MOTIVATION IN SEVENTH GRADE ENGLISH: A REVIEW

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper was to review motivation in seventh grade English classrooms. Specifically, I review motivators that are in place in middle school students’ daily lives and the effects of parents, peers and school. Further studies were examined for possible systemic changes which could create more positive motivation for middle school students. The review concludes with recommendations for practice and possible future studies.
Chapter I. A case in point:

Armed with the knowledge that motivation increases in English when students are asked to write authentically and from their own experiences, I felt this day’s lesson was right on the mark (Krogness, 1996). As a teacher, I felt a writing assignment based on something interesting to them would be motivating for the class. For once, they could write on anything they wished and have a little fun in school. I began with an enthusiastic, “Today you may write on any topic that holds interest for you. It can be a story about something that happened to you or you can write in any way you wish about something that is interesting to you. Your paper may even be about a question you have about life in general. My only requirements are that it is school appropriate and at least one page in length.”

Most of the students began writing immediately with ideas going straight from their heads onto the paper. However, there was one young man who sat with a grim expression on his face. His hand never moved towards his pencil nor did his eyes look upon the blank white piece of paper in front of him. Convinced I could help motivate this non-writer, I sat next to him and asked why he had not begun to write.

He answered me with, “I dunno what to write about.”

Looking into the part of my brain that holds motivating ideas, I countered with, “Do you like to hunt?”

“No.”

“Oh. Is there a special birthday or Christmas that you’d like to write about?”

“No.”

“I know. What about your first bike?”

“I never had no bike.”
“Well, do you remember a time when you felt special or had a funny experience?”

“No.”

It was at this point I realized the box of motivating ideas I was reaching into, was getting empty quickly and had been filled with old and worn ideas that had been passed unto me in education classes. As I looked at this young man, I knew there was a story in him, but I hadn’t found the path that would jump start his creative side. The frown was becoming deeper on his forehead and I could see frustration beginning to show in his eyes. I had to find an incentive soon or I would lose him and his story to the abyss of failure.

This time I tried an unusual idea. I said, “So, what do you think about UFOs?” Suddenly there was life in his eyes, he sat upright in his chair and looked me in the eye.

“I saw one ya know. Me and my friend saw one outside his garage.”

“Tell me about it.”

With this, his animation returned and he excitedly began to tell me his story. I told him his story sounded great and he should write it down. He began to write and in about twenty minutes he announced to the class that he was on his third paragraph. When he was finished, he wanted to read his completed piece to the class and he was actually excited.
A. Introduction

This was my first lesson that everyone can be motivated and motivational techniques are not a one size fits all. I began to explore motivation in adolescents focusing on research reflective of seventh grade English class. We know that education should be as individualized as possible for everyone and that everyone learns differently and at different speeds; however, education usually is taught in traditional methods that do not inspire everyone. The lesson is brought forth with the command to learn it, and then we move on to the next lesson. Before we can understand our students, pointedly seventh grade English students, we must first understand what motivating structures are in place in their lives.

My research into this topic will serve two purposes. First, I want to use the knowledge I gain in my own classroom. I will be better able to reach more students being armed with new methods, which will help me reach as many students in my classroom as possible. School does not need to be a dull, boring place. As teachers we are told to give our students the gift of learning that will last throughout their lives. No one really tells new teachers how to bring this into being, but teachers have this concept in the forefront of their minds as they teach. Perhaps motivation is the key that will transform schools into a place of discovery and fulfillment. Secondly, I want to help my fellow teachers become aware that motivating middle school students is possible and is our responsibility.

In order to motivate seventh grade English students, we must first understand what motivates students and why. Middle school students are at an age when everything is changing both inside of them and outside of them, which leads to a state of some confusion. In a study conducted by Mac Iver & Epstein (1991) which included 2,400 public schools that contained
seventh grade, the researchers were convinced this confusion is coming from the dual personalities of these students. These students still require feelings of caring protection from adults while simultaneously they desire independence. They also want to be known for their individual feats but again simultaneously they want to be part of their particular peer group. They want to fit in and be like everyone else, and be looked upon as a part of the plural but a part of them needs the identification of being a singular someone. They have an incredible amount of energy and without a proper outlet this can lead to trouble. Engaging motivation that makes the students want to participate in school and learning can tap that energy and direct it down productive corridors.

