade, “We ain’t never gonna use this stuff.”

Discussion of Research Questions

Responses to the questions that form the basis for this study are supported by analysis of interviews, focus groups, classroom observations, and a student survey, which provide four sources of data necessary for triangulation, suggesting that the results represent valid conclusions, at least in this particular setting. The first question, “To what extent do language arts teachers perceive themselves to be motivators of student learning for reluctant rural adolescent male learners?” is addressed by an examination of statements made by the four teacher participants as well as by observations of their classroom practice. It appears that these teachers take very seriously their role as motivators of reluctant students, both males and females, and make many on-going efforts to engage these learners. Each teacher demonstrates an understanding of adolescent disengagement as observable in the student’s body language and lack of response to classroom activities, and each teacher believes that they can utilize specific
strategies that may bring about a behavioral improvement in the unmotivated student, which could lead to greater academic improvement.

The two sub-questions, “What strategies do language arts teachers claim to use to motivate reluctant rural adolescent male learners?” and “What motivational strategies are observable for reluctant rural male adolescent learners in the language arts teachers’ practices?” are addressed by means of interviews, a focus group, and classroom observations. The teachers discuss the practices they incorporate in their classrooms that they intend as motivational and are generally observed engaging in those practices.

Mentioning most frequently the importance of establishing an appropriate teacher-student relationship, the teachers are observed periodically engaging students in conversations that appear personally supportive. Other motivational strategies mentioned by the teachers and observed being practiced in the classroom include giving students explicit and detailed instructions for assignments both orally and in a printed rubric; breaking lengthy assignments into several short-term goals; allowing students a degree of autonomy in choice of topics and delivery modes within an assignment; utilizing flexible grouping for peer support; attempting to provide relevant topics that connect to students’ lives; and incorporating student use of technology for research purposes as well as for delivery of information within presentations.

These strategies, considered to be external motivators, seemed to be aimed largely at under-performing students whom the teachers hoped would demonstrate improved academic achievement. The teachers appeared unaware of the possibility that reluctant students may lack self-efficacy (Schunk & Zimmerman, 1998) and may need exposure to strategies that would encourage them to development a better understanding of self-
motivation. Because reaching a goal successfully often entails a hybrid of extrinsic and intrinsic motivators (Alderman, 2008), students who struggle with low self-efficacy may need support with both types of motivating factors to develop greater personal agency, better study habits, more self-confidence, and higher academic achievement. When literacy skills as well as will power are weak or insubstantial, students may need interventional instruction in the form of self-regulatory skills, which include teaching not only cognitive procedures (organizing, monitoring, rehearsing), but also the adaptive behaviors that lead to success, such as self-management, perseverance, and help-seeking (Schunk & Zimmerman, 1998). Additionally, research suggests that increased skills in self-regulation may produce growth in positive self-perceptions as well as in perceptions of competence (Schunk, Pintrich, & Meece, 2008), leading to increased motivation in academic and other settings. Although the teachers in this study are observed incorporating several externally motivating strategies, other than attempting to establish a supportive personal relationship with a reluctant learner, no evidence of strategies to develop greater personal agency and intrinsic motivation are observed.

In response to the question, “To what extent do reluctant rural adolescent male learners perceive their language arts teachers to be motivators for success in language arts?” the students are unclear. The 12th graders hold their teachers responsible for presenting relevant lessons that would engage their interest, yet these students indicate in conversation that their only interests involve athletics (M. Wright, Transcription of focus group, May 21, 2013). The 10th grade students are unable to respond clearly concerning specific personal interests other than two who are highly engaged in playing video games at home. The 10th grade students indicate that they understand the dilemma teachers face
with standards-based subject matter, which does not always appear relevant or useful to them in the classroom but which nevertheless must be covered (M. Wright, Transcription of focus group, May 22, 2013). Therefore, it appears that these students, unlike the 12th graders, do not expect their English teachers to help generate the motivation they need to complete assignments. The 10th graders also indicate that they do not necessarily desire an appropriately supportive personal relationship with their teachers (M. Wright, Transcription of focus group, May 22, 2013), and they are observed in the classroom as generally unresponsive to Mr. Jones’ attempts to engage them in classroom banter.

