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Increasing Homework Quality and Completion Through Improved Student Engagement

An Action Research Report
By Amber Gullickson, Amanda Primus and Eric Primus

Increasing Homework Quality and Completion
Through Improved Student Engagement

By Amber Gullickson, Amanda Primus and Eric Primus

Submitted on August 9, 2013
in fulfillment of final requirements for the MAED degree
Saint Catherine University
St. Paul, Minnesota

Advisor _____

Date _____

Abstract

The objective of our action research project was to determine if improved student to teacher engagement would lead to increased homework completion and quality. Our research focused on a kindergarten classroom consisting of 18 students and an EBD resource room consisting of 17 students in grades 7-12. We collected data from student interviews, student surveys, classroom observations, and homework completion charts. The survey dealt with students' feelings toward homework and the student interviews dealt with what motivates the students. The results showed that students who felt appreciated were more engaged and were more motivated to complete homework. We plan to continue implementing student choice and will continue to build and sustain individual student to teacher relationships. We also plan to continue and maintain our homework completion models in our classrooms.

Many students at all levels of education that we as teachers work with on a day-to-day basis are affected by motivation. We believe that student attitudes toward education have a lot to do with our current problems with motivation. We believe that there likely are many causes for the lack of student motivation. The issue could be that parents do not hold their students to as high of standards as they used to. For some students the classroom environments are not stimulating enough to maintain their attentions and efforts. We intend to strive to create environments where students cannot help but be motivated, and focus on student accountability. We all three find motivation lacking in our classrooms. We decided that we wanted to ensure we are doing everything in our power to help students become and stay motivated throughout school.

Amanda's classroom used for this study consisted of twenty-two 7th grade students learning about United States History in a small public school in rural west central Minnesota. The class was evenly split with eleven boys and eleven girls. This district has an influx of migrant students in the fall and spring, adding one more male student to the class before the end of the study. Within the classroom, there were three students receiving special education services. There were also two students who were serviced in the English Language Learner program.

Another setting for this study was Amber's Kindergarten classroom. This classroom is located in a small public school in rural western Minnesota. The school is made up of about 400 students K-6 and has a high population of migrant students in both the fall and spring. The school also supports a daycare and school readiness program. Amber's classroom consisted of twenty students, ten boys and ten girls. Two female students moved to another district during the course of the study. It was a young class with the

majority of the class turning six years old in the winter and spring. It contained approximately 85% who participated in the daycare and or school readiness programs. Of the 18 students who participated in the study throughout its entirety, three of them qualified for special education services, and an additional five of them were part of the Title 1 program in either math, reading, or both.

Eric's classroom is an EBD Special Education Resource Room in rural central Minnesota about forty eight miles away from Amber and Mandy's classrooms. There are seventeen students serviced in Eric's EBD room, ranging from grades seven through twelve. There are seven females, (two seventh graders, one eighth grader, three juniors, and one senior), ten males (one seventh grader, two eighth graders, one ninth grader, one tenth grader, three juniors, and two seniors). All of the students that Eric works with are dealing with either an emotional or a behavioral problem that negatively affect their classroom success.

Motivation is something that nearly all teachers have spent many hours worrying about at some point, if not many points, throughout their careers. Throughout the literature review we conducted on the topic of motivation, we found that motivation can be broken down into four dimensions. The first is competence, or the student's ability to complete a task. The second is control/autonomy, where students feel in control and have choice in the task. The third dimension is interest/value, in which students have some interest in a task and feel completion will prove valuable. Finally is relatedness in which a student feels a sense of belonging or approval by completing the task. All of these dimension work together to influence motivation towards a given task.

We also found that there are two main types of motivation. They are intrinsic and extrinsic. Students who are motivated intrinsically do things because they really want to do it. They find the task pleasurable and see value in it. Students who are extrinsically motivated do things only to achieve certain results (Usher & Kober, 2012).

One driving part of our motivation programs came from the views that motivation can be greatly affected by praise and student choice. Praise must be sincere and relevant to the student for it to be effective. Likewise, choice must be within reason and not completely open as that can prove to be too overwhelming and have a negative affect (Beesley, A., Clark, T., & Barker, J, 2010).

We as teachers play a huge role in the classroom environment and making students feel comfortable enough to learn. We need to create a respectful setting in which all students feel safe taking part in. According to Bernabei (2010), a child's natural drive to learn will emerge only in safe environments. As teachers we need to follow through with communication to students and parents about their missing assignments, we need to let them know that we care that they complete the assignments. At the same time teachers have a duty to make the assignments meaningful; as Hill and Nave (2009) alluded, the quality of the assignment is more important than the quantity of them.

Increased motivation can also come when teachers set high expectations for homework completion, attendance, behavior, and academic performance (Usher & Kober, 2012). According to King (2009), students need to have their minds challenged to be engaged rather than merely meeting test requirements.

The goal of our action research project is to find the impact of a diverse motivation program on quality homework completion. This goal of reaching

unmotivated students will be attained with more student engagement in the classroom. We will be able to measure this with quality and quantity of homework completed. In the next section we will describe the procedures followed in our project. We will describe the methods used to collect data as well as describe the motivation programs that were implemented in our classrooms.

Description of Research Process

To gain a better understanding of student motivation we needed to collect a wide variety of data. We collected data using four different approaches including student attitude surveys, student behavior observations, student interviews, and student work collection. Research took place beginning on April 2nd and continued through May 24th.

