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Christina M. Hall

Northwest Missouri State University, christina.mann02@gmail.com

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The Impact of Family Engagement on Student Achievement

Christina Hall ~ Northwest Missouri State University

Abstract

This action research study explores the impact of family engagement on student achievement using three family/student pairs. Family involvement has an impact on student learning and achievement throughout the school year. Taking a look at how a family's involvement in their student's learning plays a part on the achievement the student has throughout the school year. Previous writing scores were used to compare the growth made within a three-month period after the families worked with students to give feedback through a classroom communication app. Families were able to work at home to give feedback while their students were in class for quick response time and authenticity. The teacher/researcher coached families on how to give accurate feedback that would help students grow and feel successful.

Key Words: Family involvement, family engagement, writing, student feedback

Introduction

Many families do not know exactly how to support their students in finding academic success. All in the same, many families have also never been invited into a classroom to learn how to support their students in finding this academic success. Prior to this research, students' work was sent home to their families, with no method of guaranteeing family feedback. There was also no guarantee the families would even look at the work that had been sent home by the classroom teacher. Many families work with teachers on behavior based goals in classrooms, but not on academic based goals. Families are more comfortable helping a teacher with a behavior based goal. They are not as comfortable working on academic based goals because families view the teacher as the expert in that area. Success is found when families work with teachers on behavior based goals for their students which gave the researcher the idea that success could also be found when families and teachers work together on academic based goals for students. This research will examine the change in student achievement, when a system to encourage family

feedback on student work is introduced into the classroom. In this research, three family/student pairs were taught about growth mindset, feedback, and goal setting through the classroom phone application Class Dojo (ClassDojo, Inc.). Students submitted pieces of work throughout the week to their families on Class Dojo (ClassDojo, Inc.), giving their families an opportunity to respond and give feedback to their students. The researcher/teacher taught the families weekly on how to give meaningful feedback to their students. These family members were encouraged to take a more active role, which helped students feel more invested in their own achievement in return.

The first grade teacher/researcher in this study sought to find ways to invite families into a classroom, teach families how to support their students and then look at the results of the academic growth due to students and families partnering in academic learning.

Review of Literature

Family engagement as a motivator for student achievement is an important practice which has seen impressive results. Kraft (2017) discussed the effects of creating better communication systems to bridge the gap between homes and schools. He found when he engaged parents through phone calls more regularly, student achievement in completing homework increased. He also did a study which looked at the impact of sending individualized short notes home to parents each week. These notes contained one “praise” point and one “teach” point for those students and parents to learn from. After his studies, Kraft (2017) found these practices had a positive impact on student engagement, test scores, and even homework completion. Parents involved in Kraft’s (2017) research were more likely to remain a part of students’ academic progress and schooling through the rest of the year.

This article helped inform the selection of the action research project because it shows the important link between parent engagement and student achievement. “Together, these

randomized control trials illustrate that providing parents with even brief but specific and actionable recommendations and advice can enable them to better support their children's learning" (Kraft, 2017, p. 3). Kraft's (2017) research shows how parent engagement plays a role in and has a positive impact on students' academic achievement.

Mapp (2017) shares her viewpoint that parents want partners in the school that their children attend, but they do not always know how to find them. Mapp (2017) goes further by arguing that it is a school's job to facilitate this partnership. Finally, she shares that it is important for teachers to share goals with parents and to be open about how students are meeting those goals.

Mapp's (2017) article ties into this action research project in her discussion of the importance of parent engagement through the lens of a parent-school "partnership." In these parents' own words: "We showed up because we feel like partners" (Mapp, 2017, p.2). Parents who were studied in this article felt like they had gained partners in the school because clear learning goals were shared, and the parents had opportunities to discuss them with school leaders and teachers. In this action research project, parents had the chance to be equal partners with clear goals and learning targets, as well as artifacts of work. In return, parent input would be encouraged and implemented where appropriate. Finally, Mapp (2017) concludes her article with important advice, "the most important practice to integrate into any family engagement initiative is to link that initiative to student learning and development" (Mapp 2017, p.2).

Mapp and Henderson's (2002) work on involvement and student achievement supports the project's themes of parent engagement through communication and feedback. This piece examines many studies on this topic and determines there is a direct connection to parent engagement. Mapp and Henderson's (2002) research impacts this project by approaching the

topic of parent engagement and student achievement in a different way. One of the important contributions of this piece is the breadth of the data involved. The two prior articles by Kraft (2017) and Mapp (2017) were extremely insightful, but dealt with relatively low number of students and parents. By contrast, this piece includes a much larger pool. In their analysis, Mapp and Henderson (2002) found “in schools where teachers reported high levels of outreach to parents, test scores grew at a rate 40 percent higher than in schools where teachers reported low levels of outreach” (Mapp & Henderson, 2002, p.34). Additionally, this study found the impact in test scores could be seen with students of all income levels, though high-income students saw the greatest results.