The second question concerning students, “What strategies do reluctant rural adolescent male students claim are effective motivating strategies in the language arts classroom to keep them engaged in learning?” is addressed through a series of discussions with the students. Only one of the six students defines motivation as an inner drive that causes one to move voluntarily toward a desirable goal (M. Wright, Transcription of interview, May 13, 2013); the other five describe motivation as an outside force that “makes a person do something” (M. Wright, Student survey, March 2013). These students seem to lack understanding of how intrinsic and extrinsic motivation are often connected, and this disconnect may be detrimental to a student’s moving toward and achieving a desirable goal on his or her own power, consistent with previous research findings (Alderman, 2008). When I asked the students to suggest additional ideas for increasing their motivation in English classes, they mentioned that more modern textbooks and updated technology would be helpful (M. Wright, Transcription of focus groups, May 21 & 22, 2013). The seniors want their teachers to
show more movies in class but do not suggest the movies be used as additional texts to explore literary themes or to elicit meaningful personal responses.

The 10th graders want to do away with mandated classes that hold little interest for them, such as math and social studies, arguing that most students would not need this knowledge in their choice of professions. When I suggested that perhaps not every high school freshman knows what he or she wants to do in life and therefore might need to learn a wide range of subject matter, the students in this study responded that high school students should take only general classes until they can decide on a career or life path, and then take more rigorous, subject-specific classes only “if they want to” (M. Wright, Transcription of focus group, May 22, 2013). These students indicate again that being faced with what they perceive as uninteresting or challenging subject matter in school does not serve to motivate their engagement or learning. These students, apparently unaware of their own capacity to exercise agency (Belfiore & Hornyak, 1998), may not understand that they are capable of generating much of their own motivation to succeed. Without understanding how self-management strategies may impact their performance in academic settings, they continue to perceive school work as irrelevant and onerous.

Several observations in the classroom were necessary to address the last research question, “What motivational student behaviors are observable in the language arts classroom?” Student participants engaged in social interactions, flexible grouping, independent research using computers, collaborative work on projects, and presentations to classmates, activities generally referenced in the literature as being motivational (Alderman, 2008; Hidi, 2000). In the 12th grade English class, the two student participants appeared to enjoy their collaborative groups more than working
independently, even though one of the students was able to listen and respond to only an occasional question from his group-mates because he was simultaneously engaged in doing the work required for several missed assignments.

In the 10th grade, where the project was not done in collaborative groups, student participants were not as animated as in the 12th grade class, and fewer interactions between students occurred there. It is possible that Mr. Jones’ frequent use of technology, which required a darkened room and silence as he lectured, created an environment less conducive to social interaction. During one observation, Mr. Jones repeatedly sought to quell the remarks of a female student who was apparently in high spirits and whose contributions to the discussion he considered disruptive. The next day I observed that she was much subdued, having had a conference concerning her behavior with the assistant principal that morning. It appears that Mr. Jones appreciates his own banter and light-hearted approach in the classroom, but not that of students. The male participants in Mr. Jones’ class sat quietly for the most part: Zeus holding hands with his girlfriend, Larry with his head down, Jim and Drake engaged with their electronic devices, screens hidden from others’ view. Throughout the observations, I recorded little in the 10th grade English class that could be construed as motivated behaviors. The students did not work in collaborative groups on their Dracula projects, did not ask questions of the teacher, and were not observed engaging in productive self-management learning behaviors such as taking notes on lectures or recording the accomplishment of steps toward completion of their projects.
Limitations

This study may be limited by the small number of participants and the short time in which data were collected. Because the criterion for identifying reluctant learners as student participants was having been included in Communications Skills, the remedial writing class into which these students were placed during their 9th grade year, the initial number of potential participants was small. Many of the former Communications Skills students had been assigned to an English class during the first semester of the school year, before the initiation of this study, leaving approximately 15 students as potential participants. Of those students who were approached concerning the study, six returned their permission forms. Both teachers of these six students readily agreed to participate in the study also, as well as two additional teachers who had taught one or more of these six students in a previous year. A study conducted over a longer period of time may yield a wider array of results, especially if teachers are implementing teaching strategies designed to encourage their students to utilize personal agency. By incorporating specific teaching strategies that feature the development of greater intrinsic motivation and self-directed behaviors, another study may suggest the growth of productive academic attitudes over time.

Another limitation of the study may be related to the homogeneity of the participants. The situation of Magnolia Cove High School (a pseudonym) provides very little diversity in either teacher or student populations; in this case, all the participants were Caucasian, leading to what is possibility a uniformity of conclusions that in other circumstances might not occur. Differing results could perhaps be found in a different locale with a more diverse student population.
This study’s results could also have been limited by the friendships that developed over many years between the teacher participants and me. In my two roles as researcher and colleague, I felt somewhat constrained about the conclusions I could draw, respectfully recording the data while maintaining a researcher’s stance. Ethically and in deference to my personal opinion of these teachers, should I draw conclusions that reflected the positive nature of these classrooms while downplaying the negatives? I have labored over the transcripts and data, working diligently to acknowledge this predisposition and then to overcome this bias in reporting these results. Although I enjoyed observing their classrooms and the interactions these teachers experienced with their students, I made every attempt to analyze my observations accurately and with scrupulous care.

