

The Power of Positive Motivational and Diverse Instructional Strategies  
on Young Adolescents' Academic and Social Achievement

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### **Abstract**

Most teachers agree that every student is different. They have different prior knowledge backgrounds, personal experiences, learning preferences, socioeconomic factors, and achievement levels among other unique characteristics. This makes it quite difficult for educators who are tasked with teaching every student and motivating them all to succeed. The truth of the matter is that teachers and administrators alike do not know what is going on behind the scenes in each child's life. Some live difficult and discouraging lives while others seem to come from nearly perfect homes. Some attend class ready to learn and eager to participate while others sit in the back of the class with their heads down the entire time. What are the differences between these individuals, and how can teachers reach every student when such a disparity exists? The hypothesis of this research projects suggests that the answer lies in building positive relationships with students. It is not enough to simply attempt to teach them; educators must also develop professional/personal relationships with their students. This qualitative study, based on observations, surveys, interviews, and the analysis of existing research literature, attempts to discover effective teaching strategies to engage students in learning in memorable ways. This project concerns motivational theory, child advocacy, special education, and social and emotional development.

## The Power of Positive Motivational and Diverse Instructional Strategies on Young Adolescents' Academic and Social Achievement

### **Introduction**

In today's world, education plays a pivotal role. It is not merely a part of an individual's childhood, where one goes to school, learns the basics, makes friends, and grows up along the way. It is now the meter stick by which success is measured.

Academic achievement has become a necessity, a tool required for survival. For example, if a person desires a well-paying job, he or she needs a college degree. If one wants a college degree, he or she must have the funds to pay for it. Financial aid, for the most part, is determined by one's success or lack of it in high school. Therefore, a good education, particularly one in which the student foresees some level of success, is the key by which these doors are opened.

In this ever-changing world, it does not take a genius to realize that the path to financial independence and strong job security begins within the school system. Furthermore, a successful society needs individuals who have the mental, emotional, and social skills required to contribute to and improve the world around them in a wide variety of ways. This includes, but is certainly not limited to, doing their part in the work force, raising and mentoring the future generations, creating new technological innovations, and assisting in the evolution of thought and reason as time goes by. With this in mind, it becomes clear that in order to develop a successful society made up of caring, innovative, and intelligent individuals, academic achievement must be emphasized in middle schools and high schools.

The importance of each and every student acquiring the skills, tools, and knowledge required to succeed both in school and in life is relatively unquestioned. In an attempt to ensure that all individuals are given the opportunity to develop these, lawmakers in civilized nations

have worked to make educational success or, at the very least, proficiency, mandatory. By passing policies such as the United States' No Child Left Behind Act (the 2002 update of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act), legislators are doing their best to try to force school districts around the nation to reach every student and to do what it takes in order to ensure that each has the capability to succeed when it comes to academics and the real world. These legislative acts provide long-term goals for school district achievement and outline the benefits for reaching them and the consequences for failing to do so.

While policies such as these put a highly-needed emphasis on education and the need for academic proficiency, they often fail to provide sufficient guidelines detailing how administrators and instructors should communicate, teach, and motivate each and every student to do his or her best. This can be frustrating for educators who are tasked with reaching dozens of individual students every single day.

No two children are the same. Each has different interests, personal experiences, and learning preferences that make him or her unique in his or her own way. Some are naturally motivated and seem to be destined for success while others grow up with learning differences that make their academic journeys a little more difficult. It is not uncommon to have a classroom filled with students who have Individual Education Plans (IEPs) or 504 Plans. In today's world of education, the typical classroom may include English language learners, individuals with learning differences related to the Autism spectrum, students with physical disabilities, and children in gifted and talented programs. These groups can then be further divided by learning preferences.

Each student absorbs content knowledge in his or her own way. Some may be auditory learners and remember everything the instructor says. Some may be visual learners and require seeing each process in action. Some may prefer kinesthetic methods and seek active participation (Gardner, 1991). The list goes on and on. An individual's unique characteristics are not limited to how he or she learns, though.

Each and every student also has his or her own life outside of the school that differs from any other in many ways. The classroom is made up of students who come from a variety of economic classes. There are children from wealthy families sitting right beside some who do not know where their next meals are coming from. Some students come from happy families while others move from home to home as part of the foster program. Sadly, there are even some children in today's classrooms who come from abusive situations. There are those who feel abandoned and alone sitting beside those who lack any fear or insecurity. Some students seem naturally happy and joyous while others struggle with self-esteem issues and depression. At every level of academics, there are individuals who are ready to flexibly navigate any personal or learning challenge, but there are also those who struggle with the pressures of their life at school and home and even contemplate taking their own lives.

Diversity in the classroom goes beyond gender and ethnicity. It is more complex than the disparity of learning preferences from student to student. It goes much deeper. No two individuals are the same. Each has his or her own interests, feelings, and personal lives. Each faces his or her own emotions and struggles that define who he or she really is.

National education mandates, standardized testing methods, and academic achievement plans have good intentions, but they do not take into account that each child is developing as a

student and as an individual at different academic, social, and emotional levels and in unique ways. This makes it more difficult for educators to connect with each one and motivate him or her to work hard, but it also makes it all the more important.

