Curricular Factors in Middle School Teachers’ Motivation to Become and Remain Effective

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Abstract
Research in education and psychology contributes to an understanding of how educators create contexts for learning that encourage intrinsic motivation and increase academic achievement. In this article, the researcher investigated how middle level teachers define effectiveness and identified what factors influence their motivation, both positively and negatively. The purpose of this study was to explore what factors teachers self-identified as both supporting and hindering their professional motivation. An understanding of what motivates teachers to maintain effectiveness and what contributes to a loss of motivation may help administrators and other leaders make professional development, personnel, and curricular decisions that support teacher motivation. Data analysis revealed that teacher motivation was influenced by curricular, relational, and logistical factors. Curricular elements that encouraged teachers to improve their practice, as well as those factors that contributed to apathy or disinterest, are discussed. Findings revealed that competence in terms of one’s ability to effectively teach required content increased professional motivation. Feelings of autonomy also increased participating teachers’ desire to further develop their skills and improve their competence. Administrators, professional development providers, and teacher educators may find these results useful as they work to create environments that positively influence teacher motivation.

Keywords: teacher motivation, curriculum, self-determination theory, middle level

Introduction
Educational researchers in the United States focus on numerous variables that affect K–12 instruction, assessment, and curricula. They rarely explore one key variable in an intentional way: a teacher’s motivation for increased effectiveness. Indeed, a recent research agenda developed by the Middle Level Education Research Special Interest Group (MLER SIG, 2016) and endorsed by the Association for Middle level Education specifically called upon researchers to investigate topics related to educator development. While the onus for academic achievement lies with the students themselves, research suggests that external
factors affect a student’s willingness to exert effort when learning (Dweck, 2006; Ryan & Deci, 2000). While researchers have investigated the influence of context on students’ motivation, it may also be worth considering factors that affect teachers’ motivation. Nowhere is this more needed than in middle level schools where young adolescents’ rapidly increasing cognitive capacity and changing social needs pose challenges to the teachers who work with them (Giedd, 2012; Luna, Padmanabhan, & O’Hearn, 2010).

Teaching in the middle grades is challenging, exciting, rewarding, and frustrating (often all at the same time) because young adolescents have such unique and varied needs. Compounding the issue is the fact that some states do not have dedicated licensure to prepare middle grades educators and, thus teachers sometimes “fall into” teaching in the middle grades for a variety of reasons. When teachers are not prepared to teach in the middle grades, the challenges for administrators and teachers may become more pronounced. Middle level professionals, whether working as researchers, administrators, or teachers, recognize that “teachers of young adolescents need specialized professional preparation to be highly successful” (MLER SIG, 2016, p. 11). Beyond specialized preparation in content and pedagogy, teachers’ dispositions play a role in student achievement (Hattie, 2011; Stronge, Ward, Grant, 2011). Additionally, teachers who implement theoretically-grounded practices have an impact on student motivation as well as achievement (Turner, Christensen, Kackar-Cam, Trucano, & Fulmer, 2015).

Understanding what specific factors influence middle level teachers’ motivation to become and remain effective may help district administrators, principals, and teacher educators better support teachers and students. Thus, the main research question for this study was, “What factors influence middle grades teachers’ motivation to become and remain effective?”

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study was to explore what factors middle level teachers self-identified as both supporting and hindering their professional motivation. What motivates so many teachers to begin and then maintain a path of reflection, healthy discourse with colleagues, and continuous improvement in pedagogy? Why do some teachers seem to choose a path that embraces complacency and the status quo, while others thrive on applying research, conversations, observations, and data to a continual improvement of their craft? Left unsupported or attended to, teacher motivation may wane, and this can potentially inhibit a school culture from making continual gains in student achievement. While the motivation of teachers of all age groups is important, this study focused on those in the middle grades for two reasons. First, middle level school contexts are rather different from elementary or high schools. Second, it is important to understand how to nurture teachers who specifically choose to work with young adolescents.

This study is important, as an understanding of factors that motivate teachers to maintain effectiveness and factors that contribute to a loss of motivation may help district- and building-level administrators make professional development, personnel, and curricular decisions that nourish teachers’ attitudes. Although the participants identified three primary influences on their motivation (i.e., curricular, relational, and logistical), the discussion of results and implications in this article focuses on curricular factors in order to provide the detail necessary to practically apply the findings.

Conceptual Framework

Sociocultural Theory

In its Latin form, the term motivation means “moved to act” (Ryan & Deci, 2000), and the factors that move individuals to act are heavily influenced by the contexts in which they function (Daniels, 2010). Sociocultural theory (Brown, Collins, & Duguid, 1989; Gee, 2004; Vygotsky, 1978) offers explanations as to why this occurs and provides a useful frame to explore the research questions discussed in this study. Because culture and knowledge are the product of negotiation among activities, language, and expectations (Brown et al., 1989; Scardamalia & Bereiter, 2010), sociocultural theory provides an appropriate perspective when considering how a school context might influence teachers’ motivation to become and remain effective.

