

CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, NORTHRIDGE

Middle School Students' Perceptions of Teacher Characteristics
that Contribute to Culmination

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements

For the degree of Master of Arts in Special Education,

Educational Therapy

By

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May 2012

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Acknowledgments

I would like to express my deepest appreciation and gratitude to Tamarah Ashton and Deborah Wiltz for being supportive and helping me complete my goal. I would like to especially thank Sue Sears for going through the entire process with me, assisting me, and guiding me through until the end.

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ABSTRACT

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There is an alarming rate of students dropping out of high school, and students with learning disabilities (LD) tend to be at a higher risk for not completing high school than their general education counterparts. In order to address this issue contributing factors that influence school completion must be identified. The literature suggests that having a positive relationship with an adult on a school campus influences middle school culmination, which is a predictor of successful high school graduation. This paper examines students' perceptions of teacher support and effectiveness on middle school completion for middle school students with LD. One-hundred male and female middle school students with LD completed a survey, and of those, 10 were interviewed. Findings suggest that students make clear distinctions about qualities of effective teachers and ineffective teachers, students seek out teachers who they perceive as effective, and finally, many different people and factors influence students going beyond the school setting.

Keywords: learning disabilities, dropout prevention, graduation factors, teacher rapport

Chapter One: Introduction

The number of middle school students with learning disabilities (LD) who do not culminate, but are passed on to high school is unacceptably high and increasing. Additionally, students with LD have a higher rate than their general education peers of dropping out of middle school and no longer continuing their education. At the national level, The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2009) found 8.1% of all students did not complete high school. Of these, 15.1% were students with special needs. According to the California Department of Education (CDE, 2010) 23.7% of students with special needs drop out of high school statewide. The NCES notes that high drop out rates have a negative effect on society because too many students are not getting an appropriate education that can be used to find jobs to support themselves and their families. Culminating from middle school is correlated with graduating from high school, which is highly correlated to the success of a person's career, thus impacting his or her socioeconomic status (Warren & Cataldi, 2006). As a result, many students who do not complete high school have low paying jobs (Warren & Cataldi). Families without the means to support themselves must receive assistance, and copious amounts of public and private funds are spent on programs assisting people from low socioeconomic status (Warren & Cataldi). Additionally, students who do not make it to high school, or do not graduate from high school have higher rates of incarceration (Goodman, Hazelkorn, Bucholz, Duffy, & Kitta, 2011).

Many habits begin early in a student's school career. For this reason, middle school is a critical time for impacting how students will continue their education, and if they will find success as they progress through their education (Gibbons & Borders,

2010). During the middle school years, students learn valuable skills creating a foundation for future and more difficult tasks. The ability to use learned study skills, problem solving skills, social skills and communication skills effectively aid in finishing high school. There are many factors that contribute to successful school completion. Some include family support, socioeconomic status, academic achievement, transitions between middle school and high school, and in school support (Kemp, 2006). According to Kemp, factors that contribute to school dropout are grouped into two general categories, academic failure and disengagement from the educational environment.

An effective teacher and positive student-teacher relationships aid in engaging students inside the educational environment and can help students succeed in academic settings; however, there are few studies that examine student perception of teacher characteristics that have been found to support students' success in school, which lead ultimately to graduation. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to examine the perceptions of eighth grade middle school students ready to culminate regarding teacher characteristics that motivated and assisted them in graduating. Specifically, the study examines the qualities of teachers who are able to create and foster positive and mentoring relationships with students with LD. It is expected that if students with LD perceive themselves to have had positive relations and/or rapport with an adult at school (e.g., teacher, counselor, administrator), then they will be more likely to culminate from middle school.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

This review of the literature focuses on the importance of school culmination and various factors that contribute to it. The review begins by analyzing the importance of high school graduation. Next, graduation factors that influence all students are examined. This section is broken into factors found in the school environment, factors found outside school, and the role of middle school on graduation. Finally, the review investigates common characteristics of effective teachers.

The Importance of High School Graduation

The importance of high school graduation is a topic discussed in the news media on a constant basis. High school graduation is a vital milestone in a young adult's life. The high school years are important for social maturation, academic achievement, and development of personal characteristics. In a time when employers are expecting more, and many require higher level learning, completing high school is imperative for a successful future. According to Tyler and Lofstrom (2009), high school graduation is correlated with higher paying salaries, more opportunities for employment, and better health throughout life. While in high school, students learn skills necessary to thrive in the work force that include reading, verbal, and writing abilities, as well as abilities in mathematics, arts, science, and music (Herd, 2010). Having these skills better prepares candidates for professional jobs, as well as higher education, if they choose to pursue a college degree or attend a vocational school.

The more education a person obtains, the more opportunities and options he or she has for careers and higher wages. Completing high school affects the types of possible occupations entered, as well as the amount of salary earned (Kortering &

Christenson, 2009). In order to become a desirable candidate for an employer, one must be educated and possess a range of versatile competencies. Employees who do not possess a high school diploma earn lower salaries, on average, than like peers who complete high school (Kortering & Christenson).