We live in an age in which the educator's job is complex. Gone are the days in which instruction is the sole duty of a teacher. Today's students need more content knowledge and support with social and emotional development. Teachers have to be mentors and counselors in addition to being instructors. It is vital that the education system focuses on developing the whole child.

Ultimately, teachers cannot expect every single student to be proficient in every single subject when many are facing their own personal struggles and dealing with issues that their classroom instructors will never know, let alone understand. It may be controversial to say that teaching content is not the most important part of the education system because academics are so vital when it comes to success in society today. The truth of the matter is that some students are facing obstacles both in their minds and in life that trump their desire to learn how to properly write a five paragraph essay, for example. There are children out there at every grade level who could care less about what their teacher is saying because they are convinced that they are alone in this world and that no one cares about them. How can teachers expect young adolescents to concentrate on improving their reading levels when they are tired and hungry or afraid of what awaits them when they go home?

Connecting with every student may seem like an impossible and unreasonable goal, but for educators, it should be the most important thing they strive to achieve each and every day. There is no way for teachers to know exactly what is going on behind the scenes in each child's life,

but they should make it their mission to show their students that despite everything, they are developing the capabilities to succeed. There is no simple set of procedures, detailing the steps to take, but teachers must show greater concern for the academic, social, and emotional well-being of their students individually if they are to transition successfully from middle school to high school and then to higher education and to citizenship in an ever-changing world.

The hypothesis of this study is that building and promoting positive student-teacher relationships will show students that their teachers care for and believe in them and are there to help them build pathways to academic, social, and emotional success. As educators connect with their pupils, trusting bonds are created. A child who feels comfortable in the classroom and has an instructor who takes an active interest in his or her life will be more open to the learning process. This connection opens doors for the teacher to get to know his or her students and learn about their lives outside of the classroom. It allows the caring adult to really see what the child is going through and identify special needs, develop and implement plans to meet those needs and assess progress incrementally as the academic year unfolds. Creating an appropriate and trusting relationship between educator and child will provide the instructor with an opportunity to connect with the student, assist in his or her development, and motivate him or her to succeed.

Through observations, personal interviews, and surveys, it is the intent of this study to show the power of building and promoting positive and appropriate student- teacher relationships as they relate to students' academic, emotional, and social success.

### **Literature Review**

When it comes to motivating students, the practice of promoting positive student-teacher relationships in middle grades (4-8) classrooms is closely aligned with Maslow's Hierarchy of

Needs. Maslow (as cited in Woolfolk, 2013) believed that students were more likely to succeed once their deficient needs, including safety, belonging, and self-esteem were met. It makes sense that individuals who are comfortable and know that they are valuable members of the classroom community would be more likely to work harder to achieve their goals when it comes to academics and life. If one were to feel ill-at-ease, he or she might be distracted and unmotivated. Educators, today, can assist in the process of making positive connections by showing each and every student that they care about them and believe they have the abilities necessary to succeed.

Dr. Robert Blum (2007) of Johns Hopkins University Bloomberg School of Public Health points out that students are more motivated and tend to work hard to achieve high expectations when they have an instructor who cares for and values them as members of the classroom community. Of course, most students would respond to a caring mentor who believes they can do great things. High expectations motivate individuals to work harder in order to meet or beat them and make their teachers proud. When an educator displays no interest in his or her students, this quells a student's motivation.

In her widely-used textbook, *Educational Psychology*, Anita Woolfolk (2013) explains that a child's intrinsic motivation increases when he or she has a caring adult nearby. When instructors build positive relationships with their students, they respond by working harder because they gain confidence from their teachers' beliefs in their abilities. Hamre and Pianta's research (2006) describes how this response is tied to students feeling emotionally secure, which also connects to Maslow's emphasis on the relationship between security and success.

While the importance of such relationships is widely accepted and relatively unquestioned, most of the current information on the topic comes from educational research

conducted in elementary schools (Gallagher, 2013). It would make sense to think that studies conducted at higher levels of learning would render similar results. That is why this study is so important. It will show that caring teachers who observe and identify specific academic, social, and emotional needs in middle school classrooms can plan and implement interventions that contribute to the success of students in grades 4-8 and beyond. Positive student-teacher relationships are vital when it comes to the academic and social success of students at all grade levels. In order to be truly motivated to do their best and achieve at high levels, all students need to feel safe, comfortable, and cared for.

## **The Study**

### **Preparation**

When formulating the process and goals of this study, I began by developing my research question. I wanted to focus on how one might really connect with students when each is different in a wide variety of ways. After analyzing existing research, I formed my hypothesis. It was my belief that motivating students to succeed began by creating positive student-teacher relationships. In order to support this hypothesis, I needed a large sample of students spanning grades 6-12 and at least three school districts. My plan was to observe the methods of teachers and administrators in several schools, provide surveys for students and staff, and conduct personal interviews in order to determine how to encourage a wide variety of students to participate in class and succeed when it comes to both academics and life outside of the classroom.

