

Introduction

The Invisible Ecosystem of Student Motivation

I am on hall duty when one of my students—I'll call him "Damian" here—is kicked out of algebra class for the third consecutive school day. On Friday, he apparently called the teacher a "fucking bitch." On Monday, he was thrown out as soon as he stepped through the door because the teacher was still angry about Friday and thought Damian should have been suspended (but had not drawn up the paperwork to initiate the process). Today—which is also the last day before the math MCAS¹ exam that Damian and the rest of the tenth grade will be taking—he was talking in class, Damian tells me as he shuffles slowly toward the hall monitoring table.

It is May 2008, and I am nearly through an exhausting third year in the Boston Public Schools. After teaching eleventh and twelfth grade my first two years, I was shifted to the lower school to fill a vacant slot that was initially supposed to be four sections of ninth-grade English. My school, however, had also just acquired a new headmaster, and student recruitment had fallen through the cracks during the transition,² leaving the ninth grade underenrolled and necessitating a dramatic intraschool restructuring two weeks into the school year. My unit's four sections of ninth graders were consolidated into two, and we acquired two sections of tenth graders from another unit of teachers within the school—who, somehow, were allowed to hand-pick which students they wanted to reassign to us. On their first day in the new configuration, my tenth graders looked around the room at each other and said, "Dang, they put all the bad kids together in here."

Though algebra class has been especially contentious, everyone has been struggling with these tenth graders all year. A month ago, I had it out with Damian myself when he would not stop wandering around the room, poking

*his classmates, and not doing his work during my class—and then also refused to serve the detention I gave him until I threatened to suspend him in a heated exchange that I later regretted. I probably lose my cool a bit more than I should with Damian because his latent potential is so obvious to me. He reads the extra books I give him outside of class and seems to have a near-photographic memory for tiny details in them; we’ve discussed the ethical issues raised in *Monster*, *Flowers for Algernon*, *The House of the Scorpion*, *The Kite Runner*, *The Bluest Eye*. Even when I handed him *The Sound and the Fury* on a whim, just because it’s a favorite of mine and I wondered what he’d do with it, he gave it a fair shot before finally returning to me to ask, “Miss, what is this?”*

Damian is also an especially frustrating puzzle to me because he seems so self-aware. He surprised both of us during our suspension argument after I told him, “I am so sick and tired of having this conversation with you!” and he replied, “I’m tired of making you have to have this conversation with me.” Nor is he defiant and confrontational with teachers by default; last week of his own volition, he hung out in my classroom with me and my coteacher after school, joking that he was going to crash her upcoming wedding. “You know that part at the end when they ask if anyone has objections?” he said. “I’m gonna stand up and start wilin’ out: ‘Hell no, I didn’t approve this marriage—nobody even asked me!’ They’re all gonna be like, ‘Who’s that skinny Black kid in the front row?’”

*Now, he perches on the edge of my table, all long limbs and natural hair and big eyes—he’s always reminded me of a *Simpsons* character come to life—and suddenly says, “You know how when you’re a little kid, they give you a ribbon or a prize no matter how you do? Like if it’s a competition, even the last-place kid gets something because he tried? I don’t think that’s right.”*

I reply that some people believe that we’re raising generations of people who never develop self-reliance because they are dependent on praise for everything they do. Damian nods emphatically: “I think that’s true! And it makes the people who win less motivated because it’s like, if you get a prize for coming in last, who cares about coming in first?”

The above is a scene that I documented in my teaching journal at the time and that has stayed with me, a dozen years later. It’s an exchange that I hope resonates with other teachers who undoubtedly have their own Damians: charmers chock-full of potential whom we somehow, infuriatingly, just cannot quite seem to motivate consistently to attend to their schoolwork. After that year, I was shifted back to upper school and therefore ended up teaching Damian—and that whole cohort—for eleventh and twelfth grade. While Damian did become somewhat consistently more engaged in English,

he jeopardized his graduation by very nearly failing a required class on a technicality that he stubbornly refused to rectify until the last minute. On graduation day, I took a picture with him, joking that I needed the photographic proof that he'd actually finished school. And high school graduation was the finish line for Damian; he did not pursue any further education.

I ultimately left the high school classroom after eight years to try to answer the motivational questions and puzzles underlying student interactions like these. What was I doing wrong, or what more could I be doing for students like Damian to get them to invest in their schoolwork? Was he right that “participation-trophy” culture diminished the appeal of working hard, or was he just making excuses? Why didn't his love of reading and his clear affection for at least some of his teachers transfer to school assignments? What was it about algebra class—or the algebra teacher—that resulted in Damian getting kicked out multiple times every week? Had we failed him by not pushing him harder to go to college? What would have happened to him if he had pursued postsecondary education? Would he have blossomed in a less regimented learning environment, or would he have struggled without daily attention and check-ins from familiar educators?³

While the research questions of greatest interest to me have always focused on what I and other educators could do differently, I also remain cognizant of the broader contexts that shape educators' responses to students like Damian. When given the opportunity, Damian's former teachers chose to ship him and the other self-identified “bad kids” out of their unit—a decision that infuriated me at the time and directly impacted my classroom experience, but one that I can now more fully recognize as a downstream effect of a vacuum in school leadership and the ensuing institutional chaos. Those teachers, like my algebra colleague, used a tool that had been made available to them to try to create a better learning environment for their remaining students. These are crude tools, but sometimes born of necessity due to teachers not knowing alternative strategies, perceiving a lack of support—or accountability—from school administration, or simply being at wit's end. Many of these teachers were, like me, young and idealistic but working themselves to exhaustion in an often-unforgiving large urban public school district.

