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What Happens When I Implement Peer Mentoring in My Classroom?



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Context Paper

Matawan-Aberdeen Regional School District is a K-12 regional suburban school district, in the heart of Monmouth County, and educates children from Matawan, Aberdeen, Cliffwood, Cliffwood Beach, and Keyport.  The middle school where I teach, Matawan-Aberdeen Middle School (MAMS), serves students in grades six through eight, after filtering from four elementary schools to one intermediate school in grades four and five.  The dynamic of the socio economic culture is fairly diverse.  Matawan-Aberdeen Middle School began qualifying for Title 1 services in 2013, due to the growing population of low-income families coming from Cliffwood and Cliffwood Beach.  This plays an important role in how students are viewed within the school district, as students often compare their location to what "privileges," or lack of, they have at home.  Education is not always a priority or reinforced because caregivers are busy working or trying to make ends meet for the family.

By eighth grade, many students are still not meeting milestones for grade level expectations.  For example, based on DRA (Diagnostic Reading Assessment) scores, which provide evidence about a student's reading ability, students should be reading on grade level every year.  Out of my three classes of seventy students, less than ten read at grade level; the others are one-four grade levels below where they should be.  Students will admit, "I hate reading" or "I never read was a kid, so I don't want to read now."  Families do not always provide additional support for these deficiencies at home, such as enforcing study time, and as a result, the educational responsibility to meet student needs falls on the staff and administrators at MAMS.

In a school setting where the primary focus is raising test scores and closing the gap on educational weaknesses, peer relationships are often glossed over.  There is one club, Peer

Leadership, which aims to promote positive peer relations in school; however, only a dozen students sign up in the building and they do not participate in many team-building activities.  For example, last year Peer Leadership hosted a "jeans for teens" event to collect jeans for low-income teams.  While this promoted community involvement, students only placed boxes in designated areas; no community building activities occurred.  My interest in evaluating peer relationships as a factor for increasing student success evolved from observing a huge increase in student isolation within the school and the Language Arts classroom.  Even at an assembly, a speaker asked students to identify if they enjoyed working with their peers; less than a third raised their hands - reiterating students' disengagement in peer relationships.  For this reason, I would like to carefully examine and target peer mentoring as a strategy to improve social relationships within the classroom community.

I have been teaching Language Arts at Matawan-Aberdeen Middle School for the past five years.  Prior to this year, I taught sixth and seventh grade, but this year I volunteered to teach eighth grade.  This opportunity has enabled me to evaluate how students develop and mature throughout middle school at various ages.  By eighth grade, as they begin to move from early to middle adolescence, students should be actively pursuing opportunities, relying less on parents for guidance, and taking control of their education (Spano, 2004, p.2).  Where I did not see these behaviors in sixth and seventh grade, I am seeing these patterns in my eighth grade classroom.

The class I am most interested in evaluating is my first period class, which meets every day for seventy-four minutes.   Through observation, it has become apparent that I have an alarming number of students who appear disengaged and isolated from their peers.  Looking back on informal observational notes I took from the first few weeks of school, I repeatedly commented on behaviors related to isolation within the class.  Students did not want to work

with others, not because of lack of established relationships or bullying, but there were coming in with a social handicap.  Even when interacting with me one-on-one, a specific number of students remained "shy," not asking for help or even engaging in meaningless one-on-one conversation.

This class meets at 8:04am and is comprised of twenty-five thirteen year-olds who fill up every seat in the room. The room is set up in a U-shape, so that students can interact across the room to each other, when engaging in a group discussion; they are also paired off with some other students, so they can turn and talk with someone, if need be.  This is strategic since I have so many students with varied learning needs in the class.  Academically, this group is very diverse.  The mean NJASK (New Jersey Assessment of Skills and Knowledge) score for 2012-2013 was 199, where students are expected to achieve at least a 200 to meet proficiency.  Seventeen students were proficient and six were below proficiency. In terms of meeting the 8th grade reading level expectation, more than half are reading below grade level.  According to their DRA scores, most are ranging between 50-70, which means they are reading at a beginning of 5th grade to 7th grade level.  None of the students in this class are classified with a diagnosed with a learning disability that would give them accommodations or statistical evidence for the academic delays they exhibit.

With the exception of one student, all of these students have grown up together – attending the same schools since elementary school.  The class dynamic is a split of boys and girls who come from various areas within the district.  Some of these students have parents who proactively support their education by attending events and functions, but most families do not become very involved within the school community.  For example, in September, only a third of the parents came to back-to-school night to learn about the courses this year.  For parent-teacher

conferences, only family members for six students in my first period class came to discuss their child's progress in class.  This is a major influence on the overall attitude of the importance of school.  Due to the nature of the schedule, there are few opportunities outside of the classroom for students to work together towards a common cause.  Students recognize that they are supposed to value school, but there is no school initiative to increase peer relations.  There is no enthusiasm for spirit week, any class competitions, etc.  Also, there is no system currently in place for students to act as "mentors" for others, so students have little leadership opportunity, or conversely, opportunity to receive peer support.

Specifically, there are six students who, though motivated to succeed and passively participate in class, will not communicate needs within the class period.  These students are always doing their work, but they will not, written or verbally, share answers or ask questions. Elyssa, for example, does not talk to anyone in the class.  When she enters the room, she has a smile on her face but barely says a word to me and does not talk to her peers.  Within a month period, she has only participated three times.  She does not ask for help when she needs it and when I walk by, she covers her paper so that I cannot see her work.  Even at her locker, if she has trouble with her combination, she will come in with her book bag, instead of asking a classmate or me for help.   Likewise, Kathryn and Maddie rarely raise their hand or work with their peers. Since they will not even ask questions, they perform poorly on class assignments and sometimes, assessments.   What is most troubling is that when spoken too, they speak so quietly and blend their words together that it is often hard to even understand what they are saying.

Additionally, three boys exhibit the same behavior and mannerisms.  Wes, John, and Justin do not ask questions, even if they are confused on an assignment.  This is important to note because students do have the option of asking questions on post-it notes and putting them on

a separate board for me to read later, if they do not feel comfortable raising their hands.  These

boys will stare or doodle to pass time, rather than asking for help.  Likewise, they rarely raise

their hand to volunteer an answer.  The only time they draw attention to themselves is when they

need to go to the bathroom or I walk up to them and try to engage in one-on-one conversation

about what is going on in class.   The student who specifically stands out as the most introverted

is John.  John, specifically, loathes school.  He is passing class, but his posture is the first clue

that he is miserable in class.  He barely talks to me and never looks at anyone else in class; his

peers view him as an outsider.  John's mom is involved in his education, but her encouragement

appears to have little influence on John's attitude towards school.  He writes on all of his

notebooks, "School sucks."  As a result, he does not participate during group work and does not

raise his hand in class.  Unlike the other students, he will ask me questions but he does not

deviate from asking very specific, "to the point" questions, which typically are related to leaving

the room for one reason or another.