Not only is education linked with better careers, it is also linked with better health throughout life. There has been research on the effects of attaining education and long-term health benefits. Herd (2010) found that strong academic performance is strongly linked to health later in life; however, it is not necessarily the level of attainment, but instead the attitude towards education. Herd discusses that there is a relationship between having a constructive attitude toward school, understanding the reasons why education is important, and the amount of effort put into attaining a higher-level of education. Beyond earning more as a high school graduate, securing a stable job has an effect on overall self-worth and esteem. Lindstrom, Doren and Miesch (2011) suggest that attaining stable employment provides financial security, as well as a feeling of self-sufficiency and an overall sense of personal satisfaction. With positive feelings of self, one is able to be less stressed, and therefore, maintain better health while aging.

Graduation Factors Influencing Students with and without LD

In order to promote school completion and graduation, it is necessary to examine the many factors that successfully prevent dropout and contribute to graduation. As stated by McCallumore and Sparapani (2010), there are many variables that affect graduation rate; these can differ for students with and without LD and can begin as early as ninth grade. Further, individual factors, such as disability and socioeconomic status; family factors, such as single-parent households; and, school factors, including high

absenteeism and low levels of engagement, affect graduation (Murray & Naranjo, 2008). In addition, Young, Johnson, Hawthorne, and Pugh (2011) found both positive and negative experiences with families, teachers and peers create an attitude in the student that can influence decisions regarding education. Given these multiple variables, dropout prevention must be addressed from both within and outside the school environment.

Prevention Outside the School Environment

Children are influenced by many different factors in their lives. They spend countless hours outside of school learning from friends, the media, and family. It is imperative to know what persuades and motivates a student to take school seriously and do well. Examining issues not related to school can provide a basic level of understanding of how to help a child with LD do well in school.

Parental role. Many personal factors and beliefs influence a child's success in school; among these is the parental role. Parents play a contributing role in a student's successful completion of high school. Students view parental involvement as critical in helping them complete school. Murray and Naranjo (2008) found students who had at least one parent monitoring their progress were more likely to complete school. Similar findings were reported by Englund, Egeland, and Collins (2008). According to these researchers, some motivating parental factors influencing student graduation are the amount of parental involvement throughout the middle years, and having a more supportive parent-child relationships in early adolescence. Specifically, having a higher level of social competence when interacting with adults is correlated with a higher level of school completion. Additionally, findings in a longitudinal study by Gregory and Rimm-Kaufman (2008) revealed positive mother-child relationships in kindergarten were

correlated with a higher likelihood of graduation, as well as higher grade-point averages (GPA) by the end of high school. Furthermore, adult role models, such as parents, play an important part in students' perceptions and influence many important decisions including ones about school. Parents identified as students' main role models (Somers, Owens, & Piliawsky, 2009) should actively participate in guiding their children and be involved in school and extracurricular activities. The more parents are involved with their children's education, the higher the possibility students will succeed. Along with parental support, there are several other factors that may contribute to dropout prevention.

Outside of school programs. According to Tsoi-A-Fatt and Harris (2009), students receive critical instruction on cognitive development at school; however, they need community-based, out of school programming to help with physical and social/emotional development, career skills, and a sense of civic and ethnic responsibility. A strong sense of the aforementioned skills creates a responsible person who is more likely to complete school. In order to create a successful community for the student, there needs to be a continuum of support where everyone involved has common goals. To do this successfully, service providers (e.g., those who run after school programs including coaching and tutoring), and those who provide services within education (e.g., teachers, counselors, psychologists) need to communicate and collaborate. Additionally, all service providers need to have more resources including financial funding, opportunities for training, and the ability to create programs for older youth (Tsoi-A-Fatt & Harris). As students participate in different programs and are exposed to different adults who support and mentor them, they become more confident in themselves, and their abilities to problem solve and make appropriate decisions.

Academic success depends on varying factors working together; however, school focuses primarily on academics, and to prevent dropout students must receive support in the other areas in other settings (Tsoi-A-Fatt & Harris, 2009). In after school programs, youth have the potential to fulfill this need by receiving support for the other domains that play a role in academic success such as social-emotional development, cognitive development, and career skills through community-based after school programs (Tsoi-A-Fatt & Harris). Adults who work in after school programs build mentoring relationships and provide a structured and stable environment for students. With these extra supports, students build the skills necessary to achieve. However, for some students learning and developing the other abilities is not enough, they also need extra support with academics to succeed.

In conjunction with programs providing developmental support, other programs are created to assist and target at-risk youth to ensure they receive extra academic help in order to graduate. Many out-of-school-time (OST) programs are held during after school hours specifically for aiding students with academic difficulties by reviewing academic skills and curricular work (Lauer et al., 2006). Lauer et al. found that OST programs may prevent some maladaptive behaviors. OST programs were created to assist low achieving, at-risk students with academic difficulties during non-academic hours. OST programs are provided after school and during the summer, and offer activities for students. They also decrease the amount of time students spend unsupervised. Kemp (2006) suggests that tailoring programs to fit students' academic needs and creating extracurricular activities are ways to prevent dropout. Both academic and out of school programs play a role in creating feelings of self-efficacy and confidence in students.