Stepping away from the classroom myself has only strengthened my empathy for educators and the challenges of their work. This empathy has demanded a holistic approach in my classroom-based research: I analyze educators' pedagogical approaches but always strive to contextualize them within each educator's specific situation. I identify possible alternative instruc-

tional decisions that educators could make, yet I also explore the reasons why the educators are not pursuing those options and what supports they might need to do so.

This book is situated at the intersection of these questions and perspectives. It presents four detailed case studies known as “portraits” that explore how educators can influence student motivation through instructional practices in the classroom and how these motivationally supportive practices may look different in high school versus college classrooms. The portraits depict secondary and postsecondary classrooms as complex motivational spaces where dedicated and well-intentioned educators implement innovative motivational supports but also encounter challenges in the form of individual student needs, institutional expectations and constraints, the stakes and pressure of the transition itself, and their own limitations. My goal is for the portraits to evoke recognition, empathy, and identification in readers as educators, school leaders, instructional developers, and scholars. The portraits prompt readers to reflect not only on how to support student motivation during a critical period of transition, but also on the necessary parallel process of supporting high school and college educators’ ability to enact motivationally supportive instructional strategies.

In this introduction, I lay the groundwork for the portraits that will follow. I first present a practitioner framework for defining motivation, followed by a brief discussion of classroom influences on student motivation. I then review research findings on trends in student motivation from late secondary school into postsecondary education and specifically within the discipline of writing, my primary focus here. I close by framing the unique contributions that portraiture methodology can make to classroom-based motivation research across the secondary and postsecondary sectors and providing an overview of the four educators spotlighted in this book and the development of their portraits.

Motivation as Mindsets

Motivation is commonly misunderstood as a relatively static personal trait or disposition (i.e., people either are motivated in certain areas or they aren’t) and that quantity is its key property (i.e., people can be more or less motivated toward certain tasks). However, motivation is a dynamic psychological process that is constantly in flux, and contemporary motivation theories are just as concerned with the quality and nature of student motivation as with

the quantity. From a psychological perspective, motivation is the process of initiating and sustaining behavior in service of a goal (Schunk et al., 2014). It is an internal energy that influences our behavior by getting us to start, and then persist at, a particular task. Because it involves the selection of a goal and directs different kinds of behaviors related to that goal, motivation has many components and many touchpoints where it can be influenced, for better or worse.

The University of Chicago's Consortium on School Research (UCCSR) synthesizes multiple theories of motivation into four "mindsets" that, together, express motivation as a kind of inner voice within students. The four motivational mindsets are: "I belong in this academic community," "This work has value for me," "My ability and competence grow with my effort," and "I can succeed at this" (Farrington et al., 2012). I refer to these in shorthand throughout the book as **belonging, value mindset, growth mindset**, and **competence mindset**. When students experience these mindsets in academic situations, they feel the confidence and desire necessary to begin and continue positive academic behaviors. By contrast, when students do not experience these mindsets, or experience a negative version of the mindset in relation to academic tasks, their motivation toward that task is undermined. I discuss the research underlying each mindset in more detail in subsequent chapters but provide a brief overview here.

"I belong in this academic community" reflects the feeling that one is seen, accepted, and valued at school, which is a critical prerequisite for wanting to engage academically (Goodenow, 1993). Rooted in attachment theory (Baumeister & Leary, 1995), social belonging has long been recognized in psychological research as a basic human need (Deci & Ryan, 2002). In school settings, a common indicator for sense of belonging is a student's answer to the question, "Does anyone notice—or mind—when I'm not here?" Research has consistently found a positive association between perceived belonging at school and motivational and achievement outcomes (Beachboard et al., 2011). Conversely, feeling a lack of psychological security and social connections in classrooms and schools can impede students' motivation for academic tasks; it is difficult for students to summon a desire to engage when they feel unvalued or are in conflict with the teacher and/or their peers.

While belonging is an important condition for academic engagement, "This work has value for me" expresses students' reason for wanting to engage in specific tasks or subject areas in school. The expectancy-value theory of motivation identifies three interrelated types of value that students

can perceive in an academic task: 1) intrinsic value, the inherent interest or satisfaction a student gets from doing the task; 2) attainment value, the value of a task for a student's sense of personal identity, including its ability to help the student achieve personally meaningful and important goals; and 3) utility value, the usefulness of a task for an individual's daily life and future goals or its broader social utility (Eccles & Wigfield, 2020; Gaspard et al., 2015). Research has shown that students' perception of value toward a task or within a subject area predicts their academic performance and academic choices, such as choosing to enroll in similar courses or choosing to major in a related field (Wigfield et al., 2016).

