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Using Writer’s Notebooks and Tutoring with Alternative High School Students

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Introduction

I began this project with a goal to determine how I could help my at-risk students become more engaged in learning. Research encourages teachers to use relevant pedagogical tools to engage students. While I agree with that conclusion, I felt it was still too broad to be effective. My project helped narrow the conclusion to specific tools teachers can use and what they looked like with a specific population of students. I researched the effects of writer’s notebooks and service learning for at-risk high school students to see if the level of academic engagement, individual success and self-esteem would increase among students.

Methodology

We conducted this study in the classroom at Independence High School. As a student teacher at the school, I was able to better assess student growth as I knew them individually and worked with them on a daily basis. All eleventh and twelfth grade students in my classes were invited to participate. Once students consented to participate, they completed a pre-questionnaire that evaluated their interest and ability in reading and writing, as well as their view of themselves as a role model. We wanted to see how they perceived themselves as readers, writers, and role models to those around them so we could compare the data collected at the end of the study.

This research was conducted daily in the classroom as well as during a final project service opportunity. Three times a week, students responded to a writer’s notebook prompt. The prompts included questions, videos, songs, quotes, picture books or simple pictures. Students were encouraged to write anything that came to their mind. After each entry, students were invited to share what they wrote. During the time of research, students picked a picture book. I retrieved a wide variety of children books from local library’s for students to pick from. Mini lessons included a variety of reading, speaking and presentation strategies that students were required to practice while reading their book of choice aloud. Students were given opportunities to practice alone, in groups, and in front of the class before their final presentation. Students were finally evaluated as they read their book aloud to a group of elementary students, based on the skills and strategies they learned in class. Students also completed another questionnaire post research to determine whether their view of themselves had changed from the beginning of the study.

Results

After analyzing the data, I came to several conclusions. It was evident from the observations, final reflections and service learning scores, that students’ level of interest and engagement increased with an authentic purpose. So my initial research question was answered: writer’s notebooks and service learning do positively affect at-risk students’ engagement and autonomy.

Before the experience, students labeled themselves as low achieving readers and writers. Most students believed they were not a role model to anyone, in fact many suggested that they were the opposite of a role model. However, their frequent writer’s notebook entries, reading practice, and the opportunity to read
to younger students, challenged the pre-conceived notions of themselves as learners. Some even expressed a change in opinion of reading and writing in general, expressing and increased interest in both, especially writing, due to writer's notebooks. Some students stated that they didn't like all of the prompts, while others said they enjoyed the freedom to write about anything that came to their mind. Some students discovered that they were in fact writers and were capable of more than they thought.

The opportunity to read to elementary students allowed high school students to engage in the learning because there was an authentic purpose. Students were both excited and apprehensive to read to these students. Even students who were terrified of talking in front of people, were able to overcome and fear and read successfully to the younger students. All of my students were engaged and enthusiastic about learning and sharing what they learned with the younger students. Some expressed the positive influence the experience had on their self-esteem, as younger kids looked up to them and asked them questions that positioned them as experts as they provided this service in the elementary schools.

Discussion

Through this study I found that an authentic learning experience can make all the difference for at-risk students. When teachers provide students with the freedom to write without restrictive prompts, students become more engaged in writing. When students have the opportunity to share what they are learning with others, in this case, elementary students, they are more engaged and their self-esteem increases.

Understanding students' view of themselves as learners, was an important element of this study. I anticipated most students would have low interest in the subjects, but viewed themselves as capable in the subjects. I also expected that students would view themselves as role models. After learning that they thought very poorly of themselves and the way this influenced their learner identity, it helped me craft my lessons and chose pedagogical methods that would not only improve their learning, but also give them small successes to increase their confidence as they prepared to serve others.

This study allowed me, as a pre-service teacher, to understand the value of knowing our students, and providing my students and authentic learning experience. These findings can prove useful to English teachers because it shows that writer's notebooks are in fact useful, and that service learning can encourage learning engagement. As teachers, we can find effective pedagogical tools that the students can enjoy while they learn and improve.

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