Self-efficacy. A crucial factor when predicting a child's success is his or her self-efficacy. Self-efficacy becomes important in school because students who exhibit a high level of belief in their abilities are successful (Gibbons & Borders, 2010). Gibbons and Borders argue further that self-efficacy is one of the most powerful influences on a person's ability to initiate and persevere toward accomplishment of a challenging goal like school graduation. Similarly, Murray and Naranjo (2008) found the most important characteristics of a student which aid in successful school completion are self-determination and the belief in the value of education for future societal benefits. Young et al. (2011) found the more support a child perceives to have, the more secure he or she is about school and academics; and the less support a child perceives to have, the less secure he or she is in matters of education. When students feel they receive social support, they have more academic motivation and self-determination, which are both necessary for school success (Young et al.). On the other hand, low academic achievement in school, as well as behavior issues, can be predictors of dropping out (Englund et al., 2008). If a student has high self-esteem and realizes the importance of school, then he or she is more likely to continue with his or her education. Thus, self-efficacy should be supported and fostered by parents, in after school programs when students are not at school, and by teachers and counselors inside of the school setting.

Prevention Inside the School Environment

Along with all the factors outside of the school environment, factors inside the school environment that create a sense of community need to be in place in order to prevent dropout. Schools need to focus on engaging students and motivating them to learn. Kortering and Christenson (2009) argue in order for schools to promote school

completion and not just high school graduation, a conceptual change is necessary. High school graduation focuses only on putting in enough seat time, whereas high school completion focuses on engaging students and teaching them the skills necessary to complete the academic and social tasks of everyday life. As noted previously, Kemp (2006) states the main reasons students dropout are classified under two main categories: academic failure and detachment from the educational environment.

School factors that promote graduation, including teacher mentors in the school environment (Murray & Naranjo, 2008) and school engagement, can begin as early as middle school. A key year that is a good school predictor of completion is the ninth grade when students become responsible for their learning and cannot move on to the next course without making sufficient progress in the previous one (McMallumore & Sparapani, 2010). During this time, students must pass classes and receive good grades to build self-esteem, to continue their motivation to work, and persevere in school. Kemp (2006) found failing a course and receiving poor grades is categorized under academic failure and is among the main reasons students with disabilities exited school. Beyond academic success, students must feel connected to their school environment to do well, which is categorized under school engagement. A lack of connectedness is an additional reason students with disabilities dropout (Kemp).

Using a model of student engagement, schools can create a community where students receive extra support in academics through relationship building, problem solving, and persistence. The more success students find in academics, the more engaged and willing they are to continue in school. Students' academic success is a multidimensional construct with different subtypes working together to create the most

conducive environment for graduation. These subtypes involve engagement in academics, which depend upon behavior, cognitive, and psychological factors (Kortering & Christenson, 2009). According to Kortering and Christenson, it is the main goal of an educator to assist students in acquiring skills that support and aid them in meeting the academic and behavioral demands of school. Teachers should clarify and assist students in understanding the connection between the real world of work and school. If students understand the importance of what they learn, they receive better grades and are more involved. Furthermore, student engagement in class and school is crucial to maintaining student involvement in academics.

Engagement in the school contributes to completing it (Christenson & Thurlow, 2004). Students must be engaged academically and behaviorally, as well as cognitively and psychologically. Engagement is directly related to students' behavior, including attendance, participation, effort, and pro-social behavior. Christenson and Thurlow view attention, attendance, number of suspensions, and completion of work as indicators of being engaged academically and behaviorally. In order to be engaged psychologically, Christenson and Thurlow found students must have a sense of belonging and positive relationships with peers.

Detachment from the academic environment manifests in a lack of involvement in school functions and extracurricular activities (Kemp, 2006). Kortering and Christenson (2009) found it is imperative for students to participate in non-academic activities, which are still school related. They also found these involved students to be more successful. Some of the activities include sports groups, lunch clubs, musical groups and other related clubs. Schools need to provide a wide range of activities to keep students with an

array of different interests engaged in school. Kortering and Christenson describe psychological engagement as a sense of belonging and an ability to build relationships. Finally, cognitive engagement involves skills such as self-awareness, autonomy, self-regulation, and goal setting abilities. Thus, teachers need to be highly qualified and employ various instructional styles to meet the needs of the different students and maintain engagement.

Some possible accommodations to assist in both academic success and engagement of students to the school environment are to reduce class size, and to create and maintain parent outreach programs to ensure parental involvement. In addition, students should have close ties with at least one adult they trust and in whom they can confide (Somers et al., 2009). If there are adults on campus, such as teachers, counselors, custodial staff, cafeteria workers, or administrators, to whom a student can relate, he or she has a mentor and an investment inside the school. Somers et al. found that mentors have a positive influence on student engagement and can lead to more academic success in school as well as prevent students from dropping out.

Teacher mentors. School is associated with work, friends, homework, and teachers. Teachers play an integral role in the success of a student. Good teachers can help motivate students to complete their schooling, and can guide them in the direction of graduation and higher education. Furthermore, teachers provide considerable support within the school context by advising students (Murray & Naranjo, 2008), and can influence students with long lasting effects. Effective teachers mentor students, support them, are committed to them, build rapport, and foster relationships with the purpose of positively affecting their lives. A successful teacher has the ability to build rapport and

communicate positively with a student. If a teacher is able to build positive rapport, the student can confide in that teacher and receive guidance on school and personal issues. Through this positive relationship and process, teachers mentor students and influence decisions to stay in school and follow through on difficult goals.