As a teacher, it feels challenging to me when students are this introverted to cultivate a

hands-joined environment.  Instead of the class structure being teacher vs. student, the teacher

and students work together to build a positive learning community (Albert, 2005, p. 210).  Class

participation in discussion is minimal and group work is fairly non-existent, despite allowing

students to choose partners.  There has been discussion in research that suggests social

development parallels academic performance success.  Establishing solid peer relationships

within grade-school years is crucial practice for networking down the road in the workforce.

Creating peer mentors can also promote students to take informal leadership roles and take

charge within their own education.   By the eighth grade, it is crucial that students begin to see

the value of being their own advocates. My ultimate goal is to increase student engagement

within a class and peer relationships, along with self-esteem through peer mentoring.   By doing this, I aspire to socially reach my students in a new way and foster important life skills related to social interactions.

Literature Review

*Introduction*

The desire to belong and establish relationships is one of the basic human needs people face throughout their lifetime. The immediate relationships children build as they develop are those with their caregivers (Kalkan, 2011, p. 547). Then as they begin to attend school, they expand those relationships to other people they meet along their journey through life. Relationships with classmates and friends ultimately become equally as important as relationships with family as a person develops into adulthood (Kalkan, 2011, p. 547). Today's youth are very different than the generations before them. Philip (2000) explains that "the effects of globalization in combination with general social, demographic, and economic trends" along with other societal factors have prolonged dependency amongst children on their families (p. 1). Since today's children are generally more dependent on technology to communicate, as opposed to face-to-face interactions, sometimes building community amongst children is delayed or weakened. In this section, I will be reviewing literature related to the role of community building in fostering social relationships and the role of peer mentoring in helping to strengthen communication skills in young adults.

*Development in the Primary Years*

According to Garringer & MacRae (2008), the five C's of youth development that explain what young people need for development are competence, confidence, connection, character, and caring/compassion (p. 7). These components define the framework by which all humans innately desire. As they develop, children want to be viewed positively by those around them in all aspects of their existence, including social, academic, cognitive, and vocational (Garringer & MacRae, 2008, p. 7). In addition, they desire an internal sense of positive self-

value, positive bonds with others, morals, and a sense of sympathy/empathy for others (Garringer & MacRae, 2008, p.7).  By nature, children who are rejected or denied from a social group hold a higher level of loneliness than those whose need for belonging are satisfied by a strong group of friends (Kalkan, 2011, p. 548).   On the other hand, children who develop with supportive systems around them generally are more likely to excel in their academic and social endeavors (Kalkan, 2011, p.548).  For this reason, it is ideal that strong, positive social relationships are formed early on in primary years and grow throughout adolescence.

Adolescence is a time of immense physical, cognitive, socio-emotional, and interpersonal change within young people (Spano, 2004, p.1).  In early adolescence, eleven to fourteen year olds might experience moodiness and are more likely to express their feelings through actions rather than words (Spano, 2004, p.1).  As their bodies mature, adolescents have an increased sense of awkwardness about their physical identity and "feeling normal" (American, 2008, p.1). They are on a quest to expand relationships beyond their caregivers and test the limits of their actions  (Spano, 2004, p.1).  When stressed, they may exhibit "childish" behavior, but regardless, they are striving to obtain independence (American, 2008, p.1).  For most of these individuals, adolescents strive to find their place in the world and expand peer groups.  However, if this maturity is delayed, it might take them longer to feel an increased need to multiply peer relationships.  This can lead to loneliness or disconnect from peers.

As early adolescents reach middle adolescence in the early teenage years, there is generally a huge drive to make friends and rely on them when in need (American, 2008, p.1). Popularity can be an important facet of growth, especially as many of these young people are bordering middle and high school years.  Self-esteem often fluctuates as personal expectations increase and they become preoccupied with appearance (Spano, 2004, p.2).   Likewise, these

middle adolescents may face periods of sadness as they face increased responsibility while trying to withdrawal from parental reliance (Spano, 2004, p.2).  Similar to the time of early adolescence, these behaviors in human growth can often roll over into the classroom setting, causing arguments with friends or changes in social groups.  Again, if development is delayed or individuals become preoccupied in self-image that self-esteem is lost, they may withdraw from peer relations and isolate themselves from those around them.

During the early and middle adolescent years, which consume middle school and seep into high school, self-esteem is threatened daily.  Self-esteem is comprised of two components. Self-efficacy, which is confidence in one's ability to make appropriate decisions and self-respect, can play a huge role in how the person portrays oneself (Green, 2006, p.1).  Similarly, self-respect, which is confidence in one's opportunity to be happy and accept that love, friendship, and achievement are allowed, impacts how people interact amongst others (Green, 2006, p.1).  It is important to distinguish between self-esteem and self-loathing, where young people believe the world revolves around them and they are above everyone else (Green, 2006, p.1).  Self-esteem relates to feeling positive about one's ability and successes, and when compromised, it can have serious negative effects on an adolescent's relationships, academics, and feeling of self worth.

Additionally, the level of emotional support a child receives plays a significant role in shaping his or her life; it can positively or negatively impact the physical, psychological, and emotional welfare of a person, depending on the quality of support s/he receives (Kalkan, 2011, p. 547).  Especially in primary school, a child's priority in developing peer relationships holds a significant correlation with future social interactions (Kalkan, 2011, p. 548).  Lack of social support can be a catalyst for a host of unhealthy behaviors in later development, such as using

drugs, committing crimes, etc. so it is essential that young people develop strong, positive social relationships early in their school years (Kalkan, 2011, p. 548).

*Building Community in the Classroom*

When considering building community in a classroom, it is imperative to consider self-esteem as a factor for success.  A child with an unhealthy self-esteem may say something such as "I can't do anything right" (Green, 2006, p.2).  On the other hand, a student with a healthy self-esteem accepts praise and can imagine a positive self-image perceived from those around them (Green, 2006, p.2).   For the most part, children with a healthy self-esteem can accept constructive criticism and succeed in school, but children with low self-worth are more afraid of failure and can become introverted (Green, 2006, p.2).  For this reason, it is imperative that educators strive to foster healthy self-esteem.  Creating a strong community within the classroom can allow students to feel safe, included, and rebuilds the caregiver mentality that they experience throughout the childhood years at home.

While creating a climate for peer respect is something most teachers preach, it is often easier said than done (Christensen, 1994, p. 56).  This is because it takes devotion, modeling, and reinforcement of expectations so that students experience how community building looks and feels.  It is important to note that classroom community is not always synonymous with compassion and warmth, but rather regardless of the situation, students are able to openly empathize with one another, without fear of putdown or embarrassment (Christensen, 1994, p. 50).  This creates more authentic relationships because rather than students faking care towards one another, they are able to have differing opinions and understand how to overcome those differences to proactively engage in disagreements.  Especially for students growing up in diverse family settings, this can be crucial for acceptance and understanding.  When students can

recognize where their peers are coming from and use those differences as a building block for tolerance, real community occurs (Christensen, 1994, p. 53).

