Will Mentoring Improve Students Failing Grades?
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Submitted June 1999

Introduction

In 1993, I was hired by Fairfax County schools to be an aide in science classes that had a high population of ESL students who were being mainstreamed into regular science classes at Fairfax High School. Although there were schools in the county that already had content area teachers work as a team with ESL teachers, this particular combination was new to Fairfax High School and had no precedence. This enabled the other aide and me to have a lot of freedom, flexibility and creative license on how to address each targeted student. The end result was that although some principles and procedures were used consistently, often times the process depended on individual needs and were tailored to fit the student. The success rate for student passing and being successful the following year was high. The program lasted three years, but was then discontinued because of the reduction in ESL student numbers.

This year as a classroom foreign language teacher, I wanted to see how mentoring could effect the progress of two of my failing students on a short and long term basis. I wanted to make observations on how a similar one-on-one relationship could impact the target students in my class. In addition, I wanted to see if the mentoring would affect student outlook on learning in any way (positive, negative, indifferent).

Finally, I wanted to observe and evaluate the exchange of energy that takes place in a mentor-mentored relationship and the synergy that develops from it and its applications in our classroom. The two students selected were language minority students and had received an F on their second quarter grade. The participants were both female. Student profiles were as follows:

Student A
- 9th grade
- Afro(American)-Hispanic student
- Fractured family
- Learning disabled - disability in the areas of auditory memory/visual
- Personality-outgoing/pleasant

Student B
- 9th grade
- Salvadoran
- 3rd child in a family of 5
- Personality-quiet but complex
- Possibly low parental expectations
Research Question

Will mentoring improve student's failing grades in their French and Spanish class?

Interventions Used

Students met once a week for one hour. Initially the time was used to get to know them and build a rapport and trust. Typically the first twenty minutes of the session was used for socialization and general sharing. Sometimes favorite music or a snack would be included. The remainder of the period would be used to tutor and reinforce class material. In these sessions students' strengths and achievements were emphasized through discussion and used as a springboard for student choice regarding work or individual learning styles. During class time students were seated near the front and received constant monitoring and verbal reinforcement. In addition to direct contact with the student the parents, the counselors, the LD resource teachers, and students other teachers were contacted for ongoing support and for the input we could provide each other.

Student Assessment

Grades were based on the following criteria:
- Homework
- Participation
- Active-Responding to question/class discussion and pronunciation.
- Passive-Bringing required material to class and staying on task.
- Quizzes approximately five per quarter
- Tests approximately two per quarter
- Worksheet packets-defines practice sheets completed per chapter.

Analysis of Results for Student A

Third quarter grades for student A in Spanish improved. She met her goal of receiving a C. Grades in her other classes remained the same or improved with the exception of computer applications in which she went from a C+ to a C. Though she struggles with her schoolwork, her attitude remains positive and she perseveres and accomplishes most of the tasks at hand. She remains cooperative and comes to the mentor meeting with an excellent attitude.

During the fourth quarter, Student A received a D+ due to low quiz and test grades. Final exam grade was a D. Her final grade in the course was a D. This student had failed first and second quarter. She entered my class in the middle of first quarter and was not focusing on the work. When we began with the mentoring sessions in 3rd quarter, her focus seemed to be regained. Clearly she struggled to achieve (due to her disabilities) particularly in a foreign language class where so many modalities are used. However, she was able to successfully turn her failing grade to a passing grade. Student A was issued two surveys regarding the mentoring. In the first survey presented, she expressed that
mentoring might be helpful. Student A was asked to reflect on the mentoring once again toward the end of the 4th quarter. At that point she felt that it had been beneficial and looked forward to using her Spanish on a trip to Peru this summer.

Analysis of results for student B

The third quarter grade in French was an F. She was missing assignments. She expressed a desire to make up the work but did not. Student B performed poorly in her other classes as well. She passed only two of her five classes. She admitted being very distracted and tired during third quarter. Her attendance and demeanor for the mentoring session was positive. She would actively engage in the after school discussion and remediation. On one occasion, after mastering a particular grammar point, she smiled and said, “I feel so smart.”

In the fourth quarter, Student B’s work did not improve. Poor performance was displayed not only on quizzes and tests, but also on such things as notebook checks and being prepared for class. She attended some of the mentoring sessions but was losing ground on processing the subject matter as she was falling behind. She received an F for the quarter in French. However, she improved some of her other class work. She passed three of her five classes.

I made a passing remark in one of our sessions regarding her third quarter attendance and how she had missed some of her classes several times. At that point she confided in me that one of her male teachers had made an inappropriate remark to her and as a result she had cut class. The information that she revealed was passed on the administration where it was handled. However, from the student’s perspective, she felt that her credibility was questioned. Student B received a D on her final exam and a D in the course. It seems to me that this student’s issues clearly prevented her from functioning at her full potential. Unfortunately, it is difficult to measure how much these obstacles hampered her performance.

This student was also surveyed twice on her perception of mentoring. Initially she responded that the mentoring was beneficial. The second time she said, “Even though I failed, when I stay after school I understand better than when I listen in class. Mrs. Baghdassarian has more time to explain.” Student B also commented that she did not feel comfortable taking up class time asking questions.
Implications

As a result of the research I have learned that mentoring can be a powerful means of personalizing the school environment. What might begin as a relationship that is primarily teacher to student seems to develop into a mutual exchange that is synergistic. However, this is accomplished by allowing individualized time and attention per student and this is not always feasible by individual teachers given the demands in and out of the classroom. This would make me believe that the classroom aide would be an extremely valuable asset in mentoring. In the meantime, working with a limited number of students is better than none.

Another observation I made is that in mentoring, though the initial goal was to improve the grade, it also worked to enhance or conserve student self esteem. Finally, what was striking to me is that the bond that develops during the mentoring process supersedes the time frame of a study. I would definitely expect to maintain some connection with these students throughout the remainder of their high school career and possibly beyond.

References