## **Setting/Demographics**

For this study, I chose three school districts in the Upper South: one large, one medium, and one small. All three had a diverse population of students and allowed me access to both their middle school and high school classrooms. I chose specific classes with which to work in each school, focusing on four content areas. All in all, my sample size was approximately 250 students. Fifty-eight percent were female. Forty-two percent were male. The ages of the students ranged from 9-19. This large sample offered me the opportunity to work with and study students from a wide variety of backgrounds with different learning preferences, personal interests, socioeconomic factors, and lives outside of school. It also provided me access to several teachers who used a variety of instructional strategies, ranging from direct instruction to student-led learning methods.

## **Methodology**

My goal was to spend several hours every week observing in each classroom. During this process, I took notes as I watched the instructors attempt to motivate their students. I tried to identify what kept the students engaged and interested in addition to what seemed to bore them. This provided me the opportunity to see how successful teachers plan and teach and to identify what to do and what not to do when it comes to keeping the attention of each and every student. Over time, I provided the students with anonymous surveys in which they were asked to identify and describe their opinions on school and the learning process, their learning preferences, personal interests, favorite classes, least favorite classes, and their relationships with their teachers. These were not simple fill-in-the-blank questions. Students were also required to explain themselves. Since each survey was anonymous, no one felt the need to hold back. The

answers were brutally honest and contributed greatly to my research while providing accurate insights into how today's pupils think and feel.

Toward the end of semester, I started conducting personal interviews with students and staff. Their answers were documented and secured to ensure anonymity. Teachers were asked to talk about their teaching preferences and what they believed were the best techniques to use to motivate students. They also discussed their personal struggles when it came to trying to help each and every child and motivate them to succeed in the academic world and life. Students were asked to talk about what they liked and disliked about school, their excitement and fears concerning the years ahead, and what motivated them to do their best. These one-on-one conversations served as effective tools for learning about young adolescents' and high school students' preferences and priorities. Both the faculty members and students were happy to share their stories. For me, it was an enlightening experience to connect with each individual and try to understand the reasons behind their struggles and success. In the end, all observation notes, surveys and interview data sheets were collected and analyzed for patterns and connections.

### **Observations**

Over the course of this research project, I attempted to become a part of the classroom "family" while observing. I interacted with students, assisted them with the learning process, and tried to motivate them to succeed while taking notes on their progress. Each experience was unique and added some additional insight to my research on motivational theory. This process allowed me to get to know the students and make connections. As I began interacting and working with each one, I learned so much about their interests, their opinions on school, and their lives beyond the classroom. I heard stories of triumph as well as defeat. I witnessed great

joy in these schools as well as sorrow. I saw teaching and motivational methods that worked in addition to those that should not have been utilized.

I watched as many teachers worked to build the relationships with their students. They made sure to speak to each and every child and show them that they were interested in their lives. It was the little things that mattered most in this system. For example, they would greet the class at the door and welcome them into the room. This would set the tone for the entire class period. These classrooms were based on community and mutual respect. Everyone cared for each other and respected one another. The students knew that they could trust their teacher and that they were members of the community as a whole. These instructors made an active effort to talk to each individual about their lives both in and outside of school and worked hard to show each one that they were capable of great things if they put their minds to them.

Unfortunately, I also observed some instructors who seemed to ignore the students. They were there solely to teach content and go home. They had no desire to learn about the lives of their students or build any sort of connection whatsoever. Their pupils seemed to hate these classes. There was no relationship between student and instructor. They viewed their teacher as someone who was there only to force them to do school work. It was not a happy atmosphere.

Over time, I took notes as some instructors worked hard to include every student in their lessons while making them exciting, engaging, and fun. The students always seemed to enjoy these classes. They knew that their teacher was working hard to involve them and encourage them to have fun while learning. These instructors usually avoided direct instruction for the most part. They exhibited a passion for their content, and the students knew that and appreciated it.

They incorporated technology, art, music, and modern culture into the lessons and assignments to build connections with the students and keep them engaged and interested throughout.

Of course, there were some teachers who did not care whether the students were paying attention. Some would only write page numbers on the board and tell their students to get to work. This would not motivate them at all. Often, they did not even know how to work the problems. They would quickly get distracted and remain off-task for the rest of the class period. I quickly discovered that these were the classes that the students dreaded and hated the most.

When it came to classroom management, I realized that the most positive instructors had fewer disciplinary issues than those with strict rules and negative attitudes. Those who showed the students that they truly cared about them and held high expectations usually had the best-behaved classes. They modeled positive attitudes but enforced the consequences when rules were broken. This promoted a bond of respect between teacher and students. Positive reinforcement was a mainstay in these instructor's classroom management plans too. They had a much easier time than those who were constantly yelling, those who failed to enforce the rules, and those who seemed to simply not care what their students did or did not do. One educator of 26 years stated, "While it is important to be firm when it comes to discipline, it is more important that the teacher show each and every one of his or her students that they truly care for them and only wants what is best for them" (M.C. Hill, personal communication, March 1, 2016). The stricter a teacher was, the less comfortable his or her students felt. Classroom management and the use of positivity was a vital part of the overall mood of each and every learning environment in which I observed.

