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Successful Teachers Develop Academic Momentum with Reluctant Students

***This We Believe* Characteristics**

- An inviting, supportive, and safe environment
- High expectations for every member of the learning community
- Students and teachers engaged in active learning

*Denotes the corresponding characteristics from NMSA's position paper, *This We Believe*, for this article.

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> *Last year, I couldn't keep track of my work. I lost homework on the way to school or forgot it at home. I got in a lot of trouble. This year I'm staying out of trouble. I have more friends, some of them are better, some still get in trouble, but not as much as they used to. I'm on the ABC honor roll, so I get to go on the honor roll trips. That's something I've never done before.* (Randy, 01/05)

As an eighth grader, Randy's academic engagement increased dramatically. He rarely got in trouble. He became a leader on community service projects. He qualified for the honor roll. His scores on statewide achievement tests rose significantly. He and his teachers reversed the negative dynamics that had plagued him in years past. Their story demonstrated a pattern of performance that has grown clearer in recent research reports.

In a series of investigations, my colleagues and I have examined ways that students who once did poorly in school made progress and how their teachers nurtured their accomplishments (Strahan, Smith, McElrath, & Toole, 2001; Strahan, 2003; Strahan, Faircloth, Cope, & Hundley, 2007; Strahan & Layell, 2006). We have chronicled ways that successful teachers learned to understand why students are reluctant to do their work, how to help them think through their choices, and how to create classroom learning communities. These practices create "academic momentum."

In the physical sciences, momentum is "a strength or force that keeps growing" (Neufeldt, 1996, p. 874). Athletes and coaches talk of momentum in sports. Advertisers try to create momentum for new products. Politicians try to strengthen momentum for candidates and ideas. In a school setting, momentum is the strength of a student's engagement with learning activities. Students with strong academic momentum approach new assignments with confidence. Based on previous experiences with similar tasks, they know they are likely to do well. If a task proves to be difficult, they know they have a repertoire of skills and strategies they can employ. Students with little academic momentum show little confidence and doubt their ability to do well. In some cases, they have internalized a sense of inadequacy that makes it very difficult to invest effort on assignments. To observers, they may appear "unmotivated," "turned off," or "disconnected."

In our studies, successful teachers have encouraged momentum with reluctant students in similar ways. This article describes these central dynamics and presents a case study to illustrate how

one middle school team put research into practice. These insights suggest ways for other teachers and administrators to enhance their efforts to engage reluctant students more productively.

In developmental language, academic momentum is the integration of "skill" and "will." For some time, researchers have used these constructs to describe how students achieve success in school.

> Since at least the 1980s there has been a sustained research focus on how motivational and cognitive factors interact and jointly influence student learning and achievement. In more colloquial terms, there is recognition that students need both the cognitive skills and the motivational will to do well in school. (Linneback & Pintrich, 2002, p. 313)

To learn new concepts in meaningful ways, students need the *will* to want to understand the information and the *skill* to know how best to invest their energies in the learning process (Zimmerman, 1989; McCombs & Marzano, 1990; Linnenbrink & Pintrich, 2002). For example, a student who has previously done well in school will approach a difficult homework assignment with an expectation to understand what she reads. She believes she can figure out the meaning of the text by focusing on what she reads and taking notes. If she gets confused, she may employ strategies she has learned to make sense of the material. She might ask herself questions, re-read passages, or jot down key words. She might take a brief break and return to the task with greater determination. These strategies give her the will to persist to meet her goal of understanding the material and getting a good grade.

How young adolescents experience academic momentum

In recent years, researchers have identified two connected ways of thinking that create skill and will in academic settings. Students who do well in school have developed *self-efficacy*, that is, they believe they can perform the academic task. They have also internalized a high level of *self-regulation*, believing they can control the factors necessary to perform the task. A growing number of studies have documented how the development of self-efficacy and self-regulation strengthen achievement. Figure 1 presents a brief summary of some of these studies.