Brock and Hundley (2016) discuss growth mindset and how to implement this theory inside of the classroom, using a month-by-month teacher guide, and giving guidance on how to transition students with fixed mindsets into students with growth mindsets. The authors address how to give feedback give to students and the effects that proper feedback can have on a student’s mindset.

This action research study depended on families giving feedback to their students to help them grow as writers. Because of this, Brock and Hundley’s (2016) work helps to teach and guide families in implementing proper feedback to their students. Families must be taught to give constructive and beneficial feedback that will not hurt, but help their student. The authors give a good example of the type of seemingly harmless feedback which can have detrimental effects, “when students were praised for being smart, they became less likely to take on risks...when students were praised for effort they had no such insecurities” (Brock & Hundley, 2016, p. 80). This is why the first stage of this research project included training families to give constructive, beneficial feedback to their students.

With previous research above showing the direct impact of family involvement in a student's education the teacher/researcher decided to incorporate family involvement into the classroom through a classroom communication app to help determine if the students' families input would help to support growth. The research was guided by two research questions. One focusing on the family view of student success and one focusing on student achievement:

1. How does a family's view of their students' academic achievements change when they are able to give their student feedback?
2. How does a student's perspective and understanding about their academic achievements change when their family gives them direct feedback?

Approach and Method

The researcher/teacher began by tackling question one. To determine if question one had been met, families were given a pre survey. This survey gave information that allowed for guidance of their understanding of students' work inside the classroom. At the end of this research a post survey was given that was similar but asked for more information than the pre survey to determine if their attitude regarding the classroom had changed, stayed the same or grew to be more positive, as well as the outlook on student academics.

Throughout the research, families were asked to respond to their students' work and through this, a scale was created to chart family responses. This was used to see if there was a change in student growth based on family responses, and to determine whether family responses played a part in student success in their writing. Family responses were coded through this scale to help to answer question one. This scale helped to determine patterns in each families' response and made a connection to students' success in writing. Table 1 is a scale created to chart family responses.

Table 1

Family Response Scale

Criteria	3	2	1
Timeliness	Respond to student between 12 hours and the end of school day.	Respond to student past the middle of the next school day.	Likes the post.
Descriptive feedback	Writes positive comments that are specific to writing.	Writes comments that are specific to the writing.	Writes “good job” or something similar, or off topic.
Growth over time	Uses the feedback tips to improve comments to their students over time.	Uses the feedback tips to comment to their students inconsistently.	Gives students off topic feedback and it is inconsistent.
Teach Points	Focuses on some aspect of the writing that needs to be improved. Asks a question about the writing.	Focuses on one aspect of the writing over another. Focuses on only mechanics over content.	Makes comments but does not give teaching points.

To determine if question two had been met, students were first given a pre survey to determine if their academics were impacted by their families in their eyes. The same survey was given at the end of the research to determine patterns or changes from students and their perspectives on their writing and their families’ involvement.

Out of the three students that participated in this research, all three took the pre and post survey. Each pre and post survey was coded to look for themes in the students’ responses and changes in their perceptions of their school achievement related to family involvement.

Throughout the research, the third data source used to help answer question two is the use of a pre and post assessment in students' writing. To grade this assessment, the Lucy Calkins (Calkins) Writing Rubric was used for both the pre and post assessment. This rubric is broken up into three different parts: structure, development, and language conventions.

The data from the pre and post writing assessments were coded by section. The structure was coded in orange, development was coded in green, language conventions was coded in blue, overall score was coded in red and the scaled score was coded in purple. This data was split into three different graphs. The three graphs represent student one, two and three. There were three different students studied in this research project. Each student graph compares each section with the pre and post data. The bars for each section shown in Figures 1, 2, and 3 clearly show the growth made in each area for each student.

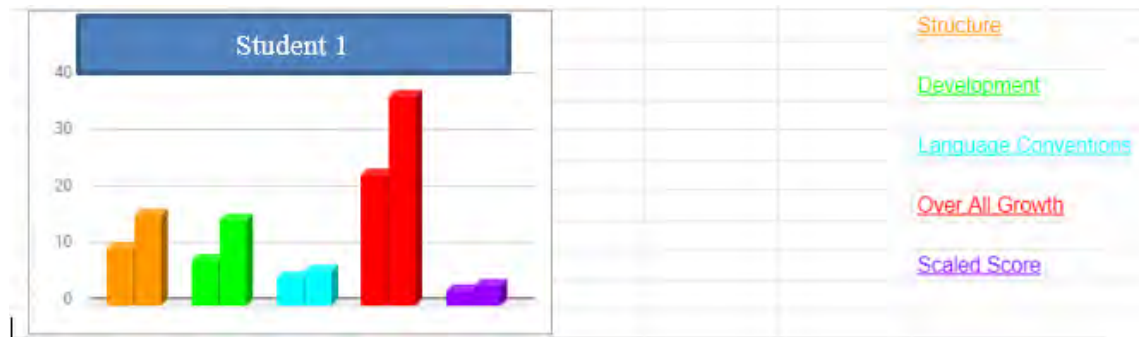


Figure 1: Student 1 pre and post writing data.