When it came to the students' personalities, emotions, and attitudes, each teacher's response seemed to differ greatly from grade to grade and school to school. There were some instructors who would berate students who seemed unhappy or distracted. They showed no interest in finding out what was wrong or seeing if the student was feeling all right. Others were exactly the opposite and would take an active interest in those who seemed discouraged or distracted. This certainly earned the best response from the students. It also allowed the instructor to do a little investigation and encourage the students, making them feel better and showing that their teacher truly cared for them.

A negative response from a teacher would only further discourage the student. Sometimes, it even made matters worse. When the child was confronted or berated, he or she would either become embarrassed or angry. This was a useless and inappropriate maneuver that rendered no positive outcomes, built no trust-based relationship, and failed to motivate the student to succeed.

My observations also included specific incidents that made a major impact on my study. A large portion of students within my sample had some sort of learning difference. While the vast majority of instructors supported these students and encouraged them to succeed, this was not always the case. Some instructors would yell at these students, embarrass them, and make them feel bad. This was appalling and rendered no positive result for the students. The teachers who went out of their way to assist and encourage each and every student, despite their differences, almost always earned positive results.

## Individual Cases

As I observed and worked with students one-on-one, I saw first-hand how important positivity and the development of student-teacher relationships are when it comes to student achievement on the academic, emotional, and social levels. Each case greatly impacted my research and teaching philosophy, but a few individual situations stood out above them all.

**Ian.** While observing in a 6<sup>th</sup> grade social studies classroom, I met a young man named Ian. A quiet student, Ian sat at the back of the class where he spent his days working on his assignments or reading a book. Nothing seemed drastically out of the ordinary until my third day of observations. During this particular period, the students were tasked with taking notes from the board. Everything was going smoothly. Then, Ian dropped his pencil. He immediately began to cry and scream uncontrollably. His instructor quickly ushered him out of the classroom and down to the principal's office. It turned out that Ian has several emotional disorders linked to an abusive home life and the fact that he constantly moves from home to home as part of the foster system. This young man experienced no stability in his life. He had no true family and no friends at school. He needed a mentor, someone to show that he was cared for and valued. He moved from school to school so often that there was no consistency. This heartbreaking story shows just how important it is to make sure that every single student feels cared for and valued.

It does not matter how long a student is in a specific classroom. It does not matter what personal issues he or she has. It is the job of the instructor and the school staff to use the time that they have with each student and show them that they matter and are capable of overcoming anything in order to do great things in life. Teachers have to encourage their students, help them make friends, and show them that they are safe and cared for at all times.

**Rachel.** Rachel was a high school sophomore in an Algebra II course. When I first began observing, her instructor informed me that Rachel struggled to turn in her work on time if at all. She also had what her teacher considered to be an odd habit. While working, she would audibly talk to herself under her breath. On my second day in this classroom, I observed this and noted that while it was indeed audible, it was not distracting and did not seem to bother or affect anyone besides the instructor. For one reason or another, the teacher became very angry with Rachel when she did this and berated her in front of the entire class. The student would then be embarrassed and refuse to continue working. The whole situation unnerved me, and I was initially unsure what to think about it.

One day, I was given the opportunity to teach Rachel's class. The assignment concerned complex equations, and each student was given a calculator to help him or her complete each problem. As Rachel began to work, I noticed that she was once again talking under her breath. Since it was not bothering me or any of the other students, I let her continue. After a few minutes of working, she called me over to her desk to check her progress. To my surprise, she had solved every problem correctly. I praised her effort and gave her the second set of problems. It was not too long until she had completed all ten correctly once again. As I gave her the third and final set, I made a conscious decision to observe her process as she worked. It was at this time that I noticed something a little odd. She never opened her calculator. It turns out that Rachel's habit of speaking under her breath was actually the method she used to solve problems in her head. This high competency with mental math is an extraordinary gift.

Throughout the semester, Rachel had been criticized for her mathematical process. Fortunately, I was able to show her instructor how this "habit" was being used to the student's

advantage. From that point forward, she was allowed to work using her own methods, and her grades began to improve as she completed more and more assignments as time went by.

Rachel's case shows the importance of paying close attention to a student and never writing her off. If a teacher thinks something is wrong, then he or she needs to speak with the student in private and discuss the issue at hand. There is no reason to become angry with a student and embarrass him or her in front of the class because the individual does things differently from the way the educator prefers. It is vital that teachers encourage each and every student to succeed and stand by them at all times. It is never right to isolate a pupil or discourage him or her from working hard and being who he or she truly is.

**Charlie.** While observing a 5<sup>th</sup> grade language arts classroom, I met Charlie, a 10 year old student with a few learning differences related to Autism. Because I was new to the classroom, Charlie initially did not want anything to do with me. He would not talk to me or let me help him with any of his assignments. I was unsure how to get through to him.

One day, I was discussing a movie with another student when young Charlie walked over to me and asked, "Mr. Hale, do you like movies?" I told him I did, and from that point forward, the entire dynamic of our relationship changed. It turns out that this young man loved watching movies and television shows. He also happened to be a trivia buff.