My positive relationships with the six student participants, which we developed while they were members of my Communications Skills classes and during ensuing years, may have predisposed me to view them also in a favorable light. However, in transcribing their interviews and focus group sessions and while observing their classroom behaviors, I was careful to view them in an accurate light; therefore, I believe I kept my personal biases from compromising the results of this study. In this or another setting, a researcher with differing personal experiences and professional perceptions might interpret the data through other lenses and reach different determinations.

Conclusions

The four teacher participants generally incorporate strategies to build appropriate teacher-student relationships, create relevant and sensible lessons, provide support for struggling learners, and encourage a positive classroom environment. When a student
falters, as in the case of one senior, Simon, the teacher initiates alternative assignments and provides additional time for completion, even requesting aid from other adults to support him. However, in their attempts to help these reluctant learners, these teachers do not include important strategies suggested by researchers as providing positive effect on student efficacy (Belfiore & Hornyak, 1998; Schunk, Pintrich, & Meece, 2008), particularly those concerning self-regulation and volition. These teachers demonstrate knowledge and understanding of the reluctant male adolescent learner but not of methods they might employ to encourage that learner toward greater academic achievement. Such methods include student-focused strategies such as the self-regulation cycle, which is an on-going interaction of forethought, performance or volitional control, and self-reflection (Schunk et al., 2008; Zimmerman, Bonner, & Kovach, 2006). Without this knowledge of social cognitive learning theory (Bandura, 1999), the teachers lack an important tool for helping their students become better able to achieve meaningful learning.

Although their teachers utilize many of the external strategies the students claim as motivational, those strategies appear to affect little change in the students' learning behaviors. Of the six students who participated in this study, half of them did not pass their English class, even while experiencing in class the very strategies they claimed were motivational. Missing were the strategies designed to promote growth of self-monitoring and the “agentic perspective” (Schunk, Pintrich, & Meece, 2008, p. 166), which enable students to influence their own academic achievement by practicing learned techniques that promote greater self-efficacy and its critical outcome, increased motivation.
Implications

In a recent conversation with a family member, I asked how he had taught his children, ages 10, 7, and 5, that their homework must be completed every night in preparation for the next day’s learning.

“I tell them it’s their job,” he said simply, “just like my job. We do our jobs every day. It’s the way the world works. They don’t have a choice.”

In those simple terms and with no equivocation, this father has set his young children on the road to success. They do their work, with whatever support their parents need to supply, in whatever amount of time it takes, instead of whatever they would rather be doing. Their parents model for them, every day, the tenacity and will power required to tackle and complete activities that no one necessarily considers to be fun, and the whole family benefits from this approach (Tough, 2012). Yet many students are not taught these attitudes at home, and they struggle in school without the strategies or skills to persevere through uninteresting or challenging tasks.

The implications of this study may be of interest to several groups of people who consider the development of the motivation of students to be critical to academic success. The teachers in this study provided many of the strategies that researchers generally recommend to increase motivation in the classroom (Quate & McDermott, 2009; Mendler, 2000), and that the students themselves said were motivational to them, yet the students still performed below their perceived abilities. The missing piece, then, may be found in social cognitive theories of learning, whereby the student engages in productive goal-directed behaviors through self-management, observation of modeled examples, and self-evaluation, among other strategies (Schunk, Pintrich, & Meece, 2008). Teaching
these skills and strategies requires further investigation into the theories and a
determination to apply them to actual classroom practice. Students, teachers, parents,
administrators, and developers of professional learning for teachers may all benefit from
learning how to incorporate these important strategies.

For students

The findings of this study suggest that students need a more thorough
understanding of motivation and how it may impact their learning. Only one of the six
students in this study could articulate that motivation was something other than an
outside force that compels a person to act. The student who perceived that motivation
provides the reasons for action stated that motivation is “What causes people to do things
that are thought out—where plans are made, there’s most of the time a reason” (M.
Wright, Student survey, March 2013). Although this student’s definition of motivation is
incomplete, he seems to understand that at least some of the reasons for pursuing a goal
are often generated by the person pursuing that goal. Students may benefit from
instruction on how to utilize intrinsic and extrinsic motivation and how that may impact
their learning.

