Motivating Low-Achieving Students during Pre-Service Teaching

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Lin Lin

SUNY Cortland

Department of Childhood and Early Childhood Education

linlin@cortland.edu

HeeYoung Kim

Armstrong Atlantic State University

Jackie.Kim@armstrong.edu

[Abstract]

Motivating high school low-achieving students is a daily struggle for pre-service teachers as well as in-service teachers. Based on empirical work, the study explores four factors that contribute to the lack of motivation of high school students observed by student teachers during pre-service teaching. They are: 1) instructors' low academic expectations on students; 2) instructors' strategies conflicting with students' behaviors; 3) teachers' perception of students' family life; and 4) curriculum pressure on teachers to teach to the End-of-the-Course test. The ultimate purposes of the study are to help pre-service social studies teachers develop more effective ways to promote motivation by taking into consideration in the process of instructional design the learning needs, learning styles, and learning abilities of students.

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There can be little doubt that our nation's largest untapped source of human intelligence and creativity is found among the vast numbers of individuals in the lower socioeconomic levels
—Renzulli (1973, p. 3)

Working as university supervisors for student teachers in the past years were invaluable experiences for us. With little teaching experience in American public schools, we soon discovered that those visits to classrooms opened our eyes, mind, and professional horizons. We learned so much from the student teachers and cooperative teachers about the subject knowledge and skills in social studies. Besides, we also learned even more about how to manage a classroom and how to manage the time assigned to each learning activity. At the same time we also made some interesting observations.

In one of the local high schools, student teachers worked in difficult situations teaching a variety of subjects in social studies to students who were not academically oriented. In this school, non-college-bound students were required to take two or three years of social studies. For these students, schools offered lower-track classes that exhibited high failure rates and low teacher and student motivation. What was striking to us was, though, the lack of motivation is a factor identified by most student teachers and cooperative teachers as the major contributing factor to account for the low academic achievement of the lower-track students, who were labeled as CP, college preparatory students.

What caused the lack of motivation of high school students in CP classes? What were the impacts of students' low motivation on pre-service teachers? These are the research questions this paper attempts to answer. The paper starts with a brief explanation of terms used in this paper. Then it reviews research on the impacts of low motivation of students on pre-service social studies secondary teacher education. Based on the pre-observation conferences, classroom instruction, post-observation conferences, small-group seminars, big-group return-to-campus seminars, email correspondences with student teachers and cooperative teachers, and an analysis of student teachers' reflection papers, this paper explores the major factors that contribute to the lack of motivation among high school CP students and discusses the impact of low motivation on the student teachers. The paper concludes with recommendations and strategies to promote motivation by encouraging student teachers to take into consideration the learning needs, learning styles, and learning abilities of CP students when designing instruction.

Key Terms and Theoretical Perspective

        Who are the CP Students? Coming from our educational backgrounds and systems, we asked this question on the first day we were in the school. We were told that CP stands for College Preparatory. This is not hard to understand as research shows that both schools and teachers use a variety of ways to group students for instruction. Ability grouping seems to be the more prevalent form among all groupings (Watanabe, 2007; Oakes et. al, 1997; Page & Page, 1995). CP stands for College Preparatory, which means college-bound. As my observation went on, I had to conclude that in this local high school, CP classes lost their original meanings.

        We embedded this study in symbolic interactionism. Symbolic interactionism comes in multiple varieties. The perspective we present here is the interpretive version of symbolic interactionism. (Denzin, 1992). Denzin (1992) points out that interpretive interactionism attempts to make the worlds of lived experience directly accessible to the reader. Interpretive interactionists try to capture the voices, emotions, and actions of those studied, and are concerned with studying the subjective meanings that individuals attribute to their activities and their environment (Denzin, 1992; Flick, 1998). Therefore, this study is to interpret pre-service teachers' voices and experiences through the meanings they attributed to their student teaching experiences in the public schools they were placed. Through pre-observation conferences, classroom observations, post-observation conferences, small-group seminars, big-group return-to-campus seminars, and email correspondences with pre-service teachers, high school students in CP classes, and cooperating teachers, we collected pre-service teachers' experiences and reflections. The meanings they attached to their student teaching experiences allowed us to understand their daily interactions in the school with cooperative teachers and students.

