MIDDLE GRADES TEACHERS' USE OF MOTIVATIONAL PRACTICES TO SUPPORT Their Visions and Identities as Middle Grades Educators

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This qualitative case study explored 4 middle grades teachers' naïve theories of motivation, and the links between these theories and their thoughts and actions related to motivation. Their naïve theories of motivation stemmed from their overall visions for teaching, and their strong identities as middle grades educators. These naïve theories also informed motivational practices enacted in their classrooms. Data included interviews and observations over an extended time period. Each teacher demonstrated a unique teaching style and drew on different practices and techniques to support student motivation. Each teacher revealed a naïve theory of motivation focused on supporting students' success. Teachers also scaffolded success for students by supporting student belonging through such means as understanding individual students, relating academic tasks to their interests, and structuring class to support self-worth and self-efficacy. Teachers also noted their own sense of belonging in middle grades, a level which resonated with their identities as middle school teachers. They connected their naïve theories of motivation to their overall visions for teaching at this level.

Teachers identify motivation as a top concern (Mansfield & Volet, 2010; Turner, Warzon, & Christensen, 2011), but they may be confused when they attempt to connect their classroom experiences with motivation research. The researchers undertook a comprehensive literature review of teachers' involvement in motivation research. Teachers' participation in research studies on motivation tends to fall into one of three broad categories: (1) teachers offered an evaluation of particular students (e.g., Wigfield, et al., 1997); (2) teachers reacted to the researchers' sometimes specific a priori constructs (e.g., Goddard, Hoy, & Woolfolk Hoy, 2000) or (3) researchers compared student and teacher perceptions of the same phenomena (e.g., Ryan, Gheen, & Midgley, 1998). This literature review yielded no

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study that focused specifically on teachers' *own thoughts* about motivation. Given a teacher's importance in the classroom (Darling-Hammond, 2006), this study explored middle grades teachers' thoughts about motivation.

The present study was influenced by a preliminary study that investigated teacher candidates' understanding of motivation. The researchers conducted a study in which 48 teacher candidates (a) defined motivation; (b) explained what aspects of motivation they would bring into their teaching; (c) identified obstacles to motivation, (d) described evidence of student motivation, and (e) prioritized whether their understanding of motivation related mostly to students' expectations to do well in school, to their reasons for involvement in activities, or to their perceptions of classroom belonging. Across 48 participants, there were 42 unique patterns of response. This wide variety of responses reflected the teacher candidates' willingness to share their emergent beliefs or "naïve theories" (Leiser, 2001) about motivation and its potential influence on their teaching.

These teacher candidates, though, had limited experiences (Fives & Buehl, 2012; Kagan, 1992; Schön, 1983). Whether expert teachers would offer similar results could not be determined. Second, the preliminary study employed only a one-time measure; the teacher candidates were not interviewed or observed in classrooms to see whether their written statements about motivation held steady or changed over time, or whether their statements aligned with their classroom practice. Those limitations led to the present study, in which we explored experienced and successful middle grades teachers' understanding of student motivation through a prolonged case study.

Middle grades teachers were selected for two main reasons. First, many studies have shown that motivation can decline during middle grades (Anderman & Maehr, 1994; Brophy, 2010; Eccles, Lord, & Midgley, 1991; Middleton, 2013; Turner, Christensen, Kackar-Cam, Trucano, & Fulmer, 2014), so it is important to understand how teachers view motivation. Second, a focus on teachers' thoughts about motivation relates to several tenets of middle grades education. At this level, there is an overall focus on developmentally responsive education for young adolescents (National Middle School Association [NMSA], 2010). Connections to motivation are present among some of Nesin and Brazee's (2013) elements of a developmentally responsive middle school: curriculum that is meaningful to students; instruction that responds to the needs, interests, and learning styles of diverse students; a safe, caring, and supportive environment; and structures that support meaningful relationships and learning. Researchers have described stage-environment fit models as providing a developmentally responsive setting for learning (Eccles & Midgley, 1989). A developmentally responsive setting is appropriate for young adolescence, an age characterized by changes in physical, intellectual, social, and other domains (Eccles & Wigfield, 1997; Jackson & Davis, 2000; NMSA, 2010). Given these changes, Pate noted that the student is at the "heart of academically excellent curriculum" for middle grades (2005, p. 16) and advocated that curriculum be informed by student voice, interest, and choice. The guiding document for middle level education, *This We Believe* (NMSA, 2010), calls for teachers who value young adolescents and are prepared to teach them. The Association for Middle Level Education (formerly the National Middle School Association), in its current Middle Level Teacher Preparation Standards (AMLE, 2012), notes that middle level teachers should know about young adolescent motivation and demonstrate their ability to motivate young adolescents. Accordingly, we investigated successful middle school teachers' understanding of motivation, and to what extent teaching at this level was part of each teacher's identity and personal vision for teaching.

