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Our Four Walls

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OUR FOUR WALLS

CAPSTONE NOTEBOOK

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Abstract

When students are given the opportunity to make choices about their own academics it works towards creating an autonomy supportive environment that supports intrinsic motivation. The aim of this capstone project is raise teacher awareness about how when students are part of a classroom community they will be engaged learners and will learn lifelong skills (e.g., self-determination). The author proposes three recommendations that allows students to make decisions on what work they want to display throughout the classroom. The author has written an article for a professional journal, with the help of a community partner, that provides information about how when students are allowed to be decision makers when it comes to the design of the classroom it will create a sense of autonomy and will help students create a sense of engagement of their own education.

Literature Review

Providing students with a choice when it comes to their own academics is a critical element in creating an environment that supports autonomy and an effective way to support intrinsic motivation (Patall & Wynn, 2010). Students who are motivated are likely to engage in classroom activities. Engaged learners are part of a classroom community and will learn lifelong skills (e.g., self-determination). Through my observations in a fourth grade classroom, I have seen the pride and engagement that students have when they talk about their personal work that is displayed throughout the classroom.

When students are given the opportunity to make choices in the classroom they are developing decision making skills, which allows students to determine what they do not know and then seek the information that they need to help them make educated decisions (Jonassen, 2012). Providing opportunities for students to make choices gives students a chance to establish one's unique self-identity and to display one's preferences (Iyengar & Lepper, 1999). In a personal interview with a Karin Falkner, a Special Education teacher at La Gloria Elementary School in Gonzales California, she was asked what

kind of impact she thought giving her students opportunities to make choices within the classroom had on her students she responded by saying, "I think that generally my students are just happier because they really feel like they are a part of the classroom. You can tell that they are taking a part and ownership of their own education because I'm not always telling them what to do and what to create (K. Faulkner, personal communication, April 15, 2015)". An absence of choice can have a detrimental effect on students' intrinsic motivation and life satisfaction. Theorists studying intrinsic motivation have provided the clearest demonstration of the link between the provision of choice and human motivation (Cordova & Lepper, 1996).

When students are motivated they become deeply involved in their school work and make attempts to try more complex operations and they gain traits of enthusiasm, curiosity, and persistence (Cordova & Lepper, 1996; Skinner & Belmont, 1993). Engagement plays an important role in school settings because it functions as a behavioral pathway by which student's motivational processes contribute to their learning and development (Reeve, Jang, Carrell, Jeon, & Barch, 2004). When students are provided with contexts that incorporate individualized information about the students' backgrounds and interests there is an increase in the motivation, involvement, and learning (Cordova & Lepper, 1996). Engagement also works as an observable indicator for teachers to track their students' underlying motivation during instruction (Reeve et al., 2004). Autonomy support is a crucial social-contextual variable for promoting positive motivation (Ciani, Middleton, Summers, & Sheldon, 2010).

"Classroom community is defined as the degree to which students feel like they are members of their classroom (Ciani et al., 2010)". Learning is a social activity that occurs in a social context. Therefore, a student's perception of how they relate to their peers has an influence on their goals for learning (Ciani et al., 2010). Autonomy support occurs when a child is given a certain amount of freedom to determine his or her behaviors within the learning environment (Skinner & Belmont, 1993). Authority figures within the school community can create autonomy support through providing as much choice as

possible within a situation. As well as, helping students "to connect their sense of self to the activity, so that they can do it with a sense of ownership and volition, rather than feeling controlled and coerced by external forces (Ciani et al., 2010)". Autonomy support ultimately revolves around the efforts of the teacher to identify and support students' interests and backgrounds. Some of the characteristic of classroom contexts that support self-determination include allowing for choice and positive feedback regarding competence (Stefanou, Perencevich, DiCintio, & Turner, 2004). "The self-determination theory represents an articulate theoretical position wherein psychological needs play a crucial role in motivation and psychological outcomes (Vallerand, 2001)". Self-determination theory states that "a teacher's motivating style toward students can be conceptualized along a continuum that ranges from highly controlling to highly autonomy supportive (Reeve et al., 2004)". Autonomy-supportive teachers' facilitate self-determination through identifying and nurturing their students' needs, interests and preferences through creating opportunities for students' to develop internalized motivations to guide their learning (Reeve et al., 2004; Deci & Ryan, 1987).