We began our research by learning more about our students' attitudes toward school with the student survey. In this survey we asked students what their feelings were about their school and homework. We asked questions to see what keeps them working diligently and engaged in the classroom. We also asked about teacher's actions that motivate them to work more diligently as students. To accommodate Amber's kindergarten class and Amanda's and Eric's high school students we had two versions of the survey.

Our survey consisted of nine questions (see Appendix A). The first questions looked at students perceptions of school, whether they liked school or not. We asked this in order to get a feel for students' feelings about school in general. The second question asked about their feelings toward homework; whether they liked it or not. This question differed between the high school and kindergarten version of the question. The high school version was a rating between one and ten; whereas the kindergarten was yes or no

question. We also asked students how much time they spent on homework each week. The high school students were asked to estimate the number of hours spent each week; however, the kindergarteners were asked to choose between “a lot” or “a little” time spent each week.

Next students were asked if they thought teachers gave them too much homework. We asked this to see if there was a relationship between those who thought there was too much homework and those who did not complete quality homework. Another question asked students what motivates them in school. This question was open to a variety of answers. We thought it was important for us to see just what these things were so we could identify with our students. This would be helpful in our teaching if we could utilize some of the more common motivators in our classrooms to reach more students. Next we asked students about their feelings about homework completion giving students three options to choose from; excited, do not mind, or dread homework. We felt it was important to understand how students view the process of completing homework.

In another question, we wanted to know students’ motives when completing their homework. We wanted to know how many students are genuinely trying to do well on their homework, versus those who just do it to be done with it. Next was an open ended question asking students what teachers can do to show students they care about them. This is an important question for us to reflect upon our teaching practices as well as to base our teaching habits to help motivate students. Finally, we asked students if they tried harder in classes where they thought teachers showed they cared for them. This helps us to find if students’ motivation is affected by outside sources.

We wanted to use student's body language to tell us a little bit more about their level of engagement, so we used a system of observation. We watched for students who appeared to be engaged or spaced out by observing those who asked questions, had eyes on the speaker, and were sitting up or were distracted by objects on their desk, staring out the window or door, or had their heads down. In order to ease the process we created a template of our classroom arrangement with a system of symbols so that it would be more efficient to collect the data (see Appendix B).

We also chose to collect data in the form of a student interview (see Appendix C). The interview allowed us to select students who might give us more detailed information. We felt that this more open ended option might give us more insight into things that were working well and those that were not, as well as what students found to be favorable in classroom settings. We tried to interview students who would give us uncensored, genuine answers; not what they thought we would want to hear.

The interview involved only four questions, but we hoped that there would be a lot of discussion involved that would help us to create our motivation program. The wording between the high school and kindergarten versions were slightly different to make it easier for the younger students to understand. The first question asked students what makes them work hard for a teacher. We wanted to find characteristics that were important to students and motivation. Next we asked what students did to show teachers that they cared or like school. This is important for us to know the cues they display so we can adjust accordingly. The third question looked at what happened in classes that made students want to work hard. This once again will help us shape our teaching. Finally, students were asked what things made less motivated in their classes. It is

important for us as teachers to be aware so we can avoid these things as much as possible to maintain student motivation.

Our final source for collecting data was to look at student homework. We are looking for the number of students that regularly complete their homework, how many hand it in on time, and the quality of work shown in the assignments. We wanted to do this over a period of time with a variety of assignments so as not to base our data on too few assignments and have information with outliers skewing our information.

Amanda observed her students' behaviors during the first week of the study before they were fully aware of the objective of the study and could change their behaviors. The next week, while continuing to observe behaviors, she then gave the survey to the class of twenty-two. Following the survey, she interviewed one-third of students to gain more insight to the student opinions. By the third week of the study, Amanda was beginning to implement the changes in the classroom for the study. Her focus was to implement more project based assessments involving student choice in methods and topics. However, at this point of the research Amanda had a baby and went out on maternity leave. She was unable to complete her motivation program and the final stages of research; therefore her data will not be included in the remainder of the project.

Amber began to collect data from her kindergarten class by completing the survey with her students about their attitudes toward school, homework, and their teachers. Once the survey was complete, she was able to analyze the data to see what students enjoyed about school.

Next she completed the student interview with a select number of students. She tried to choose students from all ends of the spectrum so that she could get a realistic

view of students' perceptions in her classroom. She wanted to be sure that she would ask students who would be honest with her and not worry about what they were saying. She was then able to formulate her motivation model based on the results of surveys and student interviews.

After the baseline data was collected, Amber began her observations. She primarily recorded observations during guided reading and center time in her classroom. This was the same time each day and lasted for about an hour and 15 minutes each school day.

After a few weeks of collecting baseline data, Amber began to implement her motivation program. This program consisted of a student choice center which began with listening to a recorded book and completing a response to it. Students were then able to play educational games on the ipads. Students were also given "Quiet Critters" during this time to ensure that those students who were completing their work and playing their games accordingly were able to be singled out for their good accomplishments. Then those who were not lost their Quiet Critters and the incentives that went along with them.

