

# Rural Teachers' Best Motivating Strategies: A Blending of Teachers' and Students' Perspectives

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*This paper extracts and elaborates rural secondary teachers' most effective reported motivating strategies. From the data generated by two years of mixed method research in rural secondary schools, these strategies emerged as among the most successful. Selection of best practices was based on a synthesis of what both teachers and students reported as making the greatest positive impact on their school-related motivation. Strategies are illustrated by multiple detailed examples from teacher interviews.*

Teachers often enter the profession because of their heartfelt desire to witness and support the physical, emotional and intellectual growth of their students. Yet a teacher's performance is measured largely by student achievements. Because motivation influences both developmental and performance outcomes, educators have a vested interest in their students' motivation. However, understanding that motivation is not an easy task.

Motivation is a complex and dynamic construct that is a function of the past, present and future and is dependent on both the whole group and the individual (Hardré & Sullivan, in press; Linnenbrink & Pintrich, 2002). While one strategy will not work on all students, some elements of social contexts influence what will influence a given group (Bandura, 1997; Black & Deci, 2000). Teachers should view motivation as a complex task involving a multi-faceted approach to the classroom and to their relationships with the students within that classroom (Schunk, Pintrich & Meece, 2008). Motivation is a process, not merely an end product (Reeve, 2005). Many long-range motivational outcomes are not readily visible to the teacher, but a set of proximate responses that teachers *can* see indicate how students are positioned for engagement and success (Maehr & Midgley, 1996; Skinner & Belmont, 1993). Based on the current indicators, the teacher may see that a detour is necessary to navigate the process around a roadblock. Students do bring all of their past experiences into a classroom with them and those experiences are often outside of the teacher's direct control. However, students' motivation is also dramatically influenced by a complex of interactions with their teachers, the context and culture of the school and community, and their personal experiences both in and out of the classroom (Hardré & Sullivan, in press; Maehr, 1984; Pintrich, 2003). The vast set of influences on students' motivation means that no one individual or group (e.g. parents, teachers) can be solely responsible for motivating students. Thus, motivation is a shared responsibility. However, the importance of teacher influence on students' motivation is well-demonstrated, making it clear that teachers really do make a difference (Hardré & Sullivan, in press).

Teaching is an honorable and noble profession in which individuals pursue the lofty goal of educating the youth of our society. Responsibility for learning is shared by students, teachers, administrators, parents, community members, and the entire society (Brembeck, 1971). Nowhere is this truer than in rural environments, which are known for their development of strong social ties (Collins, 2007; Crocket, Shanahan, & Jackson-Newsom, 2000). The relationship between students and teachers in rural contexts is often different from the student-teacher relationship in non-rural settings. For example, Brown (1996) described parents' attitudes toward the closing of a small school due to consolidation forces, including being, "proud of their school", having a relationship of "trust" and not wanting their children to be "taught by strangers" and when they have a "school staff that knows them" (p. 247). Due to the smaller rural community, students and their families are more likely to interact with teachers and their families during community events and social gatherings (Flora, Flora & Fey, 2003; Khattri, Riley & Kane, 1997). Successful rural schools often function as venues for various social activities, so that they become social and cultural centerpieces of the community (D'Amico, Matthes, Sankar, Merchant and Zurita, 1996; Barley & Beesley, 2007; Holloway, 2002). Family members also contribute to school needs, often taking on roles as bus drivers, cafeteria workers, teachers and coaches (Flora, Flora & Fey, 2003; Lemke, 1994; Stern, 1994).

In a rural setting, students' motivation may be influenced to a larger degree by their teachers than by their peers (Hardré & Sullivan, in press) perhaps because of the dual impact on students as a result of teachers' roles as educators and as prominent members of the community. The present research attempts to interpret the dependence between teacher beliefs and practices with student perceptions, in a rural context, where the students' and teachers' relationships are sometimes the strongest. The powerful influence of teachers, both as educators and as part of the community on academic achievement and motivation of rural students, prompts the question: "What are teachers' beliefs and

strategies that align with students' perspectives concerning motivation in rural schools?"

### Motivation Research

The motivating strategies that a teacher employs may be directed at individual students or directed at the whole class; motivational efforts may be in the form of their design of the classroom environment, direct intervention, or explicit instructional and/or interpersonal strategies (Hardré & Sullivan, in review). An ideal result of teachers' motivating efforts is the individual student's intrinsic and self-regulated motivation. Effort is intrinsic when student learning is driven from within, and it is self-regulated when the student plans, monitors and adapts reasons, choices and actions systematically in order to optimize learning (Schunk & Ertmer, 2000). The effectiveness of a particular motivational strategy is reflected in the self-regulated behavior of students and results from their experiences, coupled with their proximal and future goals (Miller & Brickman, 2004).

The classroom environment is a dynamic and influential context that is created both by teachers and students (Greene, Miller, Crowson, Duke, & Akey, 2004; Skinner & Belmont, 1993). The teacher designs classroom activities, sets grading policy and facilitates operation of the classroom (Tschannen-Moran, Woolfolk-Hoy & Hoy, 1998; Wenglinski, 2000). A teacher supportive environment is characterized by teachers relating content to students' prior knowledge or life outside of school, beliefs that students can improve study skills, exhibiting fairness, viewing mistakes as learning opportunities, assessing work against a quality standard, providing adequate time and offering additional help (Greene et al., 2004). However, teachers do not create the classroom environment in a vacuum. The student-student and the student-teacher interactions establish a social dynamic reflecting respect for intellectual achievement and curiosity (Anderman & Young, 1994; Schunk, 1996). A peer supportive environment is characterized by students putting forth their best work, caring about learning, and treating each other with respect and caring (Deci & Ryan, 1987; Greene et al., 2004).