Literature Review

        There have always been conflicts between research and practice in public schools where students are tracked for instruction (Arkos & Lambie, 2007; Watanabe, 2007; Lee, 2003; Hallam, 2002; Hallinan, 2000). Research shows that there is little reason to maintain the practice of ability tracking, but in reality, many schools still track students to different academic levels of classes (Lee, 2003; Hallam, 2002; Oakes et. al, 1997). Here in this local high school students are tracked into Advanced Placement, Advanced College Preparatory and College Preparatory classes. In practice,

CP class means lower-track class with low-achieving students. What also strikes me is that CP classes are predominantly African American and Hispanic students.

Motivation of students has been the focus of applied educational research for many years. Butler & Nisan (1986), Audre & Thieman (1988), and others have studied attempts to motivate students for better academic performance at all levels. A review of the literature about motivation revealed dominant themes: high expectations and clear academic goals, engaging and motivating classroom instructions, and parental support (Weaver, 2007; Stewart, 2008). There has been a trend to focus motivation research on the role of the classroom teachers and their impact on the academic development of the students (Brophy, Rashid, Rohrkemper, & Glodberger, 1983; Brophy, 1988; Marchall, 1987). Lumsden's (1997) review of the literature on the low motivation of high school students in lower track classes shows that teachers' expectations affect student performance. Students tend to internalize the beliefs teachers have about their ability (Raffini, 1993). When teachers whom students respect do not believe they can accomplish a certain task, students tend to believe they cannot do it themselves. Thus, students who are viewed as lacking in ability or motivation and are not expected to make significant progress. They tend to doubt their own abilities to handle demanding school work (Gonder, 1991). Lumsden (1997) notes that teachers' expectations for students tend to be self-fulfilling, so teachers should regularly examine their own attitudes and beliefs and treat their students as if they already are eager learners.

Not all schools and teachers maintain uniformly high expectations for all students. Evidence suggests that schools can improve student learning by encouraging teachers and students to set their goals high. A digest made by Lumsden (1997) synthesizes recent research about teachers' expectations and the ways in which teachers' expectations affect student performance; the ways in which teachers' beliefs translate into differential behavior toward students; other factors that influence expectations of students; students' attitudes toward and perceptions of expectations; and the ways in which teachers can maintain high expectations. Because teachers' expectations for students tend to be self-fulfilling, teachers should regularly examine their own attitudes and beliefs and treat their students as if they already are eager learners.

Effective teaching should be universal design for learning and differentiated instruction for learners who have different needs and performance at different levels (Voltz, 2001). Our review of research on the motivation of students showed that traditional classroom instruction featured lectures and rote memorization and that such strategies did not work with students who were

tracked into lower achieving groups (Weaver, 2007). A limited literature review of the impacts of student motivation on pre-service social studies secondary teacher education shows that successful teacher approaches to best motivate low-achieving students must include the following factors: the communication of high expectations, utilization of a variety of effective teaching strategies, and emphasis on the development of the total child (Michell & Schwager, 1993). This body of literature suggests that methods courses in pre-service social studies teacher education programs must concentrate on classroom dynamics and be less preoccupied with teacher knowledge, authority, and conformity (Lind & Duckworth, 1989). Research shows that it is not the amount of knowledge but new behavior (alternative roles and attitudes) that is most important. Research calls for a teacher education that should develop inquiry, discovery, and critical thinking capacities (Rubin, 2003; Darling-Hammond, 1998). Teacher training should include different teaching techniques and attention to selection and testing of new materials. All these reform plans require that schools must offer an educational environment that is a microcosm of modern changing society. It is a shared hope and expectation that the educational program has an appreciable influence on students' outlook, including political attitudes, values, and beliefs when controversy is allowed and critical thinking encouraged. But in reality, low motivation on the part of students greatly affected the instructors, especially the pre-service teachers who were doing their student teaching before they got certified.

There are two points that relate to motivation deserving mention here. First, motivation tends to remain high in learners whose parents and families are more encouraging and have high expectations (Lucking & Manning, 1996). The local high schools are located in areas where the majority of students come from families of low socioeconomic status. In one of those CP classes, one third of the students come from single parent families, where the priority of the family is seldom the academic achievement of the students. Second, closely related to young learners' motivation is their opinion of their ability to succeed at educational tasks. When student teachers and cooperative teachers tried new techniques, they were discouraged as students preferred old traditional ways of note taking and instructions delivered through lectures.