The original classroom discipline plan in Amber's room focuses on good and bad behaviors. However, it is often the bad behaviors that get the most attention. So Amber tried to remedy this problem with the Quiet Critters during the course of this study. She wanted to create an environment that had a more positive atmosphere and focus more on the students displaying good behaviors. So at the beginning of center time each day, she would pass out the Quiet Critters and students lost them if they talked in voices that were too loud, were talking instead of working, did not play the games according to the rules,

or did not work in their center in the correct way. Then if a student was able to maintain their Quiet Critter until the end of center time, they were able to get a green card.

Green cards are a part of Amber's original discipline plan as well. They are given to students who make good choices such as listening, following directions when few others do, or going out of their way to help a friend or teacher. If they receive one green card, they receive verbal praise. If they earn two green cards, they earn a sticker. Three green cards entitles them to a note or award being sent home about their wonderful day and a piece of candy, and four of them in one day means they get to choose a prize from the prize box.

The final part of Amber's program consisted of alternative homework assignments. On each homework sheet that is sent home, there are three math activities and three reading activities. Students were given homework each Friday. Then they had until the next Friday to complete and turn in their homework. If they completed their homework on time and it was quality work, they would be able to skip an activity of their choice on the next homework assignment. So if a student consistently turned in their homework each week and it was their best work, then they would only have three parts to their homework rather than four.

Amber continued this program in her room. While she was implementing it, she continued to record observations on students as well as collect homework samples and record homework completion. Once the program was complete, she was able to survey students once again about their attitudes and perceptions toward school, homework, and their teachers. She then interviewed the same students to be able to compare their answers with the answers that she collected before the motivation program began.

The first thing that Eric did was give all seventeen high school students a survey that dealt with their perceptions and viewpoints on homework. He also chose students to individually interview.

Eric wanted to look at what effect personal positive contact had on his student's behavior and success. In the beginning of the research Eric started class in his office. He did not greet any students or stand by the door. He merely waited in his office until the bell rang; he asked for homework, then immediately started class. If students did not have their work it was marked in the grade book, but not addressed. Eric observed his students every fifteen minutes writing down what his students were doing. From May 7th until May 25th Eric greeted all of his students by the door, every day and reminded them to get their materials ready. He also did homework check-ins every day, if he gave out an assignment the day before. Students who did not have their homework assignment completed were required to fill out a home work pink slip, which had the students explain why their homework was not completed. Eric also observed his students every fifteen minutes during this three week period as well, recording what they were doing in class.

Overall our surveys, observation records, interviews, and homework collection were all helpful in investigating the effects of motivation on quality homework completion. In the next section we will analyze the results we have gained through our investigation. The information we will find will help us to plan for a motivational program to help our students to complete quality homework in a timely manner.

Analysis of Data

Following the research process we collected data from four sources surveys, interviews, observations, and homework completion. Once collection was complete we

were able to organize and analyze it. We spent time looking for patterns and similarities regarding the effect of classroom environment on motivation and homework completion.

The first data source that we analyzed was our student survey. The survey dealt with student views of school, homework, and teachers. We will compare our findings from the beginning and at the conclusion of our research. In Amber's kindergarten class in both the pre study survey and in the post study survey, the same number of individuals liked school, 14 students, and did not like school, 4 students.

Eric's data was different. His students' answers changed from beginning to end from 8 to 11 liking school, 7 to 4 not liking, and 2 had no opinion at first. Eric found it interesting that so many students with behavior problems in school actually like being there. 2 students left Eric's class and did not complete the post survey.

The next question about students' opinions of homework produced some key differences for Amber. In the first survey 9 students said they liked homework and 9 did not. However, in the second survey, only 6 responded that they liked homework and 12 did not. She found this interesting with the changes she made to her homework policy giving them less work and more choice if they completed it the week prior. She thought there could be many reasons for this. One thought was that students grew tired of the work by the end of the year. Another was that work given often had a writing component which the class disliked. It also may have been due to the fact that many of the games used for homework were reinforcing skills mastered by many making it redundant.

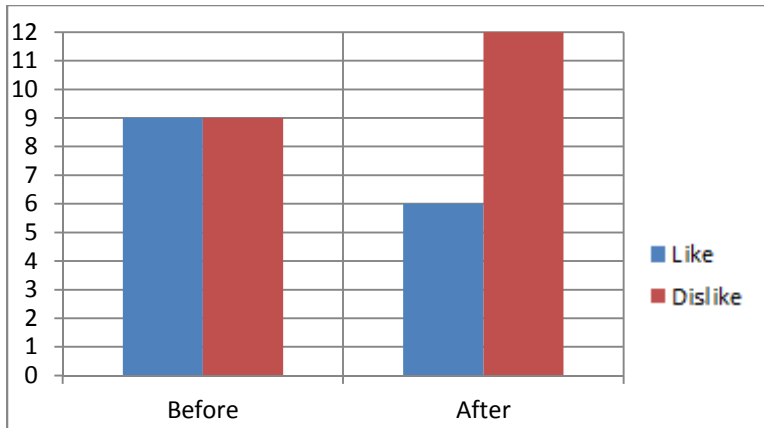


Figure 1. The number of students in Amber's kindergarten class who like and dislike homework.

Eric used a rating system from 1 (hate homework) to 10 (love homework). Both before and after, Eric had more students with negative feelings toward homework. Eric had 12 students in the pre study rate homework with a 5 or lower, with 7 really disliking it with a 1 to 3 rating. Students who rated homework with a 6 or higher were said to have positive feelings towards homework. Before 5 students said they had positive feelings toward homework. At the end 9 students had negative feelings towards homework and 6 students had positive feelings. Most of the students stayed within one or two of their original rating, but 1 dropped 4 points at the end. Eric feels that this is because this student had missed a lot of school and was stressing out about finishing everything.