Figure 1
Representative studies of self-efficacy and self-regulation

Research reports	Conclusions
Zimmerman (1989)	Successful students more consistently set goals for themselves, used their prior knowledge, considered alternative strategies, developed plans of attack, and considered contingency plans when they ran into trouble. Less successful students were less aware of these learning behaviors and less likely to assume responsibility for their own learning.
Csikszentmihalyi (1989, 1990)	As adolescents performed tasks that were clearly directed toward immediate goals, they reported that they strengthened the skills needed to perform these tasks well. Participants often noted that they felt best about themselves when they were doing well with a task that mattered to them.
McCombs and Marzano (1990)	Learning to think about their thoughts (metacognition) was important to students' development of self-efficacy and self-regulation. Students who succeeded academically understood that they made choices about how to approach tasks and how much to engage.
Zimmerman, Bonner, and Kovach (1996)	Researchers identified a cycle of four connected thinking processes that characterized self-regulation in school settings: self-observation and evaluation, goal setting and strategic planning, strategy implementation and monitoring, and strategic outcome monitoring.
	Researchers documented six types of instructional support that encouraged

Paris and Paris (2001)	self-regulation: providing a variety of strategies for completing academic tasks; showing students how, when, and why to apply these strategies; helping students see how their use of strategies promotes academic successes; helping students see how their peers use strategies; helping students use strategies in other academic subjects; helping students integrate the use of strategies across the curriculum (p. 93).
Linnenbrink and Pintrich (2002)	Motivation was situated, contextual, and domain-specific. Not only were students motivated in multiple ways, but their motivation varied depending on the situation or context in the classroom or school.
Schunk (2003)	In studies that documented growth in literacy, teachers explained and demonstrated specific strategies for reading and writing, showed how these strategies related to students' goals, and helped students evaluate their own progress using these strategies.

These studies describe ways that young adolescents gain academic momentum. Students need self-efficacy to choose to engage with academic tasks and to persist when learning becomes more difficult. Self-efficacy is not a general belief. It is task specific and based on actual accomplishments. For example, a student might believe he can solve computational problems in his math class. When he sees that the problems require addition, subtraction, multiplication, or division, he invests a great deal of energy in solving them, even as they grow more complex. If he has less self-efficacy about solving equations, however, he may give up at an early stage of deliberation.

Academic momentum also requires the internalization of the skills of self-regulation. As noted in Figure 1, these skills connect self-observation, self-evaluation, goal setting and strategic planning, and monitoring. By examining their work, successful students identify ways they want to improve. They then use specific study strategies to try to reach these goals. Based on their progress, they adjust their work plans to improve their performance. When students set meaningful, realistic goals and accomplish them, they become more confident in their abilities as students and assume more responsibility for their learning. This integration of skill and will accelerates academic progress.

How successful teachers nurture academic momentum

Teachers play an essential role in nurturing students' integration of skill and will. Joyce, Wolf, and Calhoun (1993) concluded that successful teaching begins by establishing supporting relationships: "The literature is full of examples of teachers enabling students, even the most unlikely ones, to learn to outstanding degrees and reach beyond prediction to a self-confident, socially committed state of growth" (p. ix).

Such relationships are especially important when students have rarely experienced academic success. Years ago, we had an opportunity to examine the perceptions of a group of students who entered seventh grade with very little academic momentum and "bounced back" to do well that year (Strahan, 1988). We gathered work samples and interviews from a team of seventh graders across an entire school year. At the end of the year, we compared the responses of students who made progress with a matched group of students on the same team who did not make progress. Students who made little progress made few connections with the academic life of their school. When reflecting on their responses to lessons, they expressed a "survival orientation," describing ways they tried to look busy or ask for help. Some took pride in creating disruptions, "getting into it" with classmates and teachers as a way to avoid work. In contrast, students who made progress reported functional strategies for completing assignments and ways they avoided getting in trouble. They attributed their success to supportive relationships with their teachers and to academic tasks they could accomplish.