During tough middle school and high school years, it is invaluable for students to have a mentor who is able to guide them and help make important life decisions. Somers et al. (2009) reported a mentoring relationship is especially salient and an important strategy identified to assist with dropout prevention. If teachers or counselors are able to mentor students, they can create program plans and contribute with educational and career planning as early as middle school (Gibbons & Borders, 2010). Polk (2006) identifies 10 basic characteristics of a teacher who is able to connect with students and foster positive relationships, among these being strong communication skills, an interest in self-development, an innate ability to teach and model concepts, and the ability to hold the interest of students with a charismatic and engaging attitude. Further, Polk adds appropriate methods of student assessment and evaluation, thorough knowledge of content areas, the teachers' own personal academic performance, familiarity with a variety of pedagogical approaches, creativity, and professionalism as significant qualities of teachers who are successful mentors. These traits are imperative for teachers to possess in order to be effective with most students; however, these methods are not successful with all students.

Today, schools and classrooms are more diverse and may have a mixture of students from different cultures and backgrounds. So as to engage a wider range of students, modern teachers need to take into consideration their students' diverse cultures especially

as portrayed in language, social class, ethnicity, and race (Nieto, 2008). When considering these factors, Nieto found six additional qualities that effective mentor teachers may exhibit, including a passion for social justice, a sense of mission, solidarity and empathy for their students, the ability and willingness to challenge popular beliefs, conventional wisdom, and the ability to improvise when necessary. Having many of these qualities, in conjunction with the aforementioned characteristics, a teacher is able to reach out and positively influence a multitude of students. Nieto believes teachers need to teach students from diverse backgrounds with heart, courage, and conviction. Students of all backgrounds need to feel supported by a teacher in order to confide in him or her. Building rapport and trust is essential to fostering a relationship in which a student feels trust and security.

Due to the fact that so many schools are diverse, it is imperative for teachers to have an understanding of the community from which their students come. Beyond fostering a constructive relationship with students inside the school, teachers need to identify with the community and parents. If teachers are involved with parents and the community, children tend to do better in school. Warren, Nofle, Ganley, and Quintanar (2011) reveal that everyone involved benefits from a family, teacher, community relationship including the student, teacher, school, community, and family. Having compassion and understanding of the context in which a student comes to school everyday is necessary in being able to identify with a student. However, teachers must be cautious when sympathizing with students, and make sure that expectations are clear, and students are required to work and triumph over difficulties inside, as well as outside, academic settings. Jonas (2010) explains that teachers must be thoughtful when employing

compassion with students because they must learn to persevere and overcome challenging situations. For many educators, compassion is used as a way to alleviate educational pains believed to be detrimental to learning (Jonas).

The Importance of Middle School

As students grow older, they often have more responsibilities at school, and it is imperative for them to have support at home, after school, and in school. Parents and the community should emphasize the significance of education for a better future in regards to jobs, salary, and health. Information about the importance of graduating should begin inside the school as early as kindergarten, and should be taught throughout students' entire educational lives. In addition, youth who are at-risk for dropping out benefit from receiving specific intervention as early as ninth grade (McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010). The transition period into high school can be especially problematic as the academic, organizational, and social changes become increasingly demanding without the students receiving extra support (Somers et al., 2009). The middle school years are crucial in the development of a student, and are when he or she learns to be a life long learner. In middle school, students learn how to be responsible for their education, choose the correct social circle, and begin maturing and deciding career paths. During middle school, children learn to become students and autonomous learners. They learn to organize binders, create schedules and manage time to complete everything expected, take notes, and are held accountable for their work. There are many questions with which students struggle during this transition period in regards to their futures. Additionally, many career and educational goals are made during this time, regardless of the students' ideas for post-secondary education (Gibbons & Borders, 2010). In order for

students to make the correct choices and have the motivation to get to high school and follow through with their post secondary plans, many adults need to be active in their decision making. This includes having conversations with counselors and teachers who give them concrete details on post-secondary choices (Gibbons & Borders). As students become more aware of their choices, adults must ensure they are providing accurate information, and constantly reinforce the significance of self-efficacy so students understand their potential and worth.

Due to the fact that middle school is modeled after high school and provides more specialized classes, as well as a high school like environment (Bedard & Do, 2005), it is a good predictor of high school success. If students are able to adapt to the different classes and expectations of a variety of teachers in middle school, they will learn to adapt to a similar environment in high school. Transitioning into a high school setting often comes with extra stressors of having multiple teachers and trying to build solid peer relations. As students transition to middle school, they receive instruction and move to classes as if on a high school campus, but do not become exposed to more difficult pressures faced in high school, such as more demanding academics and more varied social/emotional pressures. With proper supports, students are able to understand what is expected of them, and how to succeed. However, some advocates believe middle schools do not provide the appropriate monitoring and lack the personal attention these students need in order to plan aptly for the future (Bedard & Do). Middle school counselors and teachers must become involved and monitor students to provide them with the tools necessary to succeed in middle school, as well as show them how to transfer and transition those important skills into high school and beyond.

The literature reviewed reveals there are many contributing factors that lead to successful school completion. Graduating from high school is integral to success, and good habits as well as ambitions and decisions about the future, can begin as early as middle school. Students need many supports to complete high school, and these include programs to prevent dropout, both in and out of school, together with the influence of teachers. The literature suggests teachers play a crucial role as mentors in preventing dropout for students. In reviewing the research, new questions concerning successful high school completion and dropout prevention regarding students become evident. The purpose of this study is to look at the perceptions students with learning disabilities have of their teachers. In doing so, this study clarifies and elaborates on past dropout research and expands it by including students with LD.