Beginning the day after our first conversation, Charlie started quizzing me on my knowledge of the entertainment industry daily. He would ask me questions about his favorite movies and shows, expecting me to answer each one correctly. Honestly, I would guess, but I never got one correct. That did not matter, though. Charlie now had a reason to speak to me. The game continued every day, and incrementally the student-teacher relationship improved. He was

no longer afraid to speak to me or let me assist him with his assignments. One small, personal interaction opened the door between teacher and student.

This case shows the importance of never giving up on a student. Sometimes, the smallest circumstances will provide a pathway to developing a positive relationship between instructor and pupil. Educators must work hard to learn about their students' personal interests and then use them to make connections and build bonds. This allows the students to relate to their instructors and see that they can trust them going forward.

My observations clearly showed that the use of positivity and creativity when it comes to instruction, classroom management, and student development are the best ways to motivate each and every student to do their best and succeed. It makes sense that an individual who feels comfortable and cared for would respond better than one who feels out of place or dislikes his or her instructor. Negativity is never the answer. In order to teach content in an effective manner, teachers have to show their students that they care for them, want them to learn, and believe that they will be successful. They must practice positive and practical classroom management techniques and enforce rules without becoming angry. There is never a reason to make a student upset or embarrassed. The teacher is the adult in the classroom and must act like one while working hard to create an enjoyable learning experience for each and every child.

## **Surveys**

Of all my data-collection techniques, the surveys brought the most surprising results. My first question required the students to discuss their opinion on school in general. Sadly, approximately 68% of survey-takers said that they hated it. Their reasoning ranged from "It's boring" to "The teachers are mean." When asked which class they disliked the most, 46%

identified a math course as their least favorite. Almost 30% chose language arts. Nearly 50% of the students explained that their choice was their most difficult course, and they struggled to understand the material. The other half blamed the instructors. Favorite classes among the sample size ranged from science to physical education. When asked to explain, nearly 90% of the students identified these courses as fun and interesting.

The last few questions concerned each individual's learning preferences and personal interests. Surprisingly, almost 44% of those surveyed identified as kinesthetic learners. Thirty-two percent selected visual and approximately 24% chose auditory. This coincided well with their personal interests. Around 82% of students listed a physical activity as one of their personal hobbies. The vast majority of my sample enjoyed activities in which they were actively involved and moving. These results initially surprised me, but they remained consistent from school to school.

### **Personal Interviews**

Of all of my methods, the personal interviews were my favorite experience. At this point the students knew me and trusted me, so they were comfortable about sharing their own personal experiences. Some of their stories were humorous. Some of them were heart-breaking. I began each interview by inquiring about their future plans. Specifically, I wanted to know whether they were excited about their next level of education or if they were dreading it. To my surprise, almost  $\frac{3}{4}$  of my sample size said they were worried about the future. The vast majority feared that they would not fit in at the next grade level. They wondered if the teachers would like them and if they could succeed at a higher level of academics.

My next step was to inquire about their past learning experiences. I asked them who they considered the best teachers to be and why. Each answer was practically the same. Their favorite instructors were the ones with whom they could connect. The educators who went out of their way to show their students that they cared for them, believed in them, and were there for them garnered the most positive responses.

When asked what had motivated them throughout their lives, most students stated faith, family, friends, or all three. They needed someone who cared for them and always supported them. Some identified teachers and mentors who had encouraged them to work hard throughout the years.

My last set of questions concerned their greatest successes and struggles. Nearly 70% identified an athletic achievement as their proudest moment. Only around 11% chose an academic accomplishment. When it came to the struggles, many of their answers were heart-breaking. Several of the students had come from abusive homes, and many resided as a part of the foster system. I heard stories of lost loved ones, sad personal experiences, and even despair. Each story differed greatly from the other, but there was always one constant. My follow-up question was, "How did you make it through?" Each and every student identified at least one caring adult who cared enough to help them.

These interviews changed my entire teaching philosophy. Every student, whether they were 9 years old or 19, sought one thing. They needed people in their lives who loved them and cared for them. When it came to education, they learned best when their instructors connected with them and worked to make an impact in their lives. Many of these students came from difficult home situations. They wanted and needed people who were there for them and whom

they could trust. Teachers cannot expect every child to do well in school on their own when many of them have unbelievable struggles in their personal lives. There are children out there who doubt their importance and who think that they are alone in the world. Teachers have the power to change that. Content is important, but showing each student that he or she matters and belongs is so much more vital.

## **Discussion**

### **Analysis**

Working with the students and teachers at these three school districts was an incredible opportunity, and the experiences I had made a profound impact on my teaching philosophy and even my life philosophy. I learned so much in the classrooms. I saw what worked and what techniques should never be used. Motivating students to succeed is vital, and it all begins by building positive student-teacher relationships.

During my observations, surveys, and personal interviews, I saw just how important it is for students to know that their teachers are there for them. It saddens me that the majority of my sample size said that they hated school. This is unacceptable. School should be fun and engaging. It is where children grow up. It is one of the primary sites of development for individuals on academic, social, and emotional levels. The fact that students are not enjoying their experience says that something is truly wrong. Their primary complaints were that class was boring, and the teachers were mean. This speaks volumes. If teachers want students to enjoy the learning process, they must provide engaging curricula in which each individual is included, interested, and involved. These characteristics should correlate with specific and individual learning preferences and personal interests. Students, today, enjoy being active and doing exciting things.