"My ability and competence grow with my effort" articulates a theory of intelligence as malleable, in contrast to a "fixed" theory of intelligence as a static, innate trait (Dweck, 1999). Individuals tend to endorse one of these two theories of intelligence, which provide different frameworks for setting achievement goals and interpreting successes and failures. Individuals with a growth mindset tend to pursue mastery goals focused on learning and to view failure or mistakes as an inevitable part of development and an important learning opportunity. By contrast, individuals with a fixed mindset view both successes and failures as evidence of innate ability (i.e., either being inherently smart at or dumb/bad at something) and can tend to pursue performance goals rooted in social comparison (either looking smarter or avoiding looking dumber than others). A robust body of research demonstrates that individuals with a growth mindset and mastery goal orientation exert more effort in their learning, persist through difficulty, are more resilient, and achieve at higher levels than people who hold a fixed view of intelligence (Blackwell et al., 2007; Kennett & Keefer, 2006; Mangels et al., 2006; Yeager & Dweck, 2012).

"I can succeed at this" describes a positive self-assessment of one's own competence and likelihood of success that is central to many different motivation theories (Bandura, 1997; Deci & Ryan, 2002; Wigfield & Eccles, 1992). Evidence consistently shows that students who feel competent and are confident that they can succeed are more likely to engage and persist in academic tasks (Baier et al., 2016; Salanova et al., 2011). Competence mindsets also predict academic achievement as measured by both grades and test scores (Rosenzweig & Wigfield, 2017; Wigfield et al., 2016). Importantly, competence mindsets do not necessarily need to be accurate; research suggests that individuals' subjective judgments of their own ability influence their academic choices and behaviors in ways that are independent from their actual ability or skill level as measured objectively (Schunk & Pajares, 2005).

Identifying these four mindsets is helpful for understanding the distinct components of student motivation, but it is important to note that the mindsets interact with and influence each other. For example, the expectancy-value theory of motivation examines the relationship between the competence and value mindsets in predicting academic achievement and behaviors (Eccles & Wigfield, 2020). We may tend to be more interested in and hold more value toward tasks we know we can succeed at, but our valuation of a task may also help us persist when we encounter difficulty or are not feeling so successful at the task. Other theories examine how belonging can promote competence mindsets by providing positive peer models and social supports that help students feel more confident and capable (Bandura, 1991; Ryan & Deci, 2020).

Thus, rather than being concerned with amounts or degrees, high-quality motivation involves students experiencing all four mindsets in positive and mutually reinforcing ways. Conceptualizing student motivation as this set of mindset statements helps reframe the central questions for educators to consider about student motivation. Instead of questions with a yes/no or quantitative focus, like *Are my students motivated?* or *How can I increase my students' motivation?* it can be helpful to think in more descriptive terms. *What pattern of mindsets is each of my students demonstrating today, or for this particular task? What can I do to help each student get closer to the optimal mindsets for motivation and engagement?* While educators' practical expertise often provides them with good intuitions about students' motivational needs (Dja'far et al., 2016; Hardré & Hennessey, 2013), a primary goal of this book is to help educators practice thinking about student motivation through this more nuanced framework. As such, the chapters strive to provide both an in-depth look at a focal mindset through the educator's portrait and insights on the interplay between the mindsets in the interpretive commentary that bookends the portrait.

The Motivational Ecosystem in Classrooms

Even with a well-developed understanding of motivation, educators often encounter challenges with trying to support student motivation in the classroom. Motivation is an internal process, whereas educators can only control factors external to the student; the final step of fully endorsing and integrating the motivational mindsets will always fall to the student alone. Zachary, one of the focal educators in this book, describes motivation as one of the “invisible forces” in students that he tries to wrangle in service

of learning but is never quite sure whether he's successfully snared. This intangibility may explain why educators often feel their influence on motivation is limited. In an interview sample of high school teachers, Hardré and Sullivan (2008) found a majority expressed doubts about the effectiveness of their motivational strategies, such as, "A lot of the time there just isn't much that we can do to motivate [students]," "For some of them, nothing helps," and "I keep trying . . . but I wonder if in the long run it makes any difference at all" (p. 2069).

In fact, educators have a great deal of influence on student motivation, though that influence may not always be intentional or in the desired direction. Borrowing a metaphor from Urie Bronfenbrenner's (1977) work in developmental psychology, we can view motivational mindsets as part of a larger, complex system of psychological processes operating in each classroom, akin to a biological ecosystem. Classrooms, like ecosystems, comprise many different interconnected relationships and cyclical processes among the living organisms and the environment. Seemingly insignificant events can have ripple effects elsewhere. Even when teachers may not consciously be trying to motivate (or demotivate) students, their reward structures, explicit and implicit messages, and other cues in the classroom supply information to students that can influence their motivational mindsets (Liu et al., 2023). In the opening vignette, Damian alludes to this influence when he identifies participation-trophy culture as a motivational deterrent.