Since that early study, we have analyzed these dynamics in greater detail. A series of case studies with teachers who were successful in challenging settings showed how they developed a strong working rapport with students (Strahan, Smith, McElrath, & Toole, 2001). Teachers in these case studies demonstrated warm, supportive relationships by showing a deep knowledge of individual students. Not only could they describe in detail the emotional, physical, cognitive, intellectual, and family needs and circumstances of students in their classes, they addressed these needs by responding to students as individuals. A longitudinal study (Strahan & Layell, 2006) chronicled ways that one middle school team accomplished success across a school year. Students on this team made significant growth, higher than that of the school as a whole. Results documented three principal ways that this team promoted academic achievement. Teachers (a) created a climate of shared responsibility through team building and positive discipline, (b) taught explicit strategies for performing academic tasks, and (c) developed instructional activities that linked inquiry, collaboration, and real-world experiences.

These accomplishments are only possible when teachers have created a climate of trust. Goddard, Tschannen-Moran, and Hoy (2001) examined ways that learning depends on trust, especially in regard to language. Data from 47 elementary schools showed that measures of trust consistently predicted achievement differences in mathematics and reading, even when they controlled for race, gender, socioeconomic status, and past achievement. They concluded that "when teachers believe their students are competent and reliable, they create learning environments that facilitate students' academic success. When students trust their teachers, they are more likely to take the risks that new learning entails" (p. 14). Unfortunately, when the opposite dynamics occur, a "self-reinforcing spiral of blame and suspicion" hampers student achievement (p. 15).

To explore ways that teachers might rekindle trust with students who have struggled in school, Smith-McIlwain (2005) conducted an intensive case study with a ninth grade teacher and seven of her students. Based on observations, interviews, and analysis of writing samples, Smith-McIlwain identified three types of care that contributed to trusting relationships with students who gained academic momentum.

- *Discovery talk*—conversation aimed at discovering the details of students' personal lives to extend understanding in the classroom and "just to find out if everything is okay"
- *Help* (two types)—help for personal problems and the instructional help that actually enables the student to improve academically
- *Friendly listening*—listening to discover personal issues that affect classroom behaviors and academic performance

Because she spent a great deal of time in conversations with participating students discussing the papers they were writing, Smith-McIlwain was able to document what she called "watershed events," which she defined as "specific events that provided the opportunity for the extension of care that resulted in the establishment of a positive personal relationship between teacher and student" (p. 10). For example, one of the participants in her study rarely completed an essay or revealed much of his thinking in writing conferences. One day, in a meeting with this student, the teacher shifted discussion away from his paper to ask about a reference he made to a family event in conversation. After sharing some of his family story, he asked the teacher to suggest ways he could write about these events in his paper. He began to talk specifically about his essay and completed it within a few days. This was his first complete paper. After that, he participated in writing conferences and submitted papers regularly. His writing began to improve. Smith-McIlwain identified the conference about this student's family as a watershed event.

As this study progressed, trust promoted positive actions toward improving performance and diminished the fear of risk. Students became increasingly aware of the types of care they expected from their teacher and described them explicitly. Once this trust was in place, students expected the teacher to provide an honest assessment of their writing and to follow it with specific suggestions. Smith-McIlwain concluded that caring relationships were the key to

reengaging disengaged learners, more so than any specific instructional practice or classroom procedure.

When considered together, these studies help us better understand the dynamics of academic momentum. Students who have struggled with reading, writing, or mathematics have often experienced a vicious cycle of poor performance and limited effort. With few successes, they have limited "skills" to invest in new tasks and little "will" to take the risks necessary to improve their skills. Learning to trust a teacher seems to be the only way to break this cycle. When a student learns to trust a caring teacher, he or she can begin to take chances, find the will to invest effort in a task, and receive the guidance needed to improve skills. Trusting relationships thus constitute a "threshold" of action, a point beyond which meaningful learning can occur. Figure 2 presents a graphic representation of these dynamics.

Figure 2
The dynamics of developing academic momentum with reluctant students

From the bottom up, this figure suggests that successful teachers create classroom communities that invite students to trust them and trust each other. They engage students in conversations that allow them to learn more about them as individuals, understand their academic strengths, and listen actively to clarify these dynamics. As students learn to trust their teachers and their classmates, they cross a threshold. They begin to engage more frequently in lesson activities, especially those that scaffold instruction and teach strategies explicitly. Because they trust their teachers and their classmates, students begin to assess their own work more candidly and seek explicit guidance from their teachers. Using the academic successes they experience, they begin to set goals for themselves, make plans, and assess their progress more specifically. As they gain confidence, they begin to experiment with new learning behaviors, thoughts, and feelings until they reach a point where they gain enough self-efficacy and self-regulation to learn more independently.