Educators must integrate hands-on learning experiences across the curriculum if they seriously expect their students to pay attention and learn the material required.

Educators must be positive and develop outgoing personalities. They must display openness and show their pupils that they care about them and believe that they all have the ability to do great things. There is no room for off-putting attitudes or any sort of negativity.

Students, today, are going through so much as they grow up. There is peer pressure and the desire to be “cool”. Sadly, many have self-esteem and self-worth issues, which is unacceptable. No child, despite his or her age, should feel bad or even hate him or herself. I observed many sad situations in which this was a prevalent factor. I even observed in a school where a young, 5<sup>th</sup> grade girl attempted to commit suicide. This should not be happening. No student, especially, a 10 year old, should ever even consider such a thing. If children are even thinking about committing suicide, then teachers and other school stakeholders, including parents have failed them. This is one reason, probably the most important reason, why it is so vital that educators ensure that all students know that their teachers and administrators care about them and are interested in their lives. No child, no matter the age, should feel alone or unloved.

The fact of the matter is that teachers often do not always know what is going on in their students' homes. There are students in classrooms whose parents mistreat them and even abuse them. It is up to teachers to show these children that they are still loved and cared for and that they have someone there who wants what is best for them and in whom they can confide. It does not matter who the students are, where they come from, how they are dressed, or their ability to learn. If any student feels out of place, unloved, or worthless in a classroom, then the teacher is

not doing his or her job. Teachers cannot expect each individual to be successful academically when many are struggling in several areas of their lives.

Theodore Roosevelt once said, “People don’t care how much you know, until they know how much you care” (as cited in Burns, 2014). This can be applied easily to the educational system. One’s content knowledge is irrelevant unless the students know that their teacher cares for them and believes in them. It is only when teachers build connections between themselves and their students and show each individual that he or she matters and has the capability to overcome anything and do great things that they can truly expect each child to learn. It all goes back to caring.

### **Tips for Success**

During my research process, I developed a list of effective instructional and motivational techniques and characteristics utilized and displayed in the most effective learning environments. Encouraging students to succeed, building positive relationships, and showing each student that he or she is truly cared for is vital when it comes to education and the real world. With the right attitude and mindset, every instructor can truly be expected to reach every single student and guide that individual on a positive course for success.

**Positive Personality Traits.** Educators must display positive and outgoing attitudes towards their students and other staff members. If they want their students to trust and connect with them, negativity must be avoided. There must not be any walls separating teachers from their pupils. They must exhibit openness. No students should be afraid to approach an educator for help on their assignments or even assistance with a problem at home. Teachers should exhibit a friendly spirit and show that they are trustworthy and want only what is best for every single

child. If educators create comfortable environments in which students can connect with them, then they can then set high expectations for their pupils and realistically serve as teachers, counselors, and mentors, who are prepared to teach the whole child.

**Engaging Instructional Strategies.** If educators truly expect their students to stay on task and pay attention for entire class periods each and every day, they need to plan lessons that are engaging, interesting, and fun. This begins with creativity. All teachers should exhibit a passion for their content and work hard in an attempt to transfer this enthusiasm to their students. In today's world, there are numerous resources available to teachers to enliven instruction. There is no excuse for failing to engage each and every student. Teachers have to make learning enjoyable, and there are so many ways to do this. For example, one might incorporate technology into the learning environment, using the numerous devices and applications to make education interactive and relevant to the real world.

I have had the privilege to see so many creative ways to improve the learning process in this way. Some teachers use basketball to teach physics, gummy bears and catapults to teach statistics, games of chance for social studies, and simulated murder mysteries to teach science. The list goes on and on. It is no longer enough to have students work from a textbook. One has to make learning come alive. That is the secret for keeping each individual engaged, thinking, and having fun. Below are some of the most effective instructional strategies I observed during my research.

***Jigsaw method.*** The jigsaw method was definitely one of the most prevalent methods used during my observations. During this process, the instructor divides his or her class into groups. Each group is assigned a different part of the lesson to research or study and then

presents that part to the class. The entire class is dependent on each group's presentation to learn the material. This provides a challenge to the students and requires them to work together to achieve a required goal. Every group has a piece, and when they all provide their part, the puzzle is completed.

***Cooperative groups.*** One of the students' favorite methods of learning is cooperative groups. This allows them to work with other students, which assists in constructing knowledge and developing their social skills. It is important that the groups are assigned by the instructor and that each is heterogeneous. Every member also needs to be given a role. It is also vital that the teacher observe this process to ensure that each student is doing his or her part and making a contribution to the assignment. Overall, this method is often enjoyable for the students and allows them to develop their cooperative learning skills.

***Engaging reviews.*** When it comes to reviewing for an assessment, students want it to be informative and fun. This makes it memorable. One of their favorite ways of reviewing is through the use of games, such as "Jeopardy". The class is divided into two or three teams, and they have to work together to answer as many questions correctly as possible. Today's students love competition, and this is an effective way to incorporate teamwork into the curriculum. The process is memorable, and students are given the opportunity to work together to achieve a desired result.

