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Addressing Student Motivation in the School Setting

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Addressing Student Motivation in the School Setting

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requirements for the Master of Science Degree in
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CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

CAPSTONE PROJECT

“Addressing Student Motivation in the School Setting”

This is to certify that the Capstone Project of
Hanna Niccum
Has been approved by the faculty advisor and the CE 695 – Capstone Project
Course Instructor in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
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Abstract

Research is showing that students are becoming less motivated and more apathetic in their academic performance. Understanding student academic development and creating programming that fits the needs of students with mental health concerns and scholastic aspirations can increase a student's desire to achieve. The purpose of this research is to show a connection between apathetic students and their academic motivation and to examine how a student's mental health plays a role in their motivation. Schools are overcoming the problem of low motivation by implementing programs to increase motivation such as Centennial High School's "Leap Hour" in Minnesota and West Port High School's "Power Hour" in Florida. These programs allow for one hour of freedom for students during their lunch hour to get extra help in their studies, pursue passion projects, join clubs, and connect with teachers and other staff. Implementation of these types of programs have found success, leading to higher attendance, less office referrals, higher grades, and less behavior issues school-wide.

Keywords: student motivation, student apathy

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Introduction

According to the National Research Council, 40% of students are chronically disengaged from school (Crotty 2013). Students are not motivated to achieve for a number of reasons; research is finding that students are under an increasing pressure to achieve good grades, be involved in school activities and sports, volunteer, work, and socialize with others. With all of these pressures on the plate of students, issues such as anxiety, depression, eating disorders, attention deficit disorders (ADD), and attention deficit hyperactivity disorders (ADHD) are becoming very common in adolescents (Weare 2015). Students are becoming apathetic to course work since they want to see value and worth in the work that they are doing, and do not always believe that effort in class will increase their performance. The problem then becomes, what can be done in schools to help increase student motivation and decrease apathy?

Since students are lacking the intrinsic motivational skills needed to help learn material that may seem irrelevant to them, educators are tasked with the job of finding other ways for students to take personal ownership of learning. Extrinsic rewards such as candy, early class releases, or extra privileges have been a way that schools have tried to use to motivate the majority, however even those methods of motivation are failing (Denault & Guay 2017). According to Mitchell (2013) the answer lies in teacher enthusiasm for the subject matter and freedom of choice.

In longitudinal studies, students who have a teacher who is passionate about the content taught over time can create a desire to learn material even if it is hard or not personally applicable (Stroet, Opdenakker, & Minnaert, 2015). Additionally, when students are given the privilege to choose what they are learning or given freedom to decide what and how they learn best that is when the biggest motivational increase is detected (Scheel & Gonzalez 2007). Thus,

implementing programs where students can independently have the freedom to choose how they use their time, what they want to learn, and / or advocate for additional instruction has been proven effective to decrease student apathy (Ellspermann 2014). Students, who attend schools where they can make individual choices, about time spent and take part in special interest learning opportunities, flourish. This freedom of choice also allows students who have mental health issues time to relax if they are anxious, connect with others if they struggle with depression, and receive additional academic support for ADD or ADHD (Ellspermann 2014). Schools all over the country are battling this issue and the implementation of these types of programming is becoming more and more common.

Review of Literature

Motivation in Schools

Motivation is defined as, “the general desire or willingness of someone to do something” (Motivation). Many factors need to be considered when determining why students choose not to participate in academics. Findings are showing that motivation is an important prerequisite for learning, and can be used to predict school achievement, school completion, career success, mental health, and physical health (Taylor et. al. 2014). It is typical for motivation toward school to decrease after a transition to secondary schools (Stroet, Opdenakker, & Minnaert, 2015). Researchers have reported that one reason motivation might wane as students age is that early adolescents' interactions with their content area teachers was closely associated with the development of their motivation in those areas (Stroet, Opdenakker, & Minnaert, 2015). If students are not able to connect with their teacher or the content, motivation tends to trend downward. However, there has been little agreement as to what type of motivation is better for

schools to pursue, intrinsic or extrinsic? Should educators and teachers be fostering ways for students to find motivation to learn on their own? Or should schools be providing ways to motivate students through sports, clubs, incentives, and privileges? (Denault & Guay, 2017).