Each step of the way, three sources of energy fuel these dynamics. Ongoing *personal support* reminds students that their teachers and classmates care about them as individuals—who they are and how they feel, in and out of school. *Candid feedback* helps them increase their academic understanding and their skills of self-regulation. *Dialogue regarding academic and personal choices* helps them internalize a sense of responsibility. As this growth spiral strengthens, teachers can increase the levels of challenge, foster an even greater sense of "connectedness" among students, and strengthen academic momentum.

Academic momentum in action—Illustrations from a case study

Examples from one of our most intensive case studies provide illustrations of these dynamics in action (Strahan, Faircloth, Cope, & Hundley, 2006). For three semesters, we chronicled the responses of middle school students to their teachers' efforts to reengage them in school. Working with two teachers and their team of 42 eighth graders selected as "academically at-risk," we interviewed participants, observed interactions, and gathered follow-up data from students' first semester of high school. Results documented ways that teachers established a sense of community and co-constructed experiential learning experiences with students. During their eighth grade year, 35 students on the team (83%) developed a stronger sense of academic momentum, consistently demonstrating three patterns of behavior: cooperating with classmates and teachers, engaging with academic tasks, and expressing a sense of progress. They attributed their accomplishments to changes in attitude, task-specific successes, supportive relationships with teachers, better self-control, and opportunities for community service. To explore the dynamics of academic momentum in greater detail, we conducted more intensive case studies with seven of the students. Of these seven, Randy demonstrated some of the most dramatic growth in academic momentum.

As Randy noted in the quotation at the beginning of this article, he "got in a lot of trouble" and did not do well academically as a seventh grader. He "hated reading" and did not complete many of his assignments. In one of his interviews as an eighth grader, he reported an incident that gave us a glimpse of his previous experiences in school. He told us another student spilled water on the table during a science experiment, and the teacher blamed him. He refused to take the punishment and received two days of in-school suspension. When we asked him if it was worth it, he replied, "It really wasn't worth it, because they threatened to get an officer in there, and they moved all my friends into lunch detention with me, and they got mad at me" (4/19/05). These types of incidents, in combination with poor grades and inconsistent attendance, made Randy a good candidate for the Sage Program.

Nancy and Terri (pseudonyms) began the Sage program in 2002 as a way to engage students who had grown school weary. Based on their experiences on a regular eighth grade team, they developed a plan for a two-teacher, self-contained team that would work with students struggling in school. To acknowledge the wisdom of each person, they called themselves the Sage Team.

> Anything that we felt was hindering kids, we got rid of. And anything that we felt would help, we would try. We knew that these kids were a lot smarter than they tested. We knew that in order to convince them that we were going to do something different; we had to get rid of the textbooks and see that active learning doesn't come through a textbook. (T, 01/05)

Building on their successes with hands-on, minds-on activities, they developed more "responsive" approaches to teaching.

> I like the term "responsive teaching" a lot, because it brings in the idea we are "responsive" to what they need. It also reminds us that things are coming from realistic situations. Every moment has to become a teaching moment. (T, 01/05)

Two major goals shaped the program: promote students' respect for themselves and others and encourage them to take responsibility for their personal and academic decisions.

> We wanted these kids to be involved, to be positive, to be an asset to the community. We wanted them to be able to see themselves as, "I mean something. I can do something." And so we just thought that, in building their self-esteem, their self-confidence, that aspect of it, we needed to get them involved. (N, 01/05)

Their work with Randy demonstrated how they nurtured academic momentum in ways that illustrate the model for developing academic momentum with reluctant students (Figure 2).