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REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The literature on "naïve" theories provides a background to a motivational framework. This background is important for interpreting teachers' emerging views, understanding how such perspectives relate to the actual practices and challenges of daily teaching, and noticing the subtleties of teachers' knowledge of motivation.

Teachers' Naïve Theories and Visions for Teaching

Stipek (2002) assumed every teacher had a motivation theory, whether implicit or explicit. Thus, even if their thinking has not been examined formally, teachers have naïve theories of motivation that inform their teaching (Kagan, 1992; Leiser, 2001; Stipek, 2002). Describing these as *naïve* theories of motivation reflects their self-taught nature, not that these theories are ignorant or simple (Strevens, 2000). The use of *naïve* fits well with the preliminary study's findings because inter- and intraindividual differences underscored a lack of coherence or structure in teacher candidates' beliefs, a key characteristic of naïve theories (Leiser, 2001). This lack of clear structure among teacher candidates prompted the question of what aspects of knowledge might contribute to a teacher's growing understanding of motivation.

It was also important to understand how the teachers identified themselves relative to their roles and responsibilities (Danielewicz, 2001; Gee, 2000); their visions or personal stances on teaching (Duffy, 2005); and the significance they attached to their instructional practices (Fairbanks et al., 2010; Kagan, 1992). The researchers believed the interaction of teachers' understandings and experiences among these areas would provide a comprehensive view into the evolving nature of their naïve theories of motivation (Fairbanks et al., 2010).

Teacher Beliefs

As stated, researchers have not explored in detail what, how, or why teachers think about student motivation. Because teachers' naïve theories are, in part, self-taught, they may or may not align with the literature. Consistent with research in other disciplines (Sloutsky & Spino, 2004), naïve theories may serve as a proxy for teachers' beliefs, acting as a filter through which a teacher processes and synthesizes new information (Fives & Buehl, 2012; Pajares, 1992) and influencing how they see the world (Strevens, 2000). A recent critical review of research at the middle level identified "noticeable gaps" (Yoon, Malu, Schaefer, Reyes, & Brinegar, 2015, p. 11) in research on topics including teacher beliefs and practices, so this study's attention to middle grades teachers' thoughts about motivation is relevant.

Research on teacher beliefs provides two insights for teachers' naïve theories of motivation. Fives and Buehl (2012) set out functions of teacher beliefs: (1) filters for interpretation; (2) frames for understanding problems; and (3) guides or standards for action. Beliefs are thus influenced by a teacher's identity and her overall vision for teaching (Danielewicz, 2001). Also, as teachers gain classroom experience, their beliefs or naïve theories typically grow into a coherent and "highly personalized pedagogy" (Kagan, 1992, p. 74): beliefs become more organized, often losing some of their contradictory nature (Fives & Buehl, 2012; Pajares, 1992; Rokeach, 1968), grow more coherent and stable, and become potentially resistant to change (Kagan, 1992). However, beliefs maintain a plasticity that allows for adaptation through experience and professional interactions (Fives & Buehl, 2012). Beliefs are in constant interaction with teachers' contexts and experiences (Fives & Buehl, 2012; Leiser, 2001; Richardson, 1996). Teacher beliefs are generally associated with congruent teaching styles, thereby adding a unique significance to certain instructional actions (Kagan, 1992). Thus, the researchers

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approached this study with the idea that there is consistency between teacher beliefs and actions, and that studying this interaction may yield more understanding of each teacher's thinking about motivation and overall vision.

Motivational Framework

Current definitions conceptualize motivation as a process, not a product, inferred through actions and behaviors (Schunk, Pintrich, & Meece, 2008; Stipek, 2002; Wigfield & Eccles, 2002). Motivation is understood to be a state, to change, and to be situated in a context (Paris & Turner, 1994). Brophy's (2010) informal general model of motivation with domains of expectancy, value, and belonging is consistent with these assumptions and allowed the researchers to discover nuances in teachers' understandings of motivation.

Expectancy is "an individual's belief concerning the likelihood that a particular reinforcement will occur following a specific behavior" (Schunk et al., 2008, p. 376). Expectancy relates to the question, "Can I do this?" Teachers who favor an expectancy-related way of thinking may structure their classroom environment and interactions in terms of goals and success or may foster students' self-efficacy and self-regulation (Bandura, 1986).

Value relates to the reasons or beliefs in regards to a task or idea (Schunk et al., 2008) and relates to the question, "Do I want to do this?" Value is part of Wigfield and Eccles's (2002) expectancy-value theory of motivation in which value relates to perceptions of relevance, meaning, or voluntary engagement even beyond the classroom. Brophy (1999, 2008, 2010) contended that value is difficult to operationalize and suggested a framework for teachers to scaffold students' appreciation for learning through modeling, coaching, and feedback. A teacher who favors value-related thinking about motivation focuses on reasons to learn particular topics, their applications, and their relevance for students.