School counseling professionals are starting to see that traditional interventions for students that are not motivated are not enough to keep intellectually capable students interested in school and motivated to complete academic coursework (Scheel & Gonzalez 2007). School counselors' objectives should be to help move students "to higher levels of motivation that include self-regulated, autonomous types of learning through the promotion of a sense of purpose for academic efforts" (Scheel & Gonzalez 2007 pg. 51). This is also the reason why increased emphasis on curriculum planning that is based around subjects and areas in which students are interested may pay off in increased academic motivation (Scheel & Gonzalez 2007). Since students are looking to find a sense of purpose and connection between school coursework and their futures, schools should consider implementing a freedom of choice project program. Freedom of choice project programs put into effect during the academic school day can help students get a clearer picture of how school can impact their lives outside of high school, and leads to more buy-in and motivation in academic areas.

Lack of Motivation and Student Apathy

Students in America are becoming more apathetic than ever before (Guay 2016). A few reasons that have been documented are poor time management and self-regulation, lack of independence, low self-confidence in academic settings, embarrassment, strategic decision making, and an inability to motivate themselves (Kunzinger 2009). Students are over-scheduled or do not have the skills needed to break down complex assignments or study properly (Kunzinger 2009). At times, students see asking questions or seeking out help as a weakness, and

do not want to be embarrassed. In addition, students whose self-confidence is weak in academic content areas struggle and are resigned to the fact that they are not good at something, and therefore will not want to work hard to improve. However, probably the biggest area of concern in relationship to student apathy is their decision-making process about academic coursework. Students are determining what they feel is valuable about the work that they are given in school, and if they cannot see a purpose for what they are assigned more often than not the work will not get done (Kunzinger 2009). This concept of strategic decision-making is something that should be taken into account when schools are implementing and teaching curriculum. Placing value on transferable skills to other areas should be highlighted to increase motivation and decrease apathy.

Teachers are starting to see the need to engage students in different ways, and helping students see how information in the classroom translates to life outside of school. This can be done through changes school-wide such as freedom of choice programs built into the academic calendar, or small changes made on a teacher-by-teacher basis. An example of this is a social studies teacher from Michigan who has changed the way that he teaches and his approach to academic content. Studying the Constructivist Approach helped this teacher develop a way to rework his curriculum that redraw the boundaries of historical time periods (Kaiser 2010). He recognized the need for students to find value in their academic work and to be engaged in it, and he also changed his expectation of how students learn through using their interests in music, art, and pop culture to fit historical content into interest areas to add value (Kaiser 2010). Students were then able to be engaged, remember more historical content, and use twenty-first century skills to show what they learned (Kaiser 2010).

A physical education teacher in South Carolina is combating student apathy with his own active and continued enthusiasm for the content that is being taught. This teacher realized he could increase engagement in his classes by being a model for the lifestyle he was advocating. He did this through having movement in his lessons, demonstrating what being “fit” looked like, modeling healthy habits, being happy to talk about their personal life active activities, and being eagerly engaged to learn about the things that the students want to know, or learn, about physical education (Mitchell, 2013). A teacher being excited about the content being taught could change the attitudes, and motivation, of a student.

Motivation and Cultural Concerns

Cultural concerns regarding student motivation exist due to technological advances that allow people to move easily from country to country. It has become apparent that immigration has become an important and a permanent feature of the school environment society today (Phalet 2004). This presents challenges for schools when students have different cultural norms than the majority. For example, many American students prefer action as part of their learning style, however, often Asian students prefer to be contemplative and more passive (Guay 2016). Many of these types of examples can be seen at culturally diverse schools across the nation. When looking at a student’s motivation level, intrapersonal factors such as natural characteristics and cultural contexts are used when developing motivational competencies (Guay 2016). Other factors such as values and beliefs of a culture will affect students’ motivation to learn and overall educational outcomes (Guay 2016). In the study by Guay, the results showed that culture affects relationships between antecedents, motivation, and/or outcomes (2016). This does not mean that culture does not play a role in motivation, it means that a student’s culture would shape their level of motivation, “but not the association between motivational levels and potential

determinants and consequences of these levels” (Guay 2016 pg. 158). This means for schools that staff should be looking at the process of universal motivation in regards to self-determination, relatedness, and overall competence of students as human beings.