1. Creating classroom communities that nurture trusting relationships

To encourage self-confidence and involvement, Nancy and Terri began the school year with activities designed to create a sense of community. On the first day of school, they established a daily routine that featured classroom meetings. In these meetings, they defined their expectations for team behavior, taught procedures explicitly, and clarified rules. They planned outdoor learning experiences that built camaraderie such as Hacky Sack® competitions and team football games. They created lessons that required teamwork and peer tutoring, held conversations about teams and working together, and guided reflections about team events. During classroom meetings, they planned team field trips and asked students to make basic decisions about these trips. To make teamwork more concrete and specific, they asked students to plan community service activities. Students decided to volunteer at a nearby elementary school, an elder care facility, and a local soup kitchen. Other students chose to work on the school grounds. Randy quickly became the leader of the team that worked on the school garden with students from one of the special education classes. "We show them how we can garden and improve the community. It's a benefit for them to get out and do stuff that they normally can't

do. I enjoy doing that, helping people and doing something outside" (01/05).

When students misbehaved, Nancy and Terri conducted extensive individual conversations with them. Early in the year, Randy became distracted during a math lesson and had to miss his service learning time. He reported to us later that this was a turning point for him. He decided he did not want to miss his service learning time again. He told us, "If I do my part in the garden, I get a reward and can come back next time. You show teachers you're responsible, they let you come back and do it again. You have to be trusted by them so you can leave class. Rewards work better than ISS and OSS" (01/05). For Randy, this realization became a threshold event. He did not miss service learning again for the rest of the year. In January he reported, "I've really paid attention in class, and I've had all my work. I'm on the ABC honor roll, so I get to go on the honor roll trips. That's something I've never done before" (01/05).

2. Engaging in learning activities

Nancy and Terri developed project assignments that addressed inquiry-oriented, student-selected issues. When reading *The Outsiders*, for example, they asked students to identify ways that the social dynamics of high school in the 1960s were similar to those they experienced in school now. They raised questions related to the process of conflict resolution, analyzed choices characters made, and examined the consequences of those decisions. Randy reported that he thought the book was "pretty weird and cool at the same time."

> There were some parts that were sad, because this one boy died. The weird part was the two different sides, the rich and poor people, and they were always fighting; there was never any peace. The part that really stung me was that there were some Greasers who tried to go out with the Socs, and when they did that, they stirred up trouble. Some of that stuff still takes place, because people think they're better than someone else. It still causes fights. Everybody tries to be better than one another. (04/05)

In several other interviews, Randy described how he was engaging in learning activities in ways that were new for him. For example, he described a writing assignment in February as follows:

> We are working on a children's book as one of the projects in class. We're learning different parts of language, how to write, and we're going to try to get our book published when it's finished. We've had to learn about different types of writing, like setting, simile, metaphor, personification, protagonist, antagonist, different views of people speaking, onomatopoeia (he read off a handout). We have to have a pretty good story, and paying attention—that's hard to do, because I'm not into writing. I think it's going to be pretty hard. We have to talk about the Civil War, but in a way that makes sense to first or second graders. We know a lot about the Civil War that shouldn't be discussed with little kids, like how they killed people, and all that, because some people would run away, and they'd get killed by a firing squad—just some things that might upset them to read. It's interesting, because I've learned more on the Civil War; I know some background about how a person in the South could use the land to navigate back to his camp. It's pretty interesting. I've not liked writing in the past. Now I'm writing about something interesting, so it could be okay. I'm trying to get back to where I enjoy writing. (02/05)

Assignments like these encouraged Randy to take risks, learn new ways of thinking, and make personal connections. His successes with these activities strengthened his self-efficacy. Even when he perceived that tasks were difficult, he wanted to do well and could be candid about his performance.