Mac Iver and Epstein (1991) sent questionnaires to the principals of the selected schools and then through multiple regression analyses identified the schools that would show the biggest gap between past history and results of these four sets of practices: “group advisory periods, interdisciplinary teams, remedial instruction activities and school transition programs” (p. 590).

There has been much research on motivating adolescents and what works and what does not. This paper will focus on the theories that have resulted in positive results and combine them in a concise literature review. The literature on this topic points to factors that begin with needed systemic changes and ends with simple classroom techniques that need to be implemented before educators can realize the power of motivating our students. First, we must look at the factors that have a profound effect on motivation in the students’ daily lives. My research will answer the question: What are effective motivational techniques to improve academic achievement for middle school English classrooms?

This question needs to have answers now, or we will continue to lose generations of people that have the potential to learn and have a positive impact on our world. School cannot
become a dreaded memory in the minds of our students and the research demonstrates that middle school plays a big role in the decision of future academic success or failure in people’s lives.
Chapter II. Review of Literature

Phelan, Davidson, and Cao’s (1991), research was a two year-longitudinal study which conducted three in-depth interviews with 54 students from four schools. Their findings concluded that students live in multiple worlds with clear cut boundaries into each world. These worlds consist of their peers, their parents or home life and their school life. Each of the worlds has their own sets of rules and compliances that must be met in order to be successful in each world. In many cultures, students are guided through these troublesome times with well-known rules and principles that govern conduct, but for some reason, American culture allows our children to navigate these uncharted waters for themselves.

For a number of students, the movement between worlds is done with ease and for others it is a time of torment and confusion. There are several factors that come into play and explain the motivation for children at the middle grade level. Socioeconomic status is a powerful force, as is the educational level of the parents, ethnic origins, academic performance and where you live all play a part in the motivation or lack of it in students’ lives. The most positive outcome of peer group motivation is found when the students’ peers, family and school are part of a homogenous group and have the same expectations in life. Phelan et. al, (1991), calls these different life groups, “worlds” in the life of the middle school student.

A. The peer group

According to Ryan (2001), whose study included 331 students from urban schools who had made the transition from sixth grade to seventh grade middle school, the peer groups in school have an amazing amount of influence on each other. Students are affected in their thinking by what their classmates believe. For example, one friend may voice a hatred for school and suddenly, all the people in the group hate school and voice the same opinions. Peer groups
can have a positive effect through the use of teasing or gossiping. Instead of direct confrontation, teasing and gossip can define what is acceptable behavior within the group. Because adolescents spend so much time with each other, the group is the main motivator in the students’ lives. Most groups are composed of young people with the same characteristics and are very homogeneous, so this motivation vehicle can be either negative or positive based on the primary belief system of the participants.

According to Phelan et. al, (1991), their findings revealed that in some cases the peer group held the most power over students. For instance, students were motivated by peers to stay in classes that contained their friends. Another example of peer force is ethnic origin. For example, some Mexican students believe that to be popular you have to cut classes and be crazy. Others either want to do well in school or do poorly so they stay within the norms of their groups. The adolescences in these groups must constantly employ tactics to be accepted and to pass between these worlds.

If we look at a student from the study of Phelan, et. al, (1991), we see vicariously the motivations and the impact on the life of a female student. Peer friends encourage her to skip classes, fail to do assignments and get into trouble with authorities. She takes part in gang activities as a contributor and as a spectator. Her decisions are indicative of where she wants to fit in at the moment. Perhaps she wants to be part of the group, so she will decide to follow the prompting of her peers. At other times she has a strong desire to succeed in school. Now, she will ignore the urgings of the group and follow the rules that exist for good behavior in school (Phelan, et. al., 1991). This young woman is displaying both extrinsic and intrinsic motivation in her life.
B. The family

Even though the family structure of today is not as complete or as dominating as the families in the 1950s, families are still an important and influential part in the life of the individual adolescent. Parents still wield control over their children, if they chose to do so, but in today’s society parents are often tired from work or caught up in the drama of their own lives and sometimes the children are left to themselves.