What makes educators' work doubly challenging is that, unlike in a biological ecosystem, the downstream effects of these complex environmental processes are not observable, even at a microscopic level. The "invisible forces" of motivational mindsets ultimately hinge not on any objectively identifiable stimulus, but rather on an individual student's *subjective perception* of what is happening around them (Kaplan et al., 2002). A key motivational competency for educators, then, is perspective-taking: the ability to view their teaching practice through a student's eyes and motivational mindsets. While it is impossible for anyone ever to know and be able to experience the full complexity of another's experience, educators can endeavor to cultivate new ways of seeing that at least partially illuminate the invisible. Thus, in addition to promoting a reconceptualization of student motivation as qualitative mindset patterns rather than static quantities, another goal of this book is to use portraiture to help educators incorporate that new conception of motivation into a kind of motivational-perspective-taking "lens" through which they can examine, first, the focal educators and classrooms featured in the case studies, then ultimately their own practice. Honing this skill

will enable educators to recognize more opportunities to enhance students' motivational mindsets in service of higher-quality motivation and learning.

I discuss the research on specific environmental influences for each mindset in subsequent chapters, but the metaphor of a psychological, partly invisible ecosystem is helpful for remembering that these are dynamic, living interactions, rather than automatic inputs and outputs. Motivating and demotivating influences can vary from classroom to classroom, and even from day to day or task to task within the same classroom. A student can therefore seem highly motivated in one class but not in another, or they can vary in motivation toward different tasks in a given class depending on how the task is presented and what supports are available to promote the student's belonging, value, growth, and competence mindsets in relation to the task.

Crucially, the motivational ecosystem includes a feedback-loop mechanism, such that the influence does not only operate in one direction, classroom event influencing student motivation. Students' motivational mindsets also influence how students behave and interact with others in the learning environment, such as their teacher or peers. Those interactions are new learning-related events that then inform students' motivational mindsets in future academic situations. For example, one of the strongest influences on the competence mindset "I can succeed at this" is prior mastery of a similar or related task (this is discussed further in chapter 4). Thus, prior learning experiences have already shaped the motivational mindsets that students bring to day 1 of a new class, and each new learning experience informs their subsequent motivation.

The cycle of this feedback loop operating over time means that although all classroom educators can promote positive motivational mindset development in students, they are also contending with students' entering mindsets. This is especially salient for educators working with older students, who have many years of prior learning behind them; I certainly felt at times that teaching Damian was like working in a closed system, where no new inputs were making any difference, even as the consequences felt increasingly high-stakes and imminent. However, the constant presence of that cycle of motivational feedback is also an opportunity for classroom educators to provide learning experiences that reinforce the positive motivational mindsets students may bring with them and disrupt the negative mindsets, creating a stronger foundation for future learning.

Of course, current and former classroom-based learning experiences are not the only forces acting on student motivation at any given moment. Other domains of life—family, friends, communities of faith, work—play a

role in the attitudes and belief that students formulate related to learning. A student's motivational ecosystem also includes indirect influences from people, institutions, and policies with whom they have no direct contact. The classroom practices that students find motivating or demotivating may not always be a result of the educator's intentional design but rather are "baked in" to the overall fabric of a department, school, or system, or else are overt constraints placed on the educators, as we will see in some of the portraits. As with students' mindsets, though, the educator's *perception* of broader constraints or culture is the key influence on their practice. My hope is that cultivating a new lens on students' motivational experience can also help educators refresh their view on their own ecosystems and see new opportunities and affordances, even amidst the constraints. In doing so, this new lens on student motivation can support a parallel motivational process in educators, enhancing their own mindsets about their competence and growth potential in teaching and their feelings of membership in and value for the profession.

The portraits in this book aim to illuminate the motivational ecosystems created by the four focal educators in their classrooms. My focus at the classroom level is not meant to be evaluative of individual educators or to hold them solely responsible for student motivation, but rather to combat educators' perceptions of their limited influence on student motivation. I mean, in other words, to make visible the role educators can and do play in shaping those invisible forces by highlighting strategies within their sphere of control—that is, their classroom—that can make a difference for students. Though not their primary focus, the portraits also provide some insights into each educator's professional background, experience, and working conditions within their respective institution to illustrate how these contextual factors in the extended ecosystem can indirectly influence the motivational climate that students ultimately encounter in the classroom. The postportrait reflections in each chapter, the interlude between chapters 2 and 3, and the cross-case discussion in chapter 5 delve into these factors in more detail. My goal is for the portraits, as a collection, to help identify motivationally supportive classroom practices that secondary and postsecondary educators can enact, as well as supports that the educators themselves may need to implement these strategies.