Most teachers report that the concept of autonomy is foreign and unfamiliar because they haven't received sufficient classroom experience and they find it difficult to incorporate and create an autonomy-supportive style into their teaching practices (Reeve et al., 2004). "Specific attempts to support intrinsic motivation, such as creating a student-centered atmosphere, encouraging student initiative, nurturing competence, and using non controlling communication, as well as attempts to promote internalization by providing rationales and promoting the valuing of the task (Stefanou et al, 2004)". Some specific teacher behaviors that are known to help promote student motivation are: provision of choice, sincere praise, reinforcement, curiosity, enthusiasm, and guidance (Skinner & Belmont, 1993).

In conclusion, when students are given the opportunity to make choices about their own academics they become engaged and take ownership of their education. Also when students are in an autonomy supportive environment they feel a connection to their environment and excel in the social

activity of learning. Through this connection to their environment and their education students develop

self-determination skills. Lastly, even though many teachers are unfamiliar with how to effectively create

an autonomy-supportive environment for their students, theorists have suggested some specific behaviors

that work towards promoting self motivation and autonomy within the classroom.

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Community Partner Description

My community partner is Dr. Jessica K. Luke. She is currently a professor at California State University Monterey Bay. She assisted me in the writing, research, and publishing process and aspects of my capstone project. I chose her to be my community partner since she has published educational journals in the past. Therefore, she was able to lend her expertise and knowledge about the technical process that is associated with writing and publishing an educational article. We worked together through biweekly meetings that focused on narrowing my issue of my project, finding and articulating scholarly articles that supported my topic and she guided me through the publishing process of my article (e.g. how to find a publisher whose articles align with my topic, how to professionally contact these publishers, and editing my article to fit the submission guidelines).

Interviewee Description

In order to gain insight into the educational problem that I was working towards resolving, I chose to interview Karin Faulkner who is a Special Education teacher at La Gloria Elementary School in Gonzales California. I chose to interview her because she had implemented GLAD (Guided Language Acquisition Development) walls, which are also referred to as "living walls" in her class. These walls allowed for students to be decision-makers about what information they wanted to display within the classroom as it pertained to the content that they were covering in the curriculum. Therefore, I was

interested in hearing her perspective on whether or not she felt that these "living walls" helped to create a sense of autonomy and engagement among her students within the classroom.

Project Plans

The plan for my capstone project was to create an article that included recommendations for teachers on how to create autonomy within their classroom and how to engage and motivate their students without having to add extra components within their lesson plans. Once I decided on writing an article I began to search for a community partner who I could use as a resource to help me write an academic article. Once I found my community partner I then began researching the concepts of; autonomy, choice, engagement, motivation, self-determination and teacher roles. From there I complied my findings into a literature review. Once I had a clearer understanding of those concepts I began to formulate the three teacher recommendations that focus on creating an autonomy supportive classroom that I would be including in my article. From there I went out and interviewed Karin Faulkner at La Gloria Elementary School, to gain an insider's perspective on how allowing students to be decision makers about the decor of the classroom affected the autonomy within the classroom. The next step in my process was to then take all of the resources that I had collected and used them to help shape my article. I then began to research publishers whose articles aligned with the topic of my article. I decided that I would send my article to Education Week -Teacher. Once I made that decision I finalized my article and sent it to my community partner for one last review. The final step in my process was submitting my article for consideration for publication.

Project Outline

Week 1 March 9-15: Meeting with Dr. Luke, discussed the process of writing an educational article and begin researching topic.

Week 2 March 16–22: Conducted interview with Karin Faulkner and outlined and organized the flow of my article.

Week 3 March 23 -29: Wrote the first draft of my article and then sent it to Dr. Luke and ASAP Writing Tutors to be reviewed.

Week 4 March 30 – April 5: Revised my article with the comments and suggestions from Dr. Luke and ASAP.

Week 5 April 6-12: Begin researching Publishers whose magazines or journals would coincide with the ideas and concepts that are present in my article. Sent out my final draft to Dr. Luke, Dr. Waltz, and ASAP Writing Tutors to be reviewed.

Week 6 April 13-19: Did a final revision of my article.

Week 7 April 20-26: Submitted my article to Education Week for consideration for publication and began creating my poster board for Capstone Festival.

Week 8 April 27 – May 3: Sent my Capstone Notebook to be archived and made final edits on my capstone poster and presentation.

Week 9 May 4 - May 10: Prepared to present my project at Capstone Festival.