Students also may benefit from learning that they are capable of making decisions
that clarify and facilitate their own approaches to schooling. This study suggests that the
students in this particular rural county may have lacked such instruction, and that now, in
high school, they find themselves without the resources to discuss or understand these
missing concepts. Such concepts may be within the reach of students in elementary
school or even younger (Tough, 2012). When conversations are initiated in the classroom
and concepts are clarified with age-appropriate language, most students are likely to
respond with greater awareness of their own motivational needs and may then begin to
develop greater capacity for capitalizing on innate and overt desires.

For teachers

The findings of this study suggest that teachers may benefit from instruction in
specific strategies to help students strengthen their early natural tendency toward self-
efficacy (Pink, 2009), a tendency sometimes smothered during the early years of
schooling. Although the teachers in this study generally knew how to demonstrate
personal interest in a student, promote a positive classroom environment, and provide
interesting content, they provided few strategies that would facilitate student self-
regulation, which helps a reluctant learner set and attain personal goals leading to a
greater sense of academic competence (Zimmerman, Bonner, & Kovach, 1996). Given
that the current climate of standardized testing and attention to the myriad details of the
Common Core national curriculum in lesson planning often distract teachers from their
determination to support students’ internal growth toward productive thinking,
differentiated instructional practices may prove beneficial to those students who lack
strong motivation to succeed. Social cognitive theory provides insight into how people
acquire knowledge, skills, beliefs, and emotions through interactions with others
(Schunk, Pintrich, & Meece, 2008). Thus, a knowledgeable and caring teacher in an
organized classroom is well-situated to support learners of all abilities (Christenbury,
2008; Noddings, 2005). Teachers may be able to move students toward an understanding
of their own agency in making daily decisions to participate or sit out, cooperate or
disrupt, learn or not learn.
Additionally, increasing the expectation of high performance and the rigor with which teachers conduct assessments might demonstrate to students that every assignment is important to their development as self-regulated learners, and that they are expected to take greater responsibility for their own success. With the recent increased interest in teaching students how to reach toward desirable personal goals by their own volition, scholarly research is readily available to support teachers who seek to expand their repertoire of motivational strategies for reluctant learners.

*For parents*

Oftentimes, adults struggle with motivation themselves (Pink, 2009), and find it difficult to carry through with their determination to complete a project or maintain the development of a beneficial habit, such as eating more fruit and less junk food (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). Like teachers at school, parents may clarify the concept of motivation for their children by discussing the sometimes complicated process of becoming and staying motivated in a variety of situations, increasing the chances that their child will not only understand motivation but will also develop it for him- or herself.

This study suggests that children may benefit from being taught how motivation works from an early age, perhaps even before formal schooling begins. When children see their parents pursuing articulated, beneficial goals, they may begin to perceive that oftentimes the desire to achieve a goal does not originate exclusively from an outside force that acts upon an individual, but rather from a drive that is generated within. If children understand that motivation is sometimes extrinsic, sometimes intrinsic, and sometimes both, they may learn to marshal their resolve in order to power through tasks they consider merely unpleasant obligations, both at home and at school. For example,
research in educational settings (Zimmerman, Bonner, & Kovach, 1996) suggests that when a child expresses a desired goal in the form of a list or drawing and writes the steps necessary to achieve that goal, he or she is more likely to attain the desired result, even if attaining the goal is far in the future.

For administrators and planners of professional development

This study suggests to administrators and others who may plan professional development for teachers that the use of more intensive motivational strategies may be necessary for the reluctant student. At Magnolia Cove High School, the setting for this study, teachers had been mandated over the previous year to attend several professional development sessions featuring the educational applications for their new iPads, but in the more than twenty years I was a faculty member at the school, teachers had never been given formal instruction on motivating students. The teachers in this study commented that in their perception, a lack of student motivation often stemmed from the home (M. Wright, Transcription of focus group, June 4, 2013). Yet, research suggests that students of any age may be taught self-regulating strategies that may result in increased motivation (Schunk, Pintrich, & Meece, 2008; Zimmerman, Bonner, & Kovich, 1996). Through familiarity with interventional strategies designed to increase the agency of reluctant learners, faculty members may be instrumental in helping students increase their academic achievement.

As a new teacher a generation ago, I was baffled by the lack of cooperation I encountered from my students and could not understand why they would not do their work. I would have benefitted greatly from professional instruction about how to help my students develop greater intrinsic motivation to succeed. Principals and planners of
professional development may find that teacher interest is high in a session designed to help teachers understand and support the reluctant learner with more than external strategies. Teachers who have been successful in helping increase the agency of unmotivated students could use their experiences to help soothe the consternation of those teachers who are faced with the same problem. Further, utilizing recent scholarly research for instruction could result in a more deliberate and uniform school wide methodology for dealing with these reluctant students.