However, family can sometimes be a greater authority than peers in the adolescents’ lives. Some students are motivated by their families to get all As and they will work toward this goal because this is the expectation proposed by their parents. It seems apparent that all of the decisions made by these students come from outside of themselves. The students do not decide their course of action because of intrinsic motivation, but rather are motivated by sources outside of themselves. At this juncture in their lives, motivation is definitely extrinsic (Phelan et al, 1991).

The academic history of the parents is also a great influence on the motivation to succeed or fail in the lives of middle school students. If the parents were drop outs, then there is more reason for the children to follow the example. In addition, if students are having problems with understanding assignments, they cannot go to the parents for help, and the result is that something that is hard to understand for the student now leads to helplessness and motivation falls (Phelan, et. al. (1991).

C. The school

If school engagement can be achieved, it can become a strong motivator in the lives of the learners. According to Fredericks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, (2004), an important premise of school engagement is to keep the students involved with school or they will be lost. There are
three main areas where students need to be engaged. Students must be engaged behaviorally. For example, they must become part of the school setting by becoming involved at many levels both academically and socially. Without this motivating attachment, dropping out becomes a possible reaction. Another connection to the school is emotional. This motivation is based on the students like or dislike of the teacher, classmates and the school in general. If this becomes a positive motivator, then students feel connected to the school and want to do well. The last and most powerful bond is the cognitive. This motivation, if it is in place correctly, will cause a student to work hard and truly learn the material in class and not be content with the status quo. Being engaged to school is linked to goal theory or the wanting to succeed and understand versus getting good grades or the pride that goes with being intelligent. Students that are engaged in school are motivated to truly understand the material being taught by offering ideas of their own, being able to validate their answers, and having the ability to analyze their own efforts (Fredericks et. al, 2004).

How teachers are perceived by their students is an incredible motivator in adolescences’ lives. For instance, if the teacher is interested in the opinions and ideas of the class, the students’ for the most part will be engaged and motivated to do well. If the classroom is teacher-centered, motivation declines greatly. If a teacher motivates the students by complimenting their achievements and encouraging them to do well, students will respond with staying on task (Phelan et al, 1991). The following quote from a student in the Phelan et. al, study reveals the thought processes of students while in the classroom. “. . . the class I’m getting an F in he to me seems like, he doesn’t really pay attention to anybody in particular in class. It’s just a whole class . . .”. If students feel unimportant to the teacher, there is no motivation to do well. So, as educators, we need to look at meeting the individual needs of the students in our classes.
There are many reasons why the transition to middle school has a negative impact on the motivation of students. There exists some evidence in the study done by Eccles, Wigfield, Midgley, Reuman, Mac Iver & Feldlaufer (1993), that the transition is poorly timed because in addition to going to a different school, students are also experiencing puberty. Their conclusions were based on a large-scale 2 year, four wave longitudinal study of the effects of changes in school and environments and the effect on adolescence and motivation (p. 560). Studies have shown that motivation may fall because general self-esteem diminishes immediately after students experience a transition from an elementary building to a middle school building and again during the fall of the seventh grade. This research also indicates that motivation runs higher at a small school, K-8, compared to a larger facility, middle school grades 6-8.

Perhaps as school systems were evolving and improving, they were in reality regressing. Did the United States have a working system in place, but in order to save money they crippled the system and along with it the motivation that is conducive to learning? If school systems are run like a business, they miss the mark of their inception. Schools are a precursor to the world of business and should not have the same characteristics or rules in place.
Chapter III. Results and Analysis Relative to Problem

A. Schools

In order for meaningful change to occur, it should start with the school structure itself. Schools should encourage and allow teachers to meet as teams and collaborate about the needs of the students they share at the middle school level on at least a weekly basis. In the elementary level teachers get to know their students well because they are with them all day. At the middle school, each student may see a teacher for approximately 45 minutes per day. This is not enough time for teachers to get to know their students and their needs. Along with team meetings, department meetings several times per year will allow teachers to share plans and ideas for school improvement. These findings are the result of a study achieved by Judith Langer (2000). Her research covered 25 schools in four states and in the classrooms of 44 teachers. The information was gathered by the researchers “shadowing” the teachers throughout the day and interviewing the students about their perception of the teacher and methods being used (p. 405).