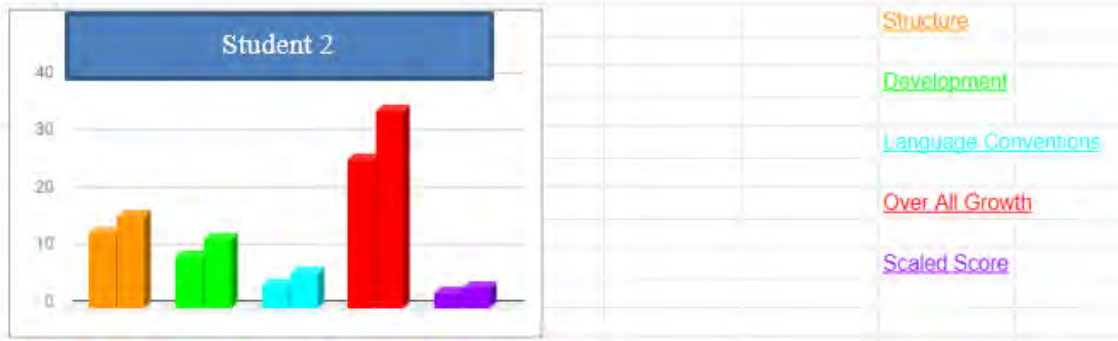


Figure 2: Student 2 pre and post writing data.



Figure 3: Student 3 pre and post writing data.

With each graph, the common themes for each student's pre and post data are demonstrated in the rubric for structure, development, language conventions, overall score and scaled score. Each student had these data points which helped to determine if question two had been answered.

The action research was implemented through an app called ClassDojo (ClassDojo, Inc.). This app was the portal from family to student and allowed the teacher to see feedback and comments. The students that participated in the action research were first taught how to use the app under their own student profile on ClassDojo (ClassDojo, Inc.). This allowed students access to create videos of their writing that they sent out to their families. Students sent updated works

of writing to their families weekly. Before week one, students practiced sending a video, as well as a picture of anything they would like, so they had full understanding of the way the app worked. The families were asked to respond to practice the use of the app as well. From then on, students submitted writing samples for families to look at and submit feedback on. The teacher sent weekly feedback tips to the families to allow them to learn how to give useful feedback to their students. This was done in a quick two-to-three-minute video format provided by the teacher.

There were two possible threats identified to the research. These included families possibly dropping off in the middle of the research, students' attendance, and proper use of school technology. None of the threats became problematic for completion of the research.

In this research, there were multiple sources of data collected. There were surveys, scales/anecdotal notes, and writing assessments using a rubric. The classroom teacher gave a pre and post survey to families and the students that participated in the research. Surveys for the families were sent home and returned to the classroom teacher. The student surveys were given in class by the classroom teacher, with help only to read each question. The anecdotal notes and scales helped the teacher to determine the responses of families through ClassDojo (ClassDojo, Inc.) and to plan ahead for the videos the teacher made for the families. These videos were used to help support the families' understanding of feedback and working with their students through the app. Last, a pre and post writing assessment was given to determine student growth in writing and to help determine if each student made growth based off family feedback.

Student surveys and writing assessments helped to answer question two: How does a student's perspective and understanding change about their academic achievements when their family gives them direct feedback?

Looking at the students' surveys closely, students' attitudes changed regarding their families' involvement in the classroom, as well as their attitude regarding their writing when they received support from their families. On the student survey, all students were asked five different questions. Out of the five questions, each student showed growth in their attitude regarding family help in writing and the way they feel their writing is better with their families help. All three students first stated they felt very neutral when it came to their asking for help with writing from their family. One student even made the comment, "I will either ask you (the teacher) or my neighbor (classmate) for help." In the post survey, that same student marked they now are very happy and excited to ask their family for help in their writing. Each student expressed a change in attitude when it came to their feelings of betterment in their writing because of their family's help. The data from the surveys is backed up by more quantitative data from the pre and-post writing assessments. Each student made a whole point of scaled score growth from the pre to the post assessment in their writing. They grew in their understanding of structure, development, and language conventions as well.