Teachers' interpersonal motivating style is a particularly important aspect of the classroom environment that affects students' motivation (Skinner & Belmont, 1993) and it can be described as either autonomy supportive or controlling (Reeve, Jang, Hardré & Omura, 2002). A controlling style is one where the teacher maintains control of classroom activities and decisions (Black & Deci, 2000; Deci & Ryan, 1987). Students are not actively involved in educational decision-making and learning is a function of the teachers' preferences and directives (Hardré & Reeve, 2003). Conversely, the autonomy supportive teacher takes advantage of students' curiosity and interests to drive instructional decisions (Reeve, Bolt & Cai, 1999; Reeve, Jang, Hardré & Omura, 2002), expresses confidence in students' ability, uses student perspectives, considers

student suggestions, shows students respect, encourages questions, shows interest in student futures, and demonstrates understanding of students' needs (Deci & Ryan, 2002).

Achievement goals are reflections of the underlying reasons for specific achievement behavior (Dweck & Leggett, 1988; Harackiewicz, Barron, Tauer, & Elliot, 2002; Nicholls, 1984), and provide valuable insight into students' motivation. Students with a *learning goal* orientation desire is to increase their knowledge and skills (Dweck & Leggett, 1988, p. 256). The learning orientation can be a characteristic of the teachers' design of the learning environment, or of the students themselves (Ames, 1992; Schunk, 1996). Students tend to adopt goal orientations from past and present classroom and teacher characteristics (Elliot & Harackiewicz, 1996). A learning orientation is promoted when success is measured by progress and improvement, an emphasis is placed on effort and learning, and mistakes are viewed as part of learning, so that attention is focused on learning and development rather than on competition and comparison (Ames & Archer, 1988). In contrast to learning goals, students with *performance goals* are concerned with looking good, smart, or capable to others. Performance goals are promoted in the classroom environment when success is defined by high grades, value is given to high ability, and attention and rewards are given to student performance relative to others (Ames & Archer, 1988). Performance goals are often divided into two separate orientations: (1) *performance-approach* (to outperform others) and (2) *performance-avoid* (to avoid appearing less capable than others) (Elliot & Harackiewicz, 1996). Future goals are more distant from the learner than performance goals, and focus on achievements that are in the future but linked to current efforts (Miller & Brickman, 2004).

Of course, students have a great deal of control over their own motivation, but teachers, administrators and the culture and climate of the school system also have a profound influence over students' self-perceptions that relate to their motivation (Hardré, 2007; Maehr & Midgley, 1996). Strategies that teachers and schools can promote in students include a set of productive perceptions, such as value for the content and subject area learning, and perceptions that they can and will succeed, which promotes productive motivations (Kao & Tienda, 1998; Maehr, 1984; Yoshikawa & Seidman, 2000). Value refers to the learner's tendency to ascribe worth and benefits to the knowledge and skills in the domain, which in turn influences attention, engagement, and investment (Eccles & Wigfield, 1995; Sansone & Smith, 2000). Perceived competence refers to the degree to which the student feels capable of succeeding in the tasks that are required for a particular class. Expectations relate to the students' perceptions of success in the class, and are related to their future aspirations (such as postsecondary education and careers (Quaglia & Cobb, 1996). Each of these student self-perceptions are influenced

by past and present achievement, feedback from teachers and peers, and the classroom environment with its values, rules and norms (Linnenbrink & Pintrich, 2002; Maehr & Midgley, 1996).

In terms of motivation, teachers' efforts are generally aimed at three types of related outcomes: (a) to improve students' motivation as demonstrated by effort, engagement and investment in classroom activities; (b) to empower students' self-perceptions relating to self and content (e.g., valuing, competence and ability, success expectations); and (c) to improve students' learning and academic achievement.

## Methods

The researchers traveled to 19 rural public high schools in a southwestern U.S. state and surveyed 625 students and 75 teachers, and conducted interviews with 66 of the teachers. Separate manuscripts report the initial analyses of those data, as correlation and simultaneous multiple regressions from the students' and the teachers' perspectives (Hardré & Sullivan, in press; Hardré & Sullivan, 2008).

The current analysis revisited that data, with the goal of matching and synthesizing from it the most effective strategies from the blended perspectives of teachers and students in the same rural schools. To that end, we re-examined the quantitative and qualitative data from teachers and students in all 19 rural high schools, and extracted best strategies and examples of them.

Due to the diversity of rural places and definitions of them (Adams, 2003), it is prudent to provide descriptive details of places in rural studies (Coladarci, 2007; Holloway, 2002). The schools in the present analysis were all located in places identified as rural by both the United States Office of Management and Budget and the State Regents Office, with populations below 2,500 and relatively isolated (at least 50 miles from a metropolitan areas with a four-year college or university). Families in the area were characterized by low socioeconomic status (average family income \$10-23,000/year, average of \$ 18,000), and from 50-85% free/reduced lunch eligibility. Agricultural and low-skilled industrial jobs were the predominant type of employment, and the median educational level was a high school diploma. School size varied from 33-430 students in grades 9-12 (average of 120), with dropout rates from 4-30% (average of 9%). Schools were well-distributed over the four geographic quadrants of the state so as to be geographically representative of its rural regions.