Motivation at the College Transition

Creating motivationally supportive learning environments for students is especially challenging—but also especially important—when students transition

from one school to another because students often confront different norms and expectations for learning at their new schools that can undermine their motivation (Farrington et al., 2012). By definition, sense of belonging is disrupted by school transitions, as students have to establish new adult and peer relationships. The change is especially stark at the college transition, as many students move from a localized K–12 educational system, where they may have had a consistent peer cohort and/or stronger connections to school through parents and siblings, to the far more varied options for higher education (Venezia et al., 2003, 2005), which they often embark on alone.

The college transition also coincides with a well-documented trend of decreasing perceptions of value and overall motivation for school over time in the K–12 sector (Jacobs et al., 2002; Spinath & Steinmayr, 2008; Watt, 2004; Wigfield et al., 2015). While young children are often enthusiastic about school, those feelings of interest and value tend to decline when they enter middle school and then further erode in high school. This pattern coincides with student perceptions of a greater emphasis on performance goals and competition in secondary school (E. M. Anderman et al., 2002), which can reinforce fixed mindsets and focus students on the demonstration, rather than actual development, of competence. Paradoxically, the elective nature of higher education overall, as well as the expectation that students declare a major, can lead college instructors to assume that students have a valued area of specialization that they are motivated to pursue and can recognize the value of the knowledge and skills they are acquiring in relation to that goal (Cox, 2009; Dja'far et al., 2016). There can be an overoptimism about students' ability to seamlessly adopt a fairly different way of doing school than anything they have previously experienced. Colin, one of the college instructors in this book, was bemused by his first-semester college students' enduring preoccupation with high school culture but seemed to have a moment of new insight when I pointed out to him that the difference between being a high school senior versus a first-year college student was a matter of a few months.

Finally, confronting more rigorous coursework and higher academic expectations in college can threaten students' growth and competence mindsets or further reinforce existing negative mindsets in these areas. In a phenomenon known as the big-fish-little-pond effect, studies have shown a consistent negative relationship between the achievement levels at a school overall and individual students' competence mindsets, such that students at higher-achieving schools experience lower feelings of competence, regardless of the student's individual achievement level (Marsh & Hau, 2003). Similarly, Kosovich and colleagues (2017) found that college students' competence

mindsets in an introductory class generally declined over the course of the semester and that this reduced sense of competence was related to a decrease in perceived value for the course. Other research has shown that college students with fixed mindset can become defiant about the decreased academic performance and critical feedback that some of them inevitably experience (Forsythe & Johnson, 2017; Nussbaum & Dweck, 2008), potentially making it more challenging for college instructors to nurture growth mindset as well as the actual academic improvement that could strengthen students' competence mindsets.

Even as the college transition is a vulnerable time for student motivation, however, research suggests that positive motivational mindsets could be critical tools in helping students experience a smoother first-year transition and better academic outcomes in college overall (Greenfield, 2013; Venezia & Jaeger, 2013). For example, Han and colleagues (2017) found that high measures of perceived competence, belonging, and value in first-year college students predicted their first-year academic performance and retention between the first and second years. These findings are consistent with other studies on the importance of belonging and competence mindsets for college students' persistence (Baier et al., 2016; Wright et al., 2013) and academic performance (Chemers et al., 2001; Freeman et al., 2007; D. R. Johnson et al., 2007; Krumrei-Mancuso et al., 2013). Other studies of early college students have also demonstrated a relationship between academic performance and motivational factors aligned with the value and growth mindsets (Bong, 2001; DeFreitas, 2012; D'Lima et al., 2014; E. Jones, 2008). There is evidence that the big-fish-little-pond effect is short-lived and that being in a more challenging academic and peer environment eventually raises individual students' achievement levels (Stäbler et al., 2017), which would in turn be expected to promote their competence mindsets and sense of belonging in college. Attending to students' mindsets during this time could therefore support and strengthen similarly adaptive patterns in motivation and achievement.

The evidence suggesting that positive motivational mindsets could be important assets in students' adjustment to college makes motivational support a worthy target for secondary-postsecondary alignment efforts. Studies have shown that high school experiences, particularly relationships with high school teachers, influence students' relationship-building interactions with college faculty, potentially influencing their sense of belonging (Hudley et al., 2009; Hurtado et al., 2011). Research has also demonstrated that high school students who are better prepared academically for college tend to have

greater perceived competence compared to their less-prepared peers (Melzer & Grant, 2016) and that precollege students' competence as well as value mindsets for a subject can predict their academic behaviors in college, such as college course selection and choice of major (Musu-Gillette et al., 2015; Priess-Groben & Hyde, 2017).

However, K–16 alignment efforts on motivational mindsets and similar skills have received less attention and investment than initiatives focused on academic expectations (Kirst & Venezia, 2004) and curriculum alignment (ACT, 2016; Alliance for Excellent Education, 2007). There are several possible reasons for this oversight. One is that the secondary and postsecondary sectors have historically operated quite separately in both practice and research (Venezia et al., 2003), creating obstacles for people trying to conduct research or provide instructional development that spans the two sectors. Another reason is that academic standards and curriculum are typically documented in some way, which facilitates large-scale and systematic comparison across sectors. By contrast, motivational support is a more nebulous topic, especially given the unique features of each classroom as a motivational ecosystem. Finally, instructional practices are far less researched in higher education compared to the K–12 sector, in part because of sector differences in pedagogical training and professional pathways for educators (Baum & McPherson, 2019).