Sociocultural theory acknowledges that linguistic and behavioral cues influence learning and knowledge within any given environment because of the transactive nature of thought and language. While researchers typically apply sociocultural theory in studies of children and learning (Scardamalia & Bereiter, 1996), it also offers a perspective for understanding the motivation of teachers. Too frequently, education assumes “a separation between knowing and doing, treating knowledge … as theoretically independent of the situations in which it is learned and used” (Gee, 2007, p. 32). This separation, or theoretical independence, becomes
tangible in many teachers’ professional learning experiences, which are often disconnected from their lived classroom experiences. Often, teaching is focused on narrow, measurable outcomes that are disconnected from the process of learning (Wilhelm, 2011), or (more detrimentally) outside influences (i.e., political agendas, federal policies) cause teachers and students to be removed from the center of meaning-making processes (Labbo & Place, 2010).

When educators first name and then reflect on their professional practices, they become more conscious of the impact of their actions on their students’ learning and their own attitudes and motivation (Wilhelm, 2011). When educators think about the experiences that learners must have, what they should be able to do with those experiences, and what tools they will require to participate productively (Gee, 2004), they create learning environments that both acknowledge and effectively utilize the influences of environment or context on learning and attitude.

**Self-Determination Theory**

Self-determination theory (SDT) is a theory of motivation that helps explain the disconnect that sometimes exists between teachers’ self-identified needs and their professional contexts. SDT posits that humans have three innate, universal psychological needs that are critical to emotional well-being, psychological health, and personal growth: autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Deci, Vallerand, Pelletier, & Ryan, 1991). Autonomy is a feeling of personal ownership for choices and behaviors. Competence is recognizing one’s effectiveness and/or believing that the skills one possesses are sufficient for meeting a challenge at hand. Relatedness is a feeling of connectedness to others. According to SDT, an environment (e.g., school context) supports engagement to the extent that it satisfies these needs (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Understanding factors that help teachers feel autonomous, competent, and connected may enable educators to create school contexts that support teacher motivation (Klassen, Perry, & Frenzel, 2012).

**Methodological Approach**

Because the purposes of this study were to explore how middle grades teachers conceptualized their professional motivation, to identify what factors they felt positively and negatively impacted that motivation, and to illuminate the complexity inherent within educational environments (Marshall & Rossman, 1989), the researcher employed a qualitative inquiry approach.

**Data Collection**

The researcher used a purposeful sampling method to identify people who could best help explore the phenomenon of teacher motivation (Creswell, 2008). The researcher sent an e-mail to all teachers at four middle level schools explaining the purpose of the study, listing the research questions, and inviting them to participate in one-on-one interviews. The schools represented demographic diversity in terms of the ethnicity, language needs, and socioeconomic status of the students they served, and each school was in a different district. See Table 1 for a description of demographic details for each school.

| Table 1: Demographic Details of Primary Participants |
|-----------------------------------------------------|
| Gender | Number |
| Male | 4 |
| Female | 9 |
| Ethnicity | Number |
| White | 12 |
| African American | 3 |
| Other | 8 |
| Language Needs | Number |
| English Proficient | 13 |
| Non-English Proficient | 0 |
| Socioeconomic Status | Number |
| High Income | 6 |
| Low Income | 7 |

The researcher invited all 32 teachers who agreed to participate to an interview. Their levels of teaching experience ranged from 1 year to 35 years. Nineteen interviews were too brief to result in substantive conversations because of scheduling conflicts and other pressures on the teachers’ time. Thus, the dataset for the study consists of 13 teacher interviews. Table 2 provides demographic details of the primary participants. Although only four of the 13 were males, this is consistent with general demographic trends in American schools.

**Data Analysis Process**

The researcher interviewed each participant with a semi-structured interview protocol containing questions designed to elicit their thoughts about their teaching competence; their desire to engage with colleagues, students, and administrators; and their willingness to devote energy to their professional practice. The researcher often asked follow-up questions based upon the participants’ responses to understand their thinking better.

After each interview, the researcher transcribed the recordings and reviewed the transcriptions to note initial impressions. During a second reading, the researcher identified frequently recurring ideas to create an in-depth understanding of how the teachers conceptualized their motivation (Creswell, 2008). The participants tended to repeat ideas related in some way to common elements in a teacher’s practice: students, administrators, curriculum, instruction, and assessment. Through this process, the researcher gave each idea a code to serve as a label for the concept and identified as noteworthy codes that arose across transcripts regardless of the school or district demographics. Those codes gave way to larger themes, which frame the discussion and analysis in the Findings and Discussion section that follows this description of methodology.
The researcher read each transcript once to gain a holistic sense of the teacher’s statements with the a priori codes related to daily practice. During subsequent readings, the researcher reclassified the broader, original codes into more specific code labels to understand the meaning participants made from their experiences (Charmaz, 2006). For example, the researcher used an initial, general label “standards” when a teacher was discussing the way he/she designed lessons, and that label was subsequently recoded more specifically as “required curriculum,” “sequencing guide,” or “group work” because the participant was explaining how he/she decided what to teach on a daily basis.