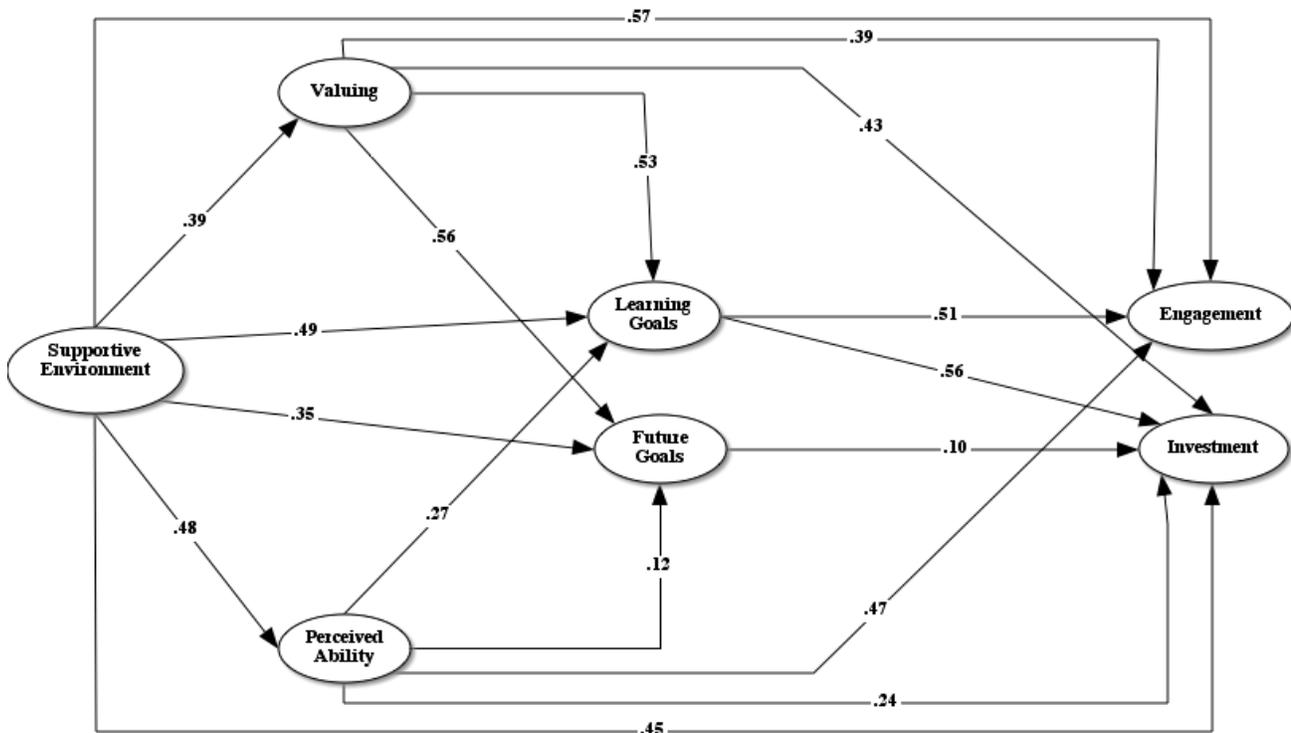
## *Selection and Recruitment*

In order to obtain a representative sample of rural school and community characteristics in the state, we identified 38 candidate schools and invited them to participate. Twenty-five schools agreed initially, but six of these were forced to withdraw due to factors unrelated to the study (loss of administrators, community emergencies). We invited all teachers and students in the schools to participate, and the volunteer sample of 75 teachers and 625 students with complete data sets resulted. Interviews were conducted with 66 of the 75 teachers in this sample. The sample included all grade levels (9-12) and a full range of subject areas, traditional and applied, required and elective.

## *Framework of Best Motivating Strategies*

The purpose of the present work is to build on a synthesis of these previous findings in identifying the most effective motivating strategies indicated by *both teachers and* students in these parallel studies of the same classrooms. The student quantitative survey data of the most relevance to this study is depicted in Figure 1 (Hardré & Sullivan, in press). The multiple regressions generated data that clearly shows the importance of a teacher's supportive environment in directly predicting students' valuing, perceived ability, learning and future goals. Teachers with a strong supportive environment foster adaptive learning and future goals in students; and also increase students' perceptions of value and perceived ability, which in turn also develops strong learning and future goals in students. Student engagement and investment (indicators of student motivation) were strongly influenced both directly and indirectly (through learning and future goals) by valuing and perceived ability. Learning and future goals were moderately to highly correlated in Hardré and Sullivan's work ( $r=.68$ ) and consequently each are important influences on students' motivation as measured through their engagement and investment in the class.

Next we examined the qualitative data from the 66 teacher interviews in order to explore classroom examples of teacher beliefs relating to their students' motivation. Examples were found and documented that demonstrated the teachers' influence on student self-perceptions, goal orientations, and motivational strategies and their relationships to student motivation. Teachers reported on their perceptions of the causes of a lack of motivation and the strategies they employed to overcome whatever motivational impediment existed.



