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Effectiveness of the Balanced Literacy Project for Supporting Struggling Middle School

Readers

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Introduction

John Davis, a teenager, sits in the back of his regular 8th grade science class with a bowed head. He is quiet and has few friends. The teacher stands at the front of the room lecturing on the process of cell division. John asks no questions and none are asked of him. The teacher describes John as a well-mannered student who simply does not apply himself. He has always performed poorly in classes that require extensive reading. As the teacher lectures, John stares at his science textbook, and he begins to doodle. His hands are noticeably trembling. He fears that the teacher will soon call on him to read out loud. Like many other times before when the teacher says, “Next,” John is willing to comply. With much frustration, John stumbles through the passage. The teacher asked the same question of John as she had done so many other times before, “Now, what does that mean?” John simply replies, “I don’t get it.” The teacher grimaces and shows a look of frustration. She sighs and moves on to another student.

In the Academic Shadows

Although this story is fictional, John Davis is a perfect example of a student sitting in a teacher’s classroom today. His situation is not a new phenomenon. In fact, researchers indicate that one-third of students who enter 9th grade are two or more grades below level (International Reading Association, n.d.). John is a student who is falling through the cracks. On the surface, John’s inability to perform may be due to lack of motivation, but a much bigger problem lies deep within. He is neither receiving exceptional program services nor is he a second language learner.

John is a struggling reader. His situation seems to be an indication of a problem that many schools are facing -- where struggling readers are in the “academic shadows”

(International Reading Association, n.d.). In the face of *No Child Left Behind* and other legislative pushes toward accountability and educating all children, how do schools deal with struggling readers (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.)?

Characteristics of Literacy Programs

According to Phillips' (n.d.) review of research on literacy programs, the International Reading Association suggests that an effective literacy program should be student-centered and have several key components:

1. "Students should have access to a variety of reading material
2. Students have high quality assessments that will indicate their strengths and weaknesses.
3. Students should be engaged through various instructional strategies that will create an interest in more complex, higher level material.
4. The program should have well trained teachers who model and teach reading strategies across the content area.
5. The program should have a reading specialist who can specifically apply instructional strategies for struggling readers" (p. 1)

If schools are going to produce literate citizens, then a challenging literacy program is needed. However, students in the middle grades encounter multiple challenges to becoming proficient in literacy. The amount of reading and writing required in order for students to be successful dramatically increases from that required in elementary school. Students are expected to understand a text from a variety of subject areas. Much of the types of texts are informational in nature with detailed content-specific vocabulary (Strauss & Irvin, 2000). These are challenging tasks for any students,

but especially for a student who struggles to read. Imagine the level of frustration a middle school student must have when you combine a changing body with academic failure. This combination could have devastating affects on a student's esteem, perspective of school or their desire to complete their education.

To address the problem of struggling readers, there are some secondary schools that teach reading in isolation or as an elective course. This is traditionally known as a pull-out program where students are removed from their regular course of study and receive remedial instruction in a weak area. Even though the concept of pull-out programs has been around for over thirty years, many educators now believe that these "approaches may actually reduce student engagement and learning opportunities while stigmatizing students" (North Central Regional Educational Library, n.d.). Additionally, critics argue that reading is not a subject that can be taught in isolation. Reading is not just a "set of skills or processes to be acquired or an aesthetic experience to be lived-through-it is an academic domain that ties together skills and processes that will serve the individual throughout life" (National Institute for Literacy, n.d, p.2).

Teaching reading in isolation is not the preferred approach to address the needs of struggling readers. It can lead to struggling readers being labeled as "at risk" due to poverty, race, ethnicity, language or a number of other factors. These factors may include: family abuse, substance abuse or pregnancies, history of poor academic performance, poor attendance, minimal identification with the school, lack of participation in school activities, low educational expectations from family, disciplinary and truancy problems, impulsive behavior or poor peer relationships (Dougherty, 2003). Rarely are at-risk students served well in schools. They are often tracked into second-

rate classes where teachers have low expectations (North Central Regional Educational Library, n.d.). Given the challenges, a different approach is needed to help the struggling reader in middle school.

The Balanced Literacy Program

For Middle School X, the different approach is the Balanced Literacy Program. This pilot program for Hillsborough County, Florida started in the 2002-2003 school year. It is tailored after the successful middle school research conducted by consultant Janet Allen. Allen likens the problem of dealing with the struggling reader to Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz*. Like Dorothy soon discovered, we are not in a utopia, there are roadblocks and obstacles. Instead of making excuses, it is our job to figure out ways to go through the roadblocks (Allen, 2000).