Chapter Three: Methods

In this study, students from an urban school district were surveyed and interviewed using open-ended questions about their perceptions of teacher effectiveness. The author distributed and collected the survey and conducted the interviews.

Participants

The survey was completed by culminating eighth graders with LD and ninth graders with LD who had just culminated. Students were selected from three comprehensive middle schools serving sixth through eighth grade students in a large urban school district, and one comprehensive high school in the same urban school district. One hundred students were surveyed. Included in the sample were 64 males and 36 females. Of the 100 subjects, 66 were of Hispanic descent, 13 were Caucasian not of Hispanic descent, 11 were of African American descent, 3 were Pacific Islanders, 4 were of Asian descent, and 3 were of other decent. In the sample were students whose ages ranged from 13 to 15 years. Of the 100 students, 33 were enrolled in special day classes (SDC) taught by special education teachers, and 67 were enrolled in general education (GE) classes taught by GE teachers with the support of a resource specialist teacher (RST), or in the resource specialist program (RSP). Ten students were selected randomly to be interviewed from the 100 students surveyed.

Procedure

Using a survey (see Appendix A), participants were asked to answer questions regarding motivators that assisted them in completing middle school and the characteristics of teachers who helped them along the way. The anonymous survey was an opportunity for the students to be open and honest about their feelings toward

culmination and factors motivating them to culminate. The survey consisted of seven statements that students indicated whether they agreed or disagreed with using a Likert scale from 1 meaning 'strongly disagree' to 5 meaning 'strongly agree.' These statements were based on factors identified in the literature that affect graduation, such as work completion and behavior in school. The surveys were administered during the students' class time, which ensured 100% return rate. Ten surveys were chosen at random, and those students were interviewed to gain a more in-depth perspective on students' opinions about teachers (see Appendix B). The interview consisted of only four open-ended questions ensuring students remained interested. The questions focused on characteristics of effective teachers. The 10 students identified their favorite and least favorite teachers on the middle school campus, and reasons for their choices. The author pulled students out of their elective class during the school day to conduct interviews.

Chapter Four: Results

Through the survey of students with LD, and interviews of a random sample of those students, this study examines the students' perception of teachers' support and teacher effectiveness. The results of the survey and interview were examined to find the extent to which teachers provide support on students' motivation towards culminating middle school. The study looked at teachers' encouragement with academics, motivation, and appropriate behaviors inside the school.

Survey Results

Results of total percentages for all survey items are represented in Appendix C. All students who completed the survey stated that they either agree (6%) or strongly agree (94%) that graduating is important to them, making graduation valuable to 100% of students completing this survey. Of the items identified as contributing to culmination, the questions on the survey were broken into academic factors, affective factors, and motivation factors. The highest ratings were for factors relating to academics. Specifically, 81% of students surveyed agreed (36%) or strongly agreed (45%) "There is a teacher or counselor who helps me with work whenever need;" 78% of students agreed (26%) or strongly agreed (52%) that, "A teacher or counselor on campus has encouraged me to complete my work." Affective questions included: "There is a teacher or counselor on campus who I can speak to and confide in," and 56% of students agreed (41%) or strongly agreed (15%) with this first statement. In addition, 50% of all students surveyed agreed (37%) or strongly agreed (13%) with "I have a favorite teacher who I want to make proud of me by culminating." When analyzing motivating factors, 26% of students agreed (17%) or strongly agreed (9%), "A teacher or counselor has helped motivate me,"

and 28% agreed (21%) or strongly agreed (7%) there was, “A teacher or counselor who motivates me to behave well in my classes.” Factors least perceived as influenced by teachers or counselors were those related to motivation and it leading to successful culmination.

Of the 100 students surveyed, 33% who completed the questionnaire were students enrolled in an SDC class. The results for students in the SDC setting were very similar to the overall results. Percentages for these students’ responses can be found in Appendix D. One hundred percent of SDC students agreed (12%) or strongly agreed (88%) graduation was important to them. As for the group as a whole, students reported teachers and counselors having the most influence on academics. More specifically, 88% of SDC students agreed (30%) or strongly agreed (58%) there was a teacher or counselor who helped with work whenever necessary; also, 88% agreed (21%) or strongly agreed (67%) a teacher or counselor had encouraged them to complete work. Questions concerning affect were ranked second as influenced by teachers or counselors. Sixty-four percent of students agreed (55%) or strongly agreed (9%) there is a teacher or counselor on campus who they confide in, and 63% agreed (39%) or strongly agreed (24%) they had a teacher or counselor on campus who they want to make proud by culminating. Finally, teachers and counselors had the least influence in the areas of motivation when working with SDC students. Thirty-six percent of students either agreed (30%) or strongly agreed (6%) that there was a teacher on campus who helped motivate them overall; whereas 27% of students either agreed (24%) or strongly agreed (3%) that their teachers or counselors motivate them to behave well in all classes. Results for students in the SDC setting are consistent with the results of the group as a whole.