School is not an ending point for students; it is a time investment in their futures. Research is showing that goal setting is one of those universal motivation processes that can help all students increase motivation at every level of academic development (Phalet 2004). The purpose of creating goals is to support achievement motivation instead of focusing on past setbacks or fear of the future. Having students create scaffolded, task-oriented goals will help them focus on the steps that need to be taken and not crumble under the weight of big picture thinking (Phalet 2004). Educational scaffolding is using resources to help students move progressively towards stronger understanding and the overall learning process. Many immigrants cite self-improvement through academic achievement as high aspirations for themselves and their children (Phalet 2004). It is important to acknowledge that all students are different and even with setting goals may struggle between achieving their dreams and the work that it take to get there. Students motivate themselves in different ways and what works for some might not work for all.

Increasing motivation is not a one size fits all process, and another area in the school where this is true is with special education students. Students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) tend to avoid things that are difficult for them, so perhaps when motivating ASD students it would be beneficial to not use one type of motivational tool or another, but instead be open to a multi-faceted approach (Lequia 2011). When working with special education students that have a diverse set of needs a different approach must be taken that empowers students to look at their strengths and empower them to continue building skills moving forward (Lequia 2011). Finding

motivators for this group of students is beneficial not only for their academic performance, but their social skills as well. Finding a motivator for social skills is potentially easier than finding a motivator for academics. For example, students may be motivated to work on social skills if they knew that it could help them build friendships. However, that concept is harder when it comes to academics. Teachers and caretakers need to take abstract topics academic concepts and make them concrete to help motivate students with physical, emotional, and learning challenges to want to learn (Lequia 2011). This can be extremely challenging since every student has different cognitive processing abilities.

Mental Health in Schools

Statistics from The National Institute of Mental health reports as many as one in four young people between the age of 13 and 18 experience anxiety, and nearly six percent have a severe mental health disorder (Mental Illness 2017). Students are experiencing more mental health issues than ever before with the rise of technology and media that challenge students daily. Research from Duke University looked at-risk adolescents aged 11-15 and showed that those adolescents who used technology more than their own estimated daily use were more likely to have problems with lying, fighting, behavior, and attention (Jones 2017).

Mental health issues that students face include Depression, Anxiety, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), Panic, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD), Oppositional Defiant Disorder (ODD), Conduct Disorder (CD), different eating disorders, and many more. Students bring these issues with them into school and then schools wonder why students are not motivated to achieve. Reform must come with the knowledge that increasing mental health efforts in school is not separate from a school's

academic and instructional mission (Reinke et. al 2011). Mental health and academics must work together in harmony to help students achieve what they set out to do.

Schools are trying to meet these emotional needs by integrating mental health services into their building through school counselors, social workers, mental health interventions, and increased teacher trainings on mental health (Reinke et. al 2011). However, what is actually happening is that there is a gap between the researched mental health interventions, and their implementation into practice in schools (Weare 2015). Lack of time and resources seem to be the barrier that is holding schools back from being able to help decrease stress and implement researched based interventions. When students are struggling with mental health issues, their academic motivation plummets and students become academically at risk. The involvement and engagement of staff, teachers, parents, and students is essential for improving student mental health and increasing academic achievement.

Freedom of Choice Projects

Schools are looking for better solutions to combat the lack of motivation and increased mental health concerns that are plaguing students. One such solution comes from Jayne Ellspermann, Florida's 2014 Administrator of the year. Ellspermann noticed that many students were not engaged in school, a large number of students were failing, and high numbers of discipline referrals were being issued (2014). She decided that students needed more time. They needed time to be connected to other students, staff, activities, and resources that the school could offer. However, where would the time come from? What West Port High school did was take away separated lunches and advocated for five additional minutes at the beginning and the end of each day (Ellspermann 2014). By doing this, students were able to have an hour each day, over lunch, to do with what they wanted. Teachers were still able to get their 30-minute lunch

each day, and then supervise a club, entertain students wanting study sessions, or host activities of interest in their rooms. Students attended an activity fair at the beginning of the year to peak interest in the different offerings that they could choose from. Despite the obvious skepticism the new lunch hour, Power Hour was a huge success. Students were respectful of their school by cleaning up after themselves, course failure rates dropped from 37% to 3.8%, co-curricular participation increased from 10% to 60%, and the discipline referrals were cut in half (Ellspermann 2014). Ellspermann discovered that this independent time showed that “students are truly empowered with the power to be academically successful” (Callahan 2013). Finding meaningful connections to school helped kids want to succeed.