The concept of interdisciplinary teams is especially important at the middle grades. Sometimes the teachers begin to feel isolated in the middle school and if they are part of a bigger team that discusses shared students, they can more readily identify and respond to students in crisis or those that are exhibiting no signs of motivation for school. Only 36% of schools using these teams give the teachers at least two weekly hours of shared planning time, and less than 60% of these teams have a team leader (Mac Iver & Epstein (1991).

Doing only part of the job is not getting the job done.

Schools should also encourage professional development for their teachers. Even though lack of money can be a hindrance, funds should be set aside for conferences, and in-service
professional development. District English language arts teachers should meet and discuss ideas to help students be successful in English language art classes (Langer, 2000). Besides department meetings, schools should also give common planning time to teachers teaching the same subjects, such as English. If teachers teaching the same subjects can share curriculum ideas, motivation for the student is likely to be one outcome (Mac Iver et. al, 1991).

Another area where motivation dies is when students feel like failures, their motivation plunges to zero. Schools must include remedial instruction for students falling behind. The best method is the extra-subject-period approach. Using this approach allows students to get the extra help they need, but does not rob them of regular class time. The student is giving up elective time which is a small price to pay for help and not being identified as a student receiving remedial help, as is the case in using pull out remedial classes. Schools using this method of remedial teaching in the middle school have reported success and when students are succeeding, along comes motivation (Mac Iver et. al, 1991).

The inception of group advisory periods, where students can meet with a teacher when needed, is vital in the middle grade schools. Because middle school is full of changes and in particular students accustomed to having one teacher all day and now meeting with several teachers daily, students can feel alone with no one to look to for guidance or problem solving. Usually homeroom is thought to satisfy this need but in most school, this period is used for students to finish homework, take attendance, lunch count and listen to the day’s announcements. However, if an advisory group was established, students would have the opportunity to go to one person and talk about their problems or their dreams for the future. It would help the middle school students feel like someone is there for them and they are not one drop of water in the ocean (Mac Iver et. al, 1991).
On a more epic scale, perhaps the entire structure of the school must be changed. A longitudinal data and multilevel modeling experiment in the Philadelphia City School District done by Brynes and Ruby (2007), examined the difference between the middle school building and a K-8 school building. Their assessment was based on 39 middle schools that fit their criteria being compared to 42 old K-8 schools and 14 new K-8 schools. Their studies reveal that the K-8 schools have many advantages for the students. When students leave their elementary school to go to a middle school, their motivation diminishes along with their self-esteem. Middle schools are typically larger and so students have less opportunity for social and academic achievements. At their inception, they were designed to meet the needs of the adolescents using small groups, school within a school, team teaching and other best practices that were intended for the middle school population. However, the K-8 schools with the smaller size can institute “best practices” because students receive better teacher support; they tend to want to do well. Students in a K-8 school have had time to get to know the teachers and other students so they feel they are a part of the school and do well socially as well as academically. Along with this feeling of being involved, K-8 schools usually enjoy more community involvement and parental involvement because the schools are usually centered within the community.

Marie Montessori has been a well known educational icon because of her different approach to education. A study by Rathunde and Csikszentmihalyi (2005), of 290 volunteer students researched the difference between a traditional school environment and the Montessori school environment. The method used by the researchers was the Experience Sampling Method questionnaires filled out by the students. The advantage of the environment in the Montessori method are, assignments are made more relevant to the students’ lives, classrooms are student centered, and there exists an emphasis on collaboration rather than competition for grades.
Rathunde and Csikszentmihalyi believe that these changes in the school structure will result in a definite improvement in student motivation, especially intrinsic motivation.

Another problem with traditional middle schools is that the lessons are broken up into pieces that interfere with the students’ abilities to get the whole picture. The traditional middle school and the traditional middle school student are not a good fit. In a time when they should be experiencing greater autonomy, they are more restricted. In Montessori’s school system the opposite is true. Montessori schools tend to succeed because they are outwardly allowing students more freedoms as well as creating a student centered classroom. It is expected that a change in this direction would result in school time where students are deeply involved and engaged in school activities. To take this train of thought one step farther, perhaps it is time to terminate the report card and allow the children to learn for the sake of learning without stressing and competing with grades (Rathunde and Csikszentmihalyi, 2005). These ideas and theories have been around for a very long time and unfortunately, it seems apparent that they have been crushed by a very strong traditional majority.