There were similar findings for students who took the survey and were enrolled in GE classes and received support from RSTs. Total percentage results for all survey items are represented in Appendix E. One hundred percent of students either agreed (3%) or strongly agreed (97%) that graduation was important to them. Students felt the most support from their teachers and counselors in academics. Seventy-eight percent of students agreed (39%) or strongly agreed (39%) that there was a teacher or counselor who helped with work whenever needed, and 75% of students agreed (28%) or strongly agreed (47%) there was a teacher or counselor who encouraged the students to complete their work. Students in the RSP setting reported that teachers or counselors were more effective influencing them in affective areas. Fifty-two percent of students agreed (34%) or strongly agreed (18%) there is a teacher or counselor who they can confide in, and 43% agreed (36%) or strongly agreed (7%) they had a favorite teacher who they wanted to make proud by culminating. Only 22% of students agreed (11%) or strongly agreed (11%) there was a teacher or counselor who helped motivate them. This was the lowest percentage for both students in SDC or RSP. Furthermore, 29% agreed (20%) or strongly agreed (9%) teachers or counselors motivate them to behave well in all classes. Students reported the least percentage rates related to questions specifying teachers' and counselors' influence on motivation.

There were many similarities between what students reported in SDC and RSP. Both groups of students ranked academics, such as helping and encouraging with work, as the factor that teachers and counselors influence the most. This was followed by affective factors including confiding in a teacher or counselor and wanting to make him or her proud. Finally, students reported teachers and counselors influencing them least

with motivating them to behave in all classes. In general, students in SDC reported higher percentages of agreeing and strongly agreeing in all categories when compared to students in RSP. The only influencing factor where students in RSP had a higher percentage rate was the ability of teachers or counselors to motivate them to behave well. Students in RSP neither agreed nor strongly agreed there was a teacher or counselor who motivated them, giving this question the lowest percentage of the results. Overall, data for both groups of students were similar and support the information in the literature review.

Interview Results

In examining interview responses, common themes related to effective and ineffective teachers were identified. Specifically, students have similar perception in regard to effective and ineffective teachers. Many of the students identified the same teachers as effective for a multitude of reasons. The reasons given included caring, helpful with work, listens, and can joke around with students, as well as sets parameters and boundaries. Comments associated with teachers who were identified as ineffective included non-engaging academic assignments, difficulties with comprehending lessons, no structure in class, and little empathy for and understanding of students. Out of the four questions asked of students (Appendix B), the author analyzed responses given as explanations for favorite and least favorite teacher. Characteristics of teachers identified by students as being effective or ineffective can be broken into major themes.

Characteristics of effective teachers. Students interviewed identified effective teachers as having characteristics associated with being approachable, making learning easier and having strong classroom management. Students reported that teachers they

felt they could ask questions, made work comprehensible, and were available to help influenced them the most. One student in RSP said that her favorite teacher was good because, “She helps us with whatever we need,” and “she makes sure we understand the work.” Another student in RSP who was interviewed stated her teacher, “Helps me at lunch if I need.” A student in SDC mirrored his peers’ sentiments and described his favorite teacher by saying she, “Helps a lot with hard work,” and “makes class fun.” Fun assignments were identified as important. Many of the comments made about favorite teachers alluded to assignments. A student said, “She gives us a lot of science projects,” while another commented that her teacher “lets me do work on the computer,” and a different student said her favorite teacher “helps me learn by doing a lot of cool art projects.”

Students who were interviewed described strong classroom management skills while still being approachable when discussing their favorite teachers. Many of the students remarked on the positive effects of learning in a structured and safe environment, and acknowledged that the teacher created it. Students identified positive reward systems as being particularly effective. One student commented that his teacher “Gave me things for being good,” while another said, “I like going in his class, because I know what to expect.” Paired along with their sentiments regarding strong classroom management came statements about friendly traits. One student’s favorite teacher was described as, “Friendly and nice.” Another student shared a similar sentiment stating, “I can trust her and confide in her.” Students stated consistently an effective teacher does more than just teach; they also have to be available for the students in other aspects of

their lives. Additionally, students tend to share more and discuss more problems with adults they respect and with whom they feel a positive connection.

Characteristics of ineffective teachers. Students interviewed described their least favorite teachers with characteristics which can be categorized as either being unapproachable or having a lack of pedagogical skills. Students criticized their teachers for always yelling, not having time, having little understanding of the students, and making students feel afraid to ask questions inside the classroom. Representative quotes from students indicating their teachers were unapproachable included, “He always yells at me and blames me for everything, even when I don’t do anything wrong.” Other students said they feel embarrassed when they ask questions. A student voicing this sentiment said, “Whenever I ask him a question he sounds annoyed to answer it, like I am bothering him.” Many of the students interviewed mirrored those ideas by making statements including, “I would rather fail than ask him a question,” or “He makes me feel dumb when I do not understand something the first time, I usually ask one of my classmates, and then get in trouble for talking.” Another student said their teacher is never available to help, “Even though she says she is willing to help us during nutrition or lunch, she is never there.” Beyond being unapproachable in academics, students believed the teachers were unapproachable with other problems too. Some students said the teacher is “mean,” and one student stated, “I would never go to her for anything.” According to participants, when they felt less support in academics, they tended to do worse in the academics, behavior, and attitude inside the classroom.

Along with students believing their teachers were unapproachable, many of them made statements about the academics in those teachers’ classrooms. All students

surveyed made statements reporting ineffective teachers as boring and/or confusing. “She always gives us worksheets to do quietly,” stated a student regarding assignments he did not like. A student in an SDC class said, “My teacher talks too much, and makes class very confusing.” Another student made a similar statement, “He never explains what we are doing,” and “Our homework doesn’t make sense. He just gives it when the bell rings.” Finally, students said work was boring, “All she does is talk the whole time, and it’s so boring,” and “Everything we do is boring, I usually just draw or talk.” Lack of effective ways to communicate information makes work inaccessible to students who are already struggling because of their special needs. Having weak pedagogical skills leads to students losing interest in academics and lessens their motivation to behave.