Two colleagues not directly involved in the study also coded the transcripts to confirm the credibility of the initial data analysis. Comparison of 25% of the transcripts showed an interrater reliability of 71% as measured by the number of exact matches of codes. An additional 10% of the coding indicated similar results in which one researcher might have coded a section as relating to “curriculum” that another researcher coded as relating to “content.”

The intent of qualitative research is to explore the “whys” and “hows” of various phenomena (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). As such, the construct of validity as it applies to statistical analysis is not an appropriate goal in qualitative coding. Instead, the goals of data analysis through coding are to understand how participants experience the phenomenon under investigation and to identify the commonalities and differences among their experiences. Interrater reliability of 71%–81% suggested that the coding was indeed credible and might offer insights into what factors support and inhibit teacher motivation.

Table 3 shows what the primary codes were and how many times interviewees mentioned them across all the transcripts. In some cases, each participant mentioned the element the code represents, while in other cases just a few participants mentioned the elements multiple times.

The researcher reached saturation after several rounds of this process, and no new codes emerged. At that point, the researcher and colleagues then discussed connecting factors between and among the codes in order to understand how those factors supported or

| Middle school (Pseudonym) | Total population of students | Breakdown of ethnicities* | Percent free and reduced lunch |
|---------------------------|-----------------------------|--------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Hoover Middle             | 1,522                       | 47% Hispanic             |                               |
|                           |                             | 30% White                | 49%                           |
|                           |                             | 7% African American      |                               |
| San Jacinto Middle        | 1,323                       | 74% Hispanic             |                               |
|                           |                             | 15% White                | 74%                           |
|                           |                             | 3% African American      |                               |
| Sumatra Middle            | 858                         | 17% Hispanic             |                               |
|                           |                             | 73% White                | 7%                            |
|                           |                             | .09% African American    |                               |
| Boulevard Middle          | 1,001                       | 93% Hispanic             |                               |
|                           |                             | .02% White               | 84%                           |
|                           |                             | .008% African American   |                               |

*Note. The percentages are representative of the three largest racial/ethnic groups and do not equal 100%.
Table 2
Demographic Details on Study Participants

| Participant (pseudonyms) | Years experience | Gender | Content area | Middle school |
|--------------------------|------------------|--------|--------------|---------------|
| Doris                    | 5                | Female | English      | San Jacinto   |
| Emily                    | 27               | Female | Mathematics  | Sumatra       |
| Alexandra                | 30               | Female | Mathematics  | Boulevard     |
| Veronica                 | 3                | Female | Science      | Boulevard     |
| Joaquin                  | 31               | Male   | Mathematics  | Hoover Middle |
| Yesenia                  | 2                | Female | Science      | San Jacinto   |
| Joran                    | 35               | Male   | Social Studies| San Jacinto   |
| Emma                     | 1                | Female | Mathematics  | Boulevard     |
| Melanie                  | 3                | Male   | English      | Hoover Middle |
| George                   | 5                | Male   | Social Studies| San Jacinto   |
| Charles                  | 4                | Female | Social Studies| San Jacinto   |
| Lesley                   | 18               | Female | Science      | San Jacinto   |
| Ann                      | 35               | Female | English      | Hoover Middle |

Table 3
Frequency of Common Teaching Elements

| Common teaching elements | Number of times mentioned | Percentage of total codes |
|--------------------------|---------------------------|--------------------------|
| Students                 | 98                        | 32%                      |
| Content/Standards        | 37                        | 12%                      |
| Intellectual challenge   | 15                        | 5%                       |
| Instruction              | 89                        | 29%                      |
| Administrators and colleagues | 72              | 23%                      |
| Total                    | 311                       | Rounded to nearest tenth |

Limitations
The researcher is a former middle level teacher and current middle level teacher educator who has worked with young adolescents and their teachers for more than two decades. This deep knowledge of the field presented both strengths and limitations to the research. In terms of strengths, the teacher-
participants trusted the researcher because of her own classroom experience. They recognized that she understood the joys and challenges of working with young adolescents and the ways in which the context of the middle grades presented different opportunities than elementary or high school. In terms of limitations, the researcher had to ensure she was not listening to the teachers’ stories through the lens of her own experiences. This is one reason she extended invitations to participate to teachers at four very different middle level schools (see Table 1 for an overview) to ensure that data analysis found in influences on motivation that were consistent across widely varied demographic contexts. Additionally, the inclusion of colleagues in the coding process and data analysis discussion helped limit the researcher’s subjectivity, and the high interrater reliability lends credibility to the findings discussed here.

Another limitation was the fact that all data reported here were self-report data and were not confirmed through observation or document study. Because the research questions focused on understanding what the teachers themselves thought, felt, and needed, triangulation of data sources was not appropriate for this study, and the self-report nature of the interviews was intentional. The teachers’ own thoughts are significant because they are often told what to teach, how to design their instruction, and what professional development experiences to attend. The primary goals of this study were to bring the teachers’ voices directly into the conversation and to emphasize teachers in the middle grades because the stressors of teaching young adolescents can be different.