A sense of belonging connects to interactions and social bonds (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Goodenow, 1993; Juvonen, 2006) and relates to the question, "Do I belong?" Belonging refers to the need "to be part of the story" (Moje, 2000). Faircloth (2009, 2012) explored ways teachers frame academic tasks to connect with students' identities and support their belonging. A teacher who favors belonging-related thinking may connect tasks to students' identities and interests and also make relationships and caring (Ellerbrock, Kiefer, & Alley, 2014; Jackson & Davis, 2000; Kiefer & Ellerbrock, 2012; Wentzel, 1997) classroom priorities. Belonging also relates to middle level guidelines (NMSA, 2010) that call on middle level education to support students' affective development as well as their academic development.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Three perspectives guided the study. First is Stipek's (2002) statement that any teacher has a motivation theory, whether this theory is implicit or explicit. Second, is the idea that statements about motivation align with actions related to motivation, following the literature on naïve theories and teacher beliefs. In a related manner, a teacher's motivation theory is part of her larger vision for teaching and identity as a teacher. Last, Brophy's (2010) model of motivation as three domains of expectancy, value, and belonging provides a framework for understanding teacher statements and actions related to motivation.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Teachers' naïve theories of motivation were investigated through a focus on teacher actions and statements about motivation over a prolonged time period. The research questions were:

1. What are middle school teachers' naïve theories of motivation?

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2. How are their naïve theories linked to their beliefs and actions?

METHOD

The researchers used purposeful convenience sampling to invite four middle school teachers to participate in a collective case study (Maxwell, 2005; Yin, 2009). These teachers provided a heterogeneous yet representative sample (Maxwell, 2005) of middle school teachers by teaching different grades and content areas at two schools where the first author was a university supervisor. Because they were teachers known for their strong teaching, who seemed to have it all "lined up" (Duffy, 1998), the researchers gained insights into their naïve theories of motivation and visions for teaching. There were three European American women and one African American man; all had graduated from teacher preparation programs.

The teachers taught at one of two public middle schools, both in a midsize Southeastern city, including Grades 6–8 and serving mainly working class and middle class neighborhoods. The names of the schools and teachers used here are pseudonyms. At the time of the study, the first school, Laurel Middle, a Title I school, had an enrollment of 747 students: 49.4% were African American, 22.2% were European American, 16.7% were Hispanic, and other students (11.6%) were of other ethnicities. The second school, Elm Middle, had an overall student population of 874 students: 49.4% were African American, 36.4% were European American, 7.8% were Hispanic, and other students (6.4%) were of other ethnicities.

At Laurel, Mrs. Greene, in her eighth year of teaching, taught eighth-grade language arts and social studies. Mrs. Payne, in her sixth year in the classroom, taught seventh-grade language arts and social studies. At Elm, Mrs. Bates taught seventh-grade science. The study took place during her third year teaching middle school. Mr. Smith taught sixth-grade science; it was his seventh year teaching middle school. Mrs. Greene and Mrs. Payne have taught only middle school, and both teachers at Elm came to middle school after teaching high school (Mrs. Bates) or elementary school (Mr. Smith).

Measures and Procedures

Data sources included formal interviews, observations, postobservation interviews, and informal conversations. Design principles of prolonged engagement, triangulation of data through multiple sources of data, and iterative data collection and analysis guided the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Each teacher was observed and interviewed multiple times over four months with a focus on links between what was stated in interviews and what was observed in the classroom. For example, Mrs. Greene explained in the initial interview that her students improved as readers and writers because "I made them feel like they could do it." She later described how using students' favorite song lyrics as a framework for understanding poetry helped students succeed. This focus on links between each teacher's thoughts and actions relates to motivation being inferred (Schunk et al., 2008). Also, the relationship between thoughts and actions tends to become more congruent and organized as teachers gain expertise (Fives & Buehl, 2012; Kagan, 1992; Schön, 1983). Finally, prolonged engagement gave access to the ways teachers faced unanticipated complexities of classroom life.

Formal Interview. Two formal interviews, initial and final, framed each case. The teachers' own concepts about motivation were prioritized in order to explore their naïve theories of motivation (Maxwell, 2005; Patton, 1990). Interviews were structured to elicit life stories (Chase, 2003) by locating agency with teachers (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993; Reason, 1988) and encouraging them to take ownership for the interview's meaning and path.