**Figure 1.** Relevant standardized regression coefficients reported for students (Hardré & Sullivan, in press)

The product of the above analysis is presented below and represents four types of motivating strategies that emerged as consistent in both the teacher and student data as highly successful when used to motivate students across subject areas in rural secondary schools. According to the data collected from both students and teachers, these four strategies stood out as most strongly supportive of students' motivation in these rural secondary schools. From the perspective of the students, these strategies promoted their self-perceptions of their motivation reflected in their engagement and investment in the course content. From the perspective of the teachers, these strategies are their introspective voices relating their motivational interventions that resulted in positive outcomes. In our view, they are the best strategies because they are research based, implemented in classrooms and result in positive outcomes from both the teachers' and students' perspectives.

The four strategies are: (a) supporting learning and future goals; (b) establishing relevance of the content, connecting it to students' interests; (c) treating students as uniquely valued individuals; and (d) fostering student valuing and perceived competence. The most critical student self-perceptions that teachers can address are valuing and perceived ability to foster both learning and future goals.

Two related contrasts also emerged that may shed light on how these practices function in the rural school context. The first important contrast is the difference in where teachers and students believe that the most powerful social influence on student motivation originates. According to teachers, the most important social influences were the peer group and

family (all factors outside of the teachers' control); however, according to students, their teachers are more influential than their peers in motivating them toward (or away from) academic subjects. A second contrast is the degree of control that students and teachers attributed to teacher influence in the classroom environment. Students indicated that the most important environmental factor was teachers' autonomy support in the classroom, while teachers indicated high degrees of helplessness in motivating chronically disengaged students (though many said they persist in trying such strategies). The implication is that teachers have a greater influence on their students' motivation than they believe. However, despite differences in beliefs about the origins of influence, the same set of strategies emerged independently from both teachers and students as the most powerfully influential.

Often in the field of education, professionals can describe the research-supported strategies but give little attention to the implementation of those ideas and how teachers are incorporating them into their classrooms. The following sections feature each of the four subsets of strategies that were reported as most influential and illustrate how the 66 teachers interviewed in these 19 rural high schools implemented them.

#### *Supporting Learning and Future Goals*

The support of learning and future goals emerged as a best motivational strategy among both teachers and students. For students, learning and future goals predicted strong

positive motivation, as engagement and investment in learning. For teachers, these same goal types were among the strategies they reported as most productive in motivating their students, and most prevalent among the successful strategies across the rural secondary schools. Key elements of supporting these productive goals were teachers' supportive interpersonal style, and design of assignments to capitalize on current and future interests outside of school.

Goals in the classroom are a combination of the goal structures in the learning environment established by the teacher and the goal orientations of the students, both individually and as a social group (Schunk & Ertmer, 2000; Schunk, Pintrich & Meece, 2008). Learning goals are often set aside in favor of an emphasis on test performance and grades. That is not to say that tests or grades are not important but that they should be balanced with other learning indicators, to maintain a focus on learning. One teacher described the tension between performance-focused and learning-focused teaching this way:

... parents in some cases demand that their kid pass...until he or she makes the grade that the parent thinks they should have. It has nothing to do with teaching the kid anymore, it's about the grade... But if we place so much emphasis on the grade that we forget about education, that becomes an issue.

If environments can be created that stress learning as the primary objective and grades are simply one indicator of that success, then a learning-focused atmosphere is created (Bransford, Brown & Cocking, 1999). Teachers promote this type of environment by supporting students' learning goals and future goals, with classroom goal structures that take the light off performance and place it on what students can learn. However, adopting a learning goal philosophy is often not an easy task. Teachers often stress grades as the end goal in attempting to motivate students. For example, one teacher stated:

I try to praise their efforts...I give them a rubric or a grading criteria sheet, and I always write something positive...I would much rather be positive in motivation than negative. And I think that helps them because a lot of times they'll get their papers back and they'll go, "Woo, I made a higher grade than I thought I was going to!"

This teacher's strategy, giving the rubric and including positive feedback, is a great example of clarity and motivational balance in grading practice. However, focusing on the student's response, the emphasis is on how proud and surprised the student was because of the higher grade. If an atmosphere and belief system can be created so that the student's response focused on pride and excitement about the knowledge and skill resulting in the grade (i.e., "Woo, I got an A because I made some great points and backed them up") then learning becomes the objective and the grades are

a success indicator. It is not that grades are bad or unimportant, but rather that they should not be the *primary goal* of education.

Some students already profess a learning goal toward some subjects in school. One teacher identifies these students as follows.

...you know there's a few that enjoy subjects such as science and that motivates them...you got...this kid that's like 'I'm a science freak' and you got your kids that's science guys, you got your kids that's math guys, English guys and ... you know there's a handful that's motivated by academics themselves.

One teacher shared that the use of flexible groupings is one way that the enthusiasm of these students can be used to inspire others: "Students often work within the same group for the entire semester and then the spread of the learning bug is localized." In addition to helping other students, this teacher advised, the students exhibiting a learning goal orientation should also be allowed to work together as a group. Then the other groups will take notice of their combined positive attitude and that serves as a model for the other groups.