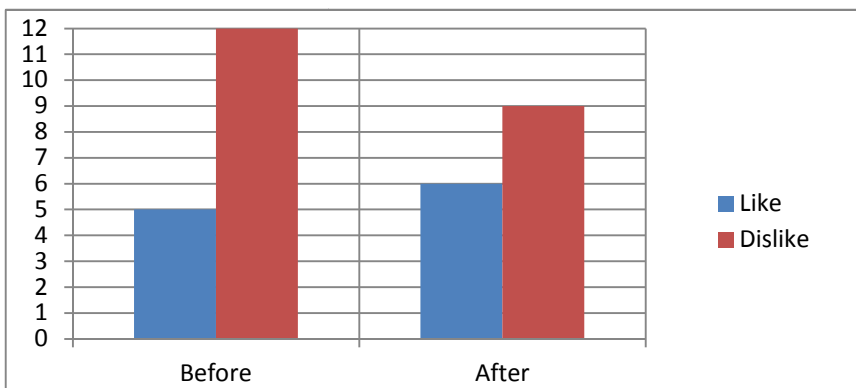


Figure 2. Number of students in Eric's high school EBD classroom who like and dislike homework.

The third question on the survey asked students how much time they spent on homework each week. In Amber's pre study survey, 6 students said they spend a lot of time while 9 said they spend little. 1 student's answer was "in between." On the post study survey, 10 students said that they spend a lot of time on homework while 7 answered that they spend a little time. One student responded that they spent "no time" completing homework. One conclusion she drew from the results was that although students often actually had to complete less work if they completed it the week before, they possibly had an allotted time given by their parents to do their work, so it felt like it took more time to complete it. Another theory that Amber had was that students felt like they spent a lot of time doing homework because it was spring and students still wanted to be outside playing rather than cooped up in their houses completing homework.

Eric's students were asked to list the number of hours spent on homework every week. In the pre study Eric's students' answers ranged from 0 to 15 hours. He found there was no direct relationship between doing homework and getting better grades. On the post study Eric found that 10 of the students who took the pre study increased the amount of time that they spent on homework. He felt this was due to the fact that the end of the year was near and many students needed to catch up before the last day of class.

Next, students were asked if they thought that their teachers gave them too much homework. On Amber's pre study survey 6 students said yes while 11 said no. However, on the post study survey, the responses were split with 9 saying yes and 9 saying no. Again, factors that may have played into their responses include the time of the year that the study was conducted and the fact that most of the homework was reinforcing skills that many of them had already mastered.

In Eric's class of the 17 students asked this question, 6 said yes, 3 sometimes, and 8 said no. He found it interesting that 3 of the students that said teachers do not give them too much homework are students who rarely do any of their homework. In the post study; 8 students said yes and 7 said they do not. It was interesting to see that more students said yes, they got too much homework. Considering it was the end of the school year, Eric had lightened the load on homework allowing time to do most of it in class.

The fifth question on the survey dealt with motivation. There were 5 choices for students to mark if they were motivators for them in school. There were 14 students in Amber's class that were motivated by what their teachers think on the pre study survey and 15 by the end. 14 students said they were motivated by their parents while 16 were in the post study. There were 16 students motivated by their grades and report card in the first survey while the number went down to 15 in the post survey. For both, only 4 students were motivated by what their friends thought or were doing. The final factor of liking school had 15 students in the pre study survey and 14 in the post study survey.

Amber's classroom data did not show any important changes in motivational factors. One thing that she found interesting was that the majority of students in her class were not motivated by friends. Peer pressure and belonging was not an issue at this age.

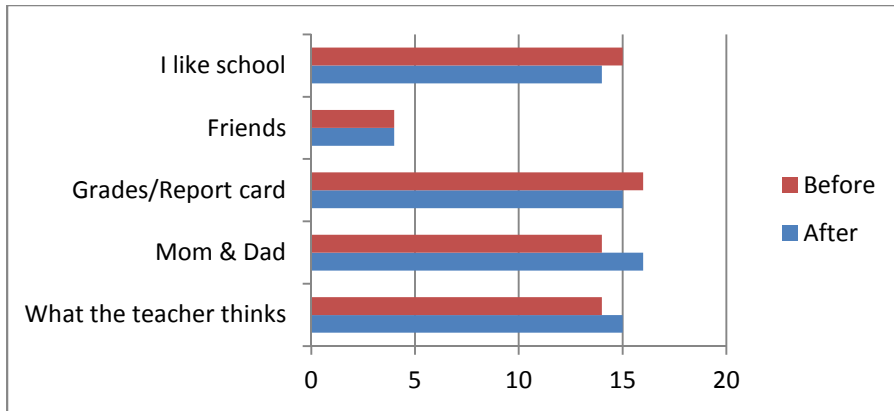


Figure 3. What motivates Amber's kindergarten students in school.

Eric's 17 students were given the same choices on motivation. In the pre study 6 students said their teacher's thoughts mattered, but in the post study only 13 students said it mattered. 5 students in the pre study said their parents' thoughts motivated them, in the post survey that jumped to 15. 8 students in the pre study said grades motivated them and 10 students were motivated by grades after. Friends did not play much of a role before or after; only 4 students noted friends as a factor before, and 6 in the post survey. In the pre study 2 students admitted to liking school and after 5 said they liked school. One student noted her motivation was intrinsic, she felt accomplished when she turned her work in.