Family surveys helped to answer question two: How does a family's view of their student's academic achievements change when they are able to give their student feedback? In the pre survey given to families, overwhelmingly every family had nothing but positivity to share about their attitude towards school, their involvement in school, and their understanding of their student's academics. In the post survey, the positivity continued with more information than the pre survey. Unanimously, each family shared that they felt by getting to see a video of their student's work, they better understood what their student was working on in writing and they all felt that it gave them a more clear understanding of how to help them with their writing skills. One family said, "The video helped to lay out our conversation about what he's been learning."

The same family also stated, “When I would ask what he learned about he would leave a lot out; now I know with a simple message exactly what he is learning.” Each family also agreed using ClassDojo (ClassDojo, Inc.) to communicate allowed for easy communication with the teacher and opened doors when it came to being up to date and communicating.

Results and Findings

This research had many useful results and findings. First, this research supports the notion that families want to be involved. When families are engaged using simple, accessible methods, this allows them to see their students’ growth and family engagement increases. Students are aware of their families’ involvement in their learning and want their families’ input. Family involvement is incredibly motivating for students and encourages a harder work ethic and buy-in for students.

Student Growth and Perception

This research shows a connection between individual student growth and family input and feedback. This growth was shown in three student graphs where each student made a whole point of growth in their scaled score, growth in structure, development, and language conventions. Students’ overall scores were also impacted through this research. When comparing students who participated in the research to students in the same class that did not, on average, the students that participated in the research made an extra half point of growth in their scaled score when compared to the students that did not participate. This research shows a definite relationship between family engagement, feedback and the use of ClassDojo (ClassDojo, Inc.) on each student's scaled score growth.

Students also stated in their surveys they valued their writing more when their families were reading it weekly and giving them feedback. The pre and post survey results from students

show a relationship between work ethic and writing assessment scores when their families were involved in the process.

Family View

Families' perspectives and understanding of their students' academics also grew when looking at their survey feedback. Families had an overwhelmingly positive outlook on their involvement in the classroom and with their students' academics before the research began according to the pre survey. However, after the research was completed, a post survey told a story of even more positivity and understanding. The families all agreed that they not only understood what their student was learning but they understood it better and to a different level. They felt that their inclusion within the classroom was much stronger and more present by using ClassDojo (ClassDojo, Inc.) and getting to see in real time what their student was working on. Families even became more involved in the classroom activities such as parties, field trips and field day. The families that were involved showed up more after the research was taking place than before it had begun. Families' comfort level with being involved within the classroom was much higher due to their involvement in the research.

Discussion and Conclusions

From this research, the teacher learned families do want to be involved in their student's learning. These families may not know how to get involved or simply may believe that looking at their students' work when it comes home is enough. The families in this study overwhelmingly shared that their experience better helped them understand what their students were learning in school and the processes that take place during the school day when their students are learning.

The teacher also learned a lot about students' motivation when their families got the chance to give them feedback. Students' motivation and academic scores increase when their families are involved in the feedback process.

The next steps for this research are to implement a workshop for all families inside the classroom to partake in this family engagement opportunity in the upcoming year. Getting the families that were a part of this research to share their own opinions regarding the research and sharing the impact it had on them and their students would be the first step to getting all families involved. This research will help to guide a chance for the entire class to share their learning with their families and receive feedback.

Recommendations for Future Research

Future research is required to help determine if this kind of family involvement will make the same impact class-wide. In this research, only three families volunteered to participate in this study, leaving the teacher/researcher with questions if a whole class of families were to buy into this family involvement process. The questions for future research are:

- What are the impacts on academics when families respond daily to student work?
- What are the impacts on academics in a classroom when every family is participating in responding to student work?
- What are the impacts school-wide when using one communication system for families?
- What are the impacts for students with behavioral issues when they share their academics daily with their families?

Reflection

Teacher

The teacher/researcher found that not only did parents want to be involved, but when they were, they helped their student thrive. Families do not always know the right questions to ask or where to go next in supporting their student. This research gave very clear guidelines in what comes next for students and their families to support the learning inside a classroom.

The teacher also learned that with her support, families that seemed uninterested in making changes at home, were more willing to partner with the teacher and school to help their student be successful not only in academics but home life as well. This research helped to change the perspective on all three fronts: teacher, family, and student.

Family

The families that participated in this research had shifts in their mindset about school, student achievement, and classroom environment. Through this research, many of the families felt their input was valuable when before, they thought it was something that was not necessary for student achievement.

Families were also able to see a genuine view of what their student is doing daily. They were able to see feedback and collaboration between students and teachers. This then helped families to realize that what is happening in the classroom can be done at home and through communication systems such as ClassDojo (ClassDojo, Inc.).

Student

Students' views of their own academic achievement changed through this research. Students previously felt their families did not need and at times want to be involved. Students did not particularly care if their families were involved in their learning. By the end of the research, students were mainly motivated by getting to share and collaborate with their families. This also

gave buy in with some students that had not previously bought into the teacher's feedback before the research.

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