Students find it motivating when teachers support their future goals. Students' future goals are largely individualized, and many rural students do not see themselves as college-bound, so this teacher stresses the need to expand the future to life beyond college:

I'm sure that all the teachers tell them...and kids get tired of hearing, "you gotta have this to go to college"... well some of them aren't going to college, but we try to incorporate the workforce...to work at any business you need to be able to be have communication skills, written communication skills, even to fill out an application...I think, they just try to impress upon the importance of, "this is your future."

One teacher told a story of how a low-achieving student had said he wanted to become a truck driver, so the teacher brought in the personnel manual for a local trucking company. The volume of the book and the skills that it contained bore witness to the future utility of education for that student. This is not a you-will-need-this-someday statement made to the class, but an example of the future goal connection for an unmotivated student. The teacher linked current class content to the students' valued future goals, and it made a huge difference in the student's value for school-based skills, and in his subsequent motivation and achievement.

A related tactic to support future goals is to expose students directly to contexts they would like to work in after they graduate. Here the rural students are at a disadvantage to their non-rural counterparts because their communities

often lack a range of nearby industries and businesses that offer a look into these futures.

When they go into . . . a hospital or insurance office . . . then they begin to see . . . that they're going to use math more than they thought. And they're certainly motivated [to see] that you actually do math in brick laying and welding, carpentry . . . that there is real math outside of the four walls of this room...out here in the country [exposing them to these things] is really hard to do"

In remote or isolated rural schools, teachers may need to be creative to implement this strategy. Teachers can use the Internet as a resource or partner with businesses in neighboring areas that have recruiting interests in their students.

Establishing a classroom environment that fosters learning goals, at least on an even par with performance goals, is a formidable challenge facing our school systems. Though people agree with the importance of learning, the performance orientation is deeply entrenched in schools. Ames and Archer's (1988) description of a teacher that stresses performance goals (i.e., high grades, rewards for students who outperform others, other normative comparisons) is strongly reflected in the strategies reported by teachers in this study. Examples include stressing the importance of getting good grades in their attempts to motivate, and encouraging students to keep their grades up for sports eligibility. We are not arguing against the importance of grades or sports eligibility requirements, but rather that successful learning should be featured in the spotlight. Strategies more consistent with these best practices would be celebrating documented efforts in attaining an academic goal, and marking improvement to increased competence relevant to students' current interests and future expectations.

Teachers who watch and listen carefully come to understand their students' motivations and recognize what drives them, as this teacher's observation of students' verbal and nonverbal indicators summarizes:

Students say, "I just want to get what I have to get to go and play basketball", or "to do whatever I want to do after school", that is their expectation. We have very few students who actually want to get an A, and I would say we have almost none who actually are just really interested in learning.

In such cases it is important for teachers to take knowledge out of isolation and link it to what students *do* care about and *are* interested in.

In sum, a learning goal classroom is one where students focus on learning, both in process and product, with the goal of gaining competence as opposed to just getting a grade. Teachers use engaging activities to get students involved and interested in the content. Supporting future goals means

going beyond telling the students that they will one day need this content. It involves helping each student set and adapt the proximal and future goals necessary to realize their desired vocation, whether the student is college bound or not.

### *Establishing Relevance and Connecting to Students' Interests*

The establishment of relevance and linking school-based learning to students' interests is not a new idea, but it is a powerful motivating strategy that can be implemented with groups or individuals. For rural students, the relevance of school subjects to their interests predicted goals, and engagement in class. Rural teachers used relevance and interest linkage strategies and attributed a multitude of positive outcomes to them, from maintaining and extending the efforts of the moderately and exceptionally motivated to catalyzing interest and action in the bright-but-underachieving. Teachers shared many creative ways of implementing the relevance and interest-linking strategies.

One teacher used the following example of how a student expressed the lack of relevance in his perception of science: "I'm never going to use this again. Mom and dad don't know how to do it, [or] help me with it. They don't need it, so why do I need it?" Students need to see the relevance of a lesson if they are going to truly engage and put forth their best efforts. If the students understand the usefulness of the content and see it as relevant, connected to their own lives, then they are more likely to develop interest and see learning as positive. One rural math teacher articulated his strategy for establishing relevance this way:

I try to put things in context ... to explain how it might be valuable in life ... like trigonometry for laying out piping systems...I use those kinds of examples and try to get them to think about it, and I try not to beat them up, not to say, "if you don't start studying, we're going to have a quiz every day." ... I don't want school to be a negative thing.

Relevance does not have to pertain to practical skills or students' professional careers. Relevance can also be established through links to students' personal lives and social interests.

They couldn't understand why it was important to learn the names of certain paintings and sculptures and I used the comment there was a basketball player in there and I said, "One of these days when John is playing professional basketball in New York he's gonna have this girl friend that's gonna want to go to an art museum and he's gonna impress the socks off her because he's going to be able to tell her about that painting."

Attending to students' individual needs and interests involves letting the students have some autonomy, and

consequently, more responsibility toward their own learning choices. This teacher presents a simple way to promote achievement from the underachieving by giving students choice on the topic of a paper: "When I taught English it was a big deal to let 'em pick their own topics for term papers ... I was doing good to get a term paper from some of those kids. So give 'em choices when you can."