**Findings and Discussion**

This section weaves together results of the data analysis and a discussion of the teachers’ thoughts

| Major themes                                      | Sample of supporting codes and labels (most are in vivo codes)                      |
|--------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Evolving perspectives on pedagogy                | Being able to manipulate the content                                             |
|                                                  | Using information in a meaningful way                                            |
|                                                  | Trying different things                                                         |
| Being intentional about instructional choices    | Working very hard                                                                |
|                                                  | Conscious competence                                                             |
|                                                  | Making sure kids are learning what is being taught                              |
| Innovation                                       | Being exceptional                                                                |
|                                                  | Tie electronic devices to learning                                               |
|                                                  | Looking at something differently                                                 |
|                                                  | Looking for ways to be better                                                   |
|                                                  | I have never gotten the result I want so I will try it again                    |
| Relevance                                        | Our children are digital natives                                                 |
|                                                  | Help students feel the content is important                                     |
|                                                  | Words need to become part of their vocabulary                                   |
| Assessment                                       | Kids get to where I thought they would                                           |
|                                                  | I know that kids learned what I taught them                                     |
|                                                  | It actually worked                                                              |
when considered as a whole to highlight the power of their collective voices. The interviews showed that the participants defined effectiveness as being competent in both pedagogical delivery and content design. Results further suggested that teachers’ motivation to become and remain effective was influenced by the connections between and among common teaching elements, especially as they do or do not allow teachers to feel autonomous in their ability to make professional decisions, confident in their ability to meet the needs of all learners, and connected to students, colleagues, and administrators.

Most participants self-identified as being highly motivated, which may have been evidenced by their willingness to be interviewed about their practice. They explained that they entered the profession for a variety of reasons, such as wanting to work with children, making a difference for students in need, or passing knowledge on to the next generation. This section reports direct quotes from the teachers to allow readers to add their own conclusions to the researchers’ themes and teachers’ words. All names are pseudonyms chosen by the teachers themselves.

Evolving Perspectives on Pedagogy
Forty-two percent of the codes focused on either instructional pedagogy or curriculum and content. This was unsurprising because deciding what to teach and how to teach it effectively constitute much of teachers’ professional lives and rightfully consume much of their attention. What was noteworthy, however, was the way in which motivated teachers thought about their instructional practice. When they talked about lesson planning, pedagogy, or instructional choices, the teachers’ perspectives on their role in the classroom and with students continually evolved. Emily, who had been teaching for 27 years, told us, “You have to really work hard to be exceptional. It’s way easy to be bad. You have to really work hard to be exceptional. It doesn’t just happen.” Considering Emily’s comment through the lens of SDT, it appears the notion of competence contributed to her continued motivation to excel at her craft. In her view, exceptional teachers become that way because they work diligently and continuously at improving their practice. Their classroom successes are largely due to their competence because the skills they have over time are an appropriate match for the challenge at hand, and the resulting student success increases their motivation to continue professional growth.

In spite of very specific curricular mandates, the teachers took seriously their responsibility for designing effective lesson plans and defined effectiveness as ensuring that all students both learn and engage with that learning. Alexandra, who had been teaching for 30 years, told us,

Good experiences tend to be where I design a lesson or a unit very carefully. In reality, you can’t design every lesson really carefully because there is too much work and too little time. When I design something really, really carefully and at the end the outcome is what I thought it was—kids get to where I thought they would get to—that is the best experience. They come when, at the end of the unit or lesson or whatever, I know that kids learned what I taught them.

Having a clear idea about what must be taught and how to best teach it is not (in itself) unique, but the ways in which these participants discussed their teaching showed that they thought about their pedagogy as being more than just content delivery. In order to become competent in their craft (which SDT reminds us is essential to motivation), the motivated teachers in this study thought carefully about how they would move students toward mastery of any given content or concept. They recognized that students have multiple learning needs and have many pressures weighing on them; thus, a “one-size-fits-all” approach does not lead to “academic achievement for all.” For example, Veronica, who was in her third year of teaching, said,

I do a lot of visuals so they can see it because sometimes they have never seen these words. They have to be able to do something, to manipulate the content. For example, we just did an activity where they had to classify a bunch of pictures in some way. They had to figure out how to group concepts represented by pictures.

Joaquin, who was in his thirty-first year of teaching, discussed his views of teacher effectiveness:

An effective teacher is one who gets the designated curriculum across so that students are then able to use the information hopefully in a meaningful way at the end of the instruction. They need to show that they are able to take what they’ve learned and apply it.

A focus on helping students apply what they learn in school in a meaningful way echoed throughout seven of the 13 interviews and was an example of the pedagogical perspectives that motivated teachers bring to their practice. The teachers thought about both practical and theoretical applications for academic
content, which encouraged them to stay engaged with their practice (reflecting competence) and to build better relationships with their students (reflecting relatedness). Both of these elements positively influenced their motivation.

Pedagogical practices have evolved because of the technological revolution, though there has been uneven implementation of technology in schools and classroom learning experiences. This was evident with the teachers we interviewed. Yesenia, who was a second-year teacher, was newer to the profession and was motivated by technology because “that’s my passion, and I want to bring it to the kids.” She went on to say the following:

Our children are the digital natives so I have to be on the ball with them. We have all of these electronic devices so let’s put them to use. Let’s tie that into our learning. It gets a lot of kids motivated; especially my struggling students and special needs students. They really buy into that. Even though they have to do all the hard work first—plan it out and then attack the technology part—they still do it.