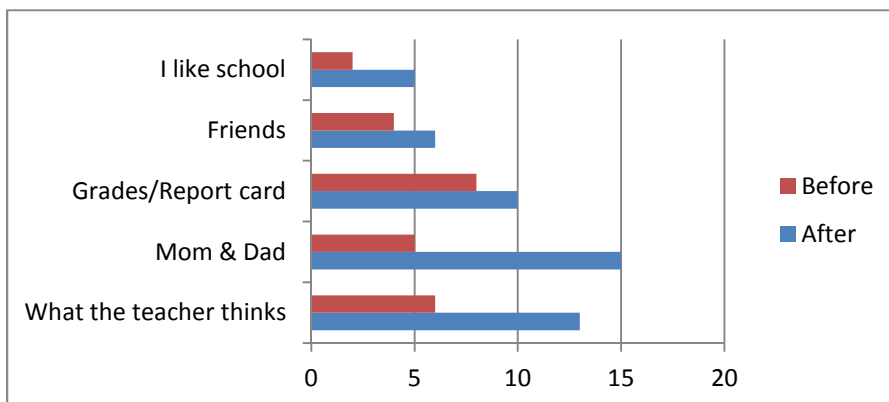


Figure 4. What motivates Eric's EBD classroom students.

The next question on the survey asked students opinions on completing their homework. They were given 3 choices. In Amber's pre study survey 6 students said they were excited homework, 6 said they do not mind it, and 6 dread doing homework. On the post study survey, answers changed. Only 2 students said they were excited to complete homework, 6 said they do not mind it, and 10 dread their homework.

Amber saw some changes in the results when comparing the data. Only 1 student changed in not minding homework. However, being excited about homework went down from 6 to only 2. There was also a large difference, from 6 to 10, between students who originally dreaded homework and who ended dreading homework. Again, Amber felt the reason for this may have been that students were tiring of work near the end of the year.

In Eric's class 1 student was excited about completing homework on the pre study survey, 12 did not mind it, and 4 dreaded doing their homework. On the post study survey some answers changed; 3 were excited to complete homework, 12 did not mind, and 0 dreaded it. There were 2 students did not take the survey. Eric thinks more were excited to finish their homework to pass their classes as the end of the year approached.

Students were asked if when working they did their best or if they completed it to just be done with. In Amber's pre study survey, 13 students answered that they did their best each time while only 5 completed it just to get it done. The post study survey had 8 doing their best work and 10 just trying to get done. Amber thought this may be because many tried hard throughout the year and did their best at everything they did. However, as the year wound down, students doing their work no longer did it up to their ability.

In Eric's pre study survey 3 students did their best work each time, 9 worked to get it done, and 5 said both depending on their mood. The post survey was interesting. 8

students said they did their homework to the best of their ability; this surprised Eric as it was the end of the year and many students were under a lot of stress with current work plus late work as well. 5 continued to do it just to be done, while only 2 said both.

The next question asked students to list things that a teacher can do to show that they care. Amber's class had a wide variety of answers for this question. Some common themes she found in the pre study survey were: 4 students said when she helps me, 4 said when she gives us green cards, 5 said when she is nice and not mean, and 3 responded with when she gives us playtime. Some other interesting responses included she smiles at us, and she does back flips. Some common themes in the post study were: doing fun stuff which got 3 responses, 2 answered that she is nice, 4 answered she gives us outside time or free time, 2 said that she helps me, and 5 responded that she gives green cards. Some other interesting responses were she dresses nice so I want to work, and encourages me and tells me I can do better. These helped Amber understand her students better.

The top themes written in both surveys for Eric's class included letting the students know that you are proud of them, being more than just a teacher, being a friend/someone who is there to listen about anything not just school work, and finally ask how their day is going. The answers to these questions helped Eric see that when he was positive and took an interest in his students' day that they felt more appreciated, and had a more positive school experience, which lead to more school successes.

The final question asked students if they work harder for teachers who show they care. In Amber's class 18 responded yes and 0 no in both surveys. This was interesting as students' perceptions of how a teacher can show them they care about them differed

greatly. They all will work harder for a teacher that displays those qualities or behaviors. It showed her that students really just want to be taken care of and know they matter.

In Eric's pre study survey 17 students answered this question. 11 students said they try harder when they know that a teacher cares, 3 who did not try any harder and 3 who said the teacher had no effect on them. On the post study survey Eric had 15 students answer the questions; 11 answered they worked harder and 4 did not.

The next data source that we analyzed was the student interview. It was given to a select group of students. Amber completed the interview with 6 of her 18 kindergarten students. The first question asked students what their teacher does that makes them work hard in the classroom. Some common answers in Amber's classroom included giving us green cards, letting us have free time, taking us on fieldtrips, doing fun projects, and doing silly things. On the second interview, students' responses included things such as encourages me, give hugs, gives free time, takes us on field trips, and gives green cards.

Eric completed this interview with all of his students. Things that made students work hard for a teacher at first were when teachers show that they care, are nice, and a handful of students said that nothing makes them work hard. In the post interview the top themes were when teachers are encouraging, are nice, and nothing makes me work hard.

