The Effects of Counseling on Academic Achievement among Language Minority (LM) Middle School Students
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Abstract
This paper documents the findings of a 18-week action research project to examine the effectiveness of academic and personal counseling on the overall academic achievement of language minority middle school students. An ESL class of a total of 13 students was monitored from one advisory period to the next advisory period. Grades ranged from 6th to 8th grade. Ages were from 11 to 15 years of age. These students received counseling once a week for twenty minutes. I performed classroom observations and I received feedback from various teachers. I looked at the students' pre-test scores (Stanford 9), classroom test scores, classroom assignments and behavior. This was examined before they received the counseling to see where they were academically. I looked at their classroom test scores during the counseling sessions and monitored them in their various classrooms. I received feedback on their progress. After the 18-week period, which was also the end of the school year, the results were that the students performed about the same on Stanford –9 (post-tests), but classroom tests and classroom assignment scores were significantly higher than before. A survey was completed by the students to gather demographic information.

The Question
How does counseling effect the overall academic achievement among language minority middle school students? This question came to me when I started visiting various classrooms throughout the school. I wanted to get a feel for how students were learning and the different teaching styles that teachers used. I found the ESL classes the most interesting because of the language barrier and most of the students are not proficient in reading and math. I also had the opportunity to speak to a student and his parent about his academic and personal issues that he was having. I was able to successfully help this student with the resources I had. I thought if I can help this individual, I know I can help other individuals like him with similar issues.

The Research
Martin Luther King Jr., in his famous 1963 letter written from a Birmingham jail, said, "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly" (Public Schools of North Carolina). Nowhere is this truer than in our public schools. Over the years, schooling for language minority (LM) students has received little attention in research, literature, methods and curriculum. Academic programs and practices
for LM students have apparently been based on the assumption that, like U.S. born English speaking children, LM children enter U.S. schools at five or 6 years old and become fluent in academics as well as social uses of English in elementary school. While the majority of LM students have been and continue to be in the elementary grades, a sizable proportion of them are in middle school and high school as well.

Language minority students are those students who learned a language other than English as their first language. These students may be immigrants, refugees, or native-born Americans. They may come to school with extensive formal education or they may be academically delayed or illiterate in their first language. Such students arrive at school with varying degrees of English proficiency. Some may not speak English at all, others may speak English, but need assistance in reading or writing English. Whatever the case, it is clear that schools that hope to help these students meet the National Education Goals must provide special assistance to them. While the type of assistance may vary from one district to another, all special assistance programs must give language minority students full access to the learning environment, the curriculum, special services, and assessment in a meaningful way (ESL Access Standards, 2003).

On January 8, 2002, President George W. Bush signed into law the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) and allocated $26.5 billion in the coming year to public elementary and secondary education. Intended to narrow the achievement gap for disadvantaged, poor, minorities, and English as-a-second language students, the act is a reauthorization of the 1965 federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). The NCLB which adds new programs and goals to the ESEA, mandates the following:

- Greater accountability for student performance in reading, math and science
- Empowering parents with more information about school and giving them more choices
- More resources dedicated to education methods that have been proven effective
- Increased funding for supplemental education services for students in under performing schools, including tutoring, summer school programs, an community learning centers
- Funding for 21st Century Community Learning Centers to promote academic enrichment and youth development (Channing Bete Company, 2002)

Research also says that youth from non-English-language backgrounds are 1.5 times more likely to leave school before high school graduation than those from English-language backgrounds (Cardenas, Montecel, Suppik, & Harris, 1992). High dropout rates among students from economically disadvantage and non-English-speaking backgrounds are among the major concerns of middle and high school educators in the United States. Though dropout rates have declined overall in recent years, especially among Blacks and Whites, the trend for Hispanic students is quite the opposite. According to the Census Bureau, in 1992 roughly 50% of Hispanic ages 16 to 24 dropped out of high
school, up from 30% in 1990 (GAO, 1994). By the year 2010, Hispanics are expected to be the largest minority group in the United States, making up 21% of the population (OREI, 1993). Thus, the increase in dropout rates among Hispanic high school students is cause for growing concern. Various dropout prevention programs have emerged as one response. As a school counselor, I felt that I could play a major role in helping language minority students achieve their academic goals. Giving LM students individual attention could enhance their self-esteem and confidence levels. In turn, their overall academic performance will be increased.

