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Which Came First: The Teacher or the Student?

Elizabeth Currin, Editor
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As a riff on the old chicken-egg conundrum, the question of "Which came first: the teacher or the student?" may not have the same enigmatic quality, but it is nevertheless a question worth posing, especially among teacher educators. We all spend countless hours preparing for our students—at the dawn of every semester and on the verge of every seminar, just as we hope they develop the skills to prepare for students of their own. Likewise, those of us who supervise interns may guide them through multiple drafts of lesson plans before the official task of observing begins. All of this preparation is undoubtedly important, yet while the teacher's work, in these respects, comes first, we must nevertheless strive to keep students at the center of the learning process.

Bonner (2010) insists student-centered education cannot happen without a "conscious and deliberate effort" (p. 191). She explains how the University of Alabama, acknowledging its identity as a research-intensive institution, leverages that position in a student-centered way, chiefly "by embracing two central ideas, that teaching should be a scholarly activity and that students should be actively engaged in learning" (p. 184). At any age and in any discipline, then, students should be at the center of our work, and by positioning ourselves as learners, we should meet them in that middle, deliberately disrupting the teacher-student binary.

Indeed, Aleccia (2011) stresses how teacher educators should model student-centered pedagogy so pre-service teachers go on to do the same in their future classrooms, and Clark (2014) provides an instructive endorsement of the gradual release model as a valuable strategy for that very aim. Similarly, Banchi and Bell (2008) offer a useful continuum for encouraging elementary school teachers to incorporate more student inquiry in their lessons. Such a spectrum further underscores how teachers are students and

students are teachers. The articles in this issue of the *FATE Journal* join these scholarly voices in advocating for student-centered learning.

The last issue of the *FATE Journal* bravely tackled the political context of education, but the concept of student-centered learning is by no means a neutral subject. Noting how "educational settings are not, and never have been, neutral, safe or fair," Rowan, Singh, and Allen (2016) challenge teacher educators to lead the charge in asking critical questions about our own work—being proactive in our willingness to make that work better, rather than always on the defense against external criticism (p. 417). Likewise, Futrell (2010) pointedly asks, "If we, as teacher educators, are not able and willing to change, how can our graduates be expected to understand their role in bringing about meaningful change in the education system?" (p. 439). Inviting the FATE community to ponder these and other questions, this issue thus delves into a range of ways to keep students at the center of the learning process, and I urge readers to consider how living up to the student-centered ideal also invites us to think of ourselves as students.

Each of the articles in this issue can enrich our understanding of student-centered learning and suggest how we, as teacher educators, can practice that principle while simultaneously cultivating the same philosophy in our students. To start, in "The Pre-service Teacher Perspective on Responding Culturally to Students through Anchor Charts," Vernita Glenn-White and Kristopher Childs welcome us into their world, vividly describing their efforts to help pre-service teachers incorporate culturally responsive pedagogy. By enacting student-centered methods at the higher education level, they simultaneously promote student-centered K-12 classrooms, striving to "support [their] Candidates and the students they serve" (p. 10). The perspectives of those candidates—and the student-centered nature of their work—shine throughout the article.

Next, in "A Teacher Inquiry Study: Supporting Teachers to Implement Student-Centered Learning," Marlena Sinclair, with help from Yvonne Franco, reflects on her experience with in-service teachers, whom she positions as learners, noting, "Supporting teachers as a coach requires the same differentiation that I used as a classroom teacher with my students" (p. 39). As she places them at the center of her work, she simultaneously guides them to keep K-12 students at the center of theirs. Though Sinclair and Franco suggest, "districts and schools must communicate with certainty what they are looking for

when describing student-centered classrooms" (p. 40), they ultimately argue it is just as important to understand the *why* as it is the *what* or the *how*.

In light of the underlying philosophy of student-centered learning, the next article, by Melissa Rainone and Yvonne Franco, offers salient insight. Charmingly titled, "Leaving the Nest: Cultivating Independent Learners," this piece centers on Rainone's own problems of practice. By centering her work on 3 students whose behavior was cause for concern, she was able to implement changes in the classroom that proved beneficial for all learners. Not only that, but pursuit of particular wonderings related to this issue sparked new questions she is eager to explore. Her embeddedness within her students' learning is palpable as she proclaims, "This study is vital to my students' success, as well my success as their second-grade teacher" (p. 45). Moreover, Rainone's study also rippled beyond her classroom walls, as she shared her findings with colleagues, who then applied similar ideas in their own contexts. Readers of the *FATE Journal* are encouraged to follow suit in their own unique ways.

Finally, in "'We're going to get worse, so what's the point of working?': Florida High School Students Speak on School Grading," Amy Rottmann and Martin Wasserberg center our gaze on K-12 students themselves, intentionally bringing those voices into the conversation. Not mincing words, the authors claim, "Student perspectives are imperative to drive any positive reform" (p. 67), implying how moving toward more student-centered learning would seem to necessitate asking students what exactly that might look like. Their article should give us pause to consider how forces beyond the classroom wall can have a decentering effect on teaching and learning: even when students were aware of and empathetic to the pressure facing teachers and administrators—or perhaps because of that, "students overwhelmingly perceived test-based accountability practices as repressive and a negative influence on their school experience" (p. 64). As such, this piece deftly bridges the prior and current issue of the *FATE Journal* and leaves me hopeful about future contributions to the journal and the field.

In addition to these excellent articles, incoming editor Tara Ferland takes an eager and earnest look at *Impactful Practitioner Inquiry: The Ripple Effect on Classrooms, Schools, and Teacher Professionalism*, (Nichols & Cormack, 2017), which, she claims, provides "a framework for effective practitioner research" of interest to "those already engaged in practitioner research as well as those who are on the fence" (p. 74). I, for one, cannot wait

to read it. Ferland's review is a fitting complement to the other articles in this issue, all of which nudge us to shake up the teacher-student status quo.

Indeed, Roberson and Woody (2012) remind us student-centered classrooms espouse "an alternative philosophy of teaching and learning" than the usual "accumulation of bits of knowledge" (pp. 207, 210). Student-centered teachers and teacher educators who are willing to be students themselves embrace the challenge of a broader view of teaching and learning, and for teacher educators in particular, inquiry can play a vital role in that paradigm shift (Duncan, Pilitsis, & Piegaro, 2010). Nevertheless, Costa (2013) insists, "student centeredness is easier to understand than to define," as the "multidimensional" concept encompasses "course design and implementation, selection of relevant curriculum suited to the likely class needs, organization of course materials and delivery of classes," among other elements in service of "achieving a sustainable motivation and engagement of students" (p. 267). While this issue of the *FATE Journal* may not get us any closer to an exact and static definition of student-centered learning—just as we may never solve the old chicken-egg riddle, the authors featured here ably illustrate what student-centered learning looks like in a variety of contexts. What does it look like in your work? The *FATE Journal* would love to learn about it.

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The Pre-service Teacher Perspective on Responding Culturally to Students through Anchor Charts

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Abstract

Teachers in urban, high-needs schools are faced with challenges that extend beyond academic achievement. Teachers in schools that have been classified as Title I, or having a large population on free and reduced lunch, often contend with outside cultural influences that shape the thinking and mindset of their students prior to their first minute of instruction. Pre-service teachers in the field experience similar situations and would therefore benefit from incorporating Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT) in their instruction (Howse, 2013). Embedding CRT into instruction provides an outlet for students to express themselves while becoming more engaged in the learning process (Gay, 2010; Howse, 2013; Ladson-Billings, 1994). The authors present the use of CRT anchor charts from the perspective of pre-service teachers in various Title I elementary schools. The pre-service teachers created anchor charts to assist with instruction or classroom rules and procedures using cultural/generational terminology.

Introduction

My colleague and I* previously worked in K-12 education before transitioning to higher education. We were both former middle and high school teachers. My colleague became a professor, while I was promoted to the local school district as a District Mathematics Specialist. Working with several schools during a turnaround initiative, I was afforded the opportunity to observe similarities and differences between teachers, classrooms, students, and administrators. I spent several months observing classrooms in four schools with a focus on teacher and student interactions. I also observed the environment of the school hallways and classroom walls, searching for the student's voice. Walking around the schools, I noticed a majority of the students would quote a variety of rap songs or phrases from reality television shows and other social media outlets to define or describe particular situations.

Through this experience, I was able to initiate a framework of how to use Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT) in classrooms through an unconventional use of anchor charts. Now as a professor, I have reconnected with my colleague and co-author, and we work with pre-service teachers who are unfamiliar with Title I schools and/or diverse populations. We recently realized our pre-service teachers had questions about how to work with students of color. They noticed a few of their Cooperating Teachers (CTs) were struggling to engage the students during instruction and were eager to learn how to reach *all* students. We decided to select an overarching theme for each cohort block and integrate it throughout our respective courses over the semester, with a strong focus on Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT).

Purpose

The purpose of this article is to present how pre-service teachers think about CRT through the use of anchor charts in elementary classrooms. From this point, we will refer to pre-service teachers as Candidates, as this term is used to refer to our students while they are conducting their field experiences. Over a few weeks, the Candidates were introduced to CRT from the authors and their other professors through literacy, mathematics, English for Speakers of Other Languages/English Language Learners (ESOL/ELL), and general lesson planning. It was important for the Candidates to start learning about CRT during their first field experience cohort block to practice strategies before and during their final student-

* In this article, first-person singular pronouns refer to the first author.

teaching internship. The Candidates undergo three rounds of field experiences in cohort blocks prior to graduating from the state approved education program. The Candidates who participated in this assignment are in the first block. During the first part of their junior year, the Candidates are grouped into cohorts and take a series of literacy, ESOL, and professional education courses. They also spend one day a week in the field, where they work with their CT and teach a series of four lessons with a different focus toward the end of the semester. In the first block, the Candidates are in contact with students for almost 70 hours in the field. For many of them, it is their first time being around young children for an extended amount of time. We also know many of our Candidates have not had a lot of experiences with diverse populations. Therefore, we strive to implement current strategies and practices, such as Culturally Responsive Teaching, that will support our Candidates and the students they serve.

Background and Literature Review

Before introducing a new idea to the Candidates, it was important to note they did not have the experiences or knowledge of inservice teachers. For example, a majority of the Candidates start to realize they are no longer observers who sit in the back of the classroom to take notes. They are in a sense co-teaching with their CTs. However, most of our Candidates are naturally drawn to the students who are not actively engaged in the lesson or to those who are struggling to learn a concept. We know this to be true based on their weekly reflections and from what we have observed when we visit the schools. In most cases, these students are students of color. While we were excited that our Candidates had the desire to gravitate toward students of color or struggling students, we wanted to make sure they were starting to build relationships instead of singling out the students.

When introducing a new idea or concept such as CRT, it was necessary to provide a practical understanding rather than introducing the idea as one more class assignment. Through other class assignments and readings, we discussed with the Candidates how CRT was developed from the framework of multicultural education, a movement advocating for students from all social, ethnic, and economic backgrounds to have the opportunity to obtain equal educational opportunities in academic settings (Banks & Banks, 2010; Howse, 2013). By definition, the implementation of CRT lends itself to Title I schools, where a majority of our Candidates are placed. Culturally Responsive Teaching allows teachers and Candidates to build upon the students' prior experiences, personal style, and interactions

with social influences to make learning more interactive and relevant while providing a platform for students to express themselves through learning (Gay, 2010; Howse, 2013). We realized our Candidates had limited prior experiences with diverse populations; however, the objective was to have this paradigm shift take place in the classroom, where the Candidates would begin to understand how to use the diversity of their students' interests to connect their learning to outside resources (Aslan Tutak, Bondy, & Adams, 2011; Gay, 2010; Howse, 2013).

Characteristics of Culturally Responsive Teaching

We also shared how CRT exhibits several characteristics such as 1) acknowledging certain music and social media outlets have importance and value to the students; 2) being able to make connections between a student's home and school life; 3) incorporating a variety of teaching styles to appeal to diverse learners; 4) creating a safe environment of respect for self and others; and 5) recognizing culture extends beyond ethnic or socioeconomic background (Gay, 2010; Howse 2013; Leonard, 2008). Prior to presenting the CRT assignment to the Candidates, we shared a few pictures I had taken of the bulletin boards when I worked with the middle schools. The boards contained a combination of Standard English words and definitions paired with terms or phrases used by the students (see Table 1, Appendix A). We were hesitant about using the term "urban terminology" to describe the words used by middle school students because we did not want the Candidates to get stuck on the word "urban." We explained how students acquired most of the terms from Hip-Hop music, reality television, or other related sources and that "urban" was used to describe the words and not the students. We explained how the examples and my experience embodied the first characteristics of CRT. We also mentioned that simply posting charts with trendy words does not automatically make a teacher, classroom, or school Culturally Responsive.