One of the most beneficial ways that teachers and peers can foster positive support systems in order to meet the needs of students is by implementing a peer mentoring program.   In recent years, mentoring has become a key component within school structures for working with young people, especially those labeled as "socially excluded" (Philip, 2000, p. 1).  Through structured activities between peers or older mentors as role-models for students, children now have additional support systems to rely on for academic or emotional support.  The main purpose of peer mentoring is to serve as an additional support to teacher and parental guidance that a student may or may not already receive.   Peer-mentoring requires determining who is in need of support, defining roles of mentors/mentees, and properly training so that everyone gets the most out of the program.

*Peer-Mentoring Successes*

Decades of studying peer mentoring have yielded positive, unprecedented results that many researchers could not have imagined (Zevallos & Washburn, 2014, p.25).  Zevallos and Washburn (2014) found that it had a positive impact by boosting social relationships, improving self-esteem and emotional health, improving conversation skills, and promoting developing a positive identify through being a role-model for others (p. 25).  For example, students who may previously not have initiated a class discussion or felt competent enough to raise their hands acquired strategies from their peer mentor to help improve their confidence (Zevallos & Washburn, 2014, p.25).  This effort to increase self-worth within a learning community can inadvertently promote advanced learning, social competence, and skills for the future workforce.

Moreover, confidence in "abilities to solve future problems" in struggling students can improve because students receive positive feedback and support from a peer (Gensemer, 2000, p.7). In a study of at-risk children, Gensemer (2000) found that having intervention sessions two to three times a week greatly improved performance in the classroom and goal-setting (p. 8). Students felt pressure to work harder at cooperation and teamwork because they knew someone on their level was invested in their success, which goes back to Garringer & MacRae's (2008) point about the primary need to feel connected to others (p.7). When people feel like someone cares, they are more inclined to work harder to impress those around them.

*Cross-age mentoring*

Cross-age mentoring has also become popular to improve student identity and value within the school setting. Cross-age mentoring is comprised of older students serving as mentors for younger students; older students are usually one or two years older than their mentees for the purpose of guiding them in many areas of their academic, social, and emotional development (Garringer & MacRae, 2008, p.2). This often works effectively because the older students have first-hand experience in what the younger students can expect to occur (Gensemer, 2000, p. 4). Also, by being so close in age, these peers can be valuable role models because they have already developed ways to succeed or overcome issues commonly faced.

Cross-age mentoring can be also be used to ease the transition from one school to another (Gensemer, 2000, p.6). There is often anxiety or challenges that arise when students transition from one level or school to another. Students may exhibit academic, behavioral, and even emotional difficulties, which if not resolved, may impact them for the rest of their schooling (Gensemer, 2000, p. 6). The best coaches to ease fears are those who have gone through it

before.  Since often help from an adult may seem authoritative, support coming from a peer can be reassuring and refocus students towards their academic priorities.

Research has even shown that cross-age mentoring has even successfully reduced absenteeism and lowered the drop out rate amongst students at risk for failure (Gensemer, 2000, p. 6).  In several studies, researchers found that students who felt connected to peers and could rely on someone to coach them through their educational or personal challenges at school, were more likely to feel connected to the school community (Gensemer, 2000, p.6).  Therefore, they were more likely to attend school regularly and be motivated to improve on their weaknesses. Conversely, students who experienced social isolation from peers were more likely to have frequent absences, or ultimately drop out of school.  Karcher (2008), found that peer-mentoring even helped students develop connectedness to society and focus attention positively on their community and family (p.139). Confidence in solving problems through peer mentoring encourages students to feel a sense of security within the school environment and belonging in a supportive community.

It is important to recognize that pairings may also change or be adjusted depending on progress and this is not seen as a "failure" on behalf of the mentor or mentee.  In the nature of working with others, some pairings may not initially hit it off or may not be suitable for each other.  Garringer (2008) found that structured activities will help determine how well a pair can work and benefit from each other (p.1).  Likewise, Karcher (2014) also noted that interviewing and mutual matching by a "meet and greet" procedure works best to have students form immediate bonds (p.140). Even though many pairings are often made on interest and struggles, it is secondary to the students' abilities to grow and develop a working relationship together.

Depending on the grouping, students many not always be in the same school and students may need to correspond through letters or other technological mediums.  For example, in districts where middle school ends at eighth grade, if eighth grade students are matched up with ninth grade students, location is an issue.  To resolve this, students should be matched up by interests or mentor expertise to target certain mentee weaknesses. Additionally, pairs will correspond through some other non-face-to-face medium, such as letters, e-mails, Skype, or phone calls.  While this is not necessarily ideal for daily or weekly monitoring, it can still provide students with unpredictable results if the program is established with a strong foundation.  Training on initial correspondence, questions to ask, and how to follow-up are all areas that would need to be addressed prior to organizing pairs.

Within cross-age mentoring, one of the most crucial factors for matching pairs is gender pairing.  Gensemer's (2000) specific study on cross-gender pairing found that gender matching is the most important factor for successful pairs and same-sex matching is crucial, especially for girls (p. 11).  If same-sex pairings are not possible due to the class dynamic, older girls may be paired with younger boys, but should be avoided if possible.  This allows students to feel comfortable within their gender to open up about any issues and not fear any gender bias.

*Roles of mentors/mentees*

Mentors and mentees come into the environment with their own struggles and areas of expertise.  Creating a successful program involves class participation, preparing mentors, monitoring by the teachers, and continuous assessment of student progress (Zevallos & Washburn, 2014, p. 26).  The first step in creating a successful program is to first encourage mentors to reflect on challenges they have faced and how they have overcome them (Zevallos & Washburn, 2014, p. 26).  For example, if the "mentor" in a pairing is a ninth grader assisting an

eighth grader, s/he might choose to provide information related to his or her own struggles with looking for potential high school interests, making the most of middle school, etc.  It is crucial that mentors are seen as relatable because this will help the mentee to feel empathy and build trust within the pairing.  Some other issues a student may recognize include relationship problems, poor study skills, family issues, procrastination, or financial difficulties (Zevallos & Washburn, 2014, p. 26).  These common issues that students face, can be crucial framework for initiating a productive discussion.  Then, students can practice role-playing and learn how to communicate effectively in order to tackle each other's needs.

Building a strong foundation from the beginning is essential for a successful peer-mentor pair.  According to Gensemer's  (2000) study on peer-mentoring and cross peer mentoring programs, mentors who use a three-step system of *pause, prompt, and praise* found exceptional results in trust building and problem solving with their mentees (p. 9).  By doing this, mentors allow their mentees to develop problem-solving skills prior to intervening.  Another key trait the mentor must possess is the ability to identify the, sometimes hidden, potential of the mentee (Philip, 2000, p.5).  This is significant because it can help promote immediate positivity in the efforts to prevent low self-worth or depression.  The best way to measure change and know if the relationship and trust is building is to measure pre-match and end-of-year outcomes (Karcher, 2008, p.141).  Doing this through observations and interviews is an informal and easy way to measure success at various points throughout the process.