***Investigative studies.*** When it comes to science and social studies courses, an effective teaching strategy lies in the use of investigative studies. This inquiry-based instructional method encourages the students to conduct investigations and play the roles of scientist, detective, and explorer.

For example, an 8<sup>th</sup> grade science instructor might create a crime scene in which students have to complete a number of forensic experiments in order to solve a murder. A geography teacher might give his or her students a trail of clues they must decipher to find a treasure hidden in an unknown location around the world. These types of assignments provide the students with memorable experiences and offer exciting alternatives to typical instructional practices.

**Effective Motivational Techniques.** Motivation is the means by which individuals are encouraged to succeed. In the education system, this begins by showing each and every student that he or she is an important part of the learning community. This can be completed in a multitude of ways. One effective strategy is the use of class jobs or monitor duties. These offer students in middle school opportunities to complete weekly responsibilities for which they are paid in points that can be redeemed at the end of the week. This is especially effective at the lower levels of learning.

It is also important to include each student in the learning process. Some teachers fall in the habit of asking the same students to answer all the questions and complete all the examples. This is not good teaching. Instructors should make sure that each student is involved during every section of the learning process. New technologies offer online applications such as random number generators that can easily be accessed to ensure that students are called on equally throughout a class period. This connects back to engaging the learner and making it fun. The more interesting the lessons and activities are, the more likely the students will actively participate.

It is important that teachers show students that they are interested in their daily lives in and out of school. They should do their best to greet students pleasantly, ask them how their days

are going, and show that their teachers are truly interested in their lives and their overall well-being. Educators should set high expectations and show every single individual that they believe in them and that they have the ability to do incredible things. If shown that they are cared for and supported, students will be more motivated to work hard and strive to do well. I have included some more effective motivational techniques below.

***Provide positive praise.*** It is important that students in today's classrooms feel comfortable and know that they are an important part of the learning community. That is one reason why it is so important for educators to acknowledge their accomplishments and provide positive praise. This shows the students that they matter, and their hard work has not gone unnoticed. When they see that their instructor is proud of them, they will be more motivated to do well when it comes to academics and the real world. Everyone wants to feel that he or she is appreciated, and positive praise assists in this process.

***Develop achievement plans.*** Setting goals is an important part of motivation. Sometimes it is necessary to sit down with a student to assist in developing an achievement plan. Some students are intrinsically motivated and just want to do well. These individuals will strive to meet the highest goals on their own at times. Others, however, are more extrinsically motivated and need incentives. Providing rewards for a student's hard work is not necessarily a bad thing. When developing an achievement plan, the instructor asks the student what he or she wants to accomplish, and then they both develop a plan to reach that goal. The rewards for reaching these goals do not have to be huge. A reward might be just five extra minutes of reading time. Maybe the instructor will agree to go to the student's ballgame or recital. It must be determined by the student's interest. These plans will set guidelines for a student to work hard and give him or her something to work for at the same time.

***Challenge your students.*** Everyone likes a challenge. Once an instructor has established a great sense of rapport with his or her students, he or she can issue challenges to pupils. As indicated earlier, students love competition. Sometimes, all it takes to get individuals to work harder is a little challenge from the instructor. He or she might promise the class with the highest grade average the title of class of the month or something of the sort, but the students will still respond. They all want to be the best.

***Use interest inventories.*** The most important motivational resource a teacher can use relates to a student's own interests. An effective tool to use at various intervals during the year is interest inventories. This allows the instructor to learn about each individual student and see what he or she enjoys doing both in and outside of school. This provides the teacher with an opportunity to connect with the student and possibly incorporate special interests into the lessons he or she teaches. If the curriculum is relevant to the students' lives, they will be more likely to participate and enjoy the entire process.

***Disciplinary Methods.*** One of the most important parts of effective classroom management concerns one's disciplinary methods. It is important that teachers remember to avoid negativity and anger and to respond not react. The best way to handle misbehavior, though, is to eliminate it as much as possible. This requires a teacher to create a small set of positive rules with defined consequences that are enforced. Empty threats are unnecessary and ineffective. In fact, there should be no threats at all. Negativity does not have a place in the classroom. Students should be encouraged to follow the rules and behave in appropriate ways through the use of positive reinforcement. Research (Blum, 2007) suggests that instructors who made connections with their students and displayed a positive attitude had fewer behavior issues than others. When a student does break the rules, it is important for the instructor to keep his or

her cool and provide appropriate consequences. One of the most effective techniques I witnessed was the use of contingency plans between teacher and student which defined a plan for improvement and consequences if the student failed to reach those goals. The most important part of discipline, though, is remaining positive and in control. Teachers must show their students that they believe they are capable of being extraordinary citizens and expect them to follow through.

Each of these steps has something in common. They are based on positivity and making connections with each and every student. If adults who facilitate learning are trustworthy and caring educators, their students will respond positively. They must intentionally make learning fun and engaging and school a comfortable and safe environment. It is their job. It is their responsibility. Though it takes a lot of planning and hard work, it is worth it to see each and every student happy, attentive, and engaged as they work through the learning process.