The Influence of Hip-Hop as a Culture in Schools

In one class setting, we explained to the Candidates how being able to relate to students academically through their own rhetoric could allow students to be more confident and willing to participate in classroom dialogues with their classmates and teachers (Gay, 2010; Howse 2013; Darder, 2015). Through class discussions, the Candidates mentioned how the students would use words from Hip-Hop songs in their classrooms. This is not surprising since the culture of Hip-Hop has influenced a variety of social circles, ethnic

groups, and other cultures. Defined in many ways, culture does not necessarily depend on race or ethnicity. Simply stated, culture involves a group of people who express themselves and relate to each other through a common interest (Hollins, 2015; Seelye, 1984; Tomalin & Stempleski, 2013). We explained how while some people only think of Hip-Hop in terms of rap music, it is an actual culture that evolved in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Due to social issues plaguing the Black and later the Hispanic communities, rap lyrics became a sort of cultural response to oppression by providing a voice that would appeal to the oppressed population (Hall, 2011; Ogbar, 2007; Parmar & Bain, 2007). Although intended to be the youthful voice of political change, Hip-Hop has also become a major influence in media and has connected people from all types of backgrounds and socio-economic status (Abe, 2009; Cepeda, 2004; Hall, 2011). Hip-Hop as a culture has influenced the way students see the world, how they view school, and the way they speak and express themselves in their communities.

Anchor Charts and CRT

Anchor charts allow teachers and students to make thinking visible through recording the important concepts of the lesson during instruction (Expeditionary Learning, 2015; Vlach & Burcie, 2010). Posting anchor charts keeps relevant and current learning accessible to students to remind them of prior learning, enable them to make connections as new learning occurs, or prompt them to solve problems (Di Teodoro, Donders, Kemp-Davidson, Robertson, & Schuyler, 2011; Miller, 2002). Students are supposed to refer to the charts and use them as tools as they answer questions, expand ideas, or contribute to class discussions. Anchor charts are typically used for literacy strategies; however, they have transitioned to other subjects (Inglis & Miller, 2011; Newton, 2014). According to Expeditionary Learning (2015), a few guidelines are needed when creating and implementing anchor charts:

1. Anchor charts should contain only the most relevant or important information so as not to confuse students.
2. Post only those charts that reflect current learning and avoid distracting clutter.
3. Organization should support ease of understanding and be accordingly varied based on purpose.

It is important to note that anchor charts were designed to capture strategies and key ideas while allowing students to explore interesting ideas, apply newly learned concepts, and develop strategies for problem-solving (Expeditionary Learning, 2015).

The Assignment

To understand our Candidates' perspective on CRT and anchor charts, it is important to know some of their background and how they view teaching. The Candidates range between 20 and 22 years of age. In an earlier assignment, Candidates wrote their teaching philosophies, and we have provided relevant excerpts (see Table 2, Appendix B). For example, Abbie*, a White female, stated, "I want to help these students become empowered by learning and help them recognize they are special and they have something different about each and every one of them." Devane, a Black male, mentioned, "I believe it is very important to allow students to be creative and explore a variety of different things and activities in the classroom that could help them figure out what they want to do in the future." We have also included demographic information about their field experience schools and classrooms (see Table 3, Appendix C). All of the classrooms include students from different ethnic backgrounds and learning abilities.

Prior to the anchor chart assignment, we struggled to describe what we wanted our Candidates to do. Although we had previously discussed how the middle school students were influenced by Hip-Hop music from the examples we had provided, we did not want to influence Candidates' thinking when it was time for them to create their anchor charts. We were transparent with the Candidates and expressed our concerns. They reassured us they were hearing words and phrases from their students well before we introduced Culturally Responsive Teaching through our class discussions. Some of the words they heard were from the bulletin board examples (see Table 1, Appendix A) such as On FLEEK and BAE. Although the Candidates saw the connection to Hip-Hop, they mentioned how they saw these words as being trendy or generational. With the help of their input, we designed the assignment, asking Candidates to create their own anchor charts using "generational or trendy" words used by their students and related either to content or classroom rules and procedures. They were also required to find the origin of the words if applicable. We were careful not to provide too much direction because we wanted the anchor charts to be

* All student names are pseudonyms.

authentic. We were surprised and excited by what the Candidates created (see Table 4, Appendix D). There was a mixture of phrases and words used in Hip-Hop songs, pop culture, and social media references like Instagram. We were also shocked the elementary students were using these word and phrases. A few of the words our Candidates used from their students for their anchor charts were "lit," "slay," "savage," and "bet."

After reviewing the anchor charts, we asked the Candidates four reflection questions:

1. Do you think the phrases you selected are associated with the type of music you or the field students listen to, or is it based on the times/generation?
2. Do you think it is appropriate to use "trendy" phrases in the classroom with students? Why or why not?
3. Think about your phrases and the phrases from your classmates. How would you incorporate this language into your classrooms? For example, would you allow students to create their own phrases? Will you incorporate these phrases into your classroom rules and procedures? Will you use these phrases as instructional strategies?
4. How do you think using the phrases from your students will impact their learning?

Although we do not include every response for each question in the discussion section below, the Candidates generally believed the phrases for the anchor charts should be appropriate and relatable to the students. A few of the Candidates were still skeptical about allowing students to select their own words for fear of not knowing the meaning of the words or appearing as "trying too hard" to relate to the students. As a whole the Candidates were open to the idea of connecting culture to the classroom using a different approach to learning.

Collected Thoughts: The Candidates Speak

Overall, the Candidates did not associate the words they heard from the students with a certain race or ethnicity. Also, the Candidates did not focus on Hip-Hop music as the reason why the students used certain words. The Candidates merely viewed the words as the language of the time. For example, when responding to Reflection Question 1, Devane stated,

> The phrases I used for this assignment are ones that I believe are generational. Every year or so a new phrase pops up that students end up loving to use and saying them all the time. They do not always come up through music, but even random words that students say together that catches other student's attention in their school.

Montana responded,

> The phrases that I selected were phrases that I have heard often around the classroom, as well as in the college environment. I wouldn't say that I pulled these words from songs that I listen to, but these are very trendy phrases used among younger generations through influence of music and pop culture.

These responses demonstrate the Candidates' keen understanding of the generation of which their students are a part.

Mostly, the Candidates thought it was appropriate to incorporate anchor charts with trendy or generational words in their future classrooms. A majority of the Candidates previously used or heard the same words. In response to Question 2, Abbie stated,

> Some of them are appropriate and if a child does say some that are useful for the situation or the person I believe it is okay. For example, a phrase that is really big is describing someone as the GOAT meaning greatest of all time. If we are talking about let's say Abraham Lincoln as a president and a child says he's the GOAT because of the context I would allow it because the child believes Abraham Lincoln was the greatest of all time as a president.

Katie made a good point, mentioning the importance of knowing the double meaning of certain trendy words to determine if they are appropriate or not. For example, she stated,

> I think it depends on the 'trend' language being used as some may sound innocent but are inappropriate or can be seen as inappropriate. For example, the term 'lit' can be used to say something is fun or exciting, but it can also mean drunk or intoxicated.

In contrast, one Candidate was hesitant about using "trendy" phrases in the classroom. Belle explained,

> I do not know if it would seem professional if a teacher were to just use these words conversationally with students regularly, but I think making these anchor charts would be a really good way to engage students and catch their attention. This would come from the fact that the teacher does not regularly use these words, however. These 'trendy' phrases must still be appropriate though.

Thus, there was not a general consensus among the candidates in regard to the appropriateness of the use of "trendy" phrases.

We did not ask the students to identify the race or ethnicity of the students who used the phrases the most; therefore, we cannot infer whether or not our Candidates would be able to relate more to students of color by using the anchor charts. However, it is apparent we have raised their awareness in regard to being culturally responsive based on the interests of the students within their classrooms. For example, Chayce responded to Reflection Question 3 by stating,

> It would be fun to allow the students to create their own phrases. It would be interesting for them because it wouldn't be a traditional school assignment/activity and there are so many ways that the students could get creative with their phrases. As long as the words/phrases they are using are appropriate, I think this type of activity would be very engaging to the students and allow me to learn a little more about them in the process.

Similarly, Katie stated, "Allowing students to use phrases, that have first been approved, to create acronyms about what we are learning is a good way to help students remember as well as give them choice and a personality in their assignments." However, one Candidate expressed her concern about allowing students to create their own anchor charts. For instance, Belle stated,

> I do not know if I would ever incorporate these phrases into my classroom, mostly just because it might seem inauthentic. Dr. [X] laughed at me last week for referencing a Kendrick Lamar song in this assignment, so I think my students might have similar reactions. It might seem like I am just trying too hard because I think my students would know that I do not really listen to the songs I am referencing or use the "trendy" phrases.

These responses demonstrated the Candidates' views in regard to engaging students and their view of the pros and cons of the strategies.

While it was interesting to read what the Candidates thought about the assignment and the process of using "trendy" words, we wanted to know their thoughts regarding the impact of using anchor charts on student learning. In response to Question 4, Devane explained how "using these phrases will impact their learning because it will help them

remember key instructions or lesson steps better because they are more relatable to them when connected to their everyday life." Abbie mentioned,

> Using the phrases will bring their outside learning of the world around them to the inside of the classroom where these kids learn more academically rigorous material. It will give the students a chance to feel like they can still learn even if they don't understand the material but if it is presented to them in a way they can understand (like through slang) they won't feel as discouraged by the information.

Katie stated, "this gives them a choice in what they do as well as allows for differentiating because you can challenge students with longer phrases or you can make it appropriate with shorter words." The Candidates realized the importance of ensuring students are learning over time and are able to make connections to the real world.

Conclusion: Empowering Students through Words

Although the Candidates were the focus of this lesson, the authors were simultaneously intertwined in a learning experience. We approached this assignment based on what the Candidates asked about working with students of color and our prior experiences as former middle school educators. The Candidates interest in their students of color was pleasing to us as they were beginning to see "beyond" the content, which is important as teachers are charged with more than just teaching material. However, through this assignment it was interesting to us that the Candidates did not associate the first characteristic of CRT—acknowledging that certain music and social media outlets have importance and value to the students (Gay, 2010; Howse 2013; Leonard, 2008)—as the only way to relate to students of color. Due to the structure of our program, our concerns are minute as Candidates travel in cohorts, which allows for further explanatory discussions and practice with CRT before they become full-time teachers.

As educators, we must understand the words we use toward or about students are powerful. Based on our collective experiences, observations, and stories from our Candidates, the students in these schools can go an entire day without hearing something positive about themselves or their futures. The use of bulletin boards and anchor charts can instill character and empower students to have fun while learning. Using words or phrases students identify with in a positive way is one step closer to showing students they have a voice and that their teachers are willing to hear them in their cultural or generational language. Each and every student deserves access to high-quality instruction, which extends

to finding ways to get students to take ownership of their learning through support and often with unconventional resources to maximize their learning potential in and beyond the classroom (NCTM, 2014). It is our hope that as we continue to incorporate Culturally Responsive Teaching in our courses, the Candidates will transfer this knowledge and deepen their understanding as they continue through the final two rounds of their field experience and in their future careers as teachers.