Related to relevance is the strategy of connecting class content to the world around them, getting outside of the textbook and classroom and making learning authentic, dynamic, even fun. Teachers are not hired to entertain students; however, a classroom where students are interested in learning is often also one where students have fun. For example, this administrator describes two teachers that bring about this positive attitude for learning.

I'm using science as an example. I have two very highly qualified teachers that are..., motivated ... personable... their great interaction with kids makes it interesting, makes it fun, they do hands on... to go to Hawaii with astronomy and hands on [with] bugs, insects. They do all kinds of hands on in the lab.

A teacher can also adapt the instruction to meet the individual needs and interests of an individual student, as in this example:

I have a student who is exceedingly bright... he drags his feet where reading lengthy material is concerned ... He is also very much involved with the contents of his psychology class. I changed my lesson plan to include a short story loaded with ideas he could relate to his psychology work. He not only read the story willingly, but he also wrote a well-crafted and perceptive paper in response. His is now involved in an epic--no grumbling!

The strategies that are employed by the teachers in this study are not stand-alone efforts. This teacher combines several strategies featuring the students' artistic strength and interest, and then provides an alternative method of presentation using the student's artistic interest coupled with a contract for future work.

We talked about what he wanted to do in life--what he liked doing--what he would do if he felt he had no barriers in his way. Then we talked about those barriers one by one and focused on ways to circumvent them ... I told him I observed him doodling a lot and that his doodlings were very artistic ... I would allow him to do a certain amount of his work via artistic representation if he could explain it in such a manner that I could see he had grasped the key points ... but that if I really felt I needed written work on something he would promise to do it. This approach did help.

The statements above are examples of how the teachers

added personal relevance to instruction, showed students that they truly cared about them and also validated the students' perceptions of self, all of which aid in student motivation. Any teacher will tell you that students often ask, why, when and where they will ever use content. Establishing relevance and attending to students' individual needs and interests answers these questions for students and that helps students see the value for them personally and aids them in making connections, seeing the relevance of what they are learning. Rural students often feel disconnected from relevant opportunities, and those who are not college-bound may need help to reach far enough to link their school-based learning to things they care about and are interested in. Rural teachers often face limited local opportunities and isolation so they have to reach out farther for connections to help their students.

### *Treating Students as Uniquely Valued Individuals*

Relating to students, treating them as uniquely valued individuals, is a powerful way to meet students' needs for interpersonal support and validation. Among rural students, these characteristics predicted positive expectations of success, value for school and perceived ability. For rural teachers, personal fairness and emphasizing students' uniqueness and value made positive difference in their whole classrooms, in how students interacted with and encouraged each other, and in students' self-respect and overall well-being, all of which contribute to their academic motivation.

Teachers have a responsibility to keep their classrooms safe but they also have a responsibility to keep the individual emotionally and socially safe as this teacher points out: "I try to keep a safe environment, especially when you're asking kids to get up and take risks to perform in front of other students." There are countless influences on motivation that are beyond the teachers' control, including students' home environment. However, the environment the teacher brings provides a powerful influence also.

I spend a lot of one-on-one time with the students... I know there's something that probably happened at home, at work... They feel like ... 'Why am I here? It doesn't mean anything' ... they go home to an empty house, clothes haven't been washed, there's no food on the table, mom or dad not there ... they really become depressed and they get that 'doesn't matter' attitude. They just give up... I see in their faces, in their actions, in their eyes ... I try to know them all.

Showing students that you really care and respect them both as individuals and as a group is a powerful strategy. Students often have a strong sense of fairness and balk when a classmate is treated unjustly. A comment by a different teacher sums up this strategy:

My approach is usually the same with all my

students whether they are engaged or disengaged. I try to reach them on a personal level to show interest in each of them as a person not just a student in my class...

This strategy of showing caring for students, relating to them and treating them as uniquely valued individuals is the hallmark of rural education. It has been lauded as decades ago as one of the best reasons to keep small schools small and for families to live rural. It is the key characteristic that at-risk urban systems try to replicate. The closeness and caring, the involvement of teachers in students' lives, and the fluid and frequent social interaction between teachers and students' families all foster the fading of school fences and walls, and bring teachers and students together. Teachers cite this rural social phenomenon as contributing to their knowing students, valuing their unique skills, and understanding their needs. It is perhaps the best feature of rural education. However, recent pressures brought on by government policy and regulation, budget constraints and social crises threaten the closeness that is such a tremendous asset to rural teachers in motivating their students. Teachers continue to strive to know and value each individual student, but policy-makers need to recognize the threats to this unique asset of rural education.

#### *Fostering Student Valuing and Perceived Competence*

The strategies of fostering value for knowledge and skills, and supporting the development of perceived competence are critical to developing and promoting self-sustaining motivation and self-regulating learners. Rural students with higher value and perceived competence reported higher ability perceptions, success expectations, and investment in school. Rural teachers saw value and competence predicting high motivation, engagement and achievement, and promoted them through expressing belief in their students' ability, and by giving students opportunities to see what they can do in school and how the skills they are learning can help them.