This is a program designed specifically for the at-risk students who face roadblocks and obstacles. The goal of the program is to assist students in overcoming the odds by offering comprehensive and continuing programs, a variety of choices and commitment levels, and ensuring that teachers are qualified, caring and demanding while utilizing an active learning approach through practice and problem solving (Dougherty, 2003). Additionally, there are four major components of the Balanced Literacy Program: read aloud, shared reading, guided reading and independent reading.

The Balanced Literacy Team is known as the Academy. The heart of the balanced program is to develop literacy skills. It is not a curriculum, but an approach to integrating reading across the content areas. The Academy team at Middle School X has many of the effective elements established by the International Reading Association, but the following are other unique elements to consider:

1. Students are grouped homogenously by Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test norm-referenced performance.
2. Students are housed in the same building.
3. Students are on a ninety-minute block schedule; the rest of the school population maintains six class periods of fifty minutes each.
4. Students are enrolled in the Academy for a minimum one full academic year.
5. The team has a literacy coach who works specifically with students who have difficulty with phonemic awareness.
6. There are no students qualifying for exceptional education services.
7. The maximum class size is 25 students.
8. Students are rewarded monthly with enriching team-building activities.

Data Collection and Participant Population

The critical question here is what the teachers' and students' attitudes are about the Academy. Is the Academy effective from the teacher and student perspective? In order to answer this question, as a teacher in the Academy, I surveyed a total of 156 students from the team. There were a total of 48 6th graders, 59 7th graders, and 49 8th graders surveyed. The team has a total of 188 students. Also, all of my colleagues were surveyed. The students were given the surveys by their individual language arts teachers and asked to complete them anonymously. A copy of both surveys is included in table one and table two. The racial ethnic background of the students are 53% Black, 23% Hispanic and 23% White. The students' ages range from 11 to 17. Approximately 20% of the Academy students are overage and have been retained at least once.

Of the 9 teachers surveyed, five of the teachers are white and four of the teachers are black. The years of experience for the teachers range from 2 to 9. In the 6th grade, two teachers have relocated to other schools during this school year. There is a long-term substitute teaching out of field for sixth grade mathematics. The second new staff member was added recently and is certified in all elementary grades. This teacher will be providing instruction for 6th grade science. All of the other teachers are certified in their subject area. Six of the teachers on the team have been trained on teaching reading in the content area.

Teacher and Student Attitudes

After review of the surveys, the teacher and students' responses relate to three areas: the quality of instruction and curriculum, academic success, and perspective of school and students. There was one major theme that emerged relating to the students' and teachers' attitudes. Students enjoyed the experience of being in the Academy, while teachers believed that it was not beneficial for students. This attitude was expressed clearly throughout the majority of the surveys.

With regards to the quality of instruction, students viewed the Academy as positive. Overwhelmingly, students enjoyed being on the Academy team and expressed feeling of being "cool" or "happy." They felt that being in the Academy was easy and a chance to be successful. Thirty-seven of the 49 6th graders polled or 75% said that the work was easier. In 7th grade, 68% or 40 of the 59 students surveyed agreed that the Academy was easy. In the 8th grade, 88% or 40 of the 49 students surveyed also indicated that the work was easy. However, five of the teachers describe their feelings as "miserable," "challenged" or "isolated." The teachers expressed feelings of frustration

due to a large number of discipline problems. Six of the teachers indicated that their teaching methods have changed, and five believed that the assignments are viewed as too easy. Four of the teachers also indicated that they do not cover the same amount of content than if they were not teaching in the Academy.

In the area of academic success, 56% of the 7th grade students (33 students), 64% of the 8th grade students (30 students), and 61% of the 6th grade students (31 students) indicated that their grades have improved from the previous school year. Over 50% from each grade level believed that being on the Academy team made it easier for them to come to school. On the other hand, 6 of the teachers surveyed indicated that after teaching in this type of program, they are rethinking their professional choices. Only three of the teachers indicated that they were better teachers because of teaching in the Academy.

When it relates to the teachers' perspective of students, 6 of teachers see students differently. Only two teachers felt like they were making a difference, while eight indicated that they would not teach in a program of this type of environment for the following school year. Seven teachers commented that the mixture of students was explosive, and the disruptive students hinder the instruction for those who really want to learn. By contrast, 30 6th graders, 35 7th graders, and 34 8th graders said that they would like to be on the Academy team next year.