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Appendix A

Table 1. *Bulletin Board Vocabulary Words*

Urban Terminology	Standard English Words or Definition
That's BAE	That's my better half; significant other; soul mate
On FLEEK	Impeccable; flawless; spotless; on point
Quit trying to be BOUGIE	Stop attempting to be pretentious; pompous; haughty; superior; snobbish; uppity
Stop TRIPPIN'	Stop overacting
Quit bein' so AGGY	Please stop being so irksome; irritating; bothersome; frustrating
GOT'EM	Bamboozled; fooled; deceived; outsmarted; outwitted

Appendix B

Table 2. *Candidate Information and Teaching Philosophy Excerpts*

Candidate	Excerpts
Abbie, White Female	"I want to help these students become empowered by learning and help them recognize they are special and they have something different about each and every one of them." "It takes a special heart to want to teach children and give them a sense of self-discovery through books, art, music, numbers, experimentation."
Belle, White Female	"When student interest presents itself, the teacher should view that as an opportunity for learning and jump at it." "Teachers should provide students with readings and experiences that allow them to learn about social justice issues, and they should challenge them to think critically about them and why they are important." "Teachers need to understand that their students come from different backgrounds and have had different life experiences."
Chayce, White Female	"Being a good teacher means adapting to the needs of every student and captivating their interest." "My teachers always taught me in ways that worked for them, but also allowed me to branch out on my own to find my own learning styles." "As a teacher, I hope to teach my students in ways that will shape their personalities and personal growth, just like my teachers did for me."
Devane, Black Male	"I believe it is very important to allow students to be creative and explore a variety of different things and activities in the classroom that could help them figure out what they want to do in the future." "I believe the arts is a key component of the classroom in every form whether that is singing, dancing, or drawing." "When it comes to summative assessments, I plan on using as many methods as possible. I do not think all summative assessments should be pen and paper because all students learn in different ways, so they also test/assess differently."
Emily, White Female	"It is my belief that children learn only when they are inspired or motivated to learn." "In my classroom I will hopefully have it be as inclusive as possible because many children learn in very different ways, some visually, some through physical interaction, and others through a variety of other methods."
Katie, White Female	"I am not solely teaching from the textbooks and curriculums, I am integrating real life scenarios and lessons into my classroom." "Creative outlets are important for students to gain something in addition to the content from the classroom."

	"In my classroom, I strive to encourage creativity from my students to get them out of their comfort zones while being challenging in another way."
Montana, White Female	"Every student deserves an art integrated education. Because statistically, students who participate in some form of art have a better retention rate for material learned, it would be almost foolish for students to not have diverse instruction and opportunity for learning." "I believe that students should have the opportunity to create, not just regurgitate material."

Appendix C

Table 3. *Field Experience Demographics for Candidates Placed in Title I Schools*

Candidates	Grade	# of Students	Race/Ethnicity	ESOL/ELL	ESE
Abbie & Katie	3	19	7-W, 10-H/L, 2-B,	10	
Chayce & Devane	3	16	9-W, 5-H/L, 1-B, 1-TMR	2	1
Montana & Emily	3	21	7–W, 13– H/L, 1 - AI	8	5
Belle	2	20	7-W, 9-H/L, 4 TMR	5	

Note. This information comes from a form completed by Candidates. W = White, H/L = Hispanic/Latino, B = Black, TMR = Two or More Races, and AI = American Indian.

Appendix D

Table 4a. *Abbie's Anchor Charts*

Anchor Chart	Hip-Hop Influence
Good Students are **SALTY:** **S**-They **Study** hard **A**-They are A**cademically** Challenged **L**-Love **Learning** **T**-**Take** good notes **Y**-**Yearn** for more Knowledge	used in Pop Culture movies
Let Your Writing be so **EXTRA** **E**-**Explai**n your points **X**-Use **eXtra** facts to back up your point **T**-**Think** before you write **R**-**Read** the prompt carefully **A**- **Always** circle back to your point	used in Pop Culture movies
Reading is **LIT:** **L**-You can **Literally** read anything **I** -**Interesting** to be able to learn new things **T**- **Thought** provoking	Hip-Hop artist YFN Lucci – "Everyday we Lit"

Table 4b. *Belle's Anchor Charts*

Anchor Chart	Hip-Hop Influence
Sit Down Be HUMBLE **H**elpful **U**nderstanding **M**indful **B**eing on task **L**istening **E**ngaged	Hip-Hop artist Kendrick Lamar – "Humble"
Are your sentences **SAVAGE**? **S**tarting with a capital letter **A**rranged in order **V**aried in sentence structure **A** space between each word **G**rammatically correct **E**nding in punctuation	Pop artist Rihanna - "Savage" and used in various video games
Is your reading group GUCCI? **G**iving everyone a chance to speak **U**sing inside voices **C**arefully listening to one another **C**ommenting on others' ideas **I**nvested in the story	Hip-Hop artist Lil Pump – "Gucci Gang" Gucci Mane – Hip-Hop Artist Designer Label

STAY WOKE **S**entence starts with capital letter **T**ells a complete thought **A**ttracts an audience **Y**ou double-checked spelling **W**hisper read it to yourself to check grammar **O**riginal work **K**now what the purpose of the sentence is **E**nds with punctuation	R & B artist Childish Gambino – "Red Bone"

Table 4c. *Chayce's Anchor Charts*

Anchor Chart	Hip-Hop Influence
Are you a SAVAGE at writing? **S**trong opening paragraph **A**mple details **V**ast examples **A**wesome grammar and punctuation **G**reat conclusion **E**vidence to support	
Subtract **A**dd **L**ong divide **T**imes	Salt Bae: Nickname of popular chef Nusret Gökçe from Instagram
Breathe **A**cademic **E**xcellence	
Be **E**ager **T**o learn	Bet: Used in a variety of songs and television shows

Table 4d. *Devane's Anchor Charts*

Anchor Chart	Hip-Hop Influence
We FINNA do our best on this test! **F**irst put your name on it, **I**ndependently take test, **N**ever give up **N**ever Christmas tree test, **A**lways go back and recheck our answers	Used in a variety of songs and television shows
That test was RACHET **R**eally easy, **A**ggravating, **C**hallenging, **H**umiliating, **E**asy **T**otally doable	Used in a variety of songs and television shows

My writing is FIRE **F**ull of opinions **I**nformative **R**eally boring **E**ntertaining	Used in a variety of songs and television shows
Who DABS during math? **D**o multiple examples **A**nswer every question **B**e positive **S**how all work	Hip-Hop artist Big Will – "Dab on em" Football star Cam Newton's end zone dance

Table 4e. *Emily's Anchor Charts*

Anchor Chart	Hip-Hop Influence
SELFIE **S**howed my work, **E**xplained my answers, **L**ots of math vocabulary used, **F**ound multiple solutions, **I** persevered through the problem, **E**liminated careless errors.	Used in a variety of songs and television shows. Also officially in the Merriam-Webster dictionary
Be L.I.T. **L**ook over work, **I**nvest the time, **T**ry your best	

Table 4f. *Katie's Anchor Charts*

Anchor Chart	Hip-Hop Influence
PANDA **P**unctuation **A+** worthy writing **N**o spelling mistakes **D**o remember to use full sentences **A**nalyze your work before turning it in	Hip-Hop artist Designer
"LIT" **L**isten when someone is talking **I**nteract kindly **T**ell the truth	
"**GOAT**" **G**eometrical shapes **O**ctagon **A**cute triangle **T**etrahedron	Used to describe the Greatest of All Time

Table 4g. *Montana's Anchor Charts*

Anchor Chart	Hip-Hop Influence
Keep Your Summary LIT **L**ight **I**nteresting **T**o the point	
SLAY **S**tay Attentive **L**earn something new **A**nswer after you raise your hand **Y**ield to making bad decisions everyday	Pop artist Beyoncé – "Formation"

A Teacher Inquiry Study: Supporting Teachers to Implement Student-Centered Learning

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Abstract

Since 2014, Florida's Common Core Math Standards have led a new wave of reform in education, shifting mathematics instruction from a focus on teaching to learning (Florida Department of Education, 2018). Teachers are encouraged to facilitate learning experiences that engage students in critical thinking and conceptual understanding to meet the rigor of the standards. This teacher inquiry study investigates how an instructional math coach worked to support a novice and veteran teacher to shift from teacher-led to student-centered learning (SCL) practices. Findings indicate ambiguity in SCL terminology, one size does not fit all, and a need for clarification between group work and collaborative structures.

Introduction

Since 2014, Florida's Common Core Math Standards have led a new wave of statewide reform in education, calling for an increase in rigor and conceptual understanding (Florida Department of Education, 2018). For students to be successful, they need to be able to explain and justify their reasoning while using critical problem-solving skills. This is particularly critical to Mathematics because the complexity of thinking required to demonstrate mastery of the standards has increased.

The Common Core for Mathematics is defined by Eight Standards of Mathematical Practice. The Eight Standards of Mathematical Practice call for students to: make sense of problems and persevere in solving them, reason abstractly and quantitatively, construct viable arguments and critique the reasoning of others, model with mathematics, use appropriate tools strategically, attend to precision, look for and make use of structure, and look for and express regularity in repeated reasoning (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2017). For teachers to prepare their students for success on the Florida Standards Assessment, these Eight Mathematical Practices must be strategically integrated into daily lessons. Moreover, given the nature of the eight practices, teachers must facilitate learning using student-centered pedagogy. This means teachers must engage learners in active investigation and problem solving, as they creatively reason through potential challenges to seek a solution. Teachers are held accountable for ensuring learners acquire proficiency in these practices, as measured by state and district assessments.

In my current role, I* collaborate with teachers during common planning to ensure their lessons are standards-based and rigorous. In my Math department, only 34% of the students met proficiency on the state exam in 2017. This means most students were unable to apply the eight mathematical practices to resolve problems, despite their familiarity with formulas and algorithms. The results made evident the need to increase classroom opportunities for learners to practice and apply the requisite skills. Most significantly, it also brought to light the need for a shift in classroom culture, whereby teachers are not doing the majority of the talking as students take notes, but rather learners are led to actively

* In this article, first-person pronouns refer to the first author, who carried out the study. The co-author contributed to the design of the study and the drafting and revision of the manuscript.

collaborate and explain their reasoning to deepen understanding beyond procedural processes.

Context

I have had the opportunity to work closely with several teachers throughout the district; some are excited and on-board with Student-Centered Learning (SCL), while many are resistant. In my latest role as a site-based coach, I work at a Title 1, Tier 2 school in an urban setting. Given the high percentage of children who come from low-income families and the school grade of C, there is a sense of urgency for improvement. I work closely to support the math department to improve the very low proficiency scores and learning gain data evident over the past few years. The department consists of eight teachers. Six are veteran teachers with an average of 10-plus years in the classroom, while two teachers have less than one year of teaching experience.

At the time of this study, two specific teachers in the department, Ms. Flow and Mr. Green (both pseudonyms), were both middle school Math teachers. Ms. Flow taught 7th-grade Math, while Mr. Green taught Pre-Algebra. Both teachers taught students assessed as below grade level, i.e. Level 1 or 2, according to the Florida Standards Assessments (FSA).

Ms. Flow's prior teaching experience consisted of one year at an elementary charter school. This was her first year teaching middle school and in the public school system. In conversations, she appeared open-minded and comfortable with trying new strategies. Unlike Ms. Flow, Mr. Green was a veteran teacher and has been working at his current middle school for many years. He was not comfortable with change and felt very strongly students needed to sit in rows and limit their discussion to minimize off-task behavior. Further, he was not comfortable with student collaboration and preferred to maintain as much control of the structure of his classroom as possible.

Literature Review

Froyd and Simpson (2008) describe student-centered learning (SCL) as a change in paradigm from *instruction* to *learning*. When comparing teacher-led *instruction* to student-centered *learning*, Pedersen and Liu (2003) specify, "key differences between the two approaches include goals, roles, motivational orientations, assessments, and student interaction" (p. 58). According to Pedersen and Liu, beliefs guide the decisions teachers make and the actions they take in the classroom and therefore impact students. Because "beliefs often masquerade as a variety of other constructs, including attitudes, values,

judgments, opinions, perceptions, conceptions, personal theories, and perspectives," literature in the field of education is challenged to come to an agreement on how teachers define SCL (p. 60). Rather, researchers advocate for providing insight into teachers' beliefs about issues in the implementation of an SCL environment.

In addressing the broad spectrum defined as SCL, Froyd and Simpson (2008) describe various approaches to implement SCL in the classroom, such as collaborative learning, problem-based learning, and inquiry-based learning. For example, Burns, Pierson and Reddy (2014) describe a professional development initiative for math and science teachers "grounded in the belief that collaborative learning serves as a 'gateway' to learner-centered instruction (p. 18). When traditional teachers begin to execute collaborative structures into their classrooms, they begin the journey toward shifting their classroom to SCL (Burns et al., 2014; Yagi, 2015). Yagi (2015) adds that the use of open-ended questions may also serve as a specific strategy to support teachers in shifting their classroom environment.