Research Method and Analysis

The research questions for this study are: What factors contributed to the lack of motivation of high school students in College Preparatory (CP) classes? What impacts the students' lack of motivation has on pre-service teachers?

Data for this study are collected through pre-observation conferences, classroom observations, post-observation conferences, small-group seminars, big-group return-to-campus seminars, and email correspondences with student teachers, high school students in CP classes, and cooperating teachers, and student teachers' weekly reflections. This study used thematic inductive analysis as well as the constant comparative analysis of observation notes and documents (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Strauss & Cornin, 1990). The inductive analysis and constant comparative analysis consisted of four steps – initial coding, selective coding (Charmaz, 2002), discovering and defining categories, and making connections among categories by writing memos (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

Findings

The researcher identified four major factors that contributed to the lack of motivation of the high school students in CP classes. They were: 1) instructors' low academic expectations on CP students; 2) students' learning styles and learning needs are in conflict with the traditional instructional strategies; 3) Insufficient family support for CP students; and 4) pressure on teachers to teach to the End-of-the-Course Test.

First, instructors' expectations on students determine the degree to which students would like to commit themselves to the assignments on a daily basis. While student teachers have been learning about how to "active student engagement in worthwhile learning" in the method course in the teacher education program, they met with resistance from cooperating teachers. One of the in-service teachers wrote in one of the email messages to me that,

> *"the student-centered activities (the student teacher planned) do not work well with CP*
> *students, who do not read their textbooks. Most of CP students in this class do not study*
> *anything we talk about in class once they leave. Motivation is a problem of such magnitude*
> *that it overrides everything we try to do."*

The teacher admitted that he tried engaging activities with his AP, ACP students, but he didn't believe that CP students would get that. So he continued to use traditional note taking with

CP students. What he said to the student teacher who was placed in his class greatly bothered the teacher and the researcher. After teaching for fifteen years in this school, he said,

> *"Some students are very simply unteachable. There is nothing you will do to motivate them. You will learn to teach to the kids that WANT to learn, and leave the others behind."*

This also greatly frustrated the student teacher who thinks all students can be taught. She believes that something out there reaches the students minds and hearts. Teaching to her is to "*find out what those things are and working them into the classroom.*" In the following weeks, anytime she intervened and asked to do some different things in classroom, such as group work, creative projects, etc., she was met with negativity. It had been painful for her to look at students' faces when they came into classroom with hollow and empty minds from copying and reciting horribly boring notes she herself had fed them. Such a low expectation of students will not help students learn. Instead teaching in that fashion is like feeding information into minds that could not analyze or think about the information at all.

Second, traditional teaching strategies, such as lectures and note taking and copying cannot engage students in classrooms. Students' learning needs and interests, students' different academic abilities were found in conflicts with the traditional instructional strategies. In the reflection essays that student teachers wrote about their most successful and most unsuccessful teaching experiences in classrooms, most student teachers commented that when they had inadequate psychological and instructional preparation, they were more likely to head towards a less engaging and less successful experience. They all agreed that mediocre and monotonous teaching materials and teaching styles just do not work with CP students.   They all observed that note copying and lectures, especially lengthy ones like what the cooperating teachers have been doing in classroom never worked with student teachers, who do not have the authority to command an increasingly noisy classroom. Notes, copied but never digested, are not going to cram into and stay in the minds of students.

On the other hand, student teachers all agree that there are things that instructors could do to engage students into worthwhile learning. For example, in one of the lessons the researcher observed, card games are used to help build up students' historical empathy in the situations of early immigrants when the instructor deliberately changed the rules of the game without students' knowledge. That class went well as all students participate in the game activity and they reported positively about the result of that lesson. In another class, student teachers tried to divide students into three groups with each group presenting what they learned in the chapter of American

Revolution using one of the three different ways of expressions – talk, write, or draw. Students were very interested and stayed on task the whole period. Student teachers reflected that was a class that they had little discipline or behavioral problems.

Student teachers agreed that "dramatized lectures" accompanied by pictures, visual aids, and other visual stimulants helped a great deal. In the mock trial on Boston Massacre activity, the student teacher encouraged students to bring in costumes, paintings, and other visual aids to facilitate presentation and discussions.