*For future study*

Examining classrooms and teacher practices in other settings with a more diverse student population could reveal further results, adding new insights to the understanding we already possess. Teachers in an academic subject area other than English—or in athletic, vocational, or fine arts settings—may perceive the problem and possible solutions differently from the English teachers in this study. Further, a larger pool of students or a younger pool of student participants could provide different student definitions of motivation, a wider perspective of opinions, and viewpoints from other cultures.

Observations of classes in which the zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978) is accessed on a regular basis might provide an interesting accompaniment to this study, in which assignments lie largely on the student’s present level. Observing strategies that provide stronger interventions than the ones in this study, and that particularly support the development of self-agency, may provide a view of motivational practices that could prove more effective in strengthening student achievement.
Emerging questions

Several questions emerge from this study that could warrant further research, including the following:

- How might teachers help students develop an accurate, working definition of motivation?
- What teacher-created interventions might further research indicate are effective strategies for increasing student motivation?
- How might teachers articulate and demonstrate explicit motivators that would be beneficial to students as models of productive behavior?
- What new directions might professional development take in order to better inform classroom teachers about more effective motivational practices?
- How might instruction in student self-efficacy and personal agency be incorporated into current teaching practice?
- How might a classroom methodology be constructed so that reluctant learners could be systematically supported with strategies to build their self-efficacy and personal agency?
- In what ways could a classroom methodology focused on building students’ self-efficacy and personal agency empirically measure any self-regulatory progress a student might make as a result of using such pedagogy in the classroom?

Final commentary

The process of motivating reluctant learners, who may be complicated and challenging, is just like the learners themselves: complicated and challenging.
Discovering the needs of adolescent students when they do not necessarily want to participate entails dedication and perseverance, creativity and a sense of humor. Teachers may formulate specific methods of encouraging these individuals using a variety of strategies ranging from promoting a positive classroom environment to helping the student produce a private list of personal goals. Many times, incorporating the most effective strategies might be trial and error. Many times, the strategies might not work. Nonetheless, some students may realize a lifetime benefit if the strategies work to bring about positive growth in self-regulation, self-efficacy, personal agency, volition to learn, and perceptions of increasing competence, characteristics each teacher hopes to find in every student.
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Appendix A

Research Study Assent Form for Students

Study: Motivating Adolescent Male Learners in Language Arts
Researcher: Marcia Scott Wright, marciawright@pickens.k12.ga.

My name is Marcia Wright. I teach English and theater at our school and I am also a student at Kennesaw State University working on my doctorate. I am doing research this spring on motivation and I’m inviting you to take part in this research study.

Why is this study being done?

The purpose of the study is to help me better understand how you are motivated to learn in your English class and in other classes you may want to discuss. I am asking you to take part because you were enrolled in Communications Skills your 9th grade year and I think you’d be helpful to my study. Some of the issues we discussed in that class are things I’d like to know more about and I value your opinion.

What am I being asked to do?

If you decide to be in the study, I will ask you to do several things over the course of the next few weeks. We’ll be finished by the time school is out in May. You will be asked to:

Answer some questions on paper about motivation at school. You can do it on the computer, answers don’t have to be long, and spelling doesn’t count! There are 9 questions, and you can skip any that you don’t want to answer. That part will take about 20 minutes.

Talk with other students in a “focus group” where you get to exchange ideas and opinions about motivation. We’ll do one in early May and another one at the end of May. With your permission, I’ll record those two conversations and later write them down. These will take about 30 minutes each.

Talk with me individually at the beginning of the study and again at the end for about 30 minutes. I’ll record these conversations also, with your permission.

Allow me to use the papers you wrote in Communications Skills class when you were in the 9th grade.
I’ll sit in your English classroom this semester three different times and write down what I see. You just have to go about your usual tasks for that day and ignore me. Everything you write and that we discuss will be kept very private. You can choose a different name and I’ll delete the audio once I’ve written it up. Nothing will be held against you, your grade in the class will not be affected in any way, and you can be completely confident that anything you say will stay with me.

I’ll be happy to share with you what I find out about motivation, if you are interested.

**What are the benefits to me for taking part in the study?**

As you think about motivation and what or who motivates you, you may discover some new ideas about your ways of dealing with your goals at home and at school. Many people are studying how to help students, especially boys, become more engaged and successful at school. You will be helping not only yourself but also perhaps other students by talking with me honestly about these things.