B. Teacher

At times motivation from the teacher can be a result of the teacher’s professional development. If the teacher is staying current with ideas and teaching methods, even through professional journals, chances are they will have fresh new ideas and will keep the students motivated. Teachers themselves should become risk takers in their profession and try new approaches or investigate other ways of presenting material to their students as well as keeping the methods that are working. One of the greatest modeling a teacher can give to the students is to allow themselves to be seen as a life long learner. The idea behind professional development is that when teachers believe they are specialists in their content area, they are more eager to
share their knowledge with others. When teachers feel that they know a great deal about their subject matter, it builds a confidence in their teaching ability and an opportunity to shine in their profession (Langer, 2000).

Another area that should be addressed is the reaction of students when they know that teachers care about them and want them to succeed and believe they will. They become more motivated to meet the expectations of the teachers. Teachers can demonstrate that they genuinely care about their students. A caring teacher looks at the students in a way that allow the students to know they are accepted by the teacher. A caring teacher allows the students to be confident risk takers in the class room. Teachers can gently encourage all students to share their ideas and opinions about a topic by coaxing them into a discussion of a topic and making the classroom a safe place where ridicule is not acceptable (Langer, 2000). When sixth grade students were promoted to seventh grade and perceived the seventh grade teacher as less supportive than their sixth grade teachers, their motivation declined. So, it is up to the teacher to create the caring and supportive atmosphere of the class room (Eccles et.al, 1993).

In the middle school grades teachers must display a high amount of teacher efficacy. If teachers believe they can accomplish the task of teaching the material to each student, the students believe it also and motivation in the student rises. Also, teachers must once again be risk takers and instead of waiting to see if middle school students are trustworthy and ready for the autonomy they crave, they must, because of the need, grant them autonomy in order to see growth. Many teachers see this age as needing more discipline and control; this is especially common with seventh grade teachers. Also for some reason, seventh grade teachers struggle with efficacious more than other middle school grade teachers. In truth, it is the time to allow the students more freedoms and exploration time to continue to develop both cognitively and
behaviorally. Students must be allowed to become part of the direction their education is taking. Traditionally middle school classes become more teacher centered and the opposite is required for the motivation of the middle school students (Eccles et. al, 1993).

A very detrimental method teachers use during reading in English is framing their questions so that the students will answer “correctly”, and not how they are personally viewing the text. Teachers are basically teaching students what and how to think as they read. If a student were to dare answer with a response other than the one being sought, possible embarrassment would be the result. When teachers ask the students to think for themselves and come to their own conclusions while reading, they are actually tricking the student because the parameters for the answers have already been created. Frustration occurs when a students see things differently during reading and their thoughts are dismissed as being incorrect. Motivation then declines because why try to respond with your own interpretation when it will only be thrown out anyway. Discussion time would be more meaningful to students if the students were allowed to analyze, disagree and ask questions of the text and not have to be prepared to answer the canned inquiries being fired at them from the teacher (Freebody, Luke and Gilbert, 1991).

Entwistle (1987) sees today’s teaching models pushing the student for success and thereby pleasing the teacher. Results of this method are stress, because of “fear of failure” and emphasis on the wrong effort of trying to please the teacher instead of trying to learn the material. Totally unmotivated students will work their hardness to not complete the requirements and usually lead to a type of “learned helplessness”. Entwistle believes that,”Three general strategies that should be implemented at the beginning of each lesson are the following: 1) Stress value and relevance of school work to everyday life. 2) Show that the teacher expects pupils to enjoy learning and 3. Treat tests as a ways of checking personal progress” (Noel Entwistle, p.
144, 1987). These three strategies will increase intrinsic motivation because as students are able to see that learning how to read will benefit the students in the outside world or learning how to write helps them communicate needs and opinions to the world outside of school, then because school becomes relevant to them.
Chapter IV. Recommendations and Conclusion

Successful English classes are student centered, and writing is taught with writing centered on the activities that are relevant to the student. Instead of an activity that is isolated from their reality and has no meaning to the student, writing should center on the current science project or current math lesson or something that is happening at the school. Keeping writing as a part of the whole is better than making it a boring assignment that has no meaning to the students (Langer, 2000). A quote by an English teacher reveals a mighty principle in teaching. “A good teacher knows that all the teaching you do has to be wrapped up in a whole cloth, so that it is a whole child, the whole day.” (Langer, 2000, p. 414). This is where authentic writing could be developed nicely with letters to the editor, pen pal letters to military personnel or writing stories to be read at the elementary level.