The college classroom in particular has not received much attention as a setting where motivational mindsets can be promoted by the instructor of record. Efforts to promote positive mindset development in first-year college students are more commonly situated in student affairs, advising, or specialized first-year programming such as first-year seminars (Hyers & Joslin, 1998) and learning communities (Beachboard et al., 2011), rather than in core academic classes (Conley, 2015). This book aims to fill part of the gap created by these challenges by presenting portraits of twelfth-grade and first-year college classrooms and how the educators in these classrooms play a critical role in fostering positive motivational mindsets that can facilitate students' college transition.

A Focus on Writing

The portraits in this book are all set in writing-based classrooms: high school English classes and first-year undergraduate introductory writing classes that are not part of broader institutional first-year support initiatives like a

learning community or first-year seminar. There are both methodological and substantive reasons for this choice. At a basic methodological level, focusing on a particular discipline aids in cross-sector comparisons that are already complicated by multiple contextual variables. Substantively, however, writing classrooms also offer unique affordances for this work as well as opportunities to contribute to the knowledge base on motivation at the college transition.

Writing is a critical academic skill for college readiness and subsequent college success (O'Neill et al., 2012), and it also socializes students in the academic culture of college (Sommers & Saltz, 2004). The intellectual work of college, across disciplines, is often carried out and demonstrated through academic writing, so learning to write in and for college is a central dimension of becoming a college student. The importance of writing is reflected in the prevalence of four-year English requirements in high school and first-year writing requirements in college (ACT, 2014; NCTE, 2013), making it close to a universal academic experience for students across the college transition, regardless of intended major: students write through their last semester of high school, and they have to write from their first semester in college. Examining the motivational opportunities and challenges in writing classrooms on each side of the college transition is therefore a key first step for understanding what educators can do to better support their students' college readiness and success.

In addition to its ubiquity and centrality in the college transition experience, writing is a complex task that draws heavily on students' motivational reserves (MacArthur et al., 2016). A dynamic and cyclical process of conceptualizing, planning, organizing, drafting, and revising is essential for developing an effective piece of writing (Downs, 2016; S. Jones, 2014). As such, the writing process also affords multiple opportunities for motivational mindsets to serve as assets or liabilities, depending on the students' entering mindsets and the extent to which the circumstances of the writing task promote positive mindset development. As with research on the college transition overall, however, the exploration of students' writing experience as they move from K–12 to postsecondary education has typically examined courses taken (Imbrenda, 2018) or contrasting expectations and beliefs about the purpose and nature of writing assignments (Addison & McGee, 2010; Patterson & Duer, 2006), but without a specific focus on motivational implications or pedagogical strategies per se. Indeed, studying motivationally supportive instruction within writing classes is a relatively new area of exploration, even though the separate fields of motivation research and composition studies have long and robust histories (Hidi & Boscolo, 2006; MacArthur & Graham, 2016).

Contemporary work that does aim to bridge the two fields typically takes a cognitive perspective by synthesizing motivational research on the constructs underlying the competence, value, and growth mindsets and aligning these with composition research on writing purpose, authenticity, and meaningfulness, as well as the management of writing processes (Boscolo & Gelati, 2018). For example, studies have shown that attending to mindset constructs such as self-efficacy and perceived value can improve students' writing performance (Pajares et al., 2007; Zumbunn et al., 2014). However, scholars have also identified the need for greater attention to sociocultural elements of writing and writing classrooms (Boscolo & Hidi, 2006), which implicates the belonging mindset. Additionally, few studies have focused on the affective or emotional experiences of writing that implicate student motivation—such as when receiving and incorporating feedback, writing multiple drafts, and interpreting evaluation criteria (Ballenger & Myers, 2019; Callahan & Chumney, 2009; Cox, 2009; Feltham & Sharen, 2015)—rather than using writing performance as the main outcome of interest when examining motivationally supportive practices.

This book aims to bring the fields of motivation, college transition, and composition studies more directly into conversation with each other. My approach acknowledges the complexity of learning contexts in the K–12 and postsecondary sectors and the central role of participants' motives and meaning-making within those contexts. Although I ground my work in mindset constructs drawn from a synthesis of motivation theories, I embed the discussion of these mindsets within rich descriptions of the pedagogical puzzles that educators encounter when teaching writing on either side of the college transition. My goal is that readers who are well versed in educational psychology will recognize familiar constructs from the motivation literature but will come to see them in a more complex and textured way, while readers experienced in college transition work and/or writing instruction will recognize the classroom contexts depicted here but will gain a motivational lens for reflecting on their own work.