The second question on the interview asked students to list ways they show that they like school. Amber's first interview got responses such as doing my work, listening, being good, and being quiet. In the post study students gave answers such as working hard, not earning red cards, doing my work, following directions, and being nice.

In Eric's class he got answers like do homework, listen, be respectful, and nothing. On the post interview Eric's class answered do homework, and listen, but a high

number of students answered with “show up to class, and I don’t.” Eric believes these negative responses were given because it was near the end of the school year.

The next student interview question asked students what they did in class that made them work hard. In Amber’s first round 4 students answered iPads, 2 liked centers, 4 liked free-time, recess, and/or gym, and 2 liked to do Smartboard activities. The data Amber gained from this question helped her to create her study procedures. Since many students responded that they liked using iPads, she made that a part of her student choice center to help motivate her students. The final interview had similar answers: 3 students liked to have free time, all 6 interviewed liked iPads, 3 liked centers, 3 liked playing games, and only 1 student responded Smartboard activities,

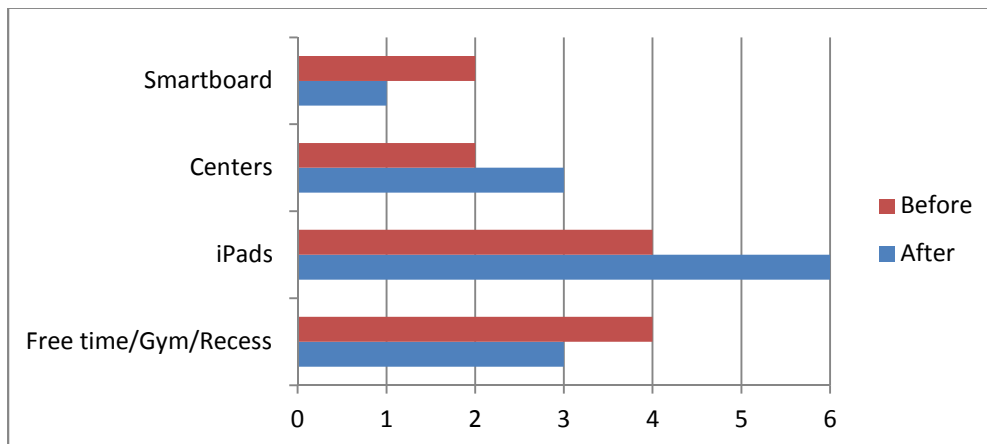


Figure 5. Activities that motivate Amber's kindergarteners out of six students questioned.

Most of the changes in the data when comparing the 2 interviews came from iPads. Amber concluded that since iPads were directly incorporated into her classroom each day that they really stuck out in students’ minds. They were able to use them each week and really enjoyed using the learning tool. She also thought that even though it was a small change, students may not have answered Smartboard because it was not used for

as many games or interactive activities as the beginning of the study. By the end of the year, most Smartboard activities dealt mostly with writing, deterring many students.

Eric's class chose to focus on qualities of a teacher, not activities. The qualities his students gave on the pre study survey were understanding, a sense of humor, and happy. On the post study interview the top qualities were happy, kind, and nothing. Eric thinks that the negative feelings at the end of the school year led to the "nothing" answer.

The final question in the student interview asked students if any teacher actions made them not want to work. Amber had 4 students responded with yells at our class. 1 responded with gives me red cards, and 1 said no. After analyzing this data, Amber decided to implement the "quiet critters" into her classroom to help prevent the class from getting yelled at or into trouble when few students were at fault. The post study survey showed very different results. 1 student answered the question saying gives red cards while 5 students responded no. These data showed Amber that the concept of "quiet critters" did have a positive effect on the classroom environment. Students no longer felt as though they were getting into trouble or being yelled when the student causing the problem was singled out. Instead they were rewarded for their good choices.

Eric also asked his class what teachers did that decreased motivation. In the pre study interview they answered: when teachers are crabby and yell the students, constantly asking them to get to work, getting off track while teaching, and talking about things that do not pertain to the lesson. After the study they said being negative and impatient is un-motivating. Some noted that they hate when teachers pick favorites, it makes it hard for them to work because they know that "favorite" will get their way more than the rest. Tedious homework assignments and huge assignments also made them lose motivation.

The next data collection piece that we analyzed was our behavior observations. Each day during center time, Amber recorded the students' behaviors to see if the motivation program was actually having an effect on behavior and participation. Amber started observing students on April 2nd. During observations, we were looking to see if students were on task or off task, whether they seemed to be engaged in their learning, if they were spaced out, if they were talking, or asking questions. The first 2 weeks of observations were analyzed to show pre study data. During this time Amber observed students off task 60 times and observed them on task 37 times. She observed 9 students spaced out during this time and talking 30 times. She observed students engaged 23 times and asking questions 9 times.

Observations were made during the whole course of the study; however, Amber closely monitored and analyzed the student's behaviors during the last two weeks to note the differences from the beginning to the end. During the final two weeks students were observed as being off task 12 times while they were on task 51 times. She observed students spaced out 4 times and engaged in their work 43 times. She observed students asking questions 4 times and talking about unrelated material 19 times.