3. Setting goals and planning

Nancy and Terri developed a daily routine that featured goal setting and reflective writing assignments. Each morning, they gave students an agenda of daily events and gave them opportunities for input to change the agenda. Morning meetings often centered on the attitudes

and behaviors that would lead to success with the day's events. Each grading period, teachers asked students to identify, in writing, their own goals for the progress report period and then to reflect on how well they believed they had accomplished those goals. At the end of the day, they often asked students to reflect on a decision scenario that might put these values into action. One of these scenarios asked students to describe what they might do if a teacher had to leave the room during silent reading time and a few students started to talk. Randy wrote the following:

> I could just sit and read, or I could join them, or I could try to stop them. Most importantly, I would just sit and read, because if you were to try and got mad at them and trying to get them to stop and the teacher comes back in the door, you'd get in trouble for talking also. Sometimes, if someone was to speak to me, I'd turn around and answer them, but most of the time, I'd just keep reading. I know if I'm good, something good will happen to me, and I don't want to get caught not working. (04/06)

Opportunities to set goals and reflect on decision scenarios helped Randy think through the choices he was making and assume more responsibility for his learning.

4. Experimenting with new behaviors, thoughts and feelings

In his interviews, Randy often described how he was trying to think more productively about his assignments. When asked to reflect on how well he was reading *The Outsiders*, he reported

> Some of it was hard to read, they'd skip from talking about one person to another, and you'd get lost. They'd talk about at the movies and skip to a gas station, and then back to the movies. That was the hard part for me. When I got lost, I talked to friends, some of them—you could work together and get a better understanding, because you get information from them. Sometimes I'll go back and reread it and see if I can understand. Other times, I'll have to go through and just read ahead, and that will help give a clue to what happened earlier. I'm trying to get to a higher level of reading, but I'm really low, because in lower grades they'd push me. I don't really like reading because of that. I'm starting to read more. (04/05)

As Randy reflected on his work, he became more aware of ways he was using specific learning strategies. This heightened sense of self-regulation reinforced his growing confidence, encouraged him to think at deeper levels, and led him to set higher goals for himself.

5. Growing stronger academically

Randy's new habits of mind seemed to serve him well. He completed his eighth grade with all As and Bs and qualified for the honor roll for the first time. He made dramatic gains on his end-of-year achievement tests, gaining 16 points in mathematics and 8 points in reading, far surpassing the expectation of 4 developmental scale points per year. When we interviewed him after his first semester of ninth grade, he told us

> There is a real big difference at the high school because of changing classes; finding all the buildings and all the classrooms was real hard at first. Now that I'm up here, it is easier to get around. Everything keeps getting harder and harder. I'm doing pretty good. I'm passing all my classes now (two weeks into the second semester). I am in a drama class for an art credit. We have to interact with people, and that helps me improve my speaking skills and not be scared. I used not to interact with many people. (Randy, 02/06)

Conclusions

Our study with Nancy, Terri, Randy, and his classmates documented many of the ways that teachers and students can work together to strengthen academic momentum. As a seventh grader, Randy and his friends displayed a survival orientation toward school, looking busy, forgetting homework, and disrupting class as ways to avoid work. When he joined the Sage

Team, he and his classmates found that Nancy and Terri worked hard to understand them as individuals and identify their academic strengths and needs. They planned lessons that drew on these strengths and scaffolded strategy instruction to build higher levels of understanding. At the same time, they encouraged shared responsibility and held students accountable for their actions. They promoted higher levels of trust by providing ongoing personal support, giving candid feedback, and promoting dialogue regarding academic and personal choices. As the year progressed and the classroom learning community grew stronger, they provided increasingly challenging tasks, fostering even stronger academic momentum.

In this environment, Randy and many of his class mates developed higher levels of both skill and will. They assumed more responsibility for their own learning and understood how to invest energy in lesson activities. As they began to understand concepts in deeper ways, new insights kindled higher levels of self-efficacy and self-regulation. Stronger skills and tangible moments of success convinced them they could make progress. This sense of momentum fueled stronger levels of engagement. As a result, Randy and many of his classmates entered high school with greater confidence and persistence, a work ethic that he described vividly in his final interview:

> Algebra class is advancing, and now there are things I don't understand. My grade was going down, but I am bringing it back up. Graphing is tough. We have to solve for equations that are about six inches long, and you have to narrow it down. It's hard to figure it all out. It's hard when you first get into it. I understand things a bit better now. The teacher gives us notes with examples. The notes help, because they show me how to break it down in steps. The teacher helps too. When someone says he's lost, she goes back and reworks it to show us how she got the answer. That really helps me. (02/06)

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