It is important to recognize that when developing a peer-mentor program and determining qualifications for good matches, no mentor should be disqualified automatically based on grades (Gensemer, 2000, p. 8).  Peer mentoring is about academic success through personal and emotional growth.  A mentor who experiences academic struggle can be especially empathetic

with students who struggle in the classroom and thus, become isolated from the rest of the class. Also, they may be able to provide insight as to strategies for overcoming academic struggles that an honors level student may not be able to necessarily provide.

The role of the teacher in a mentorship program is to teach strategies for problem solving and developing relationships that students can then practice regularly (Zevallos & Washburn, 2014, p. 26). The environment should promote a "positive class climate" with active supervision (Gensemer, 2000, p. 9). Consistent progress monitoring is also important to provide feedback and measure growth for students to see the bigger picture of their efforts. Students may also monitor their progress as mentors or mentees through journaling (Gensemer, 2000, p.11). Journaling is most productive when students "make entries concerning discussions on problems and possible solutions" as well as using them to organizing thoughts or document progress (Gensemer, 2000, p. 11). It can also help the teacher to monitor progress and identify any issues to tackle as they arise.

*Concluding*

Overall, there are many positive benefits to peer-mentoring when implemented correctly. Researchers have observed how mentoring can be a phenomenal outlet for students to rely on their peers for guidance and growth. Likewise, mentors have become empowered by this opportunity and see themselves through the lens of a role model for other students. Ultimately, peer-mentoring can stimulate "problem-solving skills to resolve conflicts with each other, increased time-on-task, and academic growth" (Gensemer, 2000, p. 2). Even with cross-age mentoring programs, students have experienced success with increased attention, attendance, and participation (Gensemer, 2000, p. 3). Peer-mentoring plays an important role in shaping academic success as well as increasing self-esteem.

Programs that have been successful usually provide training on interpersonal skills for mentors, such as using positive statements, as well as modeling activities for tutors to practice. Even though meeting face-to-face is ideal, that does not discredit the use of technology and letters to provide support amongst peers. Especially if the mentor group is in a different school, this can be a bridge to connect schools and grades together. The most important component to developing a strong relationship between the mentor and mentee is to make sure they relationship based on "trust and confidentiality, reciprocity and mutual respect, [and] support and challenge" (Philip, 2000, p. 6). An authoritative relationship will not work, as mutual learning and reflection cannot happen if one person is dominating power in the pairing; it must be a joint effort to strive for positive outcomes. In my own research, I will aim to choose the program format that I think will yield the most positive results for all of my students involved and help to bridge the gap between isolated and engaged students in my classroom.

Methodology

Early on in the school year, it became obvious through informal observation that several

of the students in my first period Language Arts class struggled with social engagement.  They

rarely interacted in group work, class discussion, and even minimally asked questions or spoke

with me in class.  For some of my students, it appeared that getting out even a sentence or two in

class was a struggle.  For this reason, I wanted to pinpoint who these students were and explore

which aspects of social engagement they could improve in my class. It was at that point that I

decided to reach these students in my class by creating a peer mentoring environment.  Peer

mentoring, in this study, refers to selected students actively working with disengaged students on

different strategies to improve peer relations and build confidence to ask questions, raise their

hands, etc.  By establishing this social system in my classroom, I hoped to find answers to the

overarching question:  What happens when I implement peer mentoring in my classroom?  Peer

mentors would be students in my first period and the students who they would be helping would

be students in that same class that I had previously identified as socially disengaged.  I will be

referring to these students as the "focus group."

*Choosing a Focus Group*

Prior to my study, I had a focus group in mind based on informal observation.  However,

I wanted to make sure that I was not making false judgments, so I surveyed my students with a

questionnaire I entitled, "Class Engagement Questionnaire" (See Appendix D).  The survey

presented students with nine statements - that were organized into the following categories:

participation, group work and peer relations.  Below are the statements I included for each

category:

*Participation:*
     1. I feel comfortable raising my hand to ask a question.
     2. I feel comfortable raising my hand to answer a question or add insight to the class discussion.
     3. I feel comfortable initiating a discussion in class or presenting a project in front of my peers.

*Group Work:*
     4. I feel comfortable working in group with my peers on projects or classwork.
     5. When working in a group, I feel comfortable sharing my ideas without fear of being put down or made fun of by my peers.
     6. I feel comfortable asking questions within my group when I am confused.

*Peer Relations:*
     7. I feel comfortable finding a partner in the class to work with on an assignment.
     8. I feel like I have at least two peers in the class I can go to if I need help with something.
     9. I feel comfortable contacting one of my peers from class outside of class if I need to ask about an assignment.

For each statement, students had to rank their responses on a likert scale - 1 being "strongly disagree" and 10 being "strongly agree." Then, after each ranking, students had to explain their ranking decision.

I wanted to the survey to be completed honestly, so I told students that even though their names were going on the surveys, I wanted it to be their genuine opinions. I emphasized that these surveys were meant to help inform me about the class dynamic and that they would never be reprimanded for anything they wrote. By making this announcement, I hoped to eliminate the fear that there would be a grade or judgment attached to the survey. Since I would be looking for students to admit that they felt disengaged from their peers, it was important to me that I emphasized that I would not be placing judgment on any student for his or her opinions; this would be simply to help me improve the climate in the classroom.

*My "Focus Group"*

To choose my focus group, I did some preliminary coding.  Preliminary coding occurs when researchers look for certain repeated concepts, based on what other researchers have previously studied (Hubbard & Power, 1999).  Since I knew from my literature review that certain behaviors - not wanting to raise hands, participating in a class discussion, and asking questions, were signs of being excluded from the class dynamic, these were themes I focused on for my initial survey.  After a tedious process of scaffolding through the student surveys and my own informal observations, I chose six students - three boys and three girls who exhibiting the characteristics I defined as "disengaged."   These six students only actively participated by raising their hand once a week, if at all.  They also did not interact with their peers to ask questions or work in groups, and likewise, they did not seek me out or say much when I tried to speak with them privately.  Five out of six of these students, Maddie, Elyssa, Kathryn, Wes, and Justin admitted throughout the student survey that they did not enjoy having to work with groups, raise their hands, and public speaking. These students scored below "5" on the likert scale for more than three categories - "1" meaning they strongly disagreed with being able to relate to the positive statements regarding participation in class.  Also, they wrote comments that were troubling, as signs of social disengagement.  For example, Maddie, when asked if she feels comfortable raising her hand to answer a question, responded with a "2" and wrote, "I doubt my answers or end up thinking [I am] wrong."   For that same question, Wes circled "5" and wrote "I do want to answer questions, but it still creeps me out when everyone looks at me." What I ended up mentally coding as insecurities or fears, I wanted to target in my study.