Stogsdill (2014) and Lambdin (2009) advocate for experiential learning as a means to lead students to interact with new knowledge and deepen their understanding of concepts. According to the researchers, when children engage in problem-solving situations, they can explore, discuss, and experiment with making sense of problems. This process of investigation helps them figure out how each new idea is related to other things they already know. As a result, connections are made in the brain (Lambdin, 2009). Further, Stogsdill (2014) adds students should explore Math in a variety of ways and settings of interest to them. Skehill (2013) and Stogsdill (2014) found that by using unique investigative methods, students changed their perception of Math courses, increased retention of concepts, and made sense of the Math in a more personally meaningful way.

Purpose and Procedure

Supporting teachers to improve their craft and develop best practices is significant to my work as an instructional coach. After completing several walkthroughs and observations in the beginning of the year, I noticed a trend in favor of teacher-directed instruction. Students were compliant and taking notes daily, but they were not engaged. According to the *Glossary of Education Reform* (Great Schools Partnership, 2016), engagement is defined as the attentiveness, curiosity, interest, optimism, and passion students show when learning or being taught. There was no collaboration occurring, and students were not

encouraged to talk amongst their peers to problem-solve and reflect on their learning. They were not being provided opportunities to deepen their understanding of the content or practice new skills.

Early in the school year, my initial observations were confirmed during a district walkthrough, also called an Instructional Support Model (ISM). During the ISM, district content supervisors observe the classrooms, collect data on trends, and make further suggestions to move the school forward and toward the School Improvement Plan goals. The district teaching and learning department with the Middle School Content Supervisors perform an equivalent to an "audit" regarding best practices in the classroom. Each class is visited, and the content specialists use a checklist identifying areas such as: student-centered learning, rigor, standards-based instruction, cultural relevance, etc. The checklist is compiled of research-based best practices that have resulted in an increase in student achievement. Our initial benchmark assessment found only 20% of teachers engaged students in SCL, while 80% of classrooms were teacher led, as characterized by direct instruction and no opportunities for collaboration. It was suggested our Math department work on student-centered learning. More specifically, the recommended next steps were for the Math department to begin shifting classrooms from teacher-led to student-led. I assumed the challenge to support and lead the math department toward shifting their instruction from the traditional styles of teaching to incorporating student-centered pedagogy to increase student achievement.

Initial reflection led me to wonder why the teachers were not already implementing SCL. Through conversation, it was evident they were aware of it as a research-based best practice. I believed there had to be an underlying root cause or reason beyond their feeling too busy or overwhelmed. This reflection led to the research questions guiding this study: 1) In what ways can I support teachers to implement student-centered learning? and 2) What barriers exist to supporting teachers to implement SCL? To answer these questions, I began by implementing the following strategies.

Define Student-Centered Learning

The first strategy I implemented was to define student-centered learning. The research of Pedersen and Liu (2003) suggests teachers have various perceptions of the term, so it was important to define the term among the group to ensure all the participants were on the same page. First, a survey was administered online through Survey Monkey in

early October, asking teachers to define student-centered learning through an open-ended, anonymous question. After pulling the data, we discussed our definitions as a team during our Monthly Content Professional Learning Community, looking for similarities and differences across our meanings.

Collaborative Planning

The second strategy I implemented was collaborative planning. I chose this strategy because teachers need to purposefully and intentionally plan for collaborative structures, which are the gateway to student-centered learning (Burns et al., 2014). While some teachers naturally infuse collaboration in their classrooms, others need to intentionally plan for it until it becomes routine. Every Monday, during our common planning time, we discussed a collaborative structure we were going to try together and infused it into the plans that week. I provided each teacher a list of collaborative structures with descriptions and video links. We would sort through them and pick out the structure that best aligned with the desired outcome or goals of the lesson. This occurred every Monday for four weeks, and I used a Professional Learning Log provided by my school to document common planning minutes when we used the strategy of collaborative planning. The Professional Learning Log facilitated common planning and maintained the focus with guiding questions, such as: How can we increase student proficiency? What do the data say? Shared strategies? I documented ideas shared amongst the group, key topics, conversation points discussed, and next steps. Our focus topics included planning for collaboration.

Modeling

The third strategy I used was to model a student-centered learning lesson. I chose this strategy because modeling allows the teacher to see and experience a lesson as a student would, therefore changing the perception and lens used daily. The teachers observed the students as I incorporated accountable talk and the collaborative structure agreed upon during that Monday's collaborative planning meeting. Modeled lessons occurred for one period at a time. Ms. Flow observed two modeled lessons, while Mr. Green observed one.

Teacher Self-Reflection

The fourth strategy was teacher self-reflection, which took place after teachers implemented new collaboration strategies into their lesson plans. After we planned for a collaborative structure and I modeled the strategy, the teachers would then implement the

strategy the following period. The following day we would meet to engage in discussion about how their lesson went. I did not use specific questions during this debrief. Rather I let the teacher reflect and share how the lesson went, including their thoughts about having shifted from teacher-led to student-led instruction.

Research Design

This qualitative teacher inquiry applies an interpretivist paradigm, as it acknowledges that I, as the describer of events, am inseparable from the described experiences in this study (Creswell, 2009). Given this, knowledge was constructed from meaning I assigned to data sources collected, using systematic and rigorous data analysis and interpretation.

Data Collection

To collect data, I used a combination of field notes, artifacts (such as lesson plans, common planning minutes, coaching logs), and surveys. I selected these methods because they allowed me to monitor the progress and gauge the success of my teachers as they shifted their instruction to student-centered learning.

My baseline data came from an open-ended survey to identify the barriers and preconceived notions they had regarding student-centered learning. The following questions were asked: 1) Thinking about your own classroom, what are barriers that come to mind regarding student-centered learning? 2) How do you plan to overcome these barriers to increase student-centered learning in your classroom? 3) Do you have any specific, effective strategies that you would be willing to share at a future PLC?

My first strategy was to define student-centered learning. I used a survey to ask teachers about their perceptions and beliefs regarding SCL. This was done only once and prior to the implementation of other strategies. The questions asked were: 1) Do you feel group work is beneficial? Why or Why not? 2) How would you define student-centered learning? 3) Would you describe your classes as student-centered? If so, in what ways? The data were then printed and used in conversation with my team during a content PLC that took place before school. Questioning techniques facilitated a discussion that led teachers to reflect on their practice. The conversation led into group work and how group work differs from collaborative structures.

To measure the effectiveness of collaborative planning meetings, teachers' planning notes and/or lesson plans created after meetings were used. These were collected for evidence of student-centered planning. A Professional Learning Log was used to document

teachers' ideas shared amongst the group, key topics, conversation points discussed, and next steps.

Observation notes were used to assess the effectiveness of my modeling student-centered lessons for teachers. After I modeled the lesson, the teacher was tasked with emulating the same lesson the following period. I observed and provided feedback to the teachers after they conducted the lessons, specifically relating to how the chosen collaborative structure was implemented and how the teacher monitored the students' progress toward the learning goal. For Ms. Flow, this occurred on two separate occasions. I modeled two complete lessons for her. For Mr. Green, I simply modeled the specific strategy and then observed him implementing the same strategy. In addition, to gauge whether this strategy was effective, I also reviewed future lesson plans, which allowed me to monitor if teachers were purposefully and intentionally planning for collaboration using the modeled strategy. Lesson plans were uploaded to a shared one-drive weekly. I reviewed them over a four-week time frame to monitor if teachers were planning for collaboration; this occurred every Monday morning.

Lastly, to measure the effectiveness of my teacher reflection strategy, I used field notes to document teachers' feelings regarding the new strategies in the classroom and their reasoning for wanting or not wanting to continue the shift. After each coaching cycle occurred (planning, modeling, and feedback), the teachers and I met to debrief during their planning period. Here, I engaged in conversations with the teachers as they reflected on their lessons and wrote down phrases and insights they shared, as related to my research questions.

To assure trustworthiness when collecting data, triangulation and reflexivity were used. Data triangulation using field notes, observations, and a survey ensured my ability to capture different moments and perspectives as I supported the teachers. This allowed me to compare data sources to gain clarification and understanding into potentially observed trends.

Using a journal to document field notes, I reflected on myself daily as the teacher-researcher throughout this study. I am aware prior experiences have shaped my beliefs and perceptions about student-centered learning. The journal allowed me to confront these beliefs to prevent from projecting my own views onto my teachers. Furthermore, there were

times when I assumed a strategy would or would not work. Documenting my reflection allowed me to confront my biases to prevent me from seeing that which I *wanted* to see.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using open coding and memoing. Using different colors, I coded all lesson plans, then coaching logs, and then field notes for vocabulary used in the literature to indicate student-centered learning. For instance, every time I saw the word "collaboration," I would highlight it blue; "rigor" green, etc. I sought and memoed alongside the margins any visible indicators of student-centered and teacher-centered ideas that surfaced in conversation and observations of my teachers. Analysis of these data sources was ongoing, as I used them to reflect and drive my next steps in supporting the teachers.

Artifacts were analyzed at the end of the study to look for trends of a documented shift in conversation toward student-centered learning. I approached these artifacts through a lens looking for the use of common SCL words such as collaboration, group activities, accountable talk, etc. Coaching logs, common planning minutes, and field notes were then coded for phrases indicating ways teachers defined student-centered learning in ongoing discussions. In accordance with the literature, codes were grouped into categories including: inquiry, problem-based learning, and collaborative structures (Pedersen & Liu, 2003). Patterns were then identified to inform the themes that surfaced in this study, which are further discussed in the findings.

Findings

Three themes surfaced in this study to inform my two wonderings: In what ways can I support teachers to implement student-centered learning? and What barriers exist to supporting teachers to implement SCL?

Who Knows How to Define SCL?!

Data from my survey indicated Mr. Green and Ms. Flow, among others, defined student-centered learning differently. For instance, Mr. Green defined it as students doing the work without teacher support, while Ms. Flow stated it involved the students talking and guiding the learning. Still others believed it had to do with leveling students based on their ability. Due to the varied perspectives among the teachers, it proved a challenge to get all members to come up with a common definition, let alone ask teachers to enact the ambiguous practice. A visit from several district staff members further validated this challenge during a conversation about the meaning of SCL. A group of us was tasked with

visiting classrooms using a district-approved checklist with a common rubric used to mark whether a lesson was teacher-led, student-centered, or student-centered with rigor. It was evident after each classroom visit that there was a discrepancy between the definition of SCL for school-based staff members and district personnel. School-based members noted that students were working together in groups without teacher support. The teachers were acting as facilitators, and the students were working on problems in small groups. However, the district personnel stated that because the task was not rigorous, it was not student-centered. They also stated that to be truly student-centered, the students would have to be teaching and guiding each other in their thought process to solve problems. Given ongoing disagreement to define SCL, the teachers and I focused less on the term and more on the characteristics of the practice, as well as how it could be enacted, such as through collaboration, inquiry, and problem-based learning.

One Size Does Not Fit All

The planning, modeling, and self-reflection strategies I used were not consistently effective in supporting all my participants to enact SCL. For example, Ms. Flow responded well to the planning and modeling strategies, though not to the self-reflection strategy. I began to see purposeful and intentional planning for collaboration in her lesson plans. However, when reflecting, she would still ultimately ask me to demonstrate the strategy. It appears my support helping her plan and modeling lessons encouraged her to position herself as a learner. Overall, I found Ms. Flow had the most success with the implementation of SCL strategies. She strived to ensure her lessons were student-centered or had characteristics of student-centered learning such as collaboration and accountable talk.

On the other hand, Mr. Green responded best to self-reflection and discussion of what student-centered learning incorporates. He did not need to plan with me or see the strategy modeled to support him with implementation. He would specifically state “I don’t need to see it; I got it. My kids will act differently for you than me.” Rather, he responded to my guided reflective discussions. On one occasion, for instance, he noticed his students were not engaged, stating his students were not learning the content. This was a disappointment, as he had expected. The awareness became the moment he opened himself up to trying alternate ways of delivering instruction, in accordance with Brownwell and Tanner’s (2012) assertion, “incentives likely drive most of our professional decisions” (p. 340). Mr. Green realized through our reflective discussion what he was doing was not

giving him the results he had hoped for, so he committed to make a change. Discussion on the implementation of student-centered learning strategies followed. He began to apply the strategies by intentionally and purposefully planning for collaboration. He later discovered his students became more engaged, and stated, "It went better today." This gave him an incentive to keep pushing forward with the shift in instruction. He continues to e-mail me and ask for my support to keep him motivated.

