

Research on Effective Schooling in Elementary Classrooms

by

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Abstract

Elementary school educators face the daunting task of guiding children who have a plethora of backgrounds and experiences—some children have preschool experience with knowledge of socialization and formal learning, while others have absolutely no concept of formal learning and possess few social skill sets. For years, educators in a rural K-4 elementary school in Indiana have spent an increasing amount of time on student behavioral issues instead of increasing academic achievement. Instructional program coherence from preschool through the elementary grades supported by research-driven data suggests that teachers have clarity in their role as educators, forge positive teacher-student relationships, and encouraging self-verbalization and self-questioning from students to provide the foundation upon which students can build their success in middle and high school.

KEYWORDS: elementary, theories, teacher-student relationships, cognitive learning.

Research on Effective Schooling in Elementary Classrooms

A growing concern in elementary schools across the United States is the issue of negative student behavior and its impending implications for future development. Negative social behaviors and the “lack of development of prosocial, positive character traits” (Rose & Gallup, 2002-2007, as cited in Freiberg, Huzinec, & Templeton, 2009, p. 63) have had negative implications not only on the interruptive students’ academic achievement, but also on the educators’ teaching strategies, and the learning environment of the classrooms. As children enter elementary school, beginning in kindergarten, they arrive with a variety of experiences—some of whom have preschool experience with knowledge of socialization and formal learning, while many others have absolutely no concept of formal learning and possess very few, if any, acceptable social skills. This diversity in childhood experiences requires that the teacher be an advocate for using a holistic approach with children by having clarity about her role as educator, forging positive teacher-student relationships, and by encouraging self-verbalization and self-questioning (Hattie, 2009) as a means for reflection and growth, all of which will provide a solid foundation upon which students can build success throughout their academic careers.

Overview of Context

The influence of holistic teaching through the use of positive teaching events, classroom procedures, and student behavior activities that are utilized simultaneously are directly related to academic achievement. This study will look at a public elementary school in rural Indiana whose primary focus has always been academic achievement, but the decline in their academic rating has been staggering over the past three years. The school’s student population from kindergarten through fourth grade is 279 students, being comprised of 99% white students and 1% Hispanic. Individual grade levels are represented by (2) kindergarten classrooms of 56

students, (2) first grade classrooms of 56 students, (2) second grade classrooms of 41 students, (2) third grade classrooms of 61 students, and (2) fourth grade classrooms of 65 students (Indiana Department of Education, 2013). In 2010 the school received an A rating, achieving greater than average scores on I-Step tests; however, in 2011 it received a C rating, and it eventually fell to an F rating at the end of the 2012 school year (2013). Of the 56 first grade students enrolled at this school, only 21 attended formal preschool for at least one year prior to entry, which was in a Head Start classroom that met three days per week for three-hour days (H. Stewart, personal communication, February 14, 2013). Given this information, less than half the school's student body had no socialization skills, no formal preschool education, and no relationship with an adult mentor before entering public school. Sadly, of 999 elementary schools rated in the state, this elementary school dropped over 150 spots to become one of the least favorable elementary schools to attend in Indiana.

The concern is that significant changes have occurred over the past several years, warranting the administrators to establish an after-school program from 3:30 PM to 6:00 PM Monday through Friday for tutoring and homework assistance. Educators are paid an incentive to stay and assist children with their assignments, while community members are solicited to play educational games with other children who utilize the program for after-school care. Although this is a progressive step to redirecting children's focus back to their studies, it does not solve the problem of children's lack of academic success in their respective classrooms. Because I am an early childhood professional and work closely with kindergarten teachers to prepare preschool children for a smooth transition to public school, I am able to provide insight as to what could improve the classroom environment and ultimately change the direction of the students' learning. By referring to Hattie's (2009) meta-analysis of "variables related to school

achievement” (p. 1), I will provide guidelines that show how the effect size of teacher clarity ($d=0.75$), teacher-student relationships ($d=0.72$), and self-verbalization/self-questioning ($d=0.64$) can improve the classroom environment through a holistic approach and put the elementary school’s academic achievement back on the A track.