Developing the Portraits

I developed the case studies in this book using a qualitative research methodology called “portraiture,” which aims to depict the nuance and complexity of human experience through rich narratives known as portraits (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). While the foci of portraits can range in scope and scale—including schools (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1983),

concepts (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2000), and processes (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2012)—the methodology always attends to the “ecological context” of its focal subject or phenomenon (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 44). This made it an ideal vehicle for examining individual educators and the ecosystems—both experienced and created by them—in which they strive to support student motivation.

Educator developers have long touted the affordances of case narratives as a vehicle for teacher learning (Gravett et al., 2017; Heitzmann, 2008; Moje & Wade, 1997). In my own professional experiences working with secondary and postsecondary educators, I have seen educators’ positive responses to text or video cases as helping to “make it concrete.” During the study, all four of my participants expressed, on numerous occasions, their interest in reading the other participants’ portraits. Though they did not necessarily have a model for what the final portraits would look like, they understood intuitively that reading portraits of other educators would lead them to a deeper understanding of their own teaching context and would contribute to their toolkit of motivationally supportive strategies to use in the classroom.

However, portraiture differs in important ways from both the teaching cases typically used in professional learning contexts and other qualitative research methodologies like ethnography. Portraiture affords the opportunity for a researcher to present the reader with analytic themes as in other qualitative research, but through more expansive and literary narratives. These narratives are also longer than typical cases used for educational purposes and incorporate more aesthetic features, particularly metaphors. The rich descriptions and use of metaphor in portraits are meant to invite and encourage the reader’s active interpretation and response—as with literature or visual art—rather than positioning the reader as a more passive recipient of didactically transferred information. As a former teacher turned researcher, I have found portraiture uniquely suited to capturing the overall “feel” of a classroom: the overlapping voices and intersecting personalities, the spontaneous and improvisational elements, the delightful messiness, and—perhaps most of all—the humor. Given the subjectivity of student uptake of motivational influences, the conveyance of this classroom gestalt is essential for understanding the complexity and nuance of a motivational ecosystem that is perceived and experienced differently by each student.

Additionally, portraiture deliberately seeks to counter the “focus on pathology” characteristic of much social science research by rooting itself in a search for goodness that acknowledges that “the expression of goodness

will always be laced with imperfections” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 9). The methodology therefore takes a generous stance toward participants by seeking to illuminate the pursuit of goodness that drives their choices while simultaneously not papering over the imperfections, limitations, and mistakes that will inherently be found. Portraiture does not aim to label participants’ thinking or actions as “good” or “bad” but rather to add texture to our understanding of human behavior in context. This makes it an appropriate method for exploring educators’ approaches to supporting student motivation and providing educators with cross-sector depictions of classrooms across the college transition. As neither of these goals has received much attention in extant research or opportunities for educator development, the generous, phenomenological approach afforded by portraiture seems warranted.

Proponents of case method advocate careful attention to the composition of cases (Darling-Hammond & Hammerness, 2002; McAninch, 1993; Merseth, 1991); the mere presence of a case does not automatically ensure identification on the part of educators, nor are all cases suited to all teacher education or professional learning situations. Likewise, portraiture adheres to a rigorous methodological process that ensures that the work is empirically sound as well as aesthetically pleasing. In the following sections, I provide an overview of the portrait-development process, focusing on what I deem essential context for the finished portraits and anticipating likely reader questions about the educators, their schools, and key procedures in the research study. Readers who are interested in a deeper methodological perspective are invited to explore appendix A, which includes additional details as well as artifacts from data collection and analysis.

THE EDUCATORS

The data informing the portraits include classroom observations, course documents, and interviews with four classroom educators: two twelfth-grade English teachers and two instructors of first-year college writing. To facilitate within-sector comparisons, I selected high school teachers who worked at similar types of schools and college instructors whose institutions were likewise similar. Because postsecondary pathways vary widely, however, I did not try to align the institutional features of the high schools and colleges to project an “expected” or “typical” college for the graduates of the focal high schools. Nevertheless, all four schools were within a ninety-minute drive of each other in the same northeastern state and students from the two focal

high schools were accepted to both focal colleges during the course of my data collection. The portraits therefore depict college writing instructors that students of the focal high schools might plausibly encounter following their experiences with the profiled high school English teachers.

The portraits introduce my participants and their schools in more depth, but table I.1 below summarizes key characteristics as well as the data collected in each classroom. “Diane Bauer” and “Zachary Kaplan” were the two high school teachers.⁴ They taught at, respectively, “Riverside Academy” and “Oak Bridge School” (OBS), small public schools in separate urban districts of roughly 25,000 students.⁵ Riverside served approximately 700 students in grades 6–12, while OBS served approximately 275 students in grades 7–12. Student cohorts generally entered both schools at the earliest grade level through lottery-based admissions, with few new students enrolling in the later grades. At both schools, the majority were students of color, and there was a high percentage of “economically disadvantaged” students.⁶ Both schools also had impressive results on the state high school equivalency exam, with passing rates in each subject exceeding those of their respective districts.