Group Work vs. Collaboration

The data also revealed a discrepancy between what my teachers identified as group work, compared to collaborative structures. They identified group work as if it were the same term as collaboration. This proved a barrier to supporting their student-centered learning, as they initially resisted the shift to collaborative structures, believing collaborative structures led to "one student doing all the work," "students off-task," and "disruptive behavior."

To support them in clarifying the distinction, I conducted a brief "30 and out" PD during planning to define and discuss group work vs. collaboration. We watched videos displaying examples of what both looked like in the classroom. When Ms. Flow and I met to debrief after my modeled lesson using "Rally Coach" and "Sage and Scribe" strategies, she observed her students were more engaged with the content as compared to her previous lesson that required group work as opposed to collaboration. Likewise, Mr. Green found he had more students engaged and even began reconsidering his stance on collaboration, stating, "I now see the difference between group work and collaborative structures."

Implications

These findings have influenced my teaching practice as a coach, as I now acknowledge there is not a one-size fits all approach to support teachers. Supporting teachers as a coach requires the same differentiation that I used as a classroom teacher with my students. My teachers need me to work closely to support their individualized needs, facilitate the collaborative establishment of expectations, hold them accountable, monitor their progress, and offer ongoing feedback to support growth. These are some of the same structures classroom teachers use with their students to increase student achievement. Lacking in these structures, whole-group professional development administered during district trainings can be ineffective, as ongoing monitoring cannot be established to ensure professional progress.

The challenge creating a common definition for student-centered learning was fascinating to me, as even the district and school-based administration could not come to an agreement on what exactly this looked like in the classroom. To advocate for SCL and support my teachers to move toward this goal, I believe literature needs to define more succinctly what this is. Further, districts and schools must communicate with certainty what they are looking for when describing student-centered classrooms. This will ensure I, along with other school-based content coaches, can best support teachers to attain this vision.

Findings from this study have led me to wonder if my professional development for teachers should focus more on the rationale or purpose for implementing a specific strategy rather than simply explaining what it is and how to do it. It is one thing to stand in front of a group of teachers and tell them how to do something and ask them to be compliant. It is another for teachers to truly understand the reasoning for why they are doing what they do. I believe teachers need to understand how student-centered learning increases student achievement and reduces classroom disruption to continue with implementation. Given this, I hope to explore a new wondering: In what ways can I shift the mindset of teachers to believe that all students (not just advanced) should be given the opportunity to critically think and problem-solve? Understanding this, as a site-based math content coach, will allow me to have a greater impact on increasing student achievement.

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Leaving the Nest: Cultivating Independent Learners

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Abstract

Each year, students do their best to bring in school supplies. However, for students to be successful, they need much more than pencils and paper. They need self-regulating skills to become independent learners. Students unable to learn to regulate emotions, attention, and behavior are at risk for social problems and lower academic achievement (Pelco & Reed-Victor, 2007). This action research study investigates a first-year teacher's journey to discover strategies for supporting students to become more independent learners, such as mindfulness activities, daily self-reflections, connections to literary characters, and functional behavior plans.

Introduction

Independence is a word that circulates throughout our students' reading, history, math, and science lessons each year. Students are taught people fought for independence, there are independent variables, and great role models were independent and defeated the odds holding them back. Independence is a character trait our students are expected to develop, but what can you do to cultivate independence in children who lack it? Do you grab them by the hand and run with them, hoping they will take off on their own one day? Do you leave them in the nest alone and wait at a distance for them to fall, spread their wings, and learn to fly? Or do you watch them fall flat, time after time?

As a novice teacher, I* dreamt of a class that was willing to give their best effort and rise to high expectations. This was a dream I knew would take a few extra pushes; there would be some bumps along the way, and it would be difficult. Within the first week of school, I could tell which students were ready to fly; which students needed a warm-up flight and some practice; and which students needed to be cradled in the nest, fed a few worms, and lured to the edge. I had a small handful of students who were not ready to be independent. They wanted their hand held. Their plummet out of our nest would be tearful; they would tell me the whole way they just could not do it; and their landing would be unsuccessful. These students had become so afraid to take a leap and fly that they refused to even come close to the edge. The minute I would announce it was time to do some work on their own, they would groan, the tears would start, and their heads would go down.

It was my first year in the classroom, and I did not know where to start with these students. This led me to wonder, *In what ways could I support a child who lacked autonomy to work independently?* I wanted all students in my classroom to feel they could fly and reach goals. More specifically, three students had walked into my classroom on the first day of school thinking they could not do anything on their own, and I wanted those three students to walk out of my room on the last day of school, knowing they could accomplish anything and be successful when they had the skills to be.

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* In this article, first-person pronouns refer to the first author, who carried out the study. The co-author contributed to the design of the study and the drafting and revision of the manuscript.

Purpose

As a novice teacher, I started off the year by hammering down procedures and held firmly to my expectations: if there was one thing I wanted to get right during my first year, it was managing my classroom by building relationships with my learners. I was constantly praised for how well behaved my class was in the first few weeks, but I still felt I had not provided what my students needed most, particularly Levi, Max, and Dani (all pseudonyms). When asked to complete a task, Levi, Max, and Dani expressed helplessness, constantly stating, "I can't do it." It was evident they lacked confidence to work independently and complete assignments successfully without constant redirects to do their work. They needed to be pushed to meet higher second-grade expectations. I needed them to become independent learners, take responsibility for their own work, and step up their game to be academically successful.

This study is vital to my students' success, as well my success as their second-grade teacher. Second grade is a time when students need to mature academically and socially, to become more responsible for their education. I felt it was my responsibility to prepare them for later years, when the stakes would become higher with testing expectations. If I could support learners to develop more independence in the classroom, then I believed they would be ready to take on the added expectations and pressures of higher grades.

Moreover, working in a high-poverty school, I witnessed the needs of my students were much different than my own needs and classmates' needs growing up. Several of my students had parents who worked all day long and/or experienced a challenging home life. They needed the extra support in areas other than finding the main idea of a paragraph or learning how to add. They first needed the skills to self-regulate so they could regroup when challenges were presented, in order to rise to their academic demands and even foster successful relationships with teachers and classmates.

This study may be of interest to other educators, given how arduous it has become for students to be independent learners in our changing and challenging world (Takanishi, 2015). This study would be of interest to beginning teachers who are facing challenges with students who are lacking the drive and skills to work independently. This action research study researches the use of strategies for supporting learners to become more independent. More specifically, it investigates the research question, *In what ways could I support a child who lacks autonomy to work independently?*

Literature Review

As life has evolved all around the globe, expectations have risen, and thus, attaining independent success in different settings has become more challenging. These expectations have also risen significantly for our learners. Takanishi (2015) and O'Donoghue (2017) relay that independent learning has become more arduous than ever before. Independent learning is defined as having the ability to work independently, knowing when to seek help with work, having confidence in that capability to learn, and managing frustrations that learning can bring to the learner (O'Donoghue, 2017).

Research indicates independence is a skill learners need to be successful in school and life, and scholars suggest having "self" skills, including the ability to self-regulate, provides students with the tools necessary to thrive independently (Flook, Goldberg, Pinger, & Davidson, 2015; Pelco & Reed-Victor, 2007; Takanishi, 2015). According to Cubukcu (2009), a major cause of failure in schools is students' lack of self-regulation. Pelco and Reed-Victor (2007) state that self-regulatory skills begin during infancy, as self-soothing infants later grow up with the ability to adapt to change, contrary to infants who do not learn to self-soothe. These individuals later react poorly in situations, have difficulty with change, and resist new experiences. Students unable to regulate their emotions, attention, and behavior are at risk for social problems and lower academic achievement (Pelco & Reed-Victor, 2007). Mestad and Kolstø (2014) discuss the zone of proximal development within activities and teacher interventions to promote students' ability to understand concepts. The zone of proximal development is described by Vygotsky as the distance between what the student can perform independently and what the student is capable of achieving with support. As students build their independence levels, they will become more successful in school.

Cooper (2007) analyzes the use of literature in the classroom to increase autonomy, initiative, and self-regulation, which are all qualities of an independent learner. According to the researcher, teachers can select literature that connects with students through characters demonstrating positive self-regulatory or independent learner skills as they overcome barriers. Another means to build learner independence and self-regulation is found in promoting mindfulness among students. Researchers suggest mindfulness practices that teach students to self-reflect and evaluate can increase learners' awareness of self and ways to respond skillfully, encourage being fully present, and promote self-

regulatory skills, which can be associated with improvements in cognitive inhibition (Bishop et al., 2004; Flook et al., 2015; O'Donoghue, 2017). A mindfulness approach leads participants to step out of the war with their thoughts and feelings and give up ineffective experiential avoidance strategies supported by feelings of helplessness and lack of confidence (Bishop et al., 2004). This is critical, as Kitsantas, Steen, and Huie (2009) report adaptive behaviors such as helplessness lead to lower rates of academic success.

Functional Behavior Plans (FBPs) are another resort for students not showing independent learner skills (Pelco & Reed-Victor, 2007). FBPs or behavioral intervention plans (BIPs) assist students displaying negative behaviors such as feeling unaccomplished and acting out to get away from their work (Korinek, 2015). Using the plans, students develop a goal to slowly chip away at behavioral issues and work toward success. Plans often include a scale for student performance of the remediated behavior, and the student or teacher ranks the student's success within that domain. Students also develop ownership of and responsibility for meeting their goals.

Context

Dani, Max, and Levi are second-grade students in my classroom at a public, Title I, Arts Magnet, inner-city school. The school draws in students from all over the county because of our unique performing arts offerings. Among my class of 18 students, 4 students receive gifted support, while many other students just barely missed the points needed for entrance into the gifted program. Demographically, the majority of students at the school are Black (58.6%) or Hispanic (20.3%). Of the 413 students at the school, 76% receive free or reduced lunch, and Dani, Max, and Levi are part of this program due to their household income.

Dani is a 7-year-old, Black female, who comes from a two-parent household and has multiple siblings. Dani's mother and father are both actively involved in her academics and responsive to communication with an understanding and supportive hand. Within the first nine weeks of school, Dani showed many signs of difficulty adjusting to expectations and procedures. Dani was ranked in the national 85th percentile for reading, yet would consistently say she could not do her work because she was unable to read or did not know what to do during independent work time.

Max is a 7-year-old, Caucasian male, who comes from a single-parent household with no other siblings. Like Dani, Max is an on-level reader, ranked in the national 85th percentile

for reading. He struggles with getting to school on time due to his mother's irregular work schedule. Max loses focus easily, especially when tired or having a difficult morning, and is challenged to overcome such setbacks. On these days, he resists completing many tasks throughout the day. When given many redirects, he becomes upset and unable to finish tasks, thinking he is not capable of completing them.

Levi is a 7-year-old, Black male, who comes from a two-parent household and has three older sisters. Levi's parents want him to be successful in school, both in his academics and in his behavior. However, Levi regularly distracts himself and others around him from learning in his academic and specials classes, as he has difficulty controlling himself and thinking about his actions. While he is on level in reading, he is below level in math and writing because he does not complete assignments successfully. After attending school conferences where immediate improvement is not visible in Levi, his parents become threatening and upset, blaming the school as the reason he does not improve. Levi meets regularly with the school behavior specialist and receives services for speech.

For this study, I chose Dani, Max, and Levi out of my 18 students because of the impact of their behaviors on their ability to be successful and independent in the first quarter of the school year. By focusing on these three learners, I could address their behaviors and why they were impeding their learning, as well as provide them with skills they needed to develop to be successfully independent learners.

Methodology

This study followed an action research plan. I first gathered data on my students' behavior and looked for trends in when their behavior was occurring and why it was occurring. Next, I created an action plan to implement the strategies of mindfulness breaks, relationship building, literature, and self-reflection. Then I implemented the strategies and continued to gather data about their behaviors and how they reacted to the use of the strategies. Finally, I measured the changes in behavior for each student and compiled my results.

Procedures

The following sections describe the strategies I implemented, as well as the techniques and data sources that guided this action research study. See Appendix for an implementation timeline.

Strategy 1: The self-reflective learner. The first strategy I chose to implement in my study was the use of self-reflection. Through this strategy, my intent was to make my students more aware of the progress they were making and how they could make even bigger strides in their learning when they evaluated what happened, why it happened, and how to improve next time.