Students bring prior biases and beliefs that affect motivation to school with them, but their self-perceptions are not determined in a vacuum. They are a product of their lifetime of interactions with family, peers, teachers, administrators and society at large. Families and cultural subgroups have different values, and these necessarily color the perceptions that students bring to school, about what they value and aspire to do. However, the teacher and school can promote a larger world view of value, particularly value for learning, knowledge and skills, as part of the student's education and socialization. Knowledge and skills, products and processes can have personal value (what it means to one person or group) and social value (possible benefits that accrue to society, perhaps over time, despite having no individual personal connection).

In contrast to future goals, which tie the value of school work and school-based learning to sometimes-distant outcomes, and the relevance strategy, which ties it to interests, valuing and competence strategies tie students' skill and value to what they can do now. One English teacher used writing assignments to bolster the competence perceptions of composition students. She challenged her students to enter a national essay contest, and they received high scores and positive feedback (one even received a monetary award). These contributed both to the students' value for writing as a skill that matters, and to their perceptions of themselves as competent in writing. A basic math teacher was frustrated by his students' mutterings that they couldn't do math and saw no reason to do it anyway. He searched the internet for math games and puzzles, and linked them to the skills he was teaching in class. He said:

I showed the students the games and said, 'If you learn the skills I'm teaching next week, you can do well at this game.' At first they didn't believe me, but after a few did, most of the rest came along. They had to demonstrate the skills, then got to play the math games. It was about seeing the connections between math and something fun, and believing they could do it.

Another teacher linked critical thinking lessons to solving cases in television crime shows, and students invested not only in writing the assignments but analyzing and solving more similar cases on their own, some in groups. One student shared his excitement when he solved a mystery faster than his older brother. This assignment:

I showed them how a skill they had previously considered boring and just for school was way bigger than that . . . how it could be used outside of school, how it could be fun. . . Once they saw value in it, and saw that they could do it well, they took off and ran with it. . . practicing it everywhere, on everybody.

The development of competence is linked to success expectations. This teacher articulates the belief held by many, "...young people tend to rise to your expectations, as long as you convey to them the belief that they can do what you are asking them to do." Another teacher who teaches both middle and high school science classes had this to say about expectations coupled with competence.

My first hour is a bunch of seventh graders...that little bunch of kids, they're interested, they're excited... and I ended up with a whole bunch of stuff on the board, and I go, "Guys this is the same stuff I'm teaching my Biology I class. You guys get this...man you guys can probably pass a Biology I test," and they wanted to take it. And they actually did very well.

Having high expectations alone is not enough; the student must have high expectations coupled with perceived competence to achieve those expectations. Value and competence in school subjects come from seeing connections between those skills and things the student wants to do, with opportunities to test their competence in various ways. Opportunities vary broadly across rural contexts, which may present challenges for teachers to link students with the appropriate and authentic experiences to see the value and to put their skills into action. Fortunately, as these examples illustrate, if opportunities are not available locally, teachers can use remote and digital resources like TV, the internet and national contests to broaden students' opportunities beyond the local

community. Historically opportunities available in the local area constrained instructional options for many rural schools, but with more consistently available and readily accessible resources, more possibilities exist for promoting value and competence perceptions.

*Summary*

The four strategies that emerged from both the teachers' and students' are not meant to be mutually exclusive but rather represent an integrated set of ideas that both teachers and students agree are motivating. Table 1 shows each strategy with example perceptions from both the teachers' and the students' views.

Table 1

*Example perceptions from each of the four areas of best motivating strategies*

Motivating Strategy	Example Perceptions	
	Teachers	Students
Supporting Learning and Future Goals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Focus on learning instead of performance</li> <li>• View grades as an indicator of learning</li> <li>• Develop lessons that engage students in learning</li> <li>• Use classroom and content to help set and attain proximal and distal goals</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• My teacher emphasizes understanding the material we study</li> <li>• My teacher judges my work relative to a standard of quality</li> <li>• My teacher makes me feel involved in the classroom</li> <li>• My teacher conveys his or her confidence in my ability to become what I want to become</li> </ul>
Establishing Relevance and Connecting to Students' Interests	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Begin with student interests and talents on an academic, personal and social level</li> <li>• Relate educational processes and products to students' past and future</li> <li>• Tailor the relevance to individual student's interests</li> <li>• Offer students choices that allow them to connect the classroom with their own talents and interests</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• My teacher relates material to life outside of school</li> <li>• My teacher attempts to relate material to what I already know</li> <li>• My teacher encourages me to ask questions</li> <li>• My teacher provides me with choices and options</li> </ul>
Treating Students as Uniquely Valued Individuals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Establish an environment that is safe from physical and emotional harm</li> <li>• Build an atmosphere where mistakes are included as part of the learning process</li> <li>• Know each student as a person and not just as part of the classroom</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• My teacher treats all students fairly</li> <li>• My teacher turns mistakes into learning opportunities</li> <li>• My teacher tries to understand how I see things before he or she offers a suggestion to me as to how to handle a particular situation</li> <li>• My teacher believes that all students can improve</li> <li>• My teacher listens carefully and considers my suggestions seriously</li> </ul>
Fostering Student Valuing and Perceived Competence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provide students with ample opportunities for success</li> <li>• Connect student accomplishments to task value</li> <li>• Set high and achievable standards of excellence</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• My teacher believes that students should get many chances to learn</li> <li>• In this class, students try to do their best work</li> <li>• My teacher expects me to be able to explain my thinking</li> </ul>