Conclusion

The results showed two different attitudes from the teachers and students. Overall, it was a positive experience for the students while the majority of the teachers viewed it negatively. Even though this may be a sad comment about our educational

system, the Academy should be recognized for creating an environment where students actually want to come to school. This is half the battle for at-risk students. Additionally, the students feel as though they are more academically successful. This seems like a winning combination. Many of the students indicated that the Academy was easy. However, this could be true because of the instructional approaches or because teachers admit that they cover less content. That question remains unanswered. One fact is clear from these results. Since this program is only two years old, more research is needed. Important questions need to be addressed like: What impact does the Academy have on high school performance? Does the Academy adequately prepare students for high school? Is there an academic difference between students in the Academy and those who are not? Does the Academy promote positive self-esteem or unfairly stigmatize students? Do the students feel like being in the Academy has helped or hindered their success in high? Exactly what instructional strategies are teachers using the classroom? Is the instruction presented in a challenging way? More importantly, is there another way to effectively teach the struggling middle school reader? There are merits to the Academy, and there are drawbacks. When it comes to reaching students who have slipped through the cracks, there is no one correct way. As educators, we owe it to our students to answer these questions, weigh the pros and cons, and determine what is best for the student.

Author Reflections

I am grateful for teaching in the Academy. It has opened my eyes to realize the deficiencies in the educational system and the flaws in some of my teaching approaches. I am sure that I have had many John Davis' in my classroom, but I was probably so busy teaching and covering content that like many other educators, I didn't notice John. It

seems I forgot the one rule in teaching: do what is best for the students. I keep thinking about the quote “diversity demands flexibility” (Hargreaves & Fullan, 1998, p. 8). Given our student population, it is imperative that we do something different. I firmly believe this after having taught in the Academy. We have to be flexible and change our approach as our students change. I applaud the success of the students who feel better about school and feel successful for the first time in their academic career. However, teaching in the Academy has also made me question my philosophy about teaching. Do I really believe that all students can learn? If so, what is the best situation for at-risk students to learn? I do believe that all students can learn, however, I think that grouping students homogenously contributes to discipline problems and the level of teacher frustration. It also reinforces a separatist attitude among other teachers on the faculty who do not have to teach “these types of students.” It is sad to hear a teacher say, “Send this student to the Academy, and let them teach him.” I do not think educators can afford to pick and choose whom they will and will not teach. All students deserve a quality education; it is not just for a select few. I would argue that teachers should be well trained in dealing with all types of students because it will certainly open your eyes. It opened my eyes, and now I can confidently say that I am a better teacher.

Table 1 – Student Survey

You do not need to put your name on the survey.

What is your age? _____

What is your grade? _____

What is your race? _____

1. Circle a word that describes how you feel about being on this team. You can choose more than one word:

SMART FUN HAPPY ISOLATED SAD STUPID

2. For next year, would you choose to be on this team? YES OR NO Why?
-

3. Circle which of the following statements you agree with the most. Circle only one.

I like coming to school because I am on the Academy team.

I like coming to school, but I wish I were on another team.

I do not like coming to school at all.

4. Circle which of the following statements you agree with the most. You can circle more than one.

I think my success in school is partly because I am on this team.

I do not think being on this team has helped me be successful.

I think being on this team has helped me see the positive side of school.

I think being on this team has helped me see school differently.

I think being on this team has helped me be a better reader.

I think I would be performing about the same no matter what team I am on.

5. What is your attitude about the administration? You can circle more than one.

I think they only want to help us.

I think they treat us better than other students.

I do not think they treat us better than other students.

I think they treat us unfairly at times.

I think we get the same treatment as other students.

Add any comments you would like to say about the Academy team:

Table 2 - Teacher Survey

1. Circle a word that describes how you feel about being on this team. You can choose more than one word:

SMART FUN HAPPY ISOLATED SAD CRAZY STUPID

2. If given the opportunity, would you choose to be on this team again? YES OR NO
Why?

3. Circle which of the following statements you agree with the most. You can circle more than one.

- I like teaching more because I am on the Academy team.
- I like teaching, but I wish I were on another team.
- Being on this team has made me rethink my professional choices.
- This team is academically beneficial for students.
- This team is not academically beneficial for students.
- Being on this team has helped me be a better teacher.
- Being on this team has helped me see students differently.
- Being on this team has not helped me at all.

4. What is your attitude about the administration? You can circle more than one.

- I think they only want to help us.
- I think they treat us better than others teachers.
- I do not think they treat us better than other teachers.
- I think they treat us unfairly at times.
- I think we get the same treatment as other teachers.

5. Add any comments you would like to say about the Academy team:

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