Thus, I decided to categorize these students as students in need of peer support through peer mentoring.  I ultimately decided to include a sixth student, John, in my focus group for a

unique reason.  This student answered all "10s" on his questionnaire, but through informal

observation and discussion with his prior teachers, he has never formed positive relationships in

classes.  He does not raise his hand, interact with peers/myself, or ask questions when he is

confused.   I thought someone like him who felt confident on paper, but displays behaviors

inconsistent with this confidence, needed to be included in this study.  All names for this study

were changed to protect the identity of the students.

*Gathering Background Information*

Once I chose my focus group, I created a survey to give to their sixth and seventh grade

Language Arts teachers, entitled "Student Inquiry Questions for Teachers"  (See Appendix D).

Below are statements I included in each category:

*Academics:*
      1. What were _____'s successes in your Language Arts class?  (topics to address
         may include- homework, class work, class participation, assessments and group work)
      2. What were _____'s weaknesses in your Language Arts class?  (topics to address
         may include- homework, class work, class participation, assessments and group work)

*Peer Relations:*
      3. Think about how _____ worked with peers.  Rank how often s/he quickly found
         someone to work with for group work.  Then explain your choice.
      4. From your memory, how well did _____ interact with his/her peers?  How well
         was s/he perceived by peers?

 Hubbard and Power (1999) reiterate to never lose sight of the intent of the survey and if the

information given is not what was asked for, it should not be disregarded (p.95).  It is important

to recognize that any provided observations - positive or negative, can end up being useful later

in the analysis process.  I made sure I kept this in mind throughout the process, since I was using

many surveys for data.  I asked the teachers, via e-mail, if they would be interested in providing

academic and social information from their memory of having the student in the class.  A few

teachers had since left the district, so I decided to choose social studies teachers as a backup, if I

could not get in touch with the Language Arts teachers.  I filled in the grade level and academic

grade for the year information, prior to handing out the survey to each teacher.  I planned on

looking at academic performance as shown by final averages later in the research process to see

if there was any relationship between grades and participation in class, so I felt it was important

to label this on the survey.

First, teachers were asked to identify strengths and weaknesses in all facets of academics

- class work, class participation, assessments, group work, etc.  For the second portion related to

peer relations, teachers ranked how often the student easily found classmates to work with in a

group and then explained their responses.  I personally delivered each survey to each

corresponding teacher and asked him or her to drop the surveys back in my mailbox, at their

convenience.  Even though the teachers were enthusiastic, receiving all of the surveys back

required upkeep because several teachers forgot to fill them out.  After a length of time, I did

have 100% completion, but it I had to personally reach out to every teacher multiple times with

reminders about turning the survey back into me.

*Choosing Peer-Mentors*

Choosing peer mentors was fairly easy because a handful of students in the class have

already been "class-helpers."  As defined earlier, peer mentors should be students who have the

ability to find potential in others and should be paired by gender (Gensemer, 2000, p.9).  They

should also should be able to reflect on their own social struggles and be able to provide positive,

emotional support (Zevallos & Washburn, 2014, p. 26). Established in my class jobs at the

beginning of the year, I choose students who will act as class helpers.  Certain students, who feel

they can uphold the "class helper" standard, volunteer bi-weekly to help catch absent students up

on work, help me with mundane tasks such as attendance, and act as collectors/passers for class

materials.  However, I did not want to limit the number of potential peer-mentors who participated so I mentally noted that if a student inquired about becoming involved later in the process, they would be allowed.

Pulling from that pool of students, along with two other students I have observed providing academic and social support to students in the class, I narrowed my choices to three boys and three girls.  The students I chose to act as peer mentors are students who are confident and motivated in class.  Their confidence is defined in their comfort in actively participating in class discussions by raising their hand, adding insight, and asking questions.  Likewise, they work with anyone in a group and contribute equally to the productivity.  They are motivated in that they want to do well in Language Arts.  These students may not necessarily have a 100 average in class, but they maintain an average above an 80, and they complete their classwork and homework regularly.  They are students who do not talk about other students behind their backs and they demonstrate the core values of our school - respect, responsibility, and ready to learn in all facets of how they carry themselves.

I initially pulled the mentoring students and privately individually asked each one if s/he would help me with a favor.  I made sure that I emphasized I did not want someone hounding the focus group students one-on-one all the time, especially since I wasn't specifically letting them know that they were going to be involved in a peer-mentor situation.  I wanted the initial meeting to be one-on-one so I could gauge each student's interest in peer-mentoring and explain how this would work.  I didn't want the students to be someone they were not and try to act fake towards the focus group, so I made sure the conversation was worded that it was more about "helping the student with participation and feel included in the group work" than isolate them and make them feel different than the rest of the class.

Upon meeting with each student, I confirmed each one's role.  I explained that over the next four weeks, we would be working on different aspects of class engagement and they would work as a team for the given students to help them feel less alienated from peers.  For example, peer mentors would ensure that the focus group would be included in conversation, have opportunities through positive verbal coaching to contribute, and compliment them for even minor successes.  These successes would be defined as any sign of improved communication from the current state of being.  Peer mentors, or "teammates" as I sometimes called them, would meet with me on Fridays during study hall to check in and then I would explain the next week's goal.

Over the course of the four weeks, a few additional students joined the original group and fell out.  These students I decided to label as support peer-mentors or support teammates because they inadvertently or intentionally supported peer-mentors in teaching interpersonal skills to the focus group students - coaching them through the process.

*Collecting Data*

At the beginning of the four-week study, I developed a sociogram to track who students wanted to work with in the classroom.  A sociogram is a visual representation of a social network, which is an extremely beneficial tool for tracking peer relations within a classroom (Hubbard & Power, 1999).  Even though this data can not stand alone to be evaluated for social patterns, it can provide valuable information about how students network within a class.  Also, sociograms are fairly easy and quick to organize; they can serve many purposes for teachers (Sherman, 2002, p. 1).  I knew that this could be helpful for this study because not only would it could provide information related to which students want to interact with and who they don't

want to interact with, but also, I would be able to track if social network patterns change over the

course of the study.

In the last fifteen minutes of class on a Monday, I handed students a post-it paper and

asked them to do the following:  Write down a list of three people who you would want to work

with in class, who you think would be strong candidates in making you successful in the

classroom (Sherman, 2002, p.1). I felt that doing these tasks at the end of class would be the best

because it would give students a "break" from academic work to do something different.  I

emphasized that this information would never be revealed to classmates because I wanted

students to feel comfortable choosing classmates who were not necessarily their best friends.  I

planned on using this information to evaluate social interactions between my focus group and the

rest of the class, as another indicator of social engagement change after my interventions.