When analyzing all of this information, Amber was able to see some good trends. Students were off task much less in the last two weeks of the study. Part of the reason may have been that the centers that were planned were challenging, but not too hard. Students were also very aware that if they were not on task they would lose their quiet critter. Amber also had some students have to skip their listening/iPad center if they were not productive in other centers for the week. This may have influenced the number of students who were on task. The number of spaced out students went down a small

amount which Amber felt was encouraging given the time of year. At the end of the year, there are often a lot of students who are looking out the window and thinking about the fun to be had in the warm weather, but numbers went down rather than climbing up.

During the last two weeks of observations in Amber's classroom, the number of students who were engaged in their activities increased from 23 students to 43. This may have been due to the centers that were given for students to work on. Students very much enjoyed working on the iPads and listening to books so they were very engaged in their work during that time. There were a lot of other very hands on novel centers that are used during the end of the year which helped students to stay engaged in their work.

The number of students asking questions during the last two weeks of the study went down as well. This may have been due to the fact that students had finally caught on to way that things are run in Amber's classroom during center time so they did not need to ask as many questions and were able to play the games without needing more information. Students were able to listen the first time directions were given and they were on task during that time so the need to ask additional questions was not there.

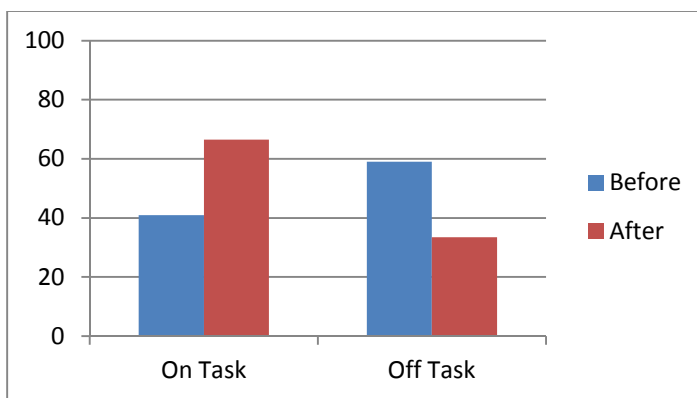


Figure 6. Amber's observations of on and off task behaviors before and after the program.

Eric chose to observe and document students' behavior every 15 minutes. He did this because his school has 45 minute classes. For the first 3 week period, Eric stayed in his office and only met students when the bell to start class rang. For this period Eric's students were off task 40% of the time. Within that 40%, 63% of the students were talking to friends, 28% were off task, and 9% appeared to be spaced out. They were on task 60% of the time. Within that 60%, 79% were on task, 13% were engaged, and 8% were asking questions or communicating with an adult about school work.

During the next 3 weeks Eric greeted every student at the door. He asked how their day was and reminded them to get their work ready. During this time Eric's class was on task 83% of the time. Within that 83%, 75% of the students were on task, 15% were engaged, and 10% were asking questions or communicating an adult. They were off task 17% of the time. Within the 17%, 60% were talking to friends, 38% were of task, and 2% were spaced out. Eric was pleased with the results, he feels that it verifies his assumptions that students who are treated with a more personal approach do in fact have more success in school, and overall will turn in and complete better quality work.

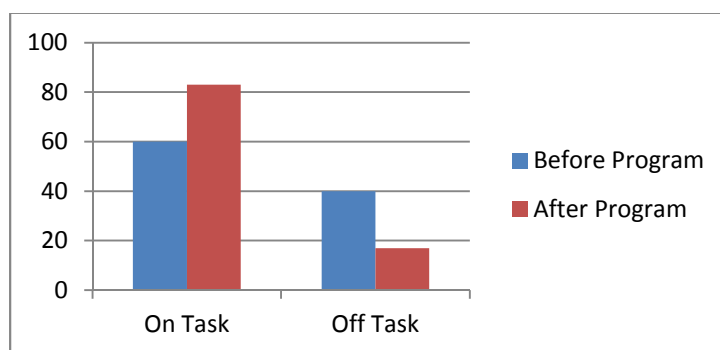


Figure 7. Eric's observations of on and off task behaviors before and after the program.

The final data collection piece that we analyzed was a homework completion chart. Amber recorded students who completed quality homework on time. Before the

study began, 11 students almost always completed their homework and turned it in when it was due. 4 completed their homework and turned it in sometimes, but not consistently. Finally, 3 hardly ever or never turned their homework in when it was due. Homework was collected and analyzed throughout the 6 weeks of the study. During this time, 15 students completed their homework on time every week, 1 completed it and turned it in on time 3 of the 6 weeks, and 2 still hardly ever or never turned in their homework.

Amber was excited when comparing the data. During this time, 4 more students started completing their homework on a consistent basis. Only 1 still did not, and 1 went from hardly ever completing their homework to completing it each week. One factor was that students were more motivated to do their work and turn it in on time in order to have less to do the next week. Amber had originally thought that the homework completion piece would be irrelevant for her students because they are young and making sure homework is completed on time is part of their parents' responsibility. She thinks some of the students who did not do it consistently in the beginning may have convinced their parents to help them complete it so they could turn it in on time.

Eric decided to try a new approach to have his students increase the percentage of homework that was completed on a daily basis. The first 3 weeks Eric collected data to form a baseline. He found that only about 50% of his students' daily homework assignments were being completed and turned in. For the first 3 weeks if an assignment was not turned in, Eric just recorded the score and left it at that. The next 3 weeks when a student did not have a homework assignment completed on time Eric made the students fill out a homework pink slip. This slip required the student to fill in their name, the date, and the reason they did not complete the assignment. It did not require the student to

finish the assignment. Aside from one student who wrote a pink slip every day, after implementing the pink slips Eric's class had a homework completion rate of 87%. Eric found out that a majority of students started coming to class with their work completed because they did not want to fill out a pink slip. There were 2 students who told Eric that this was a good idea because "my grades went up and now I'm going to pass economics."