Alexandra echoed and expanded on Yesenia’s comments when she talked about something she did “years ago for algebraic thinking”:

The workshop was primarily focused on content knowledge and how people think about math. That motivated me because it made me think a different way. We’ve done a lot of tech stuff at my school, and that has motivated me as well. Part of motivation for me is looking at something differently.

Technology caused the teachers in this study to evolve in the way they approached both teaching and learning. Veronica discussed technology and said that she was motivated when (using technology or not) she designed interactive learning experiences. “The kids need to constantly be doing something; they can’t just sit there and stare off into space. That’s when you get behavior problems. Constant hands-on and having something to do is important.”

Joran, who had 35 years of classroom teaching experience, discussed how to be innovative in terms of pedagogy, or how content is taught: “An effective teacher knows the curriculum really well and designs lessons that will explicitly teach a concept or a skill in a way that the students enjoy.” Like Veronica, Joran designs lessons “in a way that they might elaborate on or make connections to. They learn to make connections to the text and then do hand-on activities or some type of activity beyond just reading.” Each of the motivated teachers who participated in the study had some level of autonomy in terms of designing the ways that they taught the assigned curriculum. This autonomy seemed to both influence their pedagogical perspectives and to increase their professional motivation.

Veronica said, “When the students get excited, I get excited.” As a science teacher, Veronica created multiple hands-on opportunities. She said,

During the dissection when they can point out everything and identify the parts and they are able to relay what they learned to whomever is talking to them, that’s when I’ve accomplished something. They learned something; whatever I was trying to instill in them or what I was trying to get them to learn, it actually worked. I know it’s something small, but it’s big for me.

First-year teacher Emma addressed the theme of student engagement in the classroom when she said, I think an actual functioning classroom is one where students are engaged and participating. There are going to be students who are off task or talking to their neighbor, but I think a functioning class is when you can bring it back and control their attention and they can tell you that they’ve really learned something.

Similarly, Melanie, who had been teaching for three years, alluded to her innovative approach to instruction when she said that students must “take control of their own learning. There needs to be a lot of discussion between kids. I feel like if I can set them in motion, then they keep going, wherever they go—that’s the discovery. They are not sitting there being passive.”

**Being Intentional about Instructional Choices**

All the teachers who chose to participate in the interviews for this study self-identified as being motivated to excel at their profession. Each of these teachers talked about intentionality and how having the autonomy to be deliberate in their practice increased their engagement. George, in his fifth year, talked about the notion of “conscious competence,” which he had learned from Beginning Teacher Support and Assessment (BTSA), a California program to support new teachers. He said that conscious competence means “being aware of your own competence and being aware of the strategies that
Versions of this theme echoed throughout the interviews as each of the 13 teachers discussed the various ways they were intentional about their curricular, pedagogical, and management choices. SDT asserts that feeling autonomous is essential to being motivated, and this notion of intentionality resonated. It appeared that fostering classroom teachers’ ability to be intentional about how they taught the required curriculum positively influenced their motivation. Doris had learned through her five years of teaching that effective teachers know strategies that will get other people (i.e., students and co-workers) “to rise to the challenge.” Providing autonomy to already motivated teachers appeared to allow them to increase their professional abilities, and this increase in ability further nurtured their motivation.

Doris also reminded us that effective, motivated teachers understand how to take required content and teach it in a way that helps young adolescents engage. She described one such example:

It was just a really good lesson. I had previewed the game the day before so the kids would know how the game would run. I had made one person in each group in charge of the directions so there was a taskmaster in charge who could review the directions. It just went really well—they were having fun, they were learning different words, they were memorizing their roots, suffixes, and prefixes they need to know for the state standards. It was just an enjoyable day. I got to float around the classroom and troubleshoot. The kids had fun and they were learning at the same time.

The motivated teachers in this study thought critically about what and how they taught and were constantly seeking ways to improve their practice. Emily said, “I am always looking out for what I can learn and how I can be better. I will ask the kids at the end of the unit if I could do anything differently.” She told us that she keeps “trying different things because anyone who stops doing that is not good.” Emily’s comment provided another perspective when thinking about intentionality that was echoed by six of the 13 teachers.

Teachers who participated in this study recognized continual improvement as a conscious process, and it appeared to be one that created a positive motivation cycle. The effective teachers in the study were engaged enough with their practice to continually seek ways to improve, and that deliberate focus on growth in turn positively fostered professional motivation. As Charles, a teacher with four years in the classroom, said, “It’s also knowing your own strengths as a teacher and going with that and being willing to learn new strategies.” George added a reminder of the importance of enthusiasm and focus when he said, “Your passion cannot be something that becomes mundane.”