Once I collected all of this data and analyzed the information, I decided I wanted to

create four goals - one for each week of research.  Week 1 would be devoted to setting up the

mentor groups by restructuring the classroom to form what I called pods.  These pods were a

group of four to five desks that formed little U's.  This way, I could access each student, but

students discretely still had a support group and "teammate," or peer mentor with them.  The

other purpose for Week 1 was having the peer mentors get used to working with each other

within the daily class routine.  While some of these students had experience working with the

focus group members before, most hadn't regularly worked with them, especially one-on-one.

Knowing how important forming relationships can be for trust and community building, I wanted

to make sure these groups would work before moving along.

For Week 2, I had the peer mentors focus on building routine - organizing work and

following class routines.  This way, it would be a fresh slate and the mentees could rebuild their

sense of organization within the classroom. This could also include taking a few minutes out of class time to organize their binders or lockers, while other students were working on classwork. Peer mentors were instructed to casually ask if they noticed a messy binder if they could help the student re-organize his or her belongings. They would then ask me for materials, which I would supply. This not only would be beneficial for additional community building, but it would also empower the students to take action for each other.

For Week 3, peer mentors specifically focused on including mentees in group activities. They formed new groups and strived to incorporate them in the group dynamic. Whenever the pair traveled to a new group, the peer mentor would help guide the focus group student to a specific task of interest. Peer mentors would also help clarify directions, call me over on the student's behalf if he or she had a question, and would make sure the student felt supported throughout the entire group process through positive verbal praise. Examples of this praise include "Great job," and "That looks awesome. Keep up the good work."

For the final week, Week 4, peer mentors would help encourage the teammate in the focus group to actively participate in class. They would help them initiate discussion, raise their hand, and ask questions when confused. They would practice this skill by speaking on their behalf at times in the beginning of the week, but then encouraging their own responses or questions. I would also design lessons that required the whole class writing down questions and comments beforehand so that it would assist the peer mentors in anticipating questions or comments their teammate might want to share.

Over the four weeks, I used a pre-made student engagement observation template I created to organize my daily notes and jot down specific areas of engagement I was focusing on in my study. (See Figure 1)

```
┌─────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────┐
│ Student's Name: _____         │
│                                                             │
│ Notable observations in class:                              │
│                                                             │
│                                                             │
│                                                             │
│                                                             │
│                                                             │
│                                                             │
│ Interactions (names) -                                      │
│                                                             │
│                                                             │
│                                                             │
│                                                             │
│ Participation Level  ☐☐☐☐☐        Interacted (others) ☐☐☐☐☐ │
│                                                             │
│ Asked Questions     ☐☐☐☐☐        Interacted (me) ☐☐☐☐☐     │
│                                                             │
│ Raised Hand         ☐☐☐☐☐                                   │
└─────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────┘
```

Figure 1

At the top of the page, I left space to write down behaviors I wanted to note. In the middle, I left a space to write down the names of students the focus student interacted with that day. At the bottom, I created a series of checkboxes so that I could check off how many times a student asked questions, raised his/her hand, interacted with peers, interacted with me, and track his/her overall level of engagement in the class. I kept this in a binder and organized them by week, so they could be later used for analysis.

By the end of the four week study, I re-issued the sociogram questionnaire, along with a post-study survey to have many forms of evidence, besides observation, of student growth or change. I used my observations from the four-week study, the student surveys, teacher surveys, and sociograms to answer my central question: How do peer mentors influence social engagement within the Language Art classroom? While conducting this research, I also explored these sub-questions: How does peer mentoring impact other students in the classroom who it did not intend to impact? How does peer-mentoring influence social interactions?

Data Analysis

Given that I had a lot of "pre" and "post" data at my fingertips, I decided to work with one type of data at a time, rather than analyzing all of the data together. This way, I could spend time evaluating how each piece of data provided me with evidence to answer my research question and sub questions. Since the main purpose of my research was to determine how peer mentoring influenced social engagement in my classroom, I needed to document the results of my data in such a way that I could distinctly see change, or lack of change, over time. The "change" I would be looking for would appear through examining class interaction patterns prior, during, and after the study occurred. I would also be evaluating observations and comparing the student surveys to see if any positive or negative feedback came out of the peer mentoring environment that was established in my classroom. After looking at all of the data individually, I would then code for themes. As explained earlier, I had already done some of this preliminary coding when I mentally noted themes I saw in the initial student survey to determine who would be a worthy candidate for peer mentoring. Using my codes, I could then draw conclusions based on my findings.

*Sociogram*

To better organize my sociograms, I highlighted the names of my focus group members on the pre-study sociogram and post-study sociogram. This way, they would stand out from the rest of the students in the class. On a separate piece of paper, I created a table to extract information from the sociograms for each member of the focus group. (See Figure 2)

| Name of Student | Pre-Study Sociogram | Post-Study Sociogram |
|---|---|---|
|  | (they chose) 1.    2.    3. | (they chose) 1.    2.    3. |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| | (chose them) | (chose them) |

Figure 2

Each name was listed in the left column in a separate box.  Then, in two columns to the right of their names were the names of who they chose as "three people who you would want to work with in class, who you think would be strong candidates in making you successful in the classroom."  Below who they chose, I wrote down the names of students who chose those specific focus group members as students they would choose to work with.  If no one chose them, I noted that as well on this page.  This way, I could analyze if their perceptions of people changed and if peoples' perceptions of them changed over the course of the study.

After condensing all of this information, I coded names, based on the following categories:  focus group members, extroverted students (students who regularly actively participate in class), introverted students (students who do not regularly actively participate in class), and repeated students - representing names of students who either the focus group chose more than once to identify as students they would want to work with in class, or students who chose focus group members for both sociogram activities, as students they would want to work with in class.  Lastly, I jotted down themes that emerged as I evaluated the data in front of me.

*Observation Notes*

Since I had four weeks worth of daily notes, I knew it would become cumbersome to scaffold through twenty days of notes with six students.  For that reason, I broke my observation note data into two categories to find themes.  For one portion, I analyzed the actual statements I wrote about each activity we did that day and the behaviors each student exhibited.  For example, one day in Week 4, I wrote about how we worked on a interactive game activity for a particular

lesson.  On that particular day, it became clear that not only did one focus group student exhibit behaviors such as raising her hand more frequently, but so did the rest of the focus group members.  This observation allowed me to not only evaluate growth over time for that one particular student, but also to draw conclusions about how certain activities may trigger certain behaviors for "socially disengaged students."

After evaluating my observational notes, I analyzed the bottom portion of each observation note page, which had a rating system for five categories to track how many days per day a student participated in the lesson, asked questions, raised his/her hand, interacted with others, and interacted with me.  For each week, I added up the number of times each box was filled in and then averaged each number within each category.  Then, I created a graph to see if there was fluctuation in participation over time.  Later, I used this data similarly to the top portion of the observation notes page to draw conclusions about how the different aspects of class participation changed or did not change over time, based on peer mentoring.