The interviews highlighted the key differences between the students’ perceptions of effective and ineffective teachers. Students stressed teachers who made them feel bad, embarrassed them, and did not engage them in academics tended to have less of an effect on their desire to culminate. Furthermore, if the students did not feel a connection with the teacher they did less work, and were willing to break more of the classroom rules. Students were more willing to perform well for a teacher who had positive associations with the students, was organized, had the ability to control the classroom, and students felt they were learning from them. Those teachers had more of an effect on the students’ behavior, academics, and motivation while in school.

Chapter Five: Discussion

The purpose of this study was to investigate how teacher rapport affects student motivation in regard to culmination. The literature review suggested many students aim to please teachers, and also that it is important for children in middle school to have adults in school they trust and relate to. The study indicates, when there are adults on campus who students have a relationship with, students tend to feel more support in academics, and are more likely to complete work for their classes. Further, when there is a teacher who students build rapport with, students want to share their accomplishments with the teachers, such as culminating, and are more motivated to behave according to the school rules.

Major Findings

A finding consistent with both the literature review and this study was that teachers who act as mentors can support and encourage students to complete middle school. This author ascertained that students believed teachers assisted most with academics; and accordingly, when students did well in their academics, their self-reported behaviors were better, as well. To a lesser degree, teachers or counselors provided support in the areas of motivation and affect. Also, students reported the distinctions between teachers they found effective and those they found ineffective. Students wanted to do well for the teachers and counselors they liked. Students see teachers as supportive and helpful, and are able to identify what makes a teacher effective. On the other hand, students also know what makes a teacher ineffective, and will put forth less effort for those teachers. This is valuable information for teachers when learning new methodologies, and should be taught formally in educational

programs. With teachers and counselors affecting students in important factors leading to culmination, it is imperative for teachers to create positive relationships with their students.

Students seek out teachers who listen to them, offer help and are able to make learning comprehensible. More importantly, students will not ask for help from teachers they do not like. For teachers they find accessible and likeable, students will work harder and behave better. Many students find teachers who help them, and who are able to assist in problem solving as most effective. Furthermore, the teachers who were reportedly most successful were the teachers who helped students most in other areas beyond academics. The interviews and literature review revealed students relied on adults for help with motivation and affective issues taking place in school, and were reluctant to look for assistance from teachers they did not like. Adults who mentor students must make certain they listen to their students and consistently offer guidance and support to make sure students make correct choices that will ultimately lead to culmination. Teachers who act as mentors have a greater influence on students than those who have no rapport with the students. Building a constructive rapport is a practical skill teachers should learn.

Many different factors and people influence students' decisions leading to culmination. Though teachers provide support in academics, motivation, and behaviors within the school environment, there are many other people who provide support outside of the school. Culmination was important to students surveyed demonstrating students received support and guidance regarding school from other people in their lives, too. Therefore, this research is consistent with the literature review that describes how many

factors work together inside and outside the school environment to influence students' decisions. Within the school, teachers, counselors, and other staff assist students. However, outside of the school students can look for encouragement from their families, themselves, and after school community programs focusing on both academics and social skills. Having positive support from many different individuals shapes a student's path to culminating middle school and eventually graduating high school. Inside factors and outside factors must work together to ensure the most positive effect on student outcomes.

Limitations

The study draws attention to important information, but limitations may impact data. The sample population used in this study was limited in size and diversity. The homogenous group surveyed included only students living in a suburban area, and all attended schools in the same district with very similar demographics. Similarly, the limited number of teachers in the SDC and RSP setting is another limitation in the study. In the schools where students were interviewed, the students are set up in houses and all of them have the same teachers throughout the day. Therefore, all of the students are exposed to the same teachers instead of a wide variety of teachers. The students had a limited population of teachers to describe as effective or ineffective, and did not have opportunities to experience teachers from other houses who have different perspectives and training. Also, the survey neglected to include other staff members on campus who could provide assistance to students such as, administrators, janitorial staff, and paraprofessionals. Due to the limited variety of students, the results may not be

generalizable to more heterogeneous groups, although the literature review seems to suggest that these data are concurrent across different settings.

Beyond having a limited sample size of students and teachers, the questionnaire and survey provided limitations of their own. Questions on the survey did not provide an in-depth look at the specific actions the teachers implemented to motivate students, but instead, provided a small scope of factors teachers may influence such as academics. There was no distinction made to students on the difference between ‘motivate’ and ‘encourage,’ and some students may have found the word choices confusing. In addition, the open-ended question at the end of the survey was leading because it asked students what they value, trust, and find helpful.

Many of the student responses included a teacher they can trust, and a teacher who is helpful, as stated in the question. All of the students surveyed wanted to graduate, and therefore were already motivated to listen to teachers, do work, and behave well. This study did not focus on any students who exhibit negative behaviors inside the classroom and are not motivated to or do not want to culminate. Students who are less motivated to culminate may have different opinions on teachers and their effectiveness. Also, the study did not look at the distinction between male and female students and what each gender finds effective in a teacher.