English students should be allowed to decide what activities are assigned in the classroom. Their motivation will increase when they are doing something they want to do. When students have an input into their activities, the activities then become important and intrinsic motivation mounts. Also, the use of small groups during discussions work well in creating the feeling of ownership for all students and with ownership comes autonomy and motivation. Students that are afraid to express their ideas to the big group, will more readily share within a smaller one. They will then begin to feel successful and their level of motivation will become intrinsic and increase (Rathunde and Csikszentmihalyi, 2005).

When the teachers demonstrate that they like what they are teaching, the mood will rub off on the students and lastly, if the pressure is taken out of test taking and reduced to just a measure to see what they have learned, then learning can become fun and easier and motivation is on the rise (Entwistle, 1987).
Anders and Pritchard (1993) believe that instead of telling children to be quiet during class time, they should be encouraged to speak, listen, read and write with a purpose in mind. Once again, to motivate students, autonomy with a balance of respect for others is the motivation for young English students. During the discussion of an activity a simple Venn diagram may be used to determine in what areas the teacher and the students are in agreement with the direction of the task. Learning in seventh grade English should fit the students and not force students into places they don’t fit and don’t want to be. Assignments need to revolve around their interests not the interests of the curriculum and traditional lesson plan. Every seventh grade English class is going to have different dynamics, so the lessons should be created for individual classes, with input from the students.

Brock & Raphael (2003), have many good strong ideas for teaching English in the seventh grade. First of all, they also believe that writing has to serve a purpose in the minds of the students and has to have a viable end result. One idea is have the classroom write an entire book together over a school year. This activity leads to ownership and is a mighty influence in motivation. When students use their own life experiences in writing or incidents that they have witnessed in others’ lives, suddenly, writing is interesting and applicable to their lives. A danger area is when students are involved in the direction of a task and their ideas are extracted from them making this their project, the teachers must be careful not to overpower the voice of the children as they direct their students’ writing. The purpose has been lost if the only voice that emerges is that of the teacher.

Brock and Raphael also believe that students must have an audience. If students believe that no one other than the teacher will read their work, motivation will decline, but if there is a
chance that someone outside of the classroom will listen to their thoughts, motivation will increase because once again there is purpose to writing.

Teachers should know their students well enough that when an idea or method becomes boring and students begin to turn off, they together seek to change the delivery of the task. Teachers should also be willing to use examples from their own learning from workshops or graduate classes. Introducing a new topic, such as poetry, with examples from the teacher’s learning period and not an unknown author will motivate students more because they can identify with the teacher in the learning process (Langer, 2000).

Bates (1970) reports that much research has gone into using extrinsic rewards to help students complete tasks. The majority of the research points to not using extrinsic rewards because it is believed to diminish intrinsic motivation and make the task less attractive to the students. If the strategy being used in a seventh grade class is extrinsic motivation, research shows the task will probably be performed in a mediocre method and done in hast to capture the prize. As a general rule, motivation in a seventh grade English class should not be reinforced with rewards; however, if motivation is low for a task then some kind of reward as a motivator may be needed (Bates, 1979).

The research of Thomas and Oldfather, (1996) used shared journals responses in reading. The students used a set of questions that they respond to through their reading and the teachers use the same set of questions and respond with their own ideas and feedback to the students. The questions are the result of brainstorming with each class. If teachers merely interject tired old questions about the theme, the plot, nothing has changed. When students share their interpretations and experiences with literature, the students begin to feel they share the control of
their learning and it allows teachers to discover the needs of struggling students that may
otherwise be missed.

According to Thomas and Oldfather students like the idea of communicating one on one
with the teacher. A viable method of obtaining this result is in shared inquiry. This is another
tool to enhance motivation in seventh grade English. The plan is implemented when teacher and
student share a journal and responds to questions about literature. Again a danger in this method
is that the teacher must remember to begin where the students’ understanding begin and not with
how the teacher interprets how to get the message across to the students. On pages 2-3 the belief
of the researchers shows their motivation, “Rather than viewing motivation as something that
teachers do to students, we believe that motivation flows out of children’s natural curiosities and
social inclinations as well as their yearnings for self-determination.” How often are lesson plans
created that stir up the curiosity of the students? Are the educators looking at the material to be
shared through the eyes of the students or through the eyes of an educator? Tradition has created
a rigid system of this is what you will learn and this is how you will learn it mentality (Thomas
et. al, 1996).