Student teachers noticed that students hate worksheets. They created a wise way to revise and re-use the worksheets to help students review what they have learned in classrooms. For example, the new worksheets do not carry as many recall items as before. Instead, the questions on a worksheet could be challenging the students to promote their high order thinking skills.

Student teachers also find out that for this particular group of students, there is this evident lack of care and understanding in their families and their youth life. They made conscious efforts to establish good rapport, respect, trust, good relationship with the students. Showing care and consideration works far better than exercising power and authority with this group of CP students.

The CP students are more active and chatty than students in other classes. It is therefore a more demanding task for student teachers to deal with CP students. It also provides them with a golden opportunity to try a variety of teaching methods in such a classroom. CP students like to discuss in classrooms so long as instructors function as a good guide. Student teachers also reflected that their CP students prefer a debriefing after each activity for them so that they could leave the class with a handy list of things they learned. For students who have not fallen into a set of good study habits, student teachers fount it works well if they started teaching them to get into good study habits as basic as holding things in a binder, and keeping things in good order for later use or tests.

The third factor that contributes to the lack of motivation in CP classes is the insufficient family support for CP students. Research shows that family involvement plays a key part in students' academic achievement. While most CP students come from low social economic status families, their parents are not preoccupied with their academic experience at school. The "unteachable students" that cooperating teacher was referring to were the minority (mainly African American) lower class or poverty-ridden students. The ones that lived across the street from the school is what is called the projects in town. The students that came to class one day a week, and

when they did come, one could see in their bloodshot eyes that drugs were a very real part of their lives. Somewhere along the way people had given up on these students. Now, parents hold teachers and schools responsible for shortchanging their children, but they do not resume any responsibilities to help with teachers at home. One of the student teachers participated in parent-teaching conferences although it is not required of the student teachers to do that. She noticed that parents do not want to get involved in the academic development of their own children. Homework assigned on a daily basis goes unchecked by parents. When homework piled up, students would lose confidence and eventually never cared about making up for the task.

The last but not least factor is the pressure on teachers to teach to the End-of-the-Course Test (EOTC). The good thing about this kind of tests is that it is phasing out in the state. But when student teachers were in the field last year, their cooperating teachers had been talking about these tests on an hourly basis. The EOTC seemed to explain the scant in-depth discussion on certain issues. The teachers did not have autonomy to teach to the well being of the students for their future participation in the democracy. They were pressured to teach to the test. One student teacher stated, "we must be through the curriculum by May 7th due to the E.O.C.T.'s. We do not have time to slow down because we will be at fault if a student fails because we didn't finish the course in time." What we observed over the semesters was that instructors, both cooperating teachers and student teachers, had to run through the French Revolution in two days and the American Revolutions in three days. Most of the items on EOTC were lower level thinking tasks. Even if students had a good grasp of them to successfully pass the test, the young minds were not going to retain all those fragmented knowledge.

Due to these factors, student teachers as well as cooperating teachers had to suffer a great deal of frustration. One teacher wrote to me during the semester, *"We have both been cursed by students in the hall and in class over the past two days. We have students who think that they can leave the school whenever they want to and they don't think its skipping. Attendance by some students is so hit and miss that we can't catch the kids up before they are out again."*

The analysis of factors that lead to lack of motivation attempts to increase understanding of this situation and knowledge of what approaches work in motivating these students. It also helps understand the impacts of such a situation on the student teachers. As student teachers reflected, teaching in classroom increases their understanding that student teaching is as challenging as it is often presented to be. For some student teachers, especially those who are just coming out of

college, student teaching sounds somehow more difficult than any other job. For student teachers who have had working experiences elsewhere, student teaching is "*just another professional job with a different set of stresses than other professional jobs".*

Most student teachers reflected that they were "*almost completely unprepared for the realities of the classroom.*" The college of education courses seldom taught them about this level of lack of motivation existing in classroom. When they were there, it was hard for them to make do based on things they learned back in the ivory tower.