After each lesson block (Reading, Writing, Math, Science, and Arts) my students self-reflected in a daily chart using a smiley face, an "ok" face, or a frowny face. Upon their reflection, I had them share with me why they chose that face, what actions caused them to receive that, and what to do for the next lesson to improve even more. Daily, Dani, Levi, and Max reflected on their reaction to work. When they felt confident they could do their work successfully on their own or with *some* support, they would rate themselves with a smiley face. If they commented, "I can't do it" without giving effort to do it, they gave themselves a frowny face. Their goal was to earn more smiley faces than frowny faces each day, and then they tallied their smiley faces up at the end of the week. Each week a new goal was set that pushed the student harder or was more attainable depending on their success.

Strategy 2: Grow your brain: Be mindful. The second strategy I implemented was mindfulness. Through the use of an online interactive program (GoNoodle), my students participated in mindfulness sessions ranging from 1 minute to 10 minutes once to twice daily. Interactive activities included guided stretches, guided breathing, and guided mediation. Each activity began with a guide that discussed a theme of mindfulness, including reflection on your day, thinking about your breathing, regaining focus, building confidence, and managing frustrations. As students completed mindfulness activities, their characters on the program moved up levels and transformed, thus providing them an added incentive to participate.

I chose to implement this strategy because of research-based benefits in mindset, self-regulation, and learner confidence (Bishop et al., 2004; Flook et al., 2015). The GoNoodle Mindfulness activities taught strategies to stay calm, ways to manage stress, and frustration coping. I regularly chose the activity I felt would best help improve the day for Dani, Max, and Levi.

Strategy 3: Connect to reading. The third strategy I chose to implement was the use of developmentally appropriate literature to show characters' use of regulatory and independent skills to overcome barriers (Cooper, 2007). I chose one book to read aloud

each week for four weeks. Each story had a character I felt Dani, Max, and Levi could connect their emotions and experiences to. The texts were not connected to assignments, to ensure learners could focus on making personal connections to characters without the anxiety of preparing to complete a task or listening for a specific section of the text.

Discussions supported learners to relate themselves to a character, reflect on their actions and ways the character could have solved their problem differently, and build connections between positive learner behaviors and the ability to overcome. Characters would be discussed again throughout the week when situations arose. Learners would think about how the character should react and use that to guide their actions in a more positive way. The stories chosen included, *Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day*, *Where the Wild Things Are*, *How Full is Your Bucket? For Kids*, and *Moody Cow Meditates*.

Strategy 4: Functional Behavior Plan. The fourth strategy I chose to implement was a Functional Behavior Assessment (FBA) (Pelco & Reed-Victor, 2007). The strategy was only used for individuals exhibiting severe behaviors. Using the behavior intervention plan, I assisted students who showed low-confidence and negative behaviors to get away from their work (Korinek, 2015). In this study, only Levi utilized this strategy, as it was implemented by the school behavior specialist and communicated with his parents.

Levi's FBA determined his main behavior challenge was showing self-control. Levi would stop doing his task to make motions with his hands and body, turn his chair around, talk to others, or focus on something other than his work. The FBA determined Levi exhibited the behavior to escape his task. He needed to be redirected multiple times for each activity, preventing him from completing work. He had a goal each day to earn enough points to receive a treat of his choice. Levi could earn a total of 2 points per class. If he had 1 incident where he did not show self-control, then he would lose 1 of those points. If he had 2 incidents, then he would receive 0 points. My role in his FBA was to set a goal with him each day, allow him time to pick out his reward when he earned it, monitor his progress, and keep track of the points he earned.

Data Collection/Analysis

Data were collected throughout this action research study, using a daily tracking chart, student artifacts, a behavior plan, and a journal.

A daily tracking chart with each student's name tracked the amount of times I redirected or encouraged the learners, as well as times we implemented a mindfulness activity. Using this daily chart, I could track any changes in my students over time, note any patterns evident, and select strategies that responded to documented needs.

A second form of data collected included student artifacts. Pictures of student work ensured a sample of two assignments per week for each student. Reading assignments were primarily collected.

I collected additional data through our school-wide, Tier 1 behavior plan of ARTS Star Points. Each day, every student in the school had the opportunity to earn 5 points. Teachers tracked behavior throughout each class, and if necessary, wrote the corresponding number for the behavior a child needed to improve. Four different categories of behaviors could be documented, including A: act responsibly (be prepared, follow directions), R: respect others (show self-control, listen attentively), T: take ownership (show best effort, participate), and S: show kindness (use kind words, work with others).

As a fourth form of data collection, I kept a daily journal. Our school-wide behavior plans include daily monitoring and tracking. However, it did not allow for notes to be taken and specific incidents to be described in the report. Through a daily journal, I could document more specific notes of exactly what happened each day with Levi, Dani, and Max. This made their behavior and experiences more than just a number on a weekly table. I used the notes to analyze where behaviors were stemming from, as well as find trends in behaviors, attitudes about learning, and completed independent work.

Open coding, memoing, and categorizing similar codes led me to identify patterns in the data. Each data source was analyzed individually and then combined with other data sources for each student to provide deeper insight into themes that surfaced. For instance, my daily tracking chart alongside my journal allowed me to see relationships between my students' daily behaviors and journaled actions or phrases. In addition, the timing of my implemented strategies was analyzed alongside students' verbalizations or actions. I color-coded times I implemented a strategy and heard or saw my participants working independently, and reviewed their personal self-reflections to derive informed conclusions.

To compile my data, I created a long chart for each student that included each day of my study. I graphed the points each student had earned each day as a bar graph, then marked each day a strategy was implemented with a letter. "MB" was used to denote a

mindfulness break, "L" denoted literature, and "SR" was marked for self-reflection. Behaviors I had documented in my journal, on the daily tracking chart, and in the school-wide Tier 1 data chart were color-coded with highlighter onto the long chart as well (red: did not complete work, yellow: did not show best effort, blue: did not follow directions). Within each colored mark, I wrote the class in which the behavior occurred (R: reading, W: writing, M: math, S: science, and A: arts). Through using my long-chart, I could identify reoccurrences of behaviors during certain parts of the day, as well as identify trends in student progress.

Findings

In analyzing my data, three themes surfaced to inform my research question, *In what ways could I support a child who lacked autonomy to work independently*? These include: relationships aid independence, positive mind makes for a positive day, and everyone needs a break. Below, I illustrate how these themes apply to Levi, Dani, and Max.

Levi

Initially, Levi struggled to work independently, and I struggled to bond with him and build a relationship that allowed me to push him to work harder. Levi walked into my room the first week of school wanting a hug. He loved to talk, work, and play with others. However, his struggle with self-control led other students to not want to work with or be near him, as he distracted them. Levi believed he would be unsuccessful without someone to help him through step by step. Early in this study, for instance, I worked with him for 15 minutes in a guided math group and then left him to work independently on a problem. The minute I stepped away, Levi complained he could not do it, despite having just solved a problem with me. Moreover, Levi began to pick up on social cues indicating other people did not want to work with him and that I was not going to help him with every step. This made Levi upset. If someone did not want to work or play with him, he would state, "no one wants to be friends with me. They were supposed to be my friends."

Given his unique challenges, I realized building a relationship with Levi meant helping him develop boundaries with others and me in order to grow his independence. He needed to learn it was not okay to play around at all times and be out of control. I began to apply positive praise when he demonstrated self-control and took time to think about his work, rather than complain and distract others. This led to some better days for Levi, as when he understood what he was doing academically, he was able to work by himself. At times, Levi would ask for help, and after I gave him support, he would continue to try his best to solve

the problem instead of complaining he could not do it. I began to notice Levi giving effort independently. However, socially he continued to be challenged, failing to understand his behavior caused other children to be annoyed.

One thing I learned about Levi was relationships mattered. He wanted to make everyone around him happy. He did not want me to be upset with him when he failed to do his work. He wanted his parents to be proud of him and to have friends who accepted him. This all became evident when he would consistently ask me to call his mom or write a good note home so his parents could be proud of him, too. When anyone mentioned being proud of him, he burst with excitement. He lived to make others proud. He worked so hard to please everyone around him that he did not always have a chance to be himself. Data indicated this led to his bad days, as every chance of freedom Levi thought he had to be himself caused him to overflow with uncontrollable energy.

Dani

Dani would put her head down and ignore me if I tried to talk her into doing something she did not want to do. She would cry and say she could not read or could not see the board. I had her read to me to prove she could read and moved her to the front row, thus exhausting her excuses by the second week of school.

During this study, one phrase I found myself constantly saying to her was, “it might be hard, but you can do it.” Each day, even if she refused to complete assignments, I sat with her to talk at dismissal. Even on “awful days,” she began to look forward to that one-on-one time. Data indicate by week 3 and 4, Dani’s attitude began to turn around. She would say to me, “I can do it” and “it’s really hard, but I’m going to try my best first” any time I came to her table to check on her and offer support. She started to adopt my language as her own. I also noticed her zone of proximal development shifted. She had more faith in her capabilities and was willing to stretch herself further independently to the point where she was more aligned with the other students in my room and only needed guidance from me when they did. She was spending more time on the task and would tell me that she “got it” whenever I would check in on her and offer support.

When Dani had a positive mindset, she would have a positive day and believed in herself during independent work. Mindfulness activities on GoNoodle were the best strategy for turning Dani’s day around. She would look forward to participating in the activity and would often recite parts of the activity such as, “take a deep rainbow breath,” “start the day

on the right foot," "try your best," or "I can do it." Within the first week of sitting with Dani to implement mindfulness activities, I observed her working independently without complaints. Dani would not give up even if a challenge were hard for her. She would even ask if she could go help others once she completed her work. I also noticed that Dani showed her effort in all her class work. Even if she did not know the answer, she would write something down to show what she did know. Peers soon noticed Dani's positive behaviors and attitudes, and she began to make friendships in the class. She wanted to work with her group, she had friends to sit with at lunch, and she played with the whole class at recess.

By the end of this study, Dani had completely transformed into a different girl. She expressed excitement to come to school every morning, stating, "I can't wait to do math today" or asking if she could continue working on a project. On one occasion, she stated that it was hard but she was not going to give up. She promised to try her best. Another finding observed includes her ability to encourage the class to try their best whenever there is a complaint. She might say, "You can do it. You just have to try hard." It appears my finding the right words to say and the time to sit with Dani helped her become a more independent learner as she became more confident in her own abilities that she had all along. Her zone of proximal development was much more aligned with my expectations for a second grader on her level.

Max

Like Levi, Max aimed to make others proud of him, often asking in his happy and bubbly personality, "Did I do good?" Despite wanting to be a good student, he had trouble finding ways to overcome challenges. For instance, if I asked Max to fix a portion of his work, he would state that he "didn't know what to do." I would provide a few examples, model with my own work, or give him some questions to think through. I needed to give Max as much support as I could think of and would even get to the point where I would just have to tell him the answer, but he would become too wrapped up in the thought of having to make his work stronger that he would break down and cry. He would not overcome his emotions until the class ended and it was time to put away materials, even if that meant he sat at his desk for 40 more minutes without fixing or completing any more work. Max's zone of proximal development was so different than the rest of the second graders. Max had a limited belief in what he was capable of, no matter what the concept was. If Max needed to apply a new

skill that we spent days or even weeks learning, he would refuse to because he did not think he was capable of doing it on his own.

I built trust and rapport with Max. However, findings indicate this was simply no match for the challenging life he experienced outside the classroom with inconsistent parental support and schedules that affected his ability to get to school on time. In this study, Max was unable to show improvement in his independent learning. His average behavior points earned per week decreased from the start of the school year, and he ended with fewer completed assignments per class. Through the end, however, I continued to strive to reach Max by finding ways to help him become a more independent learner and by involving his mom in ensuring his schoolwork was completed in school or at home each day.

Max relied on the characters from our literature strategy books to help him turn his day around. He connected to how they were feeling, especially their attitudes, and used their solutions to think about his actions. On one occasion, Max related strongly to the character Max from *Where the Wild Things Are*. He recalled a time where he had gone to his room upset because his mom was angry with him. All he wanted to do was play around, but eventually he realized he was not happy with himself when his mom was mad at him. He understood that, like Max from the story, he needed to calm down and listen to what his mother had told him.

Max often continued to have ups and downs throughout the day. However, data indicate he responded best to seeing me set the example of working independently and speaking calmly and rationally. This had the power to help him change his attitude. On one occasion, Max refused to fix his math work during class for two hours. I spent the entire morning speaking to him calmly about what he needed to do to make his work better, but he just was not understanding or willing to try. Later in the day, the only thing that got him through his work was watching me think calmly through the steps needed to solve a problem. He then realized he could fix his work calmly if he thought through the steps.