The Students

All thirteen of the ESL students were selected out of one class. The class consisted of the following:

5 girls = 1 born in Guatemala    1 born in USA    3 born in El Salvador
8 boys = 1 born in Congo          1 born in USA    6 born in El Salvador

Eight out of the 13 students spoke and understood English however their native language was not English. I had to have an interpreter as well when counseling the students and when giving them feedback.

The Implementation

I went into an ESL classroom at the beginning of the 3rd advisory with a survey for the students to fill out. The survey asked for general information such as their name, where they were born, age, grade, whether or not they spoke English and do they think counseling once a week will help them academically. I explained to the class that if they participated in the project they would receive counseling once a week. I would also do classroom observations. I explained to them that I would get feedback from their teachers about their progress and this information would be passed on to their parent or guardian. I told them this was a win-win situation because they will monitored and they will have a chance to resolve their situation before it got worse. They all agreed that they would participate.

Anecdotal Observations

I noticed that the students appeared to be lost in the main stream classes. They appeared uncomfortable and they had to concentrate harder to understand what was going on. Some teachers said that it was hard to chart their progress because they were not sure if they were getting the concept of the lesson. Some of the students said that they were afraid to speak out in class because the other students will tease them. They felt comfortable in the ESL classes. I spoke with the ESL teachers and they said that the students were progressing and they kept a portfolio of each student’s work and you could see the progress. Although the students did not score well on the Stanford 9, they benefited by taking the test to learn the format and to get use to taking it. The students most enjoyed the field
trips they took throughout the year. Not only were they educational and informative, they were fun as well.

Conclusion

Every spring, almost all the school goals are oriented toward increasing test scores and the percentages of students meeting grade-level standards in reading and mathematics. Only occasionally are there efforts directed toward improved school attendance, increased parent participation, or decreased rates of student suspension. Much of the achievement gap between language-minority and language-majority students can be attributed to low levels of English-language proficiency. But all the tutoring in the world will not hasten the acquisition of English in the absence of a rich environment of cultural tolerance. All the high school exit exams and standardized tests will not reform our schools without caring teachers and school administrators. We must have high expectations for nontraditional students with traditional needs. We should be sensitive to each child’s needs, academically, culturally, and personally. I think in all school districts and schools where there are a high number of language minority students, there should be at least one bilingual counselor.

Language Minority Student Checklist

What can counselors do?

1. Monitor student’s grades each advisory
2. Students receive counseling for 20 minutes once a week to express any academic and personal concerns
3. Talk to teachers about each student’s progress or personal concerns
4. Do classroom observations once a week for each student and take notes.
5. Give teachers advice on how they can better tailor their assignments, tests and projects to fit the needs of the students and teachers to achieve the best results.
6. Provide parents with information so parents will be an active participant.
7. Suggest that school personnel receive some training on teaching in a diverse population.
8. Give students a survey on how they think staff can better assist them.
9. Encourage teachers to include biographical readings about minorities
10. Hold high expectations for all students. Do not treat minorities different from other students

What can teachers do?

1. Monitor achievement of students, especially language minorities on a daily basis
2. Communicate belief in the potential of minority students and underrepresented genders in math, science, and workforce development education courses.
3. Make an effort to check classroom work of all students.
4. Involve language minority students who are not participating in classroom discussions.
5. Learn as much about language minority students in your class.
6. Make instructional strategies and accommodations appropriate for students.
7. Provide precise oral communication for limited-English-proficient students. This may require examining how explanations are provided and reviewing technical terms used in assignments.
8. Allow students to select topics in some study units. This will provide opportunities for language minority students to relate their backgrounds and interest to their course work.
9. Provide opportunities for students to work cooperatively. For example, consider small group assignments.
10. Accept differences that minority students and underrepresented genders may bring to the classroom.

SURVEY

NAME:

AGE:

GRADE:

WHAT COUNTRY WERE YOU BORN IN?

HOW LONG HAVE YOU BEEN IN THIS COUNTRY?

DO YOU SPEAK AND UNDERSTAND ENGLISH?

DO YOU THINK YOU CAN BENEFIT FROM COUNSELING ONCE A WEEK? HOW?
References