**Are there any risks to me if I am in this study?**

The potential risks of taking part in this study:
Include risks associated with sensitive questions on your behavior while working toward goals, or how others treat you; you may feel embarrassed or uncomfortable.

You may feel inconvenienced when I ask for your time in focus groups and interviews.

You may feel uncomfortable having your behavior in class observed.

If you report or I observe any instance of anyone’s abusive behavior toward you, or your behavior toward others, I will have to report that to authorities.

You can decline to answer any question that makes you uncomfortable, and you can stop participating in the study at any time.

**Will my information be kept private?**

The data for this study will be kept private and confidential to the extent allowed by federal and state law. You can choose a pseudonym, or fake name, to use and I will not identify you in any way in my dissertation. This study will be reviewed by my advisors at KSU, but they won’t know who you are. I’ll keep your written responses on a flash drive, and after I transcribe the audio of the interviews and focus group conversations, I’ll delete them from the recorder. The transcriptions will also be kept on a flash drive, as well as the results, for a period of 1 year, until the end of May, 2014.
Are there any costs or payments for being in this study?
There will be no costs to you for taking part in this study, and you will not receive money or any other form of compensation for taking part in this study.

What are my rights as a research study volunteer?
Your participation in this research study is completely voluntary. You do not have to be a part of this study if you don’t want to. There will be no penalty to you if you choose not to take part and no one will be upset or angry at you. This will not impact your grades. You may choose not to answer any questions you don’t want to answer, and you can change your mind and exit the study at any time.

Who can I talk to if I have questions?
If you have questions at any time, you can ask me, and you can talk to your parent about the study. I will give you a copy of this form to keep. If you want to ask me questions about the study, call 706-253-1800 and leave a message, come by the Performing Arts Center, or email me at marciawright@pickens.k12.ga.us. You can also talk with my professor, Dr. Dawn Kirby, at 770-423-6124.

The Kennesaw State University Institutional Review Board has reviewed this study to make sure that the rights and safety of people who take part in the study are protected. If you have questions about your rights in the study, or you are unhappy about something that happens to you in the study, you can contact them at (678) 797-2268 or irb@kennesaw.edu.

What does my signature on this consent form mean?
Your signature on this form means that:
- You understand the information given to you in this form
- You have been able to ask the me questions and state any concerns
- I have answered your questions and concerns
- You believe you understand the research study and the potential benefits and risks that are involved.

Statement of Consent
I give my voluntary consent to take part in this study. I will be given a copy of this consent document for my records.
Statement of Person Obtaining Informed Consent

I have carefully explained to the person taking part in the study what he or she can expect.

I certify that when this person signs this form, to the best of my knowledge, he or she understands the purpose, procedures, potential benefits, and potential risks of participation.

I also certify that he or she:
- Speaks the language used to explain this research
- Reads well enough to understand this form or, if not, this person is able to hear and understand when the form is read to him or her
- Does not have any problems that could make it hard to understand what it means to take part in this research.

Name of parent who gave consent for child to participate

__________________________________                        ________________
Signature of Person Obtaining Consent                      Date
Appendix B

Parental Consent Form

Dissertation Study on Motivation by Marcia Wright

April-May, 2013

I give consent for my child, ________________________________, to participate in the dissertation study entitled Motivating Rural Adolescent Male Learners in Language Arts, which is being conducted by Marcia Scott Wright, Pickens High School, 706-253-1800, marciawright@pickens.k12.ga.us. I understand that this participation is voluntary and that I or my child may withdraw consent at any time without penalty to his grade or his reputation. The data for this study will be kept for one year.

The following points have been explained to me and my child:

1. The reason for the research is to determine the perceptions of teachers and students concerning motivational strategies which promote learning, what strategies are being used by teachers in the classroom, and how these strategies affect the students. The benefits of the study for your child may include a greater understanding of what motivates the student at school; for the researcher, a greater understanding of motivational teaching practice that promotes academic achievement.

2. The procedures are as follows: The student will be asked to respond to a short written survey concerning motivation, and will be asked to discuss motivation in a series of interviews with the researcher over the course of 6 weeks, both individually and in a focus group. Additionally, the student will be observed on three occasions in the language arts classroom interacting with the teacher and other students. Interviews will take 20-30 minutes each and may be conducted before or after school or at lunchtime at the student’s convenience. I would also like to include writing assignments that your child produced while in Communications Skills class during his 9th grade year.

3. The discomforts or stresses that may be faced during this research are: your child may feel uncomfortable being questioned or observed. He also may disagree with other participants discussing issues concerning motivation and feel uncomfortable doing so. The study will consume approximately two hours of the student’s time in total, which may at times be inconvenient.