*Student Surveys*

Analyzing the student surveys also required a two-part evaluation.  I wanted to be able to evaluate change between the pre-study survey and post-study survey, but I had to break the results into two parts - one part being the likert scale for each question, and the other part being the response part for each section.  For this, I used a separate piece of paper to scaffold through my data. (See Figure 3)

Name: _____

Survey Results

*Likert Scale Ratings:*

| 1. | 4. | 7. |
| 2. | 5. | 8. |
| 3. | 6. | 9. |

*Response Information:*

| Pre-Study Survey | Post-Study Survey |
|---|---|
| 1. | 1. |
| 2. | 2. |
| 3. | 3. |
| 4. | 4. |
| 5. | 5. |
| 6. | 6. |
| 7. | 7. |

Figure 3

For each student, I pulled both surveys at the same time. First, I labeled the top of six pages with

each students name being on a separate page. Then, I created a list of 1-9 to represent the nine

likert scales for each of the nine questions. Next to each question number on each separate page,

I listed the number that the particular student circled in black to represent the pre-study survey.

Then, next to that number in a separate color, I listed the number the student circled for the post-

study survey. Lastly, next to those numbers, I placed an arrow symbol to document whether the

number went up, down, or stayed the same from one survey to the next. After completing this, I

coded to see first - if for individual students their level of agreement with the statements

increased after the study ended and then, coded to see if there were patterns of questions students

seemed to all go up or down between the pre and post-study surveys. This helped me to track

areas of social engagement the focus group students themselves identified as the same or different after the four weeks.

The second part of my student survey analysis involved looking at the responses each student wrote after each likert scale.  For this I created a pre-survey and post-survey table.  I generalized the responses for each of the nine questions and wrote each response next to the number corresponding to the question they came from in the survey.  After completing this, I was able to look across and code for themes between each question response and then, draw conclusions about their responses as a whole.  Finally, I compared the results from each student survey to the rest of the student surveys in the focus group to draw conclusions about my findings.

*Teacher Surveys*

One final component of data analysis I wanted to account for was the initial teacher survey information I received from the sixth and seventh grade teachers.  I wanted to use this information to determine if the behaviors I initially witnessed before the study began were behaviors they exhibited in prior years and also to see if there were any academic correlations with those behaviors.  This way, I could draw conclusions about whether or not these behaviors were just visible in my eighth grade class, or if they had come into my classroom with years of social disengagement.  I also wanted to draw conclusions about whether academic ability had any role in their social progress/self-esteem in the class.

After examining and coding all of my data sources, I drew collective conclusions about patterns I saw amongst the students in my focus group to determine how peer mentoring influenced social engagement in my Language Arts classroom.

Findings/Implications

At the beginning of my research on peer mentoring, I imagined that my results would be in black and white.  Either peer mentoring would work and I would see students raising their hands, or the study would be a complete failure and my socially disengaged students would remain socially isolated in my class for the rest of the year.  What I did not realize was that there are many facets of social engagement that can be impacted by peer mentoring.  After coding and analyzing my data, I found that peer mentoring shaped four different aspects of my class structure that I preliminarily coded early on in my testing - class participation, asking questions, communicating with others, and building community.  These four categories channeled my focus for the study, but what came out was much more than I ever expected.

*Class Participation*

One of the major issues I noted in my primitive journaling at the beginning of the year was that I had a difficult time obtaining verbal feedback from my students.  I would pose a question and students would not raise their hands and when I asked students to "turn and talk," the room would be quiet.  Based on my research, I learned that one important way for students feeling connected to their class environment is to establish community.  Therefore,  over the four weeks, I organized focus topics for students to begin to feel socially comfortable around their peers.  Gensemer (2000) emphasized that the success of peer-mentoring pairs starts with a strong foundation (p.9). This would allow them to take risks, such as raising their hands and initiating discussion.  At the start of the study, pairs participated in some ice-breaker activities, such as "Draw a picture of a significant event," where students drew pictures of something significant

that happened to them in the past year, and wrote about that experience afterward (Los, 2015, p.1).  Then, they shared their pictures and narratives.  They also worked on team games, such as "Heads up!" where they had cards with literary characters and had to guess which character was on their forehead.  Observing positive interactions through body language and dialogue reassured me that these pairs were working, so I would not need to adjust any pairs.

One of my main focuses was increasing active participation in the class over the four weeks.  I would be looking for my students taking a prominent role in raising their hand and speaking on behalf of their ideas or the ideas of others - a skill that is very important for active participation in class.  In the first week where students were just establishing relationships with their mentors, I did not see any growth.  I noted on several student engagement observation templates that there was "no notable change in behavior," meaning, collectively, students had not made any improvement in participation in class.  In the second week where groups interacted more, I started to see some signs of occasional hand-raising, but it wasn't until the third week that their levels of participation really blossomed. (See Figure 4)
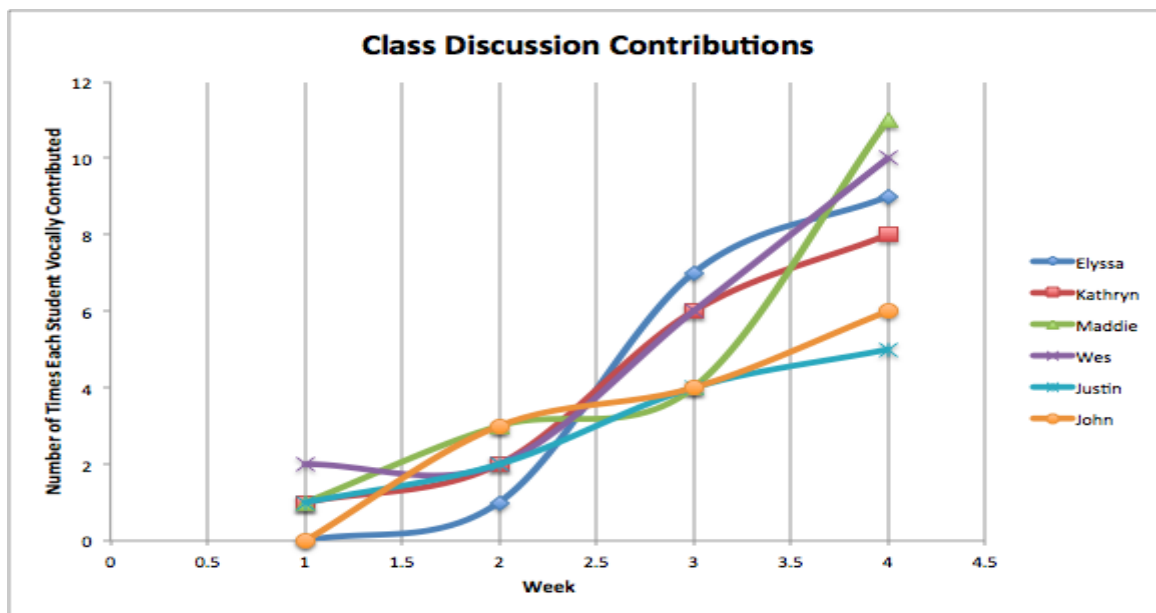


Figure 4

The line graph indicates that vocal participation, raising their hands to contribute to the class discussion, was slow until the third week.  At this point, it became obvious to me that change cannot occur overnight; it needs time.  Research shows that the brain requires positive reinforcement and it takes approximately twenty-one days for a habit to form (MIT, 1999, p.1).  It is imperative, when trying something new in the classroom, to be consistent, intentional, and systematic in the approach.  Thus, it makes sense that the progress for the focus group was slow.