Conclusions and Implications

On a more positive note, teaching in such a situation provides the student teachers the opportunity to experience teaching in a diverse, poor school rather than in a middle-class, lily-white school environment. One gets to see how the interaction of politics and education works to disadvantage the students it is trying to help. Students are promoted from one grade to another without basic skills because the school system does not want the drop out rate among disadvantaged groups to rise. However, the students are not offered remedial courses to help them bring their reading skills up to grade level because the presence of such classes would indicate that the schools were tracking along SES, racial and ethical lines. Instead, they are just thrown into high school unprepared for the curriculum. Not surprisingly, many do not succeed in high school. Meanwhile, the educational research community itself is at fault for this lack of preparation. Those on the left argued that if students were more interested in what they were learning, they would be more engaged in the learning process. Therefore they advocate for critical thinking. Those of the right always want to get "back to basics".

Such arguments would remain in the field of educational research. But when we as teachers are challenged to "leave no child behind", could we do anything to motivate the CP students in our own classrooms? The answer is positive. The student teachers have tried some effective teaching strategies to motivate CP students.

First, they devised effort-based grading system. They gave students a participation grade if the students finish a daily or weekly assignment or worksheet. They also provided bonus points if students answered the extra items on a test. They allowed students to make up for a lost grade if students failed to attend schools on certain dates.

Second, student teachers worked on increasing students' feelings of efficacy in the classroom. Developing student interest in the subject was a strategy used to nurture intrinsic motivation. They provided students with multiple performance opportunities. One student teacher, for instance, used pre-write questions before her daily instruction. Students could start each day's lesson by thinking about and commenting on the questions the teacher put on the chalkboard. Another student teacher encouraged students to write a daily journal documenting the activities, assignments and projects. Other student teachers tried oral presentations, group projects, mock trials, simulations, Internet information searching activities, etc.

Third, they increased the students' responsibility and choice. For example, they allowed students to make a choice among a few different assignments designed to reinforce the classroom instruction. For example, a student could choose to finish a worksheet, or write a reflection essay based on a certain unit. A student could also select to write a narrative paper or conduct an interview.

Student teachers' journals and classroom observations indicated that, under such conditions, most students who initially lacked motivation exhibited higher level of engagement, interest, and confidence. A study over a longer period of time should yield more results.

Considering these four factors of low motivation, the pre-service teachers have tried some effective teaching strategies to motivate CP students. Some of these strategies include using effort-based grading system, allowing students to share experiences, and increasing students' responsibility and choice in course work.

While most educators might agree that differences among high school students call for both group and individual instruction, and other types of differentiated instruction to meet the learning needs of students, some instructors of social studies in the local school failed to provide effective learning experiences for CP students to develop substantial interests around the subjects students learn during their high school years. It would be unfair to put all the blames on instructors. It is true that during high school years, most students experience diversifying interests, increased socialization, peer pressure to engage in non-academic pursuits, an increase in both quantity and difficulty of school work, and preoccupation with developmental concerns. It is also true that some schools have low expectations for such students, and in some cases, parents and families allow their children increased freedom and independence. However, classroom instructors have responsibilities to motivate students by using a variety of teaching strategies and making adjustments to students'

needs, learning abilities, and learning styles. But to our great disappointment, we did not observe conscious efforts made toward that end.

Research on the impacts of low motivation of students on pre-service social studies teachers (Butler, 1986; Brophy, 1988; Lind & Duckworth, 1989; Lucking & Manning, 1996) shows that successful teacher approaches to best motivate low-achieving students must include the following factors: the communication of high expectations, utilization of a variety of effective teaching strategies, and emphasis on the development of the total child. This body of literature suggests that methods courses in pre-service social studies teacher education programs must concentrate on classroom dynamics and be less preoccupied with teacher knowledge, authority, and conformity (Lind & Duckworth, 1989). It is not the amount of knowledge but new behavior (alternative roles and attitudes) that is most important (Lucking & Manning, 1996). These studies call for a teacher education that should develop inquiry, discovery, and critical thinking capacities and increase supervised students' field experiences. For example, teacher training should include different teaching techniques and attention to selection and testing of new materials (Lucking & Manning, 1996). Teacher training should encourage pre-service teachers to work more with students in real classrooms in professional development schools prior to student teaching. All these reform plans require that schools must offer an educational environment that is a microcosm of modern changing society. It is a shared hope and expectation that the educational program has an appreciable influence on students' outlook, including political attitudes, values, and beliefs when controversy is allowed and critical thinking is encouraged. In reality, however, low motivation on the part of students greatly affects the instructors, especially the pre-service teachers who are doing their student teaching before they get certified.

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