**Innovation**

A theme that closely aligned with the notion of intentionality was innovation. Each of the 13 motivated teachers in the study discussed the various ways in which they changed, grew, and became more effective practitioners. Considering innovation through the lens of SDT affirms that competence is not merely being “good” at any given task but being willing to innovate and take risks in pursuit of excellence. Doris said,

> I’m always motivated by the things I see in my colleagues’ classrooms or when having conversations with other teachers on campus. I’m always motivated to do more and to do better. It’s taking that risk of being willing to try new things.

For Joaquin, innovation meant “trying things differently,” whether it was looping where “all the students in my eighth grade class I had in seventh grade as well” or experimenting when he was “trying things off the top of my head.” He indicated that he engaged in a continual metacognitive feedback loop in which he stayed “challenged and grew by learning more about what I am teaching.” Still another way he used innovation to nurture his professional motivation was “learning from peers who do the job really well and just know how to come up with activities and high-interest lessons.” Emma also believed that “a motivated teacher always tries to look for something better to improve their teaching.”

Doris nurtured her professional motivation by continually trying new instructional activities and/or pedagogical approaches. As an example, she described how she had struggled for years to create literature circles that supported authentic discussion around meaningful texts. She described her challenges in this way:

> I’ve had around 42 students in my classes, and it’s really hard to get good literature circles going with that many students. The thing that goes wrong is that there is always that one student who doesn’t...
do his/her role and lets the whole group down. And then I always struggle with how to grade. Do I grade the group? Do I grade each student individually? I’m going to try it again this year, and I have some new strategies. I have been talking to other English teachers on campus to see how they do literature circles so I can make it go the way I see it in my mind. It’s something I’ve never been able to master in the years that I’ve tried it. I have never gotten the result from them that I wanted so I’ll try it again this year.

Even though Doris was still not in a place where she felt successful with literature circles, her lack of competence did not damage her motivation. She knew what she wanted to accomplish, she knew that she had colleagues from whom she could learn, and she knew her principal supported these efforts. These factors encouraged Doris to continue to innovate, which protected and strengthened her professional motivation.

The importance of continual improvement and a conscious competence reverberated throughout the interviews. Alexandra said, “Motivated teachers are the ones who come to school every day ready to seize the day, and they’re making sure their kids are learning what they are teaching.” She described a mindset toward teaching that is unique to motivated teachers, and she and the other participants identified various ways that external factors might influence that internal way of thinking. When teachers felt that they had both the freedom and expectation to try new pedagogical approaches without being overwhelmed by too many reform efforts at once, they appeared to be more professionally motivated.

Melanie was a self-professed novice with technology, but she was “trying to learn it, use it, and incorporate it more so it becomes part of the class.” She recognized that she was going to make mistakes and that some years were “not-so-good years in terms of innovation.” As she recognized and articulated her challenges, though, she noted that they did not negatively affect her motivation because she had confidence both in executing her pedagogical abilities and in addressing her professional challenges. She said she was trying too many new things, so “I feel like I’m not mastering anything, and I know I just need to refocus.” Alexandra also appreciated the freedom to “step outside the box and do some different things. For example, I pulled out tangrams and did area and square roots. That was kind of cool; I was doing something different so that was motivating.”

Conversely, Veronica felt that her attempts at innovation were stymied by ever-changing district mandates. She said,

Every year the district wants to bring something new. We feel like we’re guinea pigs, and we never follow through. They give us stuff that they want to do so we do it and reflect on it, and at the end of the year it’s gone. Do something and stick to it. I understand if you do something and it doesn’t work, move on, but maybe give it another year. Why do we do so much work for a year only to get something new the next year? That decreases our motivation. We do something all year, and it just disappears. We try something for a year, but it really takes years to know if a new idea is successful.

The researcher and her colleagues considered each of these experiences through the lens of SDT. It appeared that administrators like Doris’s who provided for teacher autonomy in terms of how to teach the mandated content had a more positive influence on professional motivation than did administrators like Veronica’s who prescribed how to teach in addition to what to teach. In her interview, Veronica repeatedly talked about the lack of control she and her colleagues had. She felt that if she had more control over how she designed her instructional environment, not only would she feel more motivated, but her students would also be more academically successful. She ended her interview on a positive note, however, by explaining that a new principal had recently taken the helm and was already providing a buffer between district mandates and teacher autonomy.

The reality of an administration’s influence on teacher motivation came up repeatedly in the interviews and seemed to connect closely to notions of autonomy and relatedness. Joaquin said,

When you work really hard and have a vision of something, it is not motivating when a department chair or administrator says, ‘No, we don’t want you to do that.’ It is disheartening; you get discouraged. You can be guided and channeled, but sometimes it is really nice to go outside the box and try new things.

Joran made a similar point in a stronger way when he said,
I’m not interested in doing what looks good on paper or whatever the program du jour is because I’m protecting my students. In other words, if the dialogue isn’t about what’s best for students pretty much at all times, if that isn’t your bottom line, then you’ve lost me.

**Relevance**

An underlying theme for four of the teachers was the notion of applicability or relevance. Joaquin said,

> Repetition and doing the same thing year after year might make you lose motivation unless you can reinvent how it is presented and really help the students feel that the content is important. The applicability of the content—to me—is essential. Why teach it if there is no connection to the real world?