My college instructors, “Liz Cartwright” and “Colin Zimmerman,” taught at “Mayfield University” and “Abbott University,” private institutions with selective undergraduate admissions. Mayfield served approximately 2,200 undergraduates, with a first-year cohort of about 540. Abbott served approximately 5,000 undergraduates, including 1,300 first-year students. Mayfield was rated “highly selective” under the Barron’s classification, with a 55 percent overall admissions rate; incoming first-year students had average critical reading and mathematics SAT scores in the low 600s, and an average high school GPA of 3.65. Abbott was rated “most selective” by Barron’s, with a 16 percent admissions rate and average incoming SAT scores in the low 700s. Both colleges were predominantly White institutions, posting similar percentages of domestic students of color (22 percent for both) and international students (Mayfield: 14 percent, Abbott: 12 percent), and had fairly low numbers of Pell Grant recipients (Mayfield: 22 percent, Abbott: 13 percent). Appendix A provides more detailed information about the four schools.

Each educator chose a focal class for me to visit consistently over the course of one academic semester. I collected data from January to June 2017 for the two high school classrooms, and from August to December 2017 for the two college classrooms. I observed each classroom roughly twice a week (for the college classes that only met twice a week, this was the majority of

Table I.1. Overview of Participants and Data Collection

Participant (<i>Institution</i>)*	Diane Bauer (<i>Reverside Academy</i>)	Zachary Kaplan (<i>Oak Bridge School</i>)	Liz Cartwright (<i>Mayfield University</i>)	Colin Zimmerman (<i>Abbott University</i>)
Personal background	— MA in teaching, EdD from Fairfield University — 29 th year teaching (10 th at Riverside) — Previously taught at comprehensive public high school in Connecticut	— MA in teaching from Mayfield University — 5 th year teaching (all at OBS)	— MFA in fiction from “State University” — 5 th year teaching (3 rd at Mayfield) — Taught analogous course at “State University”	— PhD candidate in English at Abbott University — 5 th year teaching at Abbott — Concurrently teaching same course at “Barton College”
Focal class	— AP English Literature and Composition — 22 students — Met on rotating schedule (57–65 min sessions), 5x/week	— Superheroes in World Literature — 25 students (11 th and 12 th graders) — Met from 12:23–1:23 pm, 4x/week	— First-year writing (“Expository Writing”) — 18 students — Met from 9:00–10:15 am, 2x/week	— First-year writing (“English 101”) — 16 students — Met from 12:00–1:15 pm, 2x/week
Data collected	— Feb–June 2017 — 19 observations — 5 interviews — course documents	— Feb–June 2017 — 17 observations — 5 interviews — course documents	— Aug–Dec 2017 — 25 observations — 4 interviews — course documents	— Sep–Dec 2017 — 21 observations — 4 interviews — course documents

*Participant and focal institution names are pseudonyms, as are “Barton College” and “State University” because of potentially identifiable information in the data when participants discuss their experiences at these institutions.

Source: Author provided.

the total class time for the semester), interviewed the educators periodically, and collected documents related to the course, including student work.

It is important to note that in selecting my participants, I did not seek educators who had earned any particular commendation for their teaching or received specialized training. Instead, I used the topic of the study itself—promoting motivational mindsets—to recruit educators who felt they could identify to me what they already did to support student motivation but were also interested in learning more. The educators profiled in the cases are therefore not meant to be “exemplars”—though I personally consider them extraordinary for their willingness and generosity in opening up their classrooms to me. Rather, I believe there is much to learn from “ordinary” educators like these, including the motivational challenges they face with students and their mixture of effective and imperfect strategies for addressing these challenges.

I used a combination of existing themes from motivation research and open-ended exploration to collect and analyze the data for the portraits. To reduce the obtrusiveness of my observations, I did not record the classes but rather took detailed field notes, guided by motivation theory and research about the types of instructional practices, teacher talk, and classroom features that can either promote or undermine the development of students’ motivational mindsets. I used a similar framework to guide my analysis of course documents. The interviews occurred periodically throughout the semester and provided me with opportunities to learn more about each educator’s thought process behind certain instructional decisions. Occasionally, I was able to share excerpts from my field notes and ask the educator to respond, explain his or her thinking in that moment, and verify my account and interpretation of the event. I recorded and transcribed all interviews.

At the same time, I examined my field notes, the course documents, and the interview transcripts to gain a sense holistically of each educator’s approach to motivation support, independent of motivation theory. I wanted not only to use motivation theory as a lens for looking at educator pedagogy, but also to understand each educator’s pedagogy in its own right and consider ways in which these real-life cases might provide new insights for motivation researchers about what supporting student motivation looks like in the classroom. I documented my emergent thinking, questions, and preliminary hypotheses in memos and eventually developed a set of ten to twelve codes for each participant that described the key characteristics of their teaching. I then mapped these codes onto my original observation framework derived from motivation theory and created a visual matrix of