## Conclusion

Motivation is both personally and socially defined, and the responses of young people to efforts to motivate them are in part developmental, in part individual, and also in part influenced by norms and context. Thus, the elements that are shared characteristics of human nature and development invite a high degree of generalization for strategies and interventions, while those defined by individual experience and social context must be more cautiously applied. Similarly, rural contexts and communities are diverse, and any generalization of educational practice across rural education must be made with attention to context and circumstances. However, our confidence in promoting these strategic motivating practices for rural secondary schools is based on the fact that they are strongly supported in the general literature on motivation in schools, along with the prevalence of their use and success across rural schools with a wide range of economic, cultural and social conditions. These are not tools brought in by outsiders and imposed on rural teachers, but tools that emerged from the creative work of rural teachers and are demonstrated as effective in independent data from both teachers and students.

Motivating strategies may be classified in various ways, and one way to sort and understand them is to consider where they focus their appeal to the learner. Some motivating strategies are interpersonal in nature, in that they focus on the relationship between the teacher and learner. Examples are role-modeling, interpersonal support in the learning environment, and relatedness. Other strategies are content-focused, depending on the relationship between the learner and the subject area or skills. Examples of this type of strategy are appeals to relevance, value and goals. A third subset of motivating strategies is environmental in nature, focusing on the nature of the dynamics within the learning context. Examples of environmental strategies include arrangement of the social setting, such as enabling collaboration, and taking students out of the classroom to authentic environments. Among the best practices that emerged from these studies and are discussed here, three were primarily content-focused and one a blend of interpersonal and environment. A caveat here is that there are interpersonal and environmental elements operating as teachers implement the content-focused strategies, as well, and that these three aspects of school motivation interact in complex ways.

This work illuminates the best practices identified by both students and teachers in rural secondary schools. It proposes that motivation is a shared responsibility across the community and society. In school, students, teachers, administrators, parents and others share the immediate task of connecting school to what students need and want to do, both now and in the future. Community resources and proximate access to other relevant resources function as support to teachers and students in making these linkages. Rural students also are too often underinformed of the

connections of school-based learning to the responsibilities and requirements of their future aspirations both in preparation for college work and for success in the workplace. Connecting school to the rest of life is a key part of what makes these best motivating practices work, and also what makes them so critical in the rural context in particular.

Positive motivation that is internalized and fully adopted by students enables them to self-regulate their own learning and development (Deci & Ryan, 2002). Self regulation translates into students making a plan, monitoring their progress, adapting as necessary and finally evaluating their effectiveness (Schunk & Ertmer, 2000). When students self-regulate, much of the pressure of classroom monitoring and task management is offloaded from the teacher. When teachers provide an environment that emphasizes learning, establishes relevance, treats students as uniquely valued, and promotes competence, then students are better equipped to self-regulate, to meet assignment requirements, and to strive toward challenging and rewarding futures.

Sadly, teachers often feel helpless and underskilled about motivating students. A typical example is the teacher who was asked, "If you could do pretty much anything to improve the motivation of kids, what would you do?" The teacher replied, "I don't really know or I'd be doing it." Across dozens of schools over years of research, we have heard hundreds of teachers admit that they need and want more help motivating students. Yet it is not enough to simply tell a teacher to implement these strategies. Teachers need resources and tools, along with the accompanying professional development, to not only learn the strategies but also to learn to use them effectively in the classroom. A common problem in bridging the gap between praxis and theory is that saying what to do is often favored over learning how to do it. For this reason we have provided specific examples to the extent possible in this format, to help teachers see how these best motivating practices might transfer to their own classrooms. For the same reason we have begun developing online professional development to help and support teachers in motivating students, including resources that rural teachers can access where and when they need them.

## Implications for Practice

Student aspirations were defined as "a student's ability to identify and set goals for the future, while being inspired in the present to work toward those goals" (Quaglia & Cobb, 1996, p. 130). The present study provides examples of how teachers have a dramatic influence on both students' perceptions of their own future, as well as inspiring them in the present. These findings reflect what is really happening in rural classrooms. However, as illustrated by the student regression analysis, while the use of these four strategies led to improved student motivation, the lack of such strategies can lead to decreased student motivation. Rural educators

should celebrate that these strategies work, and also strive toward expanding their use. Because motivation is a shared responsibility, school systems also need to adopt strategies that (a) support learning and future goals; (b) establish relevance of the content, connecting it to students' interests; (c) treat students as uniquely valued individuals; and (d) foster student valuing and perceived competence. Communication with parents and community members should reflect these strategies with goal of creating partnerships that promote student motivation.

Student motivation is a complex and ever-changing construct that is influenced by the past, present and future; and teachers in a rural context have a dramatic influence on their students' motivation (Hardré & Sullivan, in press). While understanding students' motivation is not an easy task, it is essential considering the mandates for educational reform that pervade our society. Motivation for education is a never-ending journey that involves many roadblocks and detours. The path of *status quo*, while easier to travel, will never lead to optimal student motivation, learning and achievement. In the words of Robert Frost, "Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—I took the one less traveled by, And that has made all the difference" (Frost, 1920).

This study was funded by grants from the Oklahoma State Regents for Higher Education, in partnership with the GearUp Program, from the Oak Ridge Associated Universities, and from the OU College of Education.

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