4. Participation entails the following risks: your child may become uncomfortable examining his own motivation levels at home or at school. I am required to report any abusive behavior, both toward the student and initiated by the student during the study to the authorities.
5. The results of this participation will be reported anonymously. Fake names will be used for the school, the teachers, and the students. No identifiable information will be included in the study, and any results of the study will not be released in any individually identifiable form without the prior consent of the participant unless required by law. Data collected will be secured on a flash drive which will be kept protected in the researcher’s possession under lock and key. This data will be destroyed one year after the conclusion of the study.

6. Inclusion criteria for participation: Students in this study will be males assigned for the current semester to language arts classes, and who were members of a Communications Skills class during their 9th grade year.

_____________________________________________________________
Signature of Parent or Legally Authorized Representative, Date

_____________________________________________________________
Signature of Investigator, Date

PLEASE SIGN BOTH COPIES, KEEP ONE AND RETURN THE OTHER TO THE INVESTIGATOR

Research at Kennesaw State University that involves human participants is carried out under the oversight of an Institutional Review Board. Questions or problems regarding these activities should be addressed to the Institutional Review Board, Kennesaw State University, 1000 Chastain Road, #0112, Kennesaw, GA 30144-5591, (678) 797-2268.
Appendix C

Consent Form for Teachers

I agree to participate in the research project entitled
Dissertation Study: Motivating Adolescent Male Learners in Language Arts
Researcher: Marcia Scott Wright, marciawright@pickens.k12.ga.

I understand that this participation is voluntary and that I may withdraw my consent at any time without penalty.

The following points have been explained to me:

1. The reason for the research is to increase our understanding of teacher perceptions of how we use motivational strategies in our language arts classrooms. The benefits of the study will be engaging in discussions together on how to better motivate students and learning new strategies to promote greater literacy.

2. The procedures are as follows: I will be asked to fill out an open-ended survey concerning motivation, which will take about 15 minutes. I will be observed in my classroom three times, and will be asked to keep a 5-day diary and a checklist focused on one class, which will take only a few minutes each. I will also participate in two focus-group discussions with other teachers, which will take 20-30 minutes each, and will be interviewed twice, which will take 20-30 minutes.

3. The discomforts or stresses that may be faced during this research are: I may feel uncomfortable having a peer observe my teaching practice; I may not agree with other teachers about motivational strategies I use, and I could feel uncomfortable or embarrassed during discussions.

4. Participation entails the following risks: anxiety at being observed by a colleague. I may exit the study at any time without repercussion should this become a problem for me.

5. The results of this participation are completely confidential and will not be released in any individually identifiable form without the prior consent of the participant unless required by law. Written responses will be stored on a flash drive by the researcher locked in a file cabinet; audio records of discussions will be transcribed by the researcher, and then deleted from the device. Records will be kept for one year. Fake names will be used for all participants.

6. Inclusion criteria for participation: participants must be a language arts teacher at the school under study and have at least one male student who was included in a Communications Skills class his 9th grade year.
PLEASE SIGN BOTH COPIES, KEEP ONE AND RETURN THE OTHER TO THE INVESTIGATOR

Research at Kennesaw State University that involves human participants is carried out under the oversight of an Institutional Review Board. Questions or problems regarding these activities should be addressed to the Institutional Review Board, Kennesaw State University, 1000 Chastain Road, #0112, Kennesaw, GA 30144-5591, (678) 797-2268.
Appendix D

SURVEY FOR STUDENTS CONCERNING MOTIVATION

1. How do you define “motivation”?

2. Describe a time or event in which you were highly motivated. Please be specific as to the situation, the result, and any people who helped you.

3. Which class have you most enjoyed in high school? Why?

4. What are some things your current English teacher does to help motivate you to learn?

5. What are some suggestions you would like to give your English teacher that would help you learn in English class?
Appendix E

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR STUDENTS

1. What class are you the most interested in this semester? Describe the class and why you find it the most interesting.

2. Which teacher is your favorite this semester? What does this teacher do that keeps you interested in the class? Please tell me why? (If the favorite teacher and the favorite class are not connected, then “Tell me more.”)

3. Have you ever had a language arts [English] teacher who made it easy to learn? [If “no,” then “Why not?”] [if “yes,” then What did your teacher do to make you feel this way?]

4. You told me in your written responses that motivation means [“words or images that keep you going” or whatever he said]. Does [favorite teacher] give you words and images that keep you interested in [the class you've named your favorite]? Can you tell me some of the words and images? What about other things [this teacher] does?