Research in the area of reading skills by Sharp and Ashby (2002) revealed that even
though the intrinsic motivation for reading declined in seventh grade still 50% of the 865 seventh
graders in their study still love to read. The problem that manifested is the students can read
words but not truly comprehend. The Gates/MacGinite Assessment was used to discover the
comprehension level of the students. The outcome showed 33% were at third grade level or
below, 50% scored at mid fifth grade level, 17% were above grade level (p. 10). Lack of
comprehension has a negative effect on motivation for seventh grade English.
Implementation of methods that need to be introduced to increase motivation according to Sharp and Ashby are once again begin with student control by choosing what they read. Students’ motivation is in jeopardy with the existence of inability to comprehend. Unfortunately at the seventh grade level, teachers cannot work one on one, but there are a variety of class time strategies that can help students get involved with what they are reading. To insure that students are not just reading words but have the ability to truly understand the text, simple techniques such as K-W-L can be implemented. This technique requires the student to think about what they know, what they want to know and what they have learned as they read. Another device is known as QAR. Students are asked to questions as they read, find the answers to their questions and show the relationship of their inquiry and answers. Another simple but valuable practice is the graphic organizer. An organizer helps students to understand and separate information into seeable, clear chunks of retainable information. If students can interact with text and understand the meaning behind the text, motivation will increase as they have their “Aha” moments. Yet another simple but effective tools is the use of drama. In order for the students to perform well, they must understand the material plus the motivation behind it. This compels students to go past simple decoding into visualization, capturing the feeling of the piece, and analyzing (Sharp & Ashby, 2002).

In English class, teachers need to start asking questions that display understanding by the students and not “test” the material. When teachers spring board off of a comment made by a student, this leads to open discussion in the class room with more meaning for the students. Leading children how to explore is more beneficial to their education and motivation, than making them repeat the answers given to them by the teacher during discussion times. These
ideas come from an observational study done by Applebee, Langner, Nystrand and Gamoran (2003) in 64 middle and high school English classrooms.

One of the most powerful motivators in the classroom is to make the students become self-motivators. Entwistle (p. 145) has these ideas for the class motivation. Encourage children to ask about the work with questions such as, “What am I supposed to do?, What do I really know?, In what ways can I do this?, What should I do first; then what? And What if I run into trouble?” Along with these questions, students can use group discussions, talk about the things they don’t understand, take turns being the teacher of the group, and most importantly think positively about their abilities to complete this task (Entwistle, 1987).

According to Terri Oginski (2003) the main motivator in students must be intrinsic. She believes that in order for a child to be motivated intrinsically they need to know the content standards and together outline and reach goals for their learning. A questionnaire given to the students during Oginski’s research, indicated that they want to know the content standard of the material being taught. Once again this would line up with taking ownership of their education and the feeling of ownership creating intrinsic motivation for learning. It is conceivable that students need to know where they are being lead and why. If seventh grade English students know why they are reading or writing and help set the goals according to Oginski’s research, their motivation will increase and especially their intrinsic motivation.

Creager (1976) believes that motivation is sometimes triggered through success. As the teacher begins to know the students with their weaknesses and strength, the teacher can arrange for each student to witness a success in their activities. Success can be used as a catalyst to cause the students to want to succeed and therefore, give forth their best effort because the high that is associated with success can be addictive. Students are rarely given the option of self evaluations.
They do the assignment, hand it in and the teacher evaluates their performance by telling they what they could do better. If students had to evaluate their own work, not only would they better understand the activity, this could lead to doing a better job and circling back to the idea of creating successes in the individuals live. Once again this would encourage motivation at the intrinsic level.

Whatever the task, students must feel successful and sometimes need to be given the benefit of a doubt. At this age they tend to think that success is inherent and effort does nothing to add to the equation. In order to motivate students, sometimes the unbending measurement of success must bend in favor of the student. If students are once successful, motivation may carry them into self-efficacy (Anderman & Maher, 1994).