Observation. Each teacher was observed 10–12 times with a goal of understanding what teachers say and do in terms of motivation; data collection included how teachers framed

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tasks (Marshall, 1988), interacted with students (Johnston, 2012), and structured time and space (Spradley, 1980). Field notes took the form of running records (Perry, 1998; Perry, VandeKamp, Mercer, & Nordby, 2002). Earlier, through observations of two other teachers, the researchers developed and piloted a protocol, influenced by the Observing Patterns of Adaptive Learning Protocol (OPAL; Patrick et al., 1997).

Postobservation Interview. Two postobservation interviews were scheduled at each teacher's convenience soon after two focus observations. The goal of the postobservation interview was to understand teachers' reflections on the class through the lens of motivation and to check the researchers' interpretations with the teacher's since "beliefs cannot be inferred directly from teacher behavior, because teachers can follow similar practices for very different reasons" (Kagan, 1992, p. 66). Formal interviews and postobservation interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed for analysis; protocols are in Appendixes A and B.

Coding and Analysis

The goal of understanding teacher thinking about student motivation directly influenced the plan of analysis. The purpose of the study was shared with teachers in hopes that they would identify with the researchers' interest in motivation and reveal their naïve theories of motivation by providing context, background, and reflection. Analysis began with the theoretical lenses described above: Stipek's (2002) claim that every teacher has a theory of motivation, the research on naïve theories and vision for teaching, and Brophy's (2010) model of motivation. The initial coding structure included three domains of motivation: expectancy, value, and belonging (Brophy, 2010). Iterative data collection and analysis (cf. Faircloth, 2012) allowed us to see and follow up on emerging themes and issues according to Reason's (2003) advocacy of "full reciprocity" between researchers and participants as a way to honor teachers' agency. Through analysis of the data, the researchers identified additional themes. To ensure reliability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), member-checking on transcriptions of formal interviews was used. With each teacher, the first author member-checked some field notes and a profile written as part of the analysis. The researchers also discussed coding and themes on a regular basis.

FINDINGS

Each teacher revealed a strong identity as a middle grades teacher with specific visions for students' performances: consistent with their identities and visions, teachers used different motivational tools to help them to accomplish their goals and reinforce their identities. Because the goal of the study was to understand teacher thinking about student motivation, each case will be presented separately, with themes across the cases and summary responses to the research questions presented afterwards.

Mrs. Greene

Mrs. Greene, renowned at Laurel for her caring persona, had a strong vision that resulted in a highly realized naïve theory of motivation: she supported student success by forging connections and fostering belonging. Mrs. Greene noted with pride that being a teacher was her life-long dream. She thought it serendipitous that she happened to member-check her profile before a potentially contentious meeting and stated, "I needed to be reminded of who I was," reflecting the importance of discerning what she stands for and being true to that vision (Duffy, 1998). When asked why she taught middle school, Mrs. Greene responded that it was "a personality thing … it's such a transitional time. And I thought if I could teach middle schoolers, maybe I could help them through that transition." She elaborated that motivation was part

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of her overall teaching: "it's a constant consideration … I think trying to find ways to motivate my students is probably *the* number one most important thing I think about every single day."

For Mrs. Greene, belonging was a pathway to student success; she was exceptionally attuned to students' lives and interests and saw her role as teaching more than content alone. In a postobservation interview, she commented on the dynamics of different classes:

> I've tried really hard to create an environment where they feel caring.… So I've tried to make that a "We accept you no matter what" and "We're all different, and we learn in different ways, but that's OK, we love each other."

In the final interview, Mrs. Greene emphasized connections: "I do everything I could possibly do to make a connection with them". She also "tries to expose them to a lot" by identifying students' interests, cultural backgrounds, and cultural points of reference, as in her way of connecting song lyrics to poetry by explaining that "A poem is like a song."

Mrs. Greene endeavored to make content relevant for students. She gave them the message that they were able to do complex academic work and that they belonged among students with academic accolades. Although Mrs. Greene stressed belonging in her classroom, that emphasis rested on a foundation of students' expectancies for their own success and value of academic tasks. She explained in her initial interview how the domains interacted:

> I think that "Can I do this?" And "Do I belong?' And "Do I want to?"—it's almost like a cycle. Can I do this—belonging is connected to that, to me, and I looked at this, and I was thinking, I can only see this as a cycle. If you don't feel like you can do it, then you don't feel like you belong. And if you don't feel like you belong, then you don't want to. If you don't want to, you don't feel like you can do it. So, to me, they're all so interconnected.

She revealed a strong naïve theory through a vision focused on who her students were and how she could support their success by fostering belonging and making content relevant.