Another similar program was started in Minnesota. This program at Centennial High School is called LEAP: Lunch, Energize, Achieve, Participate (Granholtm 2017). The general goal of the Power Hour and LEAP are the same - to increase student’s motivation to succeed both academically and behaviorally. The LEAP program does just that. Since Centennial already has high graduation rates and academic performance they were looking for the mental health component of this type of programming (Hinrichs 2017). Since implementing the program in the 2016-2017 school year, Centennial is seeing more than just a motivation to succeed they are seeing students problem solving, verbally communicating, and a new positive attitude about their school experience (Granholtm 2017). The key is helping create a balance for students where they feel excited to learn new content and encourage self-exploration in all areas of their life, not just academics. In a survey given to Centennial students numbers, 22% of students report above average stress compared to 60% before starting the LEAP program; 81% of students are also reporting connections to staff members, which is up from 57% before starting LEAP (Hinrichs 2017). The school is seeing that when they invest time to make school safe, comfortable,

emotionally/socially/physically supportive that the academics will fall into place (Insley 2017). By giving students a chance to choose how they spend their free time over lunch they are able to increase their mental health, lower their stress levels, increase academic success, and decrease overall behavior issues. These types of programs seem like a win for students and staff alike.

Discussion

In conclusion, the finding of the freedom of choice projects has far exceeded expectations. The benefits of these programs are not just seen on the academic side of the house. The mental health benefits of lowering stress levels and increasing communication has helped students find success in other areas of their academic and personal lives. Both schools that used this type of programming were looking for different results, however both schools received benefits such a higher attendance rates, lower dropout rates, lower behavior referrals, and overall school participation.

The limitation to these types of programs is ease of implementation. In order to put this type of program into place schools will need support from school board members and other stakeholders in order for a change of this magnitude to happen. This can limit how effective the program can truly be. If students are not given enough time to feel that they have freedom in how they spend this period of their day then part of the success that is felt with the program will not come to fruition (Callahan 2013). The second limitation is buy-in. It can be hard to get school staff to get behind a big change to the school day, especially with the lack of research conducted on Freedom of Choice projects. If schools are not able to “sell” the idea to the staff, then the program will have a hard time succeeding since students will be looking for the teachers to model and praise a change of this magnitude (Ellspermann 2014). The third limitation is space. Since schools tend to have multiple lunch waves to accommodate large number of students,

having students be able to eat lunch whenever they want over the course of an hour can lead to a problem in seating. While it is true that not all students will eat school lunch or choose to sit in the cafeteria to eat it, there still the problem of what space students can use, and occupy, especially in winter months. However, in most cases these limitations are not necessarily barriers for a school who is looking to make this type of project happen. With creative thought and staff buy-in schools can expect good things to happen when they give students the freedom of choice to get extra help, socialize with their friends, get engaged in school extracurricular activities, or explore independent learning projects with the help of their teachers.

Application and integration of this project to other schools is extremely beneficial. With the data to support that student academic and overall well-being is positively impacted it seems that hurdles such as scheduling and space could be overcome. With stress on the rise for adolescents, giving students time to decompress and choose how to use their time is a valuable life skill.

Author's Note

This topic stood out to me when I learned that a small school in Southeast Minnesota was adopting a mini version of this program. I wanted to see what research had been used and the results that were being seen. I was very excited to see that by fostering the interest of students and giving freedom of choice can impact student's grades and mental health in a big way. I was happy to see that students were able to use their time how they felt they needed to such as getting extra help from a teacher, having a chance to be active if they had to ride the bus home after school, learn new hobbies and skills with teachers and staff, or join a club with other people who have similar interests. As a teacher I know that students have been burdened in small towns by

not having a large selection of classes to pick from based on their career paths or personal interest due to staffing or budgets. Having a type of program like this could help students find value in school even if they don't necessarily enjoy the classes they are in. Having this type of program can be a huge motivator for students to participate and engage in school.

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