Summative Findings

My relationships with Dani, Levi, and Max led to one common realization: the learners all aimed to please. They wanted to show they could be successful, smart, and capable. They lived for positive praise and had their best days when I shared how proud I was of their accomplishments. This led me to wholeheartedly want to support them to be the best independent learners they could be.

In this study, I was reminded Max, Levi, and Dani are all active, 7-year-old students, a notion I, among others, may easily forget. Data among them indicate the learners lost the most points for not showing the best effort on their work right before lunch, and then again in the afternoon during math class. This awareness helped me plan breaks for them during times most beneficial to the learners. Initially, I applied a mindfulness break right in the morning. This, however, did not help make learners feel any more prepared to learn independently or start their day. Rather, I observed all three learners still shut down when it came time to do independent work in the morning. They would use the excuse that they "could not read" or that they did not know what to do. I did find that when I offered a break after lunch and recess, they worked harder throughout math, were more on-task, and were willing to try their best effort even when challenged. The finding proved beneficial to all of Max, Levi, and Dani's classmates, who used the time to release some energy and regain their focus for the rest of the day.

Implications

Through this study, I discovered the importance of building relationships with my learners. Had Levi, Dani, Max, and I not had a positive relationship, I do not believe I would have seen some of the improvements I saw in them. Our relationship made them receptive to our discussions, while giving me the opportunity to get close enough to realize they wanted to be better, wanted me to be proud of them, and wanted to be able to independently work so they could be successful. This made me see them differently as learners.

Part of being a teacher is being reflective. After my first few weeks of teaching, I came to realize I had bonded with some students more than others. Those I bonded with quickly became the most successful independent learners. Self-reflection led me to consider which students needed what and how I was supporting them to improve. I chose Dani, Max, and Levi for this action research because I felt I could not expect them to be independent learners when I had not given them the tools to be successful.

Teaching is a two-way street. It takes action from the teacher and action from the student. I alone could not be the force to make Levi, Dani, and Max jump out of our nest and fly. They needed to know I believed they could fly once they were prepared to leap. Had I just pushed them over the edge without preparing them for success, they would have plummeted, wings closed. Moreover, my pushing them without their trust may have caused

resentment in the effort to make them independent learners. My role was, rather, to empower them with strategies and confidence to bring them closer to becoming independent learners, even if only a bit closer.

My study also had implications for the other students in my room. Through the use of the mindfulness breaks, all the students in my room were participating and learning strategies to breathe, stay focused, and concentrate. I found that strategy was the one that benefitted all my students.

Throughout my research, I found myself sharing some of my strategies with other teachers in my school who were facing similar challenges of building a connection with students and getting them to be more motivated to work hard independently. My study could be beneficial to teachers looking for strategies to encourage their dependent learners across all grades, as my strategies could be modified to fit different needs of students. Learning about my students and myself has prompted me to begin thinking about my next inquiry. During my research, I observed Levi, Max, and Dani each struggle to make friends in the class the first few weeks of school. This led me to become interested in what drives my students to build friendships with each other. Specifically, I wonder how I can foster meaningful relationships among my students in order to create a collaborative classroom environment.

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Appendix

Strategy Implementation Timeline

Weeks 1-6	-	daily self-reflection log and discussion
	-	daily tracking chart per class
	-	discussion between student and teacher, recorded in journal daily based on anecdotal notes
Weeks 2-6	-	GoNoodle mindfulness sessions paired with daily tracking chart
Week 2 and ongoing	-	FBA and BIP created with behavior specialist and monitored weekly
Weeks 3-6	-	developmentally supportive literature (1 story per week) recorded on daily tracking chart
	-	student reflection on characters' behavior, self-regulating or independent learner strategies, and connections to themselves

"We're going to get worse, so what's the point of working?": Florida High School Students Speak on School Grading

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine Florida high school students' school experiences in the era of high-stakes accountability. Their responses revealed major concerns with the state grading of their "low-performing" school. Students perceived school grading to result in a lack of academic engagement. These voices demonstrate the need for further research investigating the effects of school grading and accountability procedures on student engagement and performance.

Introduction

Modern school reform movements often center on increased levels of performance accountability. One common way this is implemented is via school grading systems: schools are assigned a grade of A through F based largely on student performance on standardized tests. In Florida, school grading began in 1999 and evolved to be largely defined by standardized test scores and gains in grades 3-10 (FLDOE, 2011) under the federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). Letter grades were assigned to each school in accordance with (a) the percentage of students labeled proficient based on standardized test scores in math, reading, writing, and science; and (b) the percentage of lower-level students making standardized test score gains in these areas (Chingos et al., 2010).

More recently, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) required states to develop their own accountability systems (Aldeman, 2016). In Florida, letter grades are still assigned to each school based on (a) standardized test scores in math, reading, science, and social studies; (b) standardized test score gains in math and reading; (c) standardized test score gains by the lowest 25% of students in math and reading; and for high schools, (d) graduation rates; and (e) the percentage of graduates on an accelerated track (FLDOE, 2016). Additionally, traditionally low-performing schools are required to develop additional improvement plans that largely center on test-practice protocols.

Standardized test-based accountability programs have been demonstrated to narrow curriculum and result in "teaching-to-the-test" (Darling-Hammond & Rustique-Forrester, 2005; Linn, 2000; Vogler & Virtue, 2007; Welsh, Eastwood, & D'Agostino, 2014). In Florida specifically, under the pressure of school grading, teachers have spent increased amounts of instructional time on test-practice protocols and rote memorization, while reducing time in untested subjects or more creative pedagogies (B. D. Jones & Egley, 2004; G. M. Jones, Jones, & Hargrove, 2003; Wasserberg, 2014; Wasserberg & Rottmann, 2016). In general, teachers have reported spending almost half of their instructional time on test-taking strategies (B. D. Jones & Egley, 2007). Au (2011) describes how accountability practices based largely on high-stakes testing de-professionalize teachers by essentially taking pedagogical decision-making out of their hands. Florida teachers report feeling "basically afraid to *not* teach to the test," and they no longer have the ability to expose their students

to a "wide range of science and social studies experiences" (Berliner & Nichols, 2009, p. 127).

Florida teachers explained how state exams negatively affect student learning by dictating instructional time and ignoring students' individual learning needs (B. D. Jones & Egley, 2007). When teachers have to implement test-based instruction, they are unable to present the content in a format that heightens students' understanding while addressing content standards. Teachers also report a focus on "just the facts, because that is what will be tested," and they limit student-centered instruction and more engaging models (Vogler & Virtue, 2007, p. 56). Considering students' learning needs when developing instruction is especially important for low-performing students (Jennings & Sohn, 2014; Paris & Urdan, 2000). However, many teachers feel pressured to focus on test preparation versus more motivating pedagogies because of the testing policies.

In addition, high-stakes testing policies elicit negative stress in teachers (Nathaniel, Pendergast, Segool, Saeki, & Ryan, 2016). Along with the policies and the test results used to evaluate teacher performance, teachers also have pressure from parents concerning the test outcomes (von der Embse, Schoemann, Kilgus, Wicoff, & Bowler, 2016). As the teachers' stress increases, so does that of their students (von der Embse et al., 2016). Students' reactions to teachers' perceptions of their understanding of content knowledge have directly correlated with their testing performance. A teacher who believes students can successfully "generalize their knowledge to succeed on a variety of items" has students who perform better than peers in test-adverse classrooms (Welsh et al., 2014, p. 113). Teacher-student relationships are therefore a pivotal component of effective teaching. Studies have shown the teacher-student relationship is a contributing factor in student performance (Allen et al., 2013; Allen, Pianta, Gregory, Mikami, & Lun, 2011; Murray & Greenberg, 2000), and positive relationships are integral for creating a classroom environment for emotional and instructional support (Allen et al., 2013). However, high-stakes testing can negatively affect such relationships (Vogler & Virtue, 2007).

In addition to student-teacher relationships, a strong desire to defy stereotypes is also a motivating factor for success. This may add an extra layer of pressure and anxiety, as high-achieving minority students are the most likely to be hindered by stereotype threat (Rodríguez, 2014). At the same time, many view high-stakes testing as a hurdle to jump, rather than as a measure of their talent (Wiggan, 2014). Despite these varied perspectives,

the voices of students, which are largely absent from the literature, are necessary to better paint a picture of their school experience. This is especially important given the prevalence of high-stakes testing in schools serving minority students.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study was to examine high school students' experiences in a low-performing school in the era of high-stakes testing. The researchers posed two research questions:

1. What are the students' perceptions of test-based instruction in a low-performing school?
2. How does test-based instruction affect teacher-student relationships?

Data analysis revealed a pattern of responses demonstrating how low school grades were a major concern for the students, often leading to disengagement as well as their desire for more motivating and engaging instructional content and better relationships with teachers. The study presents the need for further research concerning the effects of school ratings on school experiences.

Method

The research took place in a low-performing urban high school in Florida in 2014. Eighty-five percent of the students who attended the school were African American and 15 percent were Latinx. Eighty-eight percent of the students qualified for free or reduced lunch. Florida has long used a system that grades schools based on standardized test scores (Greene, 2001), and the high school under study received a failing grade from the state for multiple years. As a result, the school had initiated a number of test-centered protocols aimed at improving standardized test scores. These included school-wide practice testing and weekly workbooks that mirrored the format of the state test.

Two university researchers (a White male graduate student and a Latino male professor) participated in an 11th-grade history course for one semester. Besides conducting research, this participation included guiding topical discussions, facilitating groups, and participating in classroom assignments. The course met semi-weekly for 90 minutes. The teacher of the course was Latina, and of the 20 students, 18 were African American, and 2 were Latinx. The class was a required course and represented a cross-section of the school population. Signed permission forms were received from all students and/or their guardians to participate in the research. All names mentioned in the study are pseudonyms.

Data Collection and Analysis

Twelve students in the course (10 African American, 2 Latinx) were individually interviewed regarding their school experiences. The interviews took place after the researchers had been actively engaged in the course for a semester, allowing for development of positive rapport. The interviews took place in a conference room adjacent to the participants' classroom. A framework for each interview was developed beforehand, and all interviews were audio-recorded. The interviews averaged 28 minutes. Examples of some questions included: What is your best subject? What subject do you spend the most time on? How important is it for you to do well on the FCATs? Why? How do you feel about schoolwork related to the FCAT? Why? What happens in school that makes you feel this way?

The interview data were supplemented with field notes from classroom observations. The classroom observations took place in 90-minute blocks over a four-month period, for a total of 48 hours. The graduate researcher observed and recorded notes on daily classroom activities including test practice protocols, student-teacher interactions, and student-student interactions. During the last 2 weeks of classroom observations, special attention was paid to situations related to comments made by students during their interviews. Participants were permitted to listen to highlighted excerpts from the interviews and suggest any changes to their comments that they deemed necessary. (No major changes were made. However, terms were defined and unclear sentences were clarified.) This member checking, as well as the classroom observations, served as forms of triangulation.

All interviews were professionally transcribed verbatim. The authors then completed a detailed line-by-line analysis of the interviews (Creswell, 2012). Relevant data were organized into categories related to the way students experience test-based accountability programs. In order to systematically analyze the data, codes were then applied. Once each transcript was coded, the coded passages were reanalyzed to develop cogent categories related to experiences in their school. The initial codes included: (a) feelings of boredom, (b) descriptions of test preparation and practice testing, (c) displays of test-related concern or anxiety, and (d) student-teacher relationships.

Findings

Despite students' understanding that the school was making efforts to improve its school grade, students overwhelmingly perceived test-based accountability practices as

repressive and a negative influence on their school experience. Students described the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT) test-practice protocols enforced at their school in efforts to improve the school's grade:

> [My definition of school] is getting me prepared to achieve something in life, but the school's is passing the FCAT and making that school look good…In PE where we're supposed to be playing, we usually do FCAT packages and answer questions, to get us ready…We have a class where we're supposed to be learning health, but most of the time they give us packages. We practice the test. So, we don't usually do nothing in classes like health.

The school's focus on preparing students for the FCAT hindered students' ability to experience and participate in other content specialties. PE and health classes did not focus on discipline-specific content, but instead centered on test-practice.