Similarly, Lesley, a teacher with 18 years in the classroom, said, “My job is not for them to memorize everything about physics and chemistry. My job is to help them feel inspired by science and to know that they can do it.”

With district mandates, state policies, and national reform movements, teachers can feel overwhelmed by conflicting demands. As the five teachers noted, a primary drag on their motivation was what they considered an over-emphasis on packaged programs or scripted reforms. Ann explained how this reality negatively affected her professional motivation over 35 years:

> Something that was most disturbing to me was the academic vocabulary this district did seven or eight years ago. We were teaching our kids rote academic vocabulary, but those words never became part of their vocabulary. I think it was very low level, and that disturbed me a lot. I voiced my opinion of that because I felt as though we were short-changing them.

**Assessment**

Assessment (i.e., identifying what students know and are able to do) is closely connected to understanding the difference between teaching and learning. Effective teachers continually assess their students to make sure that they are learning what is being taught. Motivated teachers recognize that assessment is an essential part of their daily practice. Pasi Sahlberg, director of the Finnish Ministry of Education’s Center for International Mobility, once said that accountability is what is left when responsibility is taken away (Partanen, 2011). The teachers in this study showed us what assessment looks like among professionals who feel responsible to their students and who are committed to ensuring that they both master the state content standards and understand how to use that learning authentically.

Emily wanted her students to “chart their growth, see it, and feel a sense of accomplishment.” She did that through daily and weekly feedback that was sometimes formal but just as frequently informal. Joran also used “different forms of assessment to measure student progress like listening in on conversations, reading written work, looking at test questions, or noticing student interactions.” Neither Emily nor Joran felt tied to one specific type of assessment because they wanted to create myriad ways for students to demonstrate their learning, and when that happened, they felt more motivated to continue. They nurtured their own professional motivation by ensuring that their students were learning what was taught and were able to recognize that growth.

George talked differently about assessment because while he recognized the importance of assessing his students’ progress, he also felt strongly that he must “assess the effectiveness of [his] classroom practice on a daily, weekly, and quarterly basis.” He said, “I’m always reviewing and reflecting and thinking, ‘Wow, I really laid an egg on that assignment. How can I change this to make it more effective?’” Alexandra, who taught in a different district that Joran, appreciated her district’s motto: “It begins with me.” She said,

> I’m a real believer in that, and I also say it ends with me. I don’t like when I get test scores back, and the test scores aren’t reflective of my opinion of what the kids could have accomplished. I need to figure out why I failed them. Those are the moments that feel the worst.

Just like George, Alexandra viewed one purpose of assessment as being a way to self-evaluate her practice. This ongoing, non-mandated reflection contributed to her motivation because her students’ success (or lack thereof) pushed her to continually modify her practice. Joran said, “If you’re not basing your instruction on what the students are actually getting, then I don’t think you’re a good teacher.” While assessment practices did not appear to directly influence professional motivation, George, Alexandra, and Joran explained that when teachers see concrete evidence of their students’ learning and achievement,
it has a positive impact on their subsequent engagement in the classroom. Not only does assessment improve student motivation, Joran also reminded us that “the ‘aha’ moments are the ultimate motivator because you know right then that the kids get it. Ultimately, that’s my motivation for being here—that interaction between students and myself.”

Another way that assessment played a positive role in enhancing teacher motivation was by helping teachers feel like, as Emma said, “I taught them something today.” George stated a common refrain throughout the interviews that “the kids have to be learning what the teacher is teaching; it’s about learning, not teaching.” Emma felt that when “they get what I want them to get by the end, that is really reassuring because I know that the work that I’ve been doing is making a difference.”

When considering the comments about assessment as a whole, it became clear that motivated teachers in the study understood the importance of measuring student learning. They recognized and advocated for systems that identify how students are doing well and how they are falling short. They also believed that self-assessment both on the part of the learner and of the teacher was essential. If schools and districts create teaching environments in which teachers use assessment as a tool to ensure student success and academic excellence, then teacher motivation may also benefit. As Melanie summarized,

I’m all for assessment. I want to know what the students know, and I want to be able to prepare my classes. But teaching to the test is not what we’re about. It’s about getting them to become self-motivated learners so they can access information for themselves. Not so they can take a test and take it well. We have some really good test takers, but if you ask them a critical thinking question, they can’t do it.

**Implications**

The participants in this study explained that their motivation to become and remain effective was influenced by contextual factors at their school sites and in their districts with an emphasis on issues related to curriculum. Interestingly, explorations of student motivation (e.g., Bishop & Pflaus, 2005; Cushman & Rogers, 2008; Daniels, 2011) have yielded similar insights and appear to be worthy of continued discussion as administrators work to create positive teaching environments. Following are practical suggestions for teachers and administrators that are based on the interview themes and supported by the motivation research. The headings that follow are the same as those in the “Findings and Discussion” section to make the links to the teachers’ words explicit.