Week 10 May 11 - May 14: Presented my Capstone to my fellow peers, professors, and family.

Results

The aim of my project is to reach current and future teachers and provide them with recommendations on how to enhance autonomy and engagement within their classrooms. My hope is that the readers of my article will implement my recommended techniques in their classrooms. If I had longer than one semester for capstone I would have liked to find a teacher who was willing to try out these techniques so that I could have collected data that proved that my recommendations are successful. Since I was limited on time I just had to base my recommendations off of the research that I collected, conversations with peers and faulty, and my interview with a teacher who had already implemented a similar technique to one of my recommendations.

Appendix 1 - Interview Transcript

Karin Faulkner (S.P.E.D Teacher at La Gloria Elementary School in Gonzales California) Interview

April 15, 2015

Interviewer: My project is focused on allowing students to make choices when it comes to what the classroom decor is and I think that through this practice it will work towards creating a sense of autonomy within the classroom. I wanted to speak with you because one of my peers informed me that in your classroom you have implemented a certain kind of program the incorporates and encourages the displaying of student's work on the walls of your classroom.

Karin Faulkner: What I use is called GLAD. It's Guided Language Acquisition Development. We still use the Core Curriculum, but this is just something that we add onto it, to make concepts a little more interesting for the students. Like right over here they compare and contrast. Compare and Contrast is one of the standards of the third grade. So we compared and contrasted birds and bats. It makes it very interesting for them and what a great way for them to do compare and contrast. We use the walls, they create the walls themselves. It use to be where teachers would buy posters and the teachers would decorate the walls or bulletin boards, but now these are called living walls. These are their walls, they are creating these bulletin boards with their work on it. They also follow their notes that they have taken and they will actually go and do their writing from the walls. Or what else I will do is a short assessment and they will have cite their source. They will have cite where the answer was on the wall. It's a lot of fun for them.

Interviewer: What is your definition of autonomy?

Karin Faulkner: I think that if the student is able to work either independently or within a group, but they are an important part and piece of the classroom and they work together. I don't know if I have a really good definition of autonomy but what I do more is that the students are instead of passive learners they are active learners. They are actively learning They are actively learning they are actively figuring out answers together because they are going to retain it better like that.

Interviewer: What lead you to decorate your classroom walls with student work?

Karin Faulkner: Well, I went to GLAD training last summer and I thought I would try it and I now see that it works and I see that children are really interested and have fun doing it, because they have created these walls. These are their walls. Also I tried it and implemented it fully the first quarter and I noticed that their scores actually did rise in language arts. Their reading comprehension, their writing scores, some of the concepts that they have had to learn. For example, the compare and contrast. The ability to pick out details and write about it. The biggest thing is, they are having fun.
 Interviewer: Have you seen any impact on community or autonomy through using these GLAD walls?

Karin Faulkner: Yes, these walls getting them talking amongst themselves a lot! They are collaborating with each other through the use of the walls. You know collaboration is really important for the students. It's part of their learning and a part of their grade, being able to work together is key.

Interviewer: What recommendations would you give to other teachers who are interested in implementing a similar program into their classroom?

Karin Faulkner: I think that using GLAD strategies, using the living walls, letting them be the creators of the walls, letting them take ownership of the classroom. Instead of you just as the teacher. We are a community within the classroom. My Aids and I have a personal relationship with the students, because if you don't have that you aren't really going to get anywhere with them, because they are still children and they need to be nurtured. And they are with us most of the day, so we have a community in here and we do promote that. And it works really well, they take care of each other.

Interviewer: So how might this year's experience influence next years?

Karin Faulkner: Well I'm definitely going to use these strategies again, because I know that they work. It keeps the students really engaged. And what is so awesome about it is you can cover several different subjects through the strategy of the living walls.

Interviewer: What kind of impact does providing opportunities to makes choices have on your students?

Karin Faulkner: I think that generally my students are just happier because they really feel like they are a part of the classroom. You can tell that they are taking a part and ownership of their own education because I'm not always telling them what to do and what to create.

Appendix 2 - Project Materials - Academic Article

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Our Four Walls
By: Kayla Eller

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In the Teaching profession we are constantly being presented with theories, issues and concepts that other professionals in our field think should be implemented into our classrooms. They show us the research of what the theory is and the research of all of the positive or negative effects that it can have on our students. Yet, when it comes time to actually implement these practices into our classrooms those professionals suddenly disappear and they leave us with the questions of "How? and What?". How do we as teachers find the time to implement these practices and how do we guarantee that we are correctly addressing the issue? Also, what do theses theories look like when they are implemented? Most of times these questions go unanswered and I believe that is why these practices go unimplemented.