Although students' reaction to the test-practice was negative concerning its inclusion in all content areas, they did see a benefit of the test-practice protocol:

> They over-incorporate FCAT practice into the school hours. But the way that they actually give more tests and things like that, it'll be good because the kids get to actually experience the test experience…so when it comes to a test they've been doing this all year so they're kind of used to it and they won't freeze up as much. That's probably why the school grade [will go] up. But when you constantly pound away at the kids with tests, that's when they're going to get tired and stop working.

The continual implementation of test-practice decreases test anxiety; however, it fosters a lack of motivation to continue working.

The theme of students' feeling disconnected to content and school in a test-focused instructional classroom emerged in the coding. Participants made several references to the high-stakes testing focus as a primary reason several of their peers have disengaged academically and/or dropped out of school. As a representative example, one student said:

> It's not a hard test, but what we learn in school is not what we should be learning. They concentrate on the FCAT. So that's why I think the FCAT—they should just—it makes no sense! It's just preventing kids from staying in school!

Students perceived the test-practice focus as one reason students drop out. Another explained, "They probably saw the FCAT and they were saying, '…I still can't pass it so I'm going to drop out.'"

Instead of test-based instruction, students perceived a need for instruction centered on student interest, which they believe will foster student engagement. A student stated:

> [They should] give us more class, like more interesting classes…but we have to wait until college to take those type of classes. Like, some classes, we're going to take in college, like black…history and stuff. There's different classes where you talk about different things. And that could—we need this here, but we have to wait until college to take those type of classes…here it is too much FCAT.

Another student reiterated this, "because we have all these intensive classes and stuff because of the…like in my art class—we're learning FCAT drills in art class! That's not what's supposed to happen."

Students supported interest-based learning as well as active learning through field trips. A student stated in science class they "practice what we're going to be doing on the FCAT." Students stated the FCAT is not fun, and they understand teachers are "going to be teaching it in the FCAT. And that's how they do it…Our grade is low." Classroom observations revealed no examples of interest-based learning and rare examples of active learning.

The focus on the school grade not only impacts a teacher's instructional delivery and student motivation, but it also increases student anxiety. One student stated:

> I know a lot of people when they have tests, they look at it and then they get nervous cause it has the title of 'Test' over it and they choose not to do it and they stop at a certain point.

A student claimed school grading impacts students "from the inside out," elaborating, "Some of them think we're going to be a D school again next year, or an F school again next year, or we're going to get worse, so what's the point of working?"

Along with interest-based learning, the theme of positive student-teacher relationships was evident in the data. Quotes referring to favorite teachers stressed these relationships:

> In that class it was very exciting because the teacher's very—he involved, he's very involved. He loves us, we love him. Like we know him. Like, every time we step in the class…he's very active. He know us all, how to get us involved.

Students indicated positive student-teacher relationships combat total disengagement in instruction, but references to such relationships were rare. Most often, students talked about student-teacher relationships in the context of helping them to pass the test. One

student, who disliked math and was worried about passing, shared, "when I have a teacher who sits there and teaches me…and when I found out I passed it, I was happy, and that was real special!"

Conclusion

The data demonstrated students were concerned about state testing as the results affect their school's rating and therefore the school's teaching focus. They recognized teachers were focused on the students' scores in terms of their test-centered instruction. The resulting pedagogies negatively influenced students' desire to academically engage, as they believed they were not being prepared for college because the school grading system was motivating their teachers' instructional decisions. The students wanted instruction that promoted interest-based and active learning. Students felt school motivation would increase if classes were content-focused, incorporating field trips and hands-on instruction. They found it particularly discouraging that the test preparation took place across all disciplines, and that student-teacher relationships centered on test-preparation.

The findings from this study revealed a pattern of student dissatisfaction with test-centered instruction, supporting the need for additional work examining students' perspectives. Further studies should also focus on comparing the effects of test-centered instruction and more diverse pedagogies on student engagement and performance. Future studies in Florida can also analyze whether instructional patterns have changed since the FCAT has been replaced with the Florida Standards Assessments (FSA) the year after this study was completed, given that the FSA, which is aligned with Common Core, includes more critical thinking.

State-based accountability programs influence changes for schools deemed in need of improvement and assign grades based on standardized test scores. Schools that receive low grades, such as the one in this study, often react by implementing increased levels of test-centered instruction. These schools often force the exclusion of untested content from our most low-performing schools, while also creating negative performance and attitudes in the affected teachers and students. Student perspectives are imperative to drive any positive reform.

Implications for Teacher Educators

Oftentimes, negative perceptions of minority students in urban schools are couched within the context of school grades and standardized test scores (Lewis, James, Hancock, &

Hill-Jackson, 2008). As revealed in the present study and elsewhere (Kozol, 2005; Meier & Wood, 2004; Moon, Callahan, & Tomlinson, 2003), school-based solutions focus largely on increasing levels of test-centered instruction. This model is disproportionately implemented in schools serving high numbers of minority students (Ahlquist, 2003; Carnoy & Loeb, 2002; Kozol, 2005; Nichols, Glass, & Berliner, 2006), and this study demonstrates it to lead to student boredom and disengagement (see also Moon, Brighton, Jarvis, & Hall, 2007). Additionally, test-centered instruction has been shown to lead to teacher stereotyping and underestimation of students' academic abilities (Crawford, 2004).

In the past, teacher education programs have been cited as a weak intervention in transforming such beliefs (Wideen, Mayer-Smith, & Moon, 1998; Zeichner & Gore, 1990). For teacher educators, reflection on the impact of such pedagogy is pivotal. This should involve engaging pre-service teachers in critical reflection and resisting pressure to teach to the test. Lastly, teacher educators need to work to develop pre-service teachers' ability in developing positive student-teacher relationships.

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Book Review:
Impactful Practitioner Inquiry: The Ripple Effect on Classrooms, Schools, and Teacher Professionalism, by S. Nichols & P. Cormack

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Nichols, S., & Cormack, P. (2017). *Impactful practitioner inquiry: The ripple effect on classrooms, schools, and teacher professionalism*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

Impactful Practitioner Inquiry: The Ripple Effect on Classrooms, Schools, and Teacher Professionalism (Nichols & Cormack, 2017) is an in-depth look at the impact of teacher research on education. From classrooms, schools, and communities, this book exemplifies the influence practitioner inquiry has beyond educators. The two authors, Sue Nichols and Phil Cormack, are faculty at the University of Australia and have an extensive history with educational research involving professional development opportunities and learning through informal and formal contexts. This particular work centers on "a project to investigate the kinds of impact inquiry can make and how and why practitioners believe it contributes to change" (p. 2).

Australia itself has a long history with inquiry, to the point of being a hub for teacher research (Nichols & Cormack, 2016). A prominent figure within the Australian movement, Boomer (1985) stated,

> Since schools and universities are institutions for the promotion of deliberate learning, all teaching [...] should be directed towards the support of deliberate, personally owned and conducted, solution-oriented investigation. All teachers should be experts in 'action research' so that they can show students how to be 'action researchers.' (p. 125)

Nichols and Cormack (2017) quote Boomer multiple times in *Impactful Practitioner Inquiry*, giving light to the long history of their country's inquiry reform efforts.

The tripartite division of *Impactful Practitioner Inquiry* structures the authors' exploration of the expanding impacts of practitioner research, as they go in depth into two case studies of exemplarily practitioner research and conclude with a segment on the implementation of design and analysis aspects of inquiry. The first part of this book is a report of the authors' collaboration in the Impacts Practitioner Inquiry (IPI) project. Outcomes of the project include the extended impact inquiry had on those beyond the classroom in their research sample of over 300 educators engaged in inquiry. Two extended examples from the IPI project are detailed in part two of this book to provide a framework for effective practitioner research and the vast sphere of influence. The final section focuses on the design and analysis of practitioner research with practical examples and detailed descriptions intended to be applied by teachers in a variety of settings.

Impactful Practitioner Inquiry is connected to a collection of practitioner inquiry books, including *The Reflective Educator's Guide to Classroom Research: Learning to Teach and Teaching to Learn Through Practitioner Inquiry* (Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2014) and *Inquiry as Stance: Practitioner Research for the Next Generation* (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009). What sets *Impactful Practitioner Inquiry* apart is the plethora of examples described by Nichols and Cormack through an overview of their research, case studies, and applied paradigms. The exemplary models dissolve the prevalent worry that practitioner research is too arduous to undertake in the classroom. This asset, along with the variety of examples, is an encouragement for all educators, regardless of context, to engage in practitioner research to study their own practice. Nichols and Cormack recognize the distinction often made between researchers and practitioners and attempt to bridge this gap by situating themselves as inquiry practitioners at the beginning of the book.

This book is useful for those already engaged in practitioner research as well as those who are on the fence about beginning the journey. Veteran teacher researchers will benefit from the differentiated models as inspiration to vary their approaches, as well as the networking theories of "the ripple effect" to highlight the broader applications of their efforts. Novice practitioner researchers and those who have yet to begin will benefit from the support for inquiry through research outcomes and a starting idea (or many!) to begin inquiry of their own practice. Overall, *Impactful Practitioner Inquiry* is a valuable resource for any

practitioner research literature collection, adding to the insights on the dispersion of outcomes through the inquiry movement.

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Call for Papers: Technology in Teacher Education

The Florida Association of Teacher Educators (FATE) is dedicated to improving the effectiveness of teacher education through leadership in the development of quality programs to prepare teachers, by analyzing issues and practices relating to professional development, and by providing opportunities for personal and professional growth of Association members.

The *FATE Journal* is a peer-reviewed publication meant to showcase the best articles on teacher education research and practice in the state of Florida. The journal has recently transitioned to themed issues that connect statewide issues to the larger national context.

The next special issue will focus on technology in teacher education. As we near the end of the 21st century's second decade, how have teacher educators harnessed the power of technology to improve their practice? How can/do we prepare teachers to embrace emerging and even unimagined technology? How, if at all, does technology pose risks for teacher education, and how can we mitigate those tensions and maximize the affordances of various technologies? This special issue asks potential authors to articulate and respond to the critical intersections of technology and teacher education.

Authors are encouraged but not required to consider any of the following questions in their manuscripts:

- With the rise of edTPA and other performance assessments, how has technology assisted and/or interfered with the evaluation of teachers?
- What should teachers and teacher educators know about diagnostic software like iReady?
- How are teacher education programs using technology in innovative ways (e.g. online education, distance supervision, etc.)?
- What are some best practices for the use of technology in K-12 classrooms?
- How can technology serve as a research tool for students, pre-service and in-service teachers, and teacher educators?

We encourage manuscripts written by practicing and aspiring teachers and teacher educators. Conceptual and empirical papers are welcome, as well as papers guided by practitioner inquiry, self-study, or historical inquiry.

Submission Timeline

Deadline for Submission: January 15, 2019 (Midnight, EST)
Anticipated Publication: May/June 2019

General Submission Guidelines

Manuscripts should be in double-spaced, Times New Roman, 12-point font with one-inch margins. Manuscripts, excluding references, tables, charts, and figures, should not exceed 20 pages. All pages should be numbered. Please place tables, charts, and figures at the end of the manuscript. All manuscripts should follow APA (6th edition) format. Please do not include a running head. An abstract of 150-250 words should be included at the beginning of your manuscript.

In addition to your *blinded* manuscript, please submit a separate cover page that includes the following: (1) title of the manuscript, (2) authors' names and institutional affiliation & email address of the corresponding author, and (3) statement that this manuscript is not under consideration nor has it been published elsewhere.

Please submit all manuscripts to FATEjournal@gmail.com by the submission deadline. If you have questions as to whether your manuscript is appropriate for the call, please feel free to submit an approximately 250-word abstract to the editors for review.

Call for Media and Book Reviews

The *FATE Journal* welcomes media and book reviews related to education, broadly conceived. Reviews should be no longer than 1000 words (excluding references) and include the following:

- The full reference of the work
- A brief summary, including key points
- A summary of how the work is structured and how that structure helps to facilitate or impede the work's central argument
- The strengths and weaknesses of the work and how it connects to similar books, texts, or films
- For whom this work would be useful and why

General Submission Guidelines

Reviews should be in double-spaced, Times New Roman, 12-point font with one-inch margins. All pages should be numbered. All reviews should follow APA (6th edition) format. Please do not include a running head.

Media and book reviews are welcomed on a rolling basis. Please submit all reviews and/or questions to FATEjournal@gmail.com.