5. What kinds of successes have you had? What helped you be successful?

6. To what extent did anything in school contribute to your success?
INTerview Questions for Teachers

1. How do you get to know your students at the beginning of the semester?

2. How do you identify a motivated male student (non-ESOL) in your English classroom?
2a. What observable behaviors does a motivated male student in your classroom display?

3. How do you identify an unmotivated male student (non-ESOL) in your English classroom?
3a. What observable behaviors does an unmotivated male student in your classroom display?

4. What strategies do you use to motivate male students in your English classroom?

5. What motivational strategies do you employ to help a student who doesn’t seem to put forth effort but whom you know to be capable?

6. How much choice and what kinds of choices do you allow your under-achieving male students in your classroom?

7. What motivational strategies would you like to implement, had you the time, resources, or training?

8. Tell me about a particular lesson that seemed to spark the interest of every student in your classroom. What particular strategies did you use at that time that contributed to the success of the lesson? What were the responses of the students? What observable behaviors did your students display that indicated to you that the lesson was successful? Why do you think the lesson was successful?
Appendix G

FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS

For Students

1. If you were giving advice to a new guy student, which classes would you recommend to him to take his first year? Can you give me reasons?

2. What do the teachers in your English classes do to make it easier for you to learn?

Please be specific.

3. If you were the teacher, what would you do to get your students to
   A. read a book
   B. write a four-page paper on an activity or subject you are an expert in
   C. write an original story
   D. research a topic you were interested in, using internet sources
   E. participate in an on-line blog
   F. create a webpage as a group project
   G. anything else?

4. What do you think of homework? Do you do yours in English class? Why or why not?

5. In English class, what are the most important factors in learning for you?
   A. Fun?
   B. Challenge?
   C. Working together with friends?
   D. Getting to choose what you want to work on?
   E. Anything else?
For Teachers

1. Can you tell me what motivation is to you? What does motivation look like to our language arts students, particularly our under-achieving boys?

2. What do you think it takes to motivate our male students whose averages are below or barely at a 70?

3. What are some motivational strategies you have used over the years to help these boys whom you perceive as disliking to read or write?

4. Are there supports the administration could provide you that would make it easier for you to motivate the disengaged boys in your classrooms?
APPENDIX H: OPEN CODES

Adolescent learner
Activity sheets
Attendance poor
Bookwork
Classroom environment
Classroom management
Community involvement T
Definition of motivation, T
Definition of motivation, S
Disrupters
Disengagement
Extra-curricular
Family history
Family involvement
Fear of failure
Intrinsic motivation non-academic
Keyboard skills
Lack of motivation
Literacy
Making meaning
Motivation to learn
Motivation to graduate
Multiliteracy
Off-task behaviors
Overlapping of extrinsic and intrinsic motivations
Parent(s) involvement
Parent non-supportive of student
Perception of assignment ease
Perception of assignment difficulty
Perception of success
Reading instruction
Relevance
Reluctant learner
Reluctant writer
Self-efficacy
Social interaction between students
Social interaction between stu/tchrs
Student interest/engagement
  able to articulate ideas
  enjoyment of class/activities
  fading interest through time
  hands-on activities
  choice in projects/topics/reading
  unable to articulate answers/ideas
discouragement: I can’t pass, so why try?
unclear reasoning/view
non-specific/ not articulated

Student/parent relationship
Student perceptions of:
  teacher demeanor positive
  teacher demeanor negative
  of teacher personal interest
  teachers like job
  teacher presents learning in an engaging way
  certain things have to be presented to students whether or not they are interesting/not
  teacher’s fault
Student preference for specific instructions
Student motivated to do only what is necessary or to not act
Student shows clever use of language
Teacher behavior/attitude
  positive (playful, friendly)
  negative
  commitment : going beyond what is required
  biography
  desire to help student improve
  expression of frustration
  interest in student
  ideas to increase motivation
    if it were only possible

fondness for students
building relationship with student
professional knowledge
  lack of teacher knowledge
motivated to excel
knowledge of student behavior
realistic view of student
sense of humor
unclear expression of ideas (does this indicate lack of knowledge about what motivates the student?)

Teaching strategies
  Classroom management positive/negative
  TS provides student-focused topics
    and activities
  TS no connections to standards
TS allows student choice
TS hands-on
TS collaboration between students
TS one-on-one attention
TS questioning
TS moving slowly/breaking up lengthy assignments into small/short pieces: pacing

TS use of technology
TS differentiation
TS direct instruction
  reading
  writing

Valuable lessons