In week three, the main focus for the pairs were to work together in group activities.  Peer mentors encouraged focus group students to take a more distinguished role in activities, to promote authority and inclusiveness.  Peer mentors created checklists of the most important behaviors they wanted to see in class and then spoke quietly to them at the beginning of class to go over that list.  For example, as noted in one of my observation templates, I overheard Kathryn's peer mentor leaning over to her one day and said, "Today let's try to each contribute one important idea we have when we start working on the story assignment in groups."  This is where I began to really note a huge turnaround in social behavior.  On the second day of week three, we engaged in an activity where students were working in groups on an argumentative essay and visual to represent the main ideas of their argument.   For four of the students - Elyssa, Maddie, Kathryn, and Wes, I noted on their student engagement observation templates that they "immediately walked over to their peer mentor to form a group."  This social initiative had never happened prior to my study.   I also noted that Elyssa was laughing and giving ideas to her group members, Maddie was talking to students she had never engaged with before, and Wes asked me questions on behalf of his group.

The other two boys seemed to be late bloomers.  Throughout the testing phase of my study, John seemed to be consistently stable on minimally raising his hand and interacting with

his peers.  I was intrigued by him because on his pre-study class engagement questionnaire,  he

scored his comfort level for raising his hand to answer a question or contribute to class

discussion at the highest score (10) for strongly agree, but yet he would never actually do it.  I

think the reason why John scored his responses to high in the pre-study and post-study class

engagement questionnaires was because he made assumptions my questions had to do with being

shy or not being shy.  I noticed this when reading that a lot of his comment responses involved

"I'm not shy."  But judging from his observational behaviors as the study concluded - raising his

hand more, asking questions, and working with different students, the study did impact him.  It

wasn't until week four when his peer mentor encouraged him to take these risks that I saw

progress.  That week alone, I noted on his student engagement observation template that he

raised his hand to positively contribute to class ten times, whereas in weeks one through three

combined, he had only volunteered information nine times.

Unfortunately Justin, on the other hand, was not as successful.  He did not raise his hand

significantly more or less than he had at the start of the study. He also had rated the highest score

(10) for comfort level in participation both times on his student engagement questionnaires.

However, I believe a few factors play into this.  First of all, one of his friends is John, who also

choose high ratings, despite my actual observations.  Also, Justin was absent a few of the days

where there was a heavy emphasis on group interactions or his peer mentor working with him on

sharing answers, asking questions, etc.  His personality, through observation, was very laid back.

I noted several times that while Justin had the right answers and he appeared relaxed, he said,

"no thanks" when asked to share his answers.  He even told me at one point, when I told him his

work was correct, "I want to give other people an opportunity.  They will say the same thing I

have to say, so they should have a chance."  Despite me reassuring Justin and his peer mentor

encouraging him, he wanted to take the passenger role and let others speak.  These observations could resemble his temperament, rather than social disengagement.  For Justin, he was perfectly content in not proactively engaging, which works for him to be successful in the classroom.

At the end of the four weeks, I saw progress in almost all of the focus group students, as noted in Figure 5, which outlines their comfort level on participation when surveyed for the student engagement pre and post-study questionnaires.
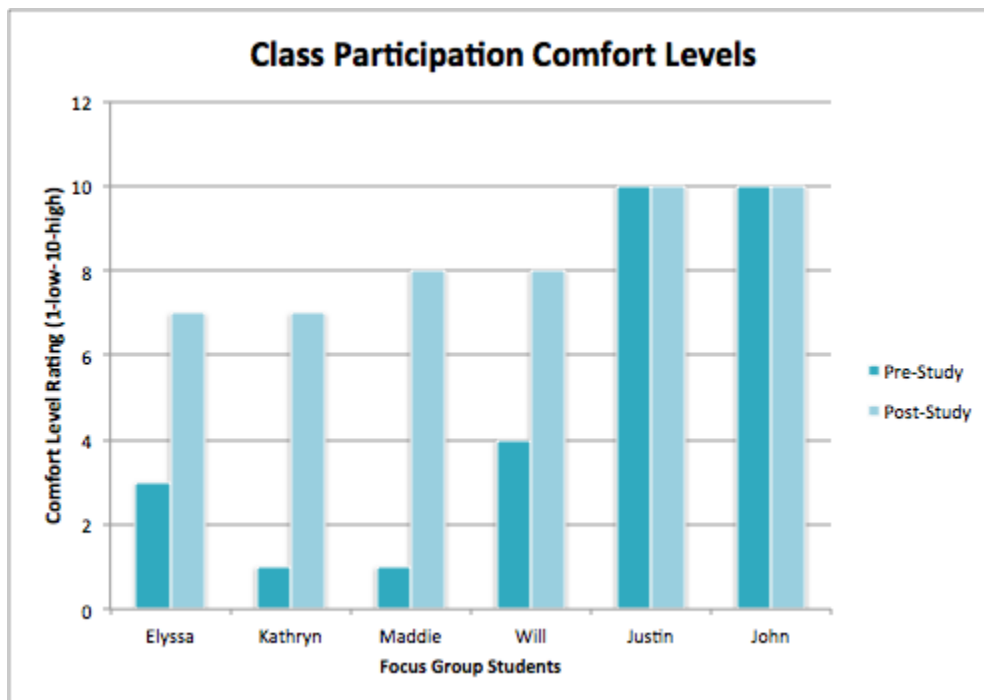


Figure 5

With the exception of John and Justin who both rated the same scores both times, all of the other students had scored that they disagreed with the participation statements before the study, and then agreed with the statements after the study.

*Asking Questions*

Another facet of class engagement that worried me about my focus group was their lack of taking opportunity to ask questions about content or anything else related or not related to the class.  At the beginning of the year, I establish a "parking lot" in my classroom, where students

can leave post-it notes with questions if they do not feel comfortable raising their hands.  What I

found was that these students who did not raise their hand, also did not utilize the parking lot.

This was something I really wanted peer mentors to encourage over the four week study.  It was

not fully targeted until week four and that is really when I saw progress made.

However, it is important to not dismiss that in the first three weeks, since I did notice

hand raising for asking questions increase.  In my observation notes from Week 2, I

acknowledged the girls, who really made strong connections