Data-Based Recommendations

It is well known that research-based data should drive educational changes; however, this is often not the case, for many school leaders and educators find the data too time consuming to read, or they feel they are not competently trained to understand the data and implement the changes correctly (Flowers & Carpenter, 2009). Numerous studies have identified various elements that can be considered useful in predicting student achievement; however, it is important they be considered as interrelated elements in the scheme of the classroom, not seen as independent variables without causal effect on other teaching aspects. As educators begin to realize and understand that factors such as their clarity on the role of teaching, building strong teacher-student relationships, and the students’ ability to self-question are interconnected, they will be better able to modify their teaching strategies and positively affect their students’ academic attainment.

Teacher Clarity

Based on the revised framework of variables that meet a certain effect size of 0.40 or greater (Huitt, Huitt, Monetti, & Hummel, 2009), the first factor is teacher clarity ($d=0.75$), which is considered a teaching event. Teacher clarity is the recognition of an educator’s role within the educational setting, ranging from how he or she fits within the entire school system to the manner in which he or she helps each individual child in the classroom to develop and grow.

The focus of this particular study is the teacher's clarity on his or her role within the classroom setting, specifically the effect he or she has on students.

Elementary educators face a breadth of issues when young children begin entering public educational systems, thus they need to know what motivates each of their students to learn. First, educators should understand that their energy, attitude, and attention to their students' needs are "the primary predictor of student empowerment and learning" (Houser, & Frymier, 2009, p. 35). When children realize that their work has meaning and that it is appreciated for what it is, they expend energy to perform duties as directed or as needed (2009). Additionally, the immediacy presented by educators to indicate the urgency for something to be done instead of taking on a nonchalant attitude increases children's desire to apply effort toward a particular task. Secondly, educators should understand that teaching and learning are not done in a bubble. Rather, "teaching and learning in schools have strong social, emotional, and academic components [and] students typically do not learn alone but rather in collaboration with their teachers, in the company of their peers, and with the encouragement of their families" (Zins, Weissberg, Wang, & Walberg, as cited in Durlak, Dymnicki, Taylor, Weisberg, & Schellinger, 2011, p. 405). When children feel an internal empowerment to learn and know they have a support system in place, the result is a feeling of competency and increased self-esteem.

An increase in competency and self-esteem are also two very important aspects that educators experience when their actions and behaviors positively affect their students. Self-efficacy is directly relational to the effects educators have on their students. For instance, educators directly affect their students' efforts and energy by motivating them to do their work and complete assignments, and, in turn, the children's efforts and energy affect the teacher through a feeling of being connected and feeling valued as an educator. As such, this evidence is

further enhanced with the educator's efforts and successes at forging strong, positive relationships with their students.

Teacher-Student Relationships

After clarifying one's role as an educator, a clear line is visible between clarity of role and the importance of teacher-student relationships. Teacher-student relationships have an effect size of $d=0.72$ and are critical to the wellbeing of both the student and the educator. As an early childhood educator, I am encouraged by the State of Indiana to create meaningful bonds with my preschool students in order to better understand their needs, but also to help them build social and emotional competencies that will enable them to lead more well-balanced lives. The act of forming meaningful relationships should not stop at the preschool level, however. Rather, it should permeate across grade levels to create program coherence and ensure children's social and emotional growth continues in a positive manner (Oxley, 2008). Emotional bonds help children to become more self aware so they may better control their feelings, make better decisions, be more empathic, and be able to control urges and impulses (Goleman, 1969) that could potentially lead to trouble. Additionally, when children feel trusted, respected, and valued as individuals by their teachers, they tend to have better attitudes and behaviors, they like school better, and they attend classes on a more consistent basis (Durlak, Dymnicki, Taylor, Weissberg, & Schellinger, 2011).