**Evolving Perspectives on Pedagogy**

Teaching often exists at the nexus of great change and greater stress. Most teachers are well-trained and well-intentioned, and they work diligently to balance the various pressures, responsibilities, and challenges that define the job. When teachers use disagreements as information and learn to consider each pedagogical perspective in terms of how it might enhance student learning, it follows that their teaching practice will improve, and their motivation will be nurtured. SDT posits that feeling competent is a basic psychological need, and the teachers interviewed for this study suggested that being open to evolving pedagogical perspectives was one way to hone their skill sets and increase their feelings of professional competence.

One way administrators might meet these needs is to spend more time in classrooms. Whether as a guest teacher, observer, or participant, an administrator who prioritizes spending time in classrooms can positively influence teacher motivation. This simple act allows administrators to remain cognizant of the carousel of responsibilities and requirements that teachers navigate every day and every year, and to witness what frequently changing district mandates look like when operationalized. This might address concerns of teachers like Veronica, who lamented, “Every year we have to try something new.” Administrators who are present in the classroom will be better positioned to facilitate conversations about pedagogy and content, and to advocate for teachers and students at higher levels.

**Being Intentional about Instructional Choices**

The participants in this study suggested that administrators might foster teachers’ autonomy by trusting them to make appropriate instructional choices. For example, district offices sometimes pressure site administrators to have all the teachers implement a new approach, and Ann’s comment about the district-wide, low-level standardized vocabulary instruction was one example. She felt that the outside forces controlling her instructional choices were compelling her to make choices that were not in the best interests of her students, and this lack of autonomy had a negative impact on her professional motivation.

Teachers feel more motivated when administrators shield them and create spaces for them to make their
own decisions. Joaquin was very clear that he felt discouraged when administrators did not let him “go outside the box.” While not all teachers will live up to high expectations, most will. Administrators can and should address teachers who do not create rigorous learning experiences for their students without restricting the vast majority of teachers who are committed, highly skilled professionals. To create motivating teaching environments, administrators should make time for teachers to engage in complex conversations in which they identify problems of practice and then have meaningful dialogue about how they might change their instruction. This approach encourages teachers like Lesley, who wanted her students to “feel inspired” about science because she was able to increase her competence while making a positive impact on her students.

**Innovation**
Motivated teachers do not understate the importance of professional growth. Time is always at a premium, and not all professional development experiences will be meaningful, but making a commitment to lifelong learning protects teachers’ motivation in the face of other (possibly negative) experiences. Teachers should be encouraged to attend conferences, join professional organizations, read scholarly journals, and talk with colleagues so that continued innovation is possible. Innovation resonates with all three human needs identified by Deci and Ryan (2000). It nurtures professional motivation through the building of relationships, the autonomy that comes with choosing growth, and the continual improvement of abilities. Joaquin spent a considerable portion of his interview explaining how disheartened he felt when administrators did not allow him to try new approaches in his practice. When he worked for a principal who did encourage innovation, however, he said he was more energized than at any other time in his career.

**Relevance**
While every content standard will not be immediately meaningful to students all the time, administrators should help teachers sift through school and district curricular mandates to ensure their relevance. They should also heed Veronica’s admonition that “results take time,” and they should allow programs time to build and thrive before abandoning them in favor of newer trends. Joran indicated that teachers tend to ignore requirements that are not clearly in the students’ best interests, so administrators should work toward continually ensuring the relevance of what they are asking their teachers to do.

**Assessment**
The purpose of assessment (formal or informal, summative or formative) is to gather information about what students can do well and where they need additional support or re-teaching. Teachers nurture their professional motivation when they are able to reduce the value judgments that often accompany assessment results, and instead focus on which instructional strategies and approaches were successful and which need refining based on students’ academic performance. George, Emily, Alexandra, and Joran all discussed the ways in which formal and informal assessments increased their professional motivation. When they saw their students achieving, they felt more competent, which pushed them to work even more diligently at improving their practice.

Administrators who create motivating teaching environments also focus teachers’ attention on assessment as information. They make it clear that they expect a growth mindset (Dweck, 2006) and that both teachers and students must understand what is going well and what is not. Educators should celebrate forward progress for all learners as everyone works toward learning content and achieving instructional goals. By reminding teachers that all students can be successful, just not in the exact same timeframe, administrators nourish and protect their teachers’ motivation.

**Conclusion**
SDT posits that three basic psychological needs (i.e., autonomy, competence, and relatedness) play a significant role in determining whether and how people are motivated. Deci and his colleagues (1991) as well as researchers who conducted subsequent studies (e.g., Cushman & Rogers, 2008; Klassen et al., 2012) found environments that meet those psychological needs encourage individuals to engage, exert effort, or otherwise participate in the tasks at hand. Although the curricular factors explored here are not often considered during discussions of ways to improve school culture and morale (Marzano, 2011), the teachers in this study mentioned them frequently as factors that had a real effect on whether and how they were motivated.

Because the context in which individuals function influences their motivation and desire to exert effort, principals and other school administrators will find this work useful as they create more motivating professional environments. The teachers interviewed in this study offer insights into ways in which their effectiveness is related to motivation, which is both positively and negatively affected by
curricular factors within district leadership’s control. Similarly, university faculty in teacher credential programs and other individuals who work with practicing teachers might use these findings to prepare, support, and sustain teachers in successful careers.

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