The concept that I am particularly interested in is creating an autonomy supportive environment. My personal definition of autonomy is an environment in which students feel that they are members of

the classroom. A space where students feel safe to share their opinions, make mistakes, discover new things and think critically about topics. Most importantly autonomy, for me, looks like a safe space where students are motivated to expand their knowledge and further their education.

The aim of this article is to provide future and current teachers with recommendations and practices that can be implemented into the classroom based on the specific theory of autonomy. Through my research I have collected data about theories and ideas from other professionals who talk about the importance of: autonomy, engagement and motivation, the opportunity of choice in the classroom, self-determination and the role of teachers. With these theories and concepts in mind I have created practices that don't take away time from our lesson plans, they simply enhance autonomy through the decor of the classroom. The following are three recommendations on how to increase autonomy within the classroom.

IT'S ABOUT US

The first recommendation is to dedicate a large portion of the classroom's bulletin boards to the students. Of course most of the bulletin boards in classrooms today are dedicated to students work, but the work that is displayed is chosen by the teacher. Instead, I want to propose that the work that is displayed is chosen by the students, and that they should be encouraged and given the freedom to display work that represents their interests, goals, dreams and individuality. For example, if one student is really proud of their math test then they can put that up on the bulletin board, but if another student is really into soccer they could draw a picture of them playing soccer and display that on the board. The focus and goal of this board is to allow the students to make decisions about what they want displayed in the classroom without the constraints of the teacher. As well as, to instill a sense of belonging within the classroom, because with this board the students will have a space where they can share pieces of themselves and learn things about their peers.

WELCOME TO OUR CLASSROOM

The second recommendation is to rethink the design of the classroom door. The first thing that you see when you walk into any classroom is the door and for the most part many classroom doors have signs that say something along the lines of "Welcome to Mrs. or Mr.'s Classroom" these words simply translate to show that the teacher has ownership of the classroom. Yet, this is not just the teacher's classroom. It is the learning environment of all of the students who walk through that door everyday. In order, to send out the message to anyone that walks through that classroom door that this classroom belongs to the students who come everyday to learn in that classroom I would propose that if you were to simply change the sign on the door to say something along the lines of "Welcome to OUR classroom" it would be working towards creating a sense of community and ownership within the classroom among the students. I would also propose that the teachers include the students in deciding how to design/decorate the door. The door is the first thing that the students will see everyday as they are on their way into their classroom we want to make sure that they are welcomed by something that they feel a connection to, something that translates to them that this is their classroom. This is their safe space to come and learn.

TOGETHER WE LEARN
The last recommendation is to create a class flag. Flags work as a device that symbolizes something and holds significance. Think about the American flag. When you look at this symbol you know that it represents the United States and for the citizens of that country it translates as a sense of belonging. How I would propose that you would create a class flag would be to start off with having all of the students draw or bring in something that they feel represents them as an individual and then you would create a flag that incorporates all of these things. You would then hang this flag in front of the room so that the students would be able to see it everyday and remember that a piece of them is being represented in the center and focal point of the classroom. Then as the year progresses you could ask the students to make a new flag that represents the class community as a whole. The purpose of redesigning the class flag is represent the change in the sense of community. In the beginning of the year the students come into the classroom as individuals who don't necessarily feel a connection to their peers. Then as the

year progress the students build bonds and connections with their peers and their learning environment. This new flag should symbolize this transition from individuals to a cohesive classroom community.

These are just recommendations, not every practice will work for every classroom. Since every classroom around the world has a wide variety and diversity of students. But, with these recommendations teachers have the ability to alter these three recommendations so that they can be effective within their classroom. The ultimate focus and goal of allowing students to make choices and make sure they feel represented within their classroom and through these practices teachers is to create an autonomy supportive environment and that is working towards increasing student engagement and motivation towards their own education.

***This article was sent to the magazine *Education Week - Teacher* for consideration for publication. This online and print magazine is an independent and non-profit publisher. Their mission is to raise awareness and understanding of critical issues facing American schools. They also seek to increase the quality of K-12 Education.

Appendix 3 - Presentation Visuals - Poster