During middle school, many teachers are afraid of what seventh grade students may indicate as appropriate ideas for writing; therefore, teachers often censor the students. To motivate students in English class we must inspire them and by censoring every idea or fun loving attempt to make class interesting, teachers are doing quite the opposite. Allowing students to brain storm and come up with as many ideas as possible, captures them and creates a pull on their interest and involvement in the lesson. We cannot set up a nest of rules and do this but not that and expect the class to be responsive to the task at hand. We must realize that seventh grade students are waking up to a new way of thinking about the world around them. Some of it is scary and some of it is exciting, but nonetheless, it is an extremely creative time for them (Krogness, 1996).

In order to motivate students in English, we have to move away from making them passive learners into active learners. Teachers must become experts at creating situations that allow students to learn through discovery instead of being spoon fed the knowledge they must
acquire. Simple conversation with the class about an assignment will cause the students to become more interested in the activity. When students feel secure about what they must do, they are more eager to accomplish the tasks before them (Bowser, 1993).
**Other areas of research**

Future research should be centered on the systemic changes that should be done first at a school, then a district and finally at the national level to increase motivation in students. Longitudinal studies within random schools that study the response of students during classtime need to be ongoing. The aim should be when parents ask the question, “How was school today?”

The answer will be, “Great! We had fun and learned.” People complain about the education system not meeting the needs of today’s students, but most teachers continue with tradition and very few strike out to change the old system into the new. If enough research is done, perhaps the confidence to evoke change will actually take form and children will be instructed in schools that are relevant to their reality. Many questions will arise about how to best change tradition and the best answer is one teacher at time and one classroom at a time until the change takes place.

New teachers coming into the profession should be taught about motivation and its importance to learning. Successful new techniques and methods should be researched and made part of the curriculum for new teachers instead of catch phrases that sound good but have no substance. Research could free all teachers from the old safe methods and allow freedom of growth with being truly innovative which would be accepted and rewarded.

More research should be done in the comparison of the middle school to the K-8 school. Perhaps following a group of students from Kindergarten to eighth grade in both settings will open up new evidence. The research that has been done to date seems to indicate that the hopes of things to be done in the middle school are actually being accomplished in the K-8 school. Yet, the new K-8 schools do not show the same amount of success as the old established K-8, so perhaps a study that follows students K-8 in the new school should be more critically evaluated.
Research should be done on the effects of passing along the success formula that has worked for each student the year before, this would allow the next teacher to begin the year with something that works already in place and education can come a bit closer to individualized lesson planning.

Summary and Conclusion

There exists no doubt that motivation is the key to success in the seventh grade English class as well as other classes. There are many powers in motion that have effects on students’ motivation, such as family, peers and school, which tend to be unchangeable; therefore, the change needs to happen in the classroom and with the teacher. When seventh grade students are treated like emerging adults, the autonomy and ownership they so crave will actually stimulate their success in English and other classes. Teachers need to check with the “customer” to ascertain what is working and what is not. The days of following in the exact footsteps of a predecessor are gone and what is not working needs to be replaced by new innovative methods. As the student population evolves, so must the methods of teaching or we will continue to fail a majority of students.

Teachers must be willing to try small discussion groups in English class, agreeing to selection of assignments or input from the students, bending a little and giving success to those that have not achieved much and do not believe they can and authentic assignments with different audiences need to become the norm for writing assignments. Finally, response to literature in English has to be free of expected answers and opened up to the imagination and inward response of the students. Their response to literature has to become individualized and free.
I have been experimenting in my classroom with a few of the techniques I have encountered during this research and I am pleased with the results. I have allowed my students to break into small groups quite often to discuss novels, and to collaborate on writing tasks. Instead of handing in many papers, they have combined their ideas and handed in one group paper. As I walk about the room, the students are on task and seem to be enjoying their endeavors. Students who feel ill-equipped are now contributing because they have a safety net in the form of a small group. I notice more enthusiasm for an activity when they can choose from a few different activities or different ways to accomplish the task. I have been guilty of keeping my class orderly, in case the principal walks in, but now perhaps I fully realize that something beautiful can come from a directed chaos.
References