Implications

The results of the study indicate that there is a relationship between positive teacher rapport and student motivation to culminate. Culmination from middle school leads to a larger likelihood of completing high school. Since positive teacher rapport was found as a factor leading to culmination, many schools can provide professional

developments highlighting rapport as one of the characteristics of an effective teacher. Additionally, the more information learned regarding the factors that help students graduate, the more information could be incorporated into teacher training and certification programs to ensure they focus on important factors. This study focused on middle school students and what motivated them to finish school. Due to the fact that teacher rapport is important in middle school, schools should set up a system where a student is followed and mentored throughout his or her middle school career. If a student understands that there is a person on campus who will help him or her throughout his or her middle school career, he or she will create a meaningful relationship, and want to be successful.

Future Research

Future research in the area of teacher rapport and student motivation is crucial in order to create a more cohesive picture of what is important and motivating to assist more students in graduating. With more empirical evidence, teacher programs can tailor classes in the area of creating and maintaining positive teacher mentor relationships. In order to learn what helps students graduate, research should be conducted in a high school environment to learn if older students find the same teacher characteristics important as middle school students. Research geared toward successful middle and high school graduation is imperative. Furthermore, research should expand to include students who are not motivated to graduate. Students who do not care if they complete school need more assistance to ensure they graduate than those who already want to do well. Studies should be conducted on useful affective, motivation, and academic interventions that could be used to assist students with LD in graduating. Studies should also consider

the variance between females and males when creating programs on building teacher rapport. Finally, future studies should include all adults on a school campus who provide guidance and support to students daily.

The research in this study shows an association between positive teacher rapport and student motivation to behave well and complete work. Good behavior and good grades are both important factors that lead to successful completion in middle school. Previous literature shows that there is a relationship between middle school culmination and high school graduation. If teachers and counselors are able to provide the proper framework supports and guidance in middle school, students are more likely to be successful in high school and beyond. Looking at past and present data, the influence teachers have on student success is obvious, and should not be ignored when training teachers' powerful pedagogical skills.

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Appendix A: Questionnaire Given to Students

Graduating influences

Directions: Please read these statements and circle a number based on how much you agree with the statement. 1 = strongly disagree, and 5 = strongly agree. If you are unsure, please leave that item blank.

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Somewhat Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
Graduating is important to me.	1	2	3	4	5
There is a teacher or counselor on campus who I can speak to and confide in.	1	2	3	4	5
There is a teacher or counselor who helps me with my work whenever I need.	1	2	3	4	5
A teacher or counselor on campus has helped motivate me.	1	2	3	4	5
I have a favorite teacher who I want to make proud of me by culminating	1	2	3	4	5
A teacher or counselor on campus has encouraged me to complete my work	1	2	3	4	5
A teacher or counselor motivates me to behave well in my classes.	1	2	3	4	5

In your opinion, list the three most important characteristics in a teacher that you value, trust, and find helpful.

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

Appendix B: Interview Questions

Interview Questions

1. Who is your favorite teacher?
Why?
2. Who is your least favorite teacher?
Why?
3. Describe the perfect teacher
4. If you became a teacher how do you think you would be in order to be considered a good teacher?

Appendix C
Percentages of Students Agreeing with Survey Statements

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Somewhat Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
	1	2	3	4	5
Graduating is important to me.	0%	0%	0%	6%	94%
There is a teacher or counselor on campus who I can speak to and confide in.	2%	13%	29%	41%	15%
There is a teacher or counselor who helps me with my work whenever I need.	1%	6%	12%	36%	45%
A teacher or counselor on campus has helped motivate me.	4%	14%	56%	17%	9%
I have a favorite teacher who I want to make proud of me by culminating	6%	12%	32%	37%	13%
A teacher or counselor on campus has encouraged me to complete my work	1%	3%	18%	26%	52%
A teacher or counselor motivates me to behave well in my classes.	10%	18%	44%	21%	7%

Appendix D
Percentages of Students in Special Day Class (SDC) Agreeing with Survey Statements

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Somewhat Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
	1	2	3	4	5
Graduating is important to me.	0%	0%	0%	12%	88%
There is a teacher or counselor on campus who I can speak to and confide in.	6%	15%	15%	55%	9%
There is a teacher or counselor who helps me with my work whenever I need.	0%	6%	6%	30%	58%
A teacher or counselor on campus has helped motivate me.	10%	15%	39%	30%	6%
I have a favorite teacher who I want to make proud of me by culminating	3%	6%	28%	39%	24%
A teacher or counselor on campus has encouraged me to complete my work	3%	3%	6%	21%	67%
A teacher or counselor motivates me to behave well in my classes.	10%	30%	33%	24%	3%

Appendix E
Percentages of Students in Resource (RSP) Classes Agreeing with Survey Statements

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Somewhat Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
	1	2	3	4	5
Graduating is important to me.	0%	0%	0%	3%	97%
There is a teacher or counselor on campus who I can speak to and confide in.	0%	12%	36%	34%	18%
There is a teacher or counselor who helps me with my work whenever I need.	1%	6%	15%	39%	39%
A teacher or counselor on campus has helped motivate me.	1%	13%	64%	11%	11%
I have a favorite teacher who I want to make proud of me by culminating	7%	15%	35%	36%	7%
A teacher or counselor on campus has encouraged me to complete my work	0%	3%	22%	28%	47%
A teacher or counselor motivates me to behave well in my classes.	10%	12%	49%	20%	9%