In conclusion from the data we collected and analyzed, we do believe that students benefit from a motivational program. When students are highly engaged and motivated their homework completion and quality improves. In the next section we will discuss how this research affects us in our teaching roles and how we will use it to improve our classroom environments and student rapport.

Action Plan

Based on the literature that we reviewed as well as the outcomes of our action research project, we learned that classroom environment plays an important part in motivation. Motivation then helps determine homework completion. We found this information very valuable as teachers. We plan on implementing parts of our study in our everyday teaching.

Amber very much enjoyed the response that she got from students using their self selected centers and plans on implementing them into her classroom in the future. She also thought that the Quiet Critters really improved the classroom environment and helped bring the focus back to students who are making good choices and plans on continuing with them as well.

Eric did not think that something as simple as a greeting and homework pink-slips would make such a difference with his students. He found that his students liked the

greeting by the doorway. Not only did his students react favorably to the greeting, but their mood was different on the days that he did not greet his students. Eric also found that his students' homework completion rate went up as a result of using the homework pink-slips. Eric has decided that he will greet his students every day considering it was such a small gesture that had such a positive impact on his students' mood and behavior. He has also decided that he will continue to use the pink slips. Many of his students were motivated to do their homework in order to avoid filling out the pink-slips.

Mandy found the information from Amber and Eric's rooms informative. She plans to use more student choice assessments in the future. She also will be using a form of homework responsibility program with her students. Finally, she will be conscientious of her relationships with her students and try to make a connection with all individuals regularly.

We found that overall, our classrooms seemed to run smoother and students seemed to care more because we were directly showing them that we care by giving the choices and asking their opinions. Students want to have a voice and we found that when we give them one, they can give us abundant valuable information.

After analyzing the post study survey, Amber began to wonder when students begin worrying about the opinions of other students. Most students in her class were not motivated by what their friend's thought because it did not really cross their minds. So it made her think about when students do start doing or not doing work in order to fit in with their friends.

Some changes that Amber thought may be necessary, if completing the study again, would be to be able to have follow-up questions on the survey. There were many

answers in which she would have like students to go into more details to give a better and clearer understanding of the situation and child's thinking.

Eric thought one change he would make would be to make the survey more personal to his classroom. He feels that the survey was a little generic and thinks he might get more genuine responses if the questions were geared more towards his students and classroom setting.

Another limitation Amber found was the way she conducted the student interview. She thinks that if she would have interviewed more of her students that she would have been able to get better and more effective data. It was hard to come up with similar answers when the pool from which the data came from was so small.

Finally Amber would have liked to do one more week of baseline observations. With her school implementing a four day week, it may have given a better sample and more information if she was able to observe students for a few more days before implementing the study.

Mandy also thought that it was difficult to analyze and categorize the observation information as there were so many different behaviors being observed. We tried to make categories to fit everything, but there were so many subcategories that were not given justice in our findings. So we would like to be able to analyze the child rather than just data. There may be reasons that they are losing focus that have nothing to do with what is happening in the classroom. There are a variety of other reasons. For example, a student may have an IEP for inattentive behavior or for other academic reasons. They also may seem to not be paying attention, but actually are getting more out of the lesson than those who look like they are paying attention.

In conclusion, we have decided to continue to implement student choice into our classrooms to give students some much wanted control over what happens in school. We will also continue to seek ways to include students in the teaching process. Most importantly, we want to remember that each student needs to feel important on a daily basis; as Bernabei reminds us “We need to communicate You Matter to our students whenever we honor their needs. This happens in a special way when we honor their name, their voice and their need to belong” (2010, p. 61).

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Student Survey—Kindergarten Version

1. Do you like school? yes no

2. Do you like homework? yes no

3. How much time do you spend on homework each week?

 a lot a little

4. Do you think your teachers give you too much homework?

 yes no

5. What motivates you in school? Check all that apply.

___ What my teacher thinks of me ___ What my friends are doing

___ What my mom & dad want me to do ___ I like school

___ My grades/report card

6. How do you feel about completing homework? Circle one.

I am excited! I don't mind it I dread it

7. When working on assignments do you

 A. Complete it doing your best B. Do it just to get it done

8. List one or two things a teacher can do to show they care about you.

9. Do you work harder for teachers who show they care?

 yes no

Appendix B

Date: _____

Place the proper symbol in the box of the given student's seat any time you notice any of the behaviors taking place:

N-on task

S-spaced out

E-engaged

Appears to be enjoying

F-off task

A-asking questions

T-talking

Appendix C

Student Interview:

1. What makes you work hard for a teacher?

2. What do you do to show your teacher that you care about their class?

3. What are activities or personal qualities of a teacher that make you enjoy their class?

4. Are there things that teachers do to unmotivated you? If so what sorts of things?

Student Interview - Kindergarten Version:

1. What does your teacher do that you like and makes you work hard?

2. How do you show your teacher that you like school?

3. What things do you do in class that you like and make you work hard?

4. Do teachers do anything that make you not want to do your work? What?