The effect of teacher-student relationships also greatly impacts the "quality of the learning environment and specifically the wellbeing of both students and staff" (Roffey, 2012, p. 8). A major study performed by Roffey (2012) revealed that, when strong bonds are formed between teachers and their students, the teachers' self-worth increases and indirectly promotes student wellbeing. "When teaching staff feel appreciated and empowered, they are much more

likely to show patience and empathy for their students [and] support their students and promote wellbeing” (Wellbeing Australia, as cited in Roffery, 2012, p. 15). In turn, this leads to better student performance in creativity and problem solving, and supports a fun and stress-free environment in which students and teachers can thrive. Martin and Dowson (as cited in Roffey, 2012) stated that “positive relationships with significant others are cornerstones of young people’s capacity to function effectively in social, affective and academic domains” (p. 13). When children feel special and know they are in a safe learning environment, their efforts escalate and can increase their academic achievement by as much as ten percentile points (Goleman, 1969). Collaborating with and empowering young children to take control of their emotions and their minds prepares them for successes through school and well into adulthood.

Self-Verbalization/Self-Questioning

Finally, to aid students in their successes throughout their academic careers, teachers should encourage younger and more immature students to use self-verbalization and self-questioning as a reflection tool, which has an effect size of $d=0.64$. Self-verbalization is the action of talking out loud to oneself as a reminder of socially acceptable rules or regulations in an effort to avoid temptations (Fry & Preston, 1979). Similarly, self-questioning is the action of asking questions to oneself to confirm whether the actions being considered are socially acceptable or if they would lead to severe consequences. These actions represent a cognitive function, particularly reasoning, which allows them to strongly consider consequences and implications before acting on their impulses to any form of external stimuli. After children have managed to avoid unfavorable actions by using self-verbalization and self-questioning techniques, they slowly move to internalized self-discussions that lead to even greater control through use of logic. Given this locus of control, young children become better able to regulate

their actions over time and thereby cut down on the number of times educators have to stop instruction time to tend to students' inappropriate behaviors.

Implementation

The small rural school in southeastern Indiana has a great need for effective teaching strategies that will restore their school rating back to an A from an F. As school administrators have already begun to realize that current efforts are falling short in increasing their students' knowledge base, they may consider the idea of instructional program coherence (Oxley, 2008). "Such coherence relies on teachers collaborating across content areas and grade levels with the aim of adopting common instructional strategies and systematically building on learning in multiple contexts" (Oxley, 2008, p. 1). Because elementary grade students are stationary in one classroom for an entire year before moving to the next level, educators have time to share their teaching methods so that the transition is smooth and the children may reap the benefits from consistency in programs. A study done in Chicago Public Schools by Newmann, Smith, and Allensworth (2001a, as cited in Oxley, 2008) showed that consistency in programs across grade levels positively affected student achievement.

Tracking

Although having clarity of role as educator is not easily monitored or tracked, it is the joint effects of clarity of role, positive teacher-student relationships, and self-verbalization/self-questioning that are. The first recommendation would be to establish a rubric from which progress and efforts can be compared. Secondly, I would encourage the principal to get involved and support her teachers by gathering and organizing pertinent data from each grade level over the past four years for comparing test results and grades to current students' efforts. Sadler (1989, as cited in Campbell & Levin, 2009) stated there should be a reference point, the

comparison of current results to those in the past, and then action taken to remedy the problem. And, finally, the principal could conduct interviews with her teachers to confirm whether there is a difference in classroom behaviors that would permit more instructional time, whether the teachers feel as though they have solid relationships with each of their students, and whether the teachers believe the students are better able to regulate their actions through self-verbalization—whether internally or out loud. As Campbell and Levin (2009) indicated, educators require the support of their principal in developing their assessment tools and ensuring best practices are aligned with school policies. “Assessment for learning is an important strategy for connecting instructional strategies and classroom practices to the individual needs, progress and learning outcomes of students” (Campbell & Levin, 2009, p. 62).

Conclusion

Because the majority of children enter public school without knowledge of appropriate social skills or the experience of close adult relationships with anyone other than family members, educators are often charged with teaching manners and social skills while preparing children for their academic futures. By combining three elements that encompass positive teaching events (clarity of role), classroom procedures (teacher-student relationships), and student behavior activities (self-verbalization/self-questioning) that are utilized simultaneously, teachers have better chance of effecting positive change on their students’ academic outcomes.

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