Mrs. Payne

The youngest teacher, Mrs. Payne shared more interests and cultural references, particularly gaming, with students than other teachers did. Her vision for teaching related to the importance of providing time and access for students to learn in a caring environment, and her naïve theory centered on expectancy for success. Mrs. Payne noted within-school constraints beyond her personal control (such as schedules or testing demands) as obstacles to motivation in an interview, and explained how she saw time as a valuable asset for supporting motivation: "Letting them know that you care … letting them know that they're worth that time." For her, students' achievement and motivation to read were outcomes of time well spent.

Mrs. Payne focused on students' needs when explaining how she came to middle school:

> Mainly, the motivation to want to teach … I did not have very incredible middle school teachers, so it was actually kind of the *lack* of good teaching in middle school that made me want to be a middle school teacher, seeing that need there.

She identified strongly with middle school and understood that motivation varies:

> Sometimes it takes a while to figure out, you know, what's the best motivation tool. And it's very, very flexible from class to class and throughout the year. And definitely with different groups of kids, you have different motivators. It's something that's always changing.

This struggle was an asset, because she understood the complexities of motivation. When asked about a time she clearly influenced stu-

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dent motivation, Mrs. Payne said "getting a kid hooked on reading is the greatest reward." More generally, she expressed that "locking in to each individual student's interests is a big part of motivation." Mrs. Payne facilitated a relaxed yet productive learning environment. She created class routines to support students' expectancy for success.

Mrs. Payne had done a voter registration drive with students and had learned that many students' parents were recent immigrants, unable to vote. She drew on that knowledge to prepare an alternative topic for a reading seminar provided by the district: "Can immigrants be patriots?" By changing the topic, Mrs. Payne and colleagues responded to their students' identities. Mrs. Payne said she considered motivation to be "built in" to the reading seminar because students enjoyed debating and engaging in simulations. A gamer herself, she thrived on higher order thinking involved in games and was eager to develop more simulations for her students.

In the final interview, Mrs. Payne reiterated her goal to support student motivation by "being personally encouraging to each student. And … part of that is getting to know each student as an individual." Mrs. Payne also stated that some students seemed to show more motivation when teachers coached, advised clubs, or were otherwise involved beyond the classroom. She saw her role as a club advisor similarly: "One reason why I keep doing it [a club] … is because they have a place where they feel like they belong. And I think that's so important, especially in middle school." She also thought students achieved belonging and inclusiveness through the positive school culture at Laurel Middle. Mrs. Payne understood that motivation was not a simple transaction but an outcome of many factors. She focused on students' needs by scaffolding engaging academic tasks, by serving as a club advisor, and through her mirthful classroom demeanor. Her naïve theory of motivation was grounded in supporting students' expectancy for success and their experiencing belonging.

Mr. Smith

Mr. Smith implemented differentiation through his layered science curriculum: students were divided into three groups (layers) with different tasks for each. He maintained a calm demeanor well suited to sixth graders. In his initial interview, he expressed that his participation in the study "gave me an avenue to talk about how I really feel because … you're not really asked about this [motivation] very much."

Mr. Smith's naïve theory of motivation started with his efforts to support student success through self-worth; he enacted his theory through interactions with students and the layered curriculum. Although he began teaching elementary grades, Mr. Smith experienced a good fit with middle grades and commented, "I don't see how I ever did elementary." In an interview, he prioritized student belonging, especially in terms of self-worth, because of the nature of young adolescents:

> That's when they are forming and developing their first impressions of who they are, based upon the surroundings, the people.… And if as a teacher you do nothing else but get a kid excited about being in school, or in learning, to help them to stay in school.… To help them to find a ray of light, then you have really helped that kid.… You begin to see the real them, and they start becoming comfortable with themselves.

He supported students' self-worth through belonging because "if they don't fit in at home or at school, then we [may] lose them." Although motivation research often aligns self-worth with expectancy (e.g., Covington, 1992), this case follows Mr. Smith's logic.

The layered curriculum was the hallmark of his teaching. He wanted students to "feel comfortable" rather than rushed, because science was a one-semester course at Elm Middle; he saw motivation in "making the environment that's going to be suitable for them." He assigned students by readiness (Tomlinson, 1999) to one of three layers: independent,

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guided, or directed. Within each layer, students chose from a range of tasks. Tasks on the independent layer were more open-ended and complex, while tasks on the directed layer were more structured. Mr. Smith tinkered with the layered curriculum each year to make it stronger: "They're going to know which group is doing what.… So what I try to do is tell them that you are working on the work that I think is good for you so that you can be successful." Mr. Smith noted that students could move from one layer to another between units. During layered curriculum time, students were observed to be engaged in purposeful learning. Students clearly understood Mr. Smith's expectations, and their self-regulation allowed him to spend one-on-one time with many students.