### **Conclusion**

If I learned one thing from my research endeavor, it would be that a teacher's job is not simply to teach. It goes far beyond content instruction. In an ever-changing world, where everyone is different in a wide variety of ways, it is vital that teachers strive to do more. They have to assist students in developing as individuals. This process extends far beyond academia. Teachers have to work to help their pupils when it comes to their social and emotion development. In a sense, they must teach the whole child. As far as my hypothesis, the data suggests that it is correct. In order for students to truly succeed, they need a mentor, a guide who cares for them and believes that they are going to do great things. This begins and ends with building and promoting positive student-teacher relationships.

Students must feel safe, comfortable, and engaged while knowing that they have someone there for them who is prepared to guide them along the way as they go through thick and thin and experience triumph and defeat. Teachers cannot control every aspect of their students' lives, but they have the ability to show them that they matter and that their teacher will always serve as an advocate for them. Facilitating learning is more than teaching content. It is about showing students that they are cared for and are valuable members of society. Only when they know that their educators believe in them and are there to support them will they be motivated to work hard and achieve in every area of life. Caring is a vital part of building relationships, but it is not as simple as it seems. There are six letters in the word and six steps to applying it in the educational world.

### **Create opportunities.**

If educators want to connect with their students and build positive student-teacher relationships, they must provide an environment in which students know that they can trust the adults who work with them. Teachers must display openness and encourage them to come to them for support. Teachers can create these opportunities by getting to know their pupils and learning about their interests. It is vital to always be prepared to talk with a student when needed. No pupil should be afraid to approach his or her teacher. Educators should be outgoing and friendly, showing each individual that they care and that are there to help them in any way possible. This also extends into the learning process. In order to encourage students to take an active interest in their education, instructors need to create a curriculum that is relevant to the real world and teach it in an engaging and insightful way. They have numerous resources at their disposal. It would be a waste to neglect them. The best way to get students excited about learning is

to get them actively involved by including fun and entertaining activities, which teaches the content and provides each student with a positive and memorable experience.

**Avoid negativity.**

Positivity is the key to making great connections. There is no need for negativity in the classroom. Educators must serve as role models, encouraging students to do great things and showing them that their teachers believe in them. In most cases, teachers are unaware of what each student is going through on a personal level. This makes it even more important that they work hard to avoid anger and negative tactics. In order to truly show that each student is valued and cared for, instructors must make it their goal to go out of their way to praise individual accomplishments and show their pupils that they are capable of overcoming any difficulty in order to make an amazing impact on the world around them. Positive praise encourages participation and personal motivation. For example, if a student is complimented for answering a question correctly or even simply paying attention, he or she will feel valuable and will be more likely to work harder in an effort to continue to make his or her teachers proud.

**Read beyond the cover.**

When it comes to the lives of students, educators must take an active interest. While, sometimes, their view is limited to behavior within a classroom, it is vital that they continue to keep a close eye for warning signs. If students seem discouraged or distracted, it is up to the instructor to check up on them, see what is wrong, and encourage them to go forward. In the case during which something horrible is happening in the home, each individual needs to know that he or she can talk to school staff and that they will do everything they can to help. Educators cannot simply write off a negative or distracted student. Sometimes there are deeper issues at

hand, and they have to be prepared to serve as counselors and advocates for each child in their classrooms and schools.

**Immerse yourself.**

In order to build student-teacher relationships, teachers have to be able to relate to their students' worlds. They should try to keep up with popular interests and current ideas in order to understand and build connections with their students. In reality, it does not matter if a student's hobby interests the instructor or not. They should still attempt to immerse themselves in the lives of those in their classrooms and express a passion for their interests, goals, and ideas.

**Never give up.**

Connecting with students will not always be an easy task. Sometimes it is difficult to reach every single individual, but it is so important to never give up. If teachers really want their students to succeed and do well in school and life, they have to build and promote respectful and professional student-teacher relationships. There is never a reason to walk away. It does not matter how difficult it is to teach each student, educators can never neglect those who struggle or have learning differences. In fact, they should put an emphasis on helping them achieve. Furthermore, if they give up on a student, they lose his or her trust and the ability to learn about his or her lives. Teachers must work hard each and every day to make an impact on every single individual's life. They have to show them they care for them and believe in them because in many cases the educators in their lives are all that they have. Nothing else matters. Giving up is never an appropriate option.

**Go the extra mile.**

All in all, it is not enough to stand in front of a classroom and provide instruction for students. A teacher's job is so much more than that. They are guides, training children to succeed in life. They are mentors, motivating and encouraging each student to work hard and apply themselves in everything they do. They are counselors, prepared to offer shoulders to cry on and warm, smiling faces. They are advocates, protecting each and every student from the evils they face in the world around them. A teacher must go the extra mile and show each individual that he or she is cared for and is a valuable member of society and the world each and every day.

**Caring**

It all goes back to caring. If educators create opportunities for students to succeed, they are caring. If teachers are avoiding negativity and displaying positivity in the learning process, they are caring. If they read beyond the cover and immerse themselves in the lives of each individual, they are caring. If they make it their mission to never give up and go the extra mile to ensure that every single student knows that they are special, cared for, and loved, they are caring. If teachers show that they care, their pupils will be all the more motivated to do great things both in academics and the real world.

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