When asked in an interview how he supported motivation, Mr. Smith mentioned tasks and the classroom environment: "That is the best way for me to get students engaged and feel good about what they're doing [and] trying to create an atmosphere in the classroom where they feel safe, where they feel accepted." Mr. Smith's solid naïve theory of motivation centered on sixth-grade success through self-worth: "So I think the way you motivate and treat kids is a 'catching' thing: other students see that, and they want to be involved in that." Mr. Smith referenced value in his aim of designing engaging tasks for students. He achieved this goal through the layered curriculum.

Mrs. Bates

Mrs. Bates was strategic, resourceful, and exacting in her teaching. Her naïve theory of motivation involved students' experiencing success by valuing their learning and achieving belonging in an academic environment. Her teaching revealed her clear vision of success and her responsibility to model the preparation, curiosity, and excitement she hoped to cultivate among students. She had a strong identity as a teacher: the classroom was "where I belong" and "I'm meant to be here." She demonstrated strong consistency between actions and statements throughout the study. During the third observation, a small interaction became a critical incident, reflecting the typical classroom operation (Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, & Allen, 1993). Mrs. Bates gave students a preassessment. As she collected papers, one student noted that he had not known much. Mrs. Bates replied, "In a minute, you're going to know more." This quick interaction encapsulates Mrs. Bates's persistent, even insistent, focus on student success.

She fostered success through a range of tasks, hands-on inquiry activities, study skills, prompt and ongoing feedback, and student autonomy. Mrs. Bates often circulated, making notes on a clipboard. She modeled hard work because, as she said, "I try to give my students what I expected as a student." In a postobservation interview, she explained how she presented the science fair to students:

> "What do you like to do? What problem have you come across in doing what you like to do? How can you solve it? And you should think of science as solving problems throughout life." So, I tell them, "You're going to be working on this for several months. Make it something you like. Make it interesting."

One of her goals was for students "to love science like I do." Her palpable enthusiasm and constant learning were models for students. Mrs. Bates's use of first-person plural language (e.g., *we*, *our*, *us*) supported belonging. She spoke excitedly about getting students invested so "then it becomes *our* class, not my class" (cf. Pennebaker, 2011).

Mrs. Bates saw expectancy and belonging interacting closely, one reason why she focused so intently on success: "If you can find out how to show them where they are capable, then they're going to give you more. Because then they're now proud of what they've done." When asked in a postobservation interview how she thought about motivation before, during, and after the lesson, Mrs. Bates replied, "You don't think of it as motivation, you think of it as 'How can I get my students to

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be successful?' But that *is* motivation." In the final interview, she used language related to expectancy, value, and belonging to explain how she tried to promote motivation:

> I think what I'm always trying to do is connect with the kids, make sure it's relevant for them, making sure that I'm building up their esteem, building up their confidence, helping them understand that they can be successful.

She focused on all three because, "I want them to choose their own path." She scaffolded success so that students would achieve belonging in advanced high school science or in college, because they would have high self-efficacy. She added: "Motivation isn't my *word*, but just making them love science. Making them feel like they're ready for where they're going next."

Mrs. Bates's case is compelling because of her clear theme of helping students realize that they can be successful: "And that's what it's about: getting them to understand that they can be successful." Her naïve theory of motivation was grounded in her vision of success for all students and their belonging in an academic environment.

DISCUSSION

Through the study, we aimed to understand how teachers identified themselves relative to their roles and responsibilities (Danielewicz, 2001; Gee, 2000); what their visions or personal stances on teaching were (Duffy, 2005); and what significance they attached to their instructional practices (Fairbanks et al., 2010; Kagan, 1992). The preliminary study revealed no clear patterns of teacher candidates' naïve theories of motivation, so there was a need for a prolonged study. Middle grades teachers were selected as the focus of the present study due to the researchers' interest in this level and the need at this level for teachers who understand young adolescents (Jackson & Davis, 2000; NMSA, 2010) and can facilitate student motivation (AMLE, 2012). Observing and interviewing these middle grades teachers over several weeks provided a comprehensive view of their naïve theories of motivation (Fairbanks et al., 2010); several themes were identified.

Identity and Vision

The naïve theory of motivation grew from each teacher's vision for teaching and identity as a middle grades teacher. Mrs. Greene said her own "crazy" disposition was well matched to middle school, while Mrs. Bates observed that the classroom was where she belonged. Mr. Smith commented that he felt more suited to middle school than elementary, and Mrs. Payne chose middle school because of her conviction that she could be a strong teacher for that level. All teachers experienced a good fit between themselves and middle grades. This identity informed their approach to motivation as middle grades teachers and reflects a tenet of *This We Believe*, that middle level educators value young adolescents (NMSA, 2010).

Belonging as a Pathway to Success

Middle grades education emphasizes affective and academic development (NMSA, 2010; Jackson & Davis, 2000); in line with this philosophy, these teachers understood student belonging as a pathway to expectancy for success. Their visions for teaching reflected the importance they placed on students' experiencing success. Mrs. Bates noted that motivation was not "her word" yet articulated a clear vision of academic belonging as a means of students experiencing success. Likewise, Mrs. Greene often referred to the interpersonal dynamics and relationships in her classroom because she had a strong vision of herself as a nurturing teacher who accepted students' differences. Mrs. Greene declared that expectancy, value, and belonging acted as "a cycle," each shoring up the others. Mrs. Payne said that she was drawn to teaching middle school because she did not have a positive experience as a middle school student. Mr. Smith aimed to

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support students' self-worth. The teachers' focus on belonging as a means to expectancy for success grew from their identities. Such contexts reflected each teacher's vision for teaching (Danielewicz, 2001; Duffy, 2005) and thereby offered a foundation upon which student motivation could flourish. Their visions for teaching informed the ways they brought goals for their students to fruition.

Differentiated Motivational Tools

To enact these visions, each teacher implemented different tools to support student motivation. As stated by Fives and Buehl (2012), teachers' beliefs served as filters and guides for actions, allowing them to interpret the extent to which students' actions were consistent with their goals for them (Fairbanks et al., 2010). Mr. Smith's layered curriculum and focus on self-worth allowed for student belonging as a means to expectancy for success. Similarly, Mrs. Payne designed academic tasks, like reading seminars, that supported motivation; she also advised a club in order to give students a place where they belonged. Mrs. Bates saw herself as a teacher of "future scientists" and had a clear vision of students achieving large goals; to support this vision, she had daily routines to monitor and model knowledge, skills, and dispositions she wanted students to develop. Mrs. Greene made space for student interaction to support academic and affective belonging in her classroom.

Consistency Between Statements and Actions

Each teacher demonstrated consistency between statements and actions related to motivation over time, reflecting Kagan's (1992) idea of a "highly personalized pedagogy." Two teachers, Mrs. Greene and Mrs. Bates, demonstrated clearer consistency, revealing fewer contradictions and inconsistencies in their naïve theories and visions, than Mrs. Payne and Mr. Smith. Consistency within each teacher's beliefs and actions grew from the coherence of each teacher's naïve theory of motivation with noticeable differences among teachers' identities, vision, and use of various motivational tools. Mrs. Greene noted that her "crazy" personality and efforts to connect with students' interests and cultures were central to her approach to motivation. Mrs. Payne emphasized students' having access to teachers through class, tutoring, clubs, and other means. Mr. Smith used the layered curriculum to support students' self-worth. Last, Mrs. Bates adopted several routines and instructional strategies in her science class. Interestingly, none of the teachers named extrinsic rewards like candy or extra-credit points as common motivation tools. Mrs. Payne sometimes offered minimal extra credit to students who came to after-school tutoring; otherwise, none of the teachers utilized extrinsic rewards or punishments (cf. Kohn, 1999). Rather, the emphasis was on students' learning for the sake of learning, and increasing their expectancy for success. The tools that each used grew from their naïve theory of motivation, which grew from a vision for teaching middle grades.

Summary of Findings

Each teacher's unique style and approach to the classroom was rooted in their naïve theory of motivation. The four teachers similarly hoped for students to experience success, but they realized that goal by different means and from individual understandings about expectancy, value, and belonging (cf. Stipek, 2002). As middle school teachers, they emphasized belonging. Mrs. Payne and Mrs. Bates especially focused on students' academic belonging, and all four teachers created challenging, exploratory, integrative, and relevant learning environments (Jackson & Davis, 2000; NMSA, 2010). Teachers understood that belonging is nurtured through relationships as well as academic tasks. In several examples, teachers harnessed (Faircloth, 2009) these tasks to students' interests, abilities, and lives

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beyond school as a way to support their identities and belonging.

The findings align with motivation research in that teachers' overall concern was student expectancy for success. Each teacher's naïve theory of motivation informed a more personalized path toward this goal, and each followed Stipek's (2002) idea that every teacher has a motivation theory. What differentiated the theories from one another was each teacher's vision for teaching, and the motivational tools used to put these theories into practice. The findings also aligned with calls for more research on belonging, particularly its role at the middle level.

These findings, however, do not align with how researchers have positioned teachers. Teachers had "highly personalized" (Kagan, 1992) motivation theories, and each explained factors that influenced that theory, from experiences as students, to their fit in middle grades, to goals they had for students. Teachers often displayed the same motivational tool for quite different reasons, so researchers need to study how their identities and resulting expectations for students influence their choices of different motivational tools. Overlooking the uniqueness of teacher's efforts presents a skewed understanding of what teachers do to promote student motivation. The nuances of each teacher's motivation theory emerged through prolonged observation. Turner and colleagues (2011, 2014) and Fives and Buehl (2012) also conducted prolonged studies of teachers and motivation, but much motivation research relies on one-time, closed measures that may not allow for teachers to elaborate on their motivation theories.

Teachers' articulation of their unique naïve theories of motivation in interviews allowed them to reflect more critically: this affordance underscores the importance of ongoing conversations about motivation, whether in teacher education or as part of teachers' continuing education and professional development. Teacher educators can provide candidates opportunities to "know their own minds" (Duffy, 1998) and to cultivate ideas that go "beyond knowledge" (Fairbanks et al., 2010) through discussion of motivation. Future studies could begin with middle grades teacher candidates and follow them into their early years in classrooms to trace the developmental paths of their naïve theories of motivation, to investigate how teachers' visions adapt, whether their statements and actions grow more consistent over time, and how their ongoing experiences influence their continuing thinking about motivation.

A similar argument could be made for teacher evaluations. While principals and peers designated participating teachers as experts, their actions could not be evaluated based on a single set of behavioral indices. Instead, teachers' visions interacted with their knowledge of students and their contexts to present unique instructional profiles and motivation theories. Once again, fitting teachers' actions into a uniform set of expectations misrepresents what occurs in their classrooms.

Limitations

The present study offers insights on middle grades teachers' theories of motivation, and how those theories inform and are informed by their overall visions for teaching and their identities as middle grades educators. However, limitations still exist. Although this was a prolonged case study, the time frame was still limited to a few months. A study that spanned a school year or longer (cf. Turner et al., 2011; Turner et al., 2014) may add more detailed insights to the findings. Also, this study included data from teachers, as teachers' theories of motivation were the focus of the study. A subsequent study may benefit by including teachers and middle grades students, to investigate not only what the teachers' motivation theories may be, but also how students respond to teachers' motivational tools in the classroom.

Significance

This study is significant because it investigated middle grades teachers' thoughts about

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motivation and their motivational practices. In this way, the study contributes to motivation research through its focus on teachers' perspectives. It also adds to middle grades research by connecting the teachers' thoughts and practices related to motivation to concepts central to middle level education, especially teachers who can impact young adolescent motivation (AMLE, 2012) in developmentally responsive ways (Eccles & Midgley, 1989; Eccles & Wigfield, 1997; Nesin & Brazee, 2013, NMSA, 2010). By focusing on teacher beliefs and practices, the study contributes to a gap in this area of middle grades research, as identified by Yoon and colleagues (2015). The four teachers in this study demonstrated their abilities to affect their students' motivation; their understanding of motivation reflected their overall understanding of their middle grades students and relates to the importance of middle grades teachers who understand and value this age group (NMSA, 2010; Jackson & Davis, 2000). Additionally, each teacher's naïve theory of motivation grew from her or his overall vision for teaching and identity as a middle grades teacher. These teachers were able to affect student motivation positively in a range of ways; they also had strong identities as middle grades educators. As Stipek (2002) emphasized, motivation theories are important because everyone has them. Consciously or unconsciously, teachers draw on their naïve theories of motivation as they teach and make a range of decisions in terms of factors like instructional strategies, classroom environment, and academic tasks. This study reveals how middle school teachers think about the domains of motivation as a cycle, with a particular emphasis on expectancy for success through belonging, in keeping with the emphasis on academic as well as social-emotional learning in middle grades.

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Appendix A: Protocol for Initial and Final Formal Interview

1. Tell me how you became a teacher (*initial interview only*).
2. Tell me about your experience teaching middle school. (*if not addressed in Question 1)*.
3. What is a typical school day like?
4. Tell me how motivation is part of your teaching. As you go through your day, how do you think about motivation, try to promote it, etc.? What sort of ideas, examples, or questions have you had?
5. When is a time that you felt that you have said or done something that clearly motivated students? How did you know?
6. Tell me about a student (or two or three) you have had who has/have been very motivated. How did you know? How much influence did you have?
7. Tell me about a student (or two or three) you have had who has/have been very *un*motivated. How did you know? How much influence did you have? What did you try?
8. Tell me what you think about when you hear the word “unmotivated”.
9. (*initial interview only*) As we discussed, I plan to observe you teaching. What kinds of things related to motivation do you want me to see? Is there anything you would like me to look at during the observation?

Appendix B: Protocol for Postobservation Interview

1. Tell me about the lesson today; walk me through the lesson.
2. How did you decide what to do in the lesson?
3. Did you think about motivation before, during, and after the lesson?
4. You asked me to notice (*topic*). What did you think?
5. I am going to read from my [observation] notes. Tell me what you think.
6. Did anything happen that taught you something about motivation?
7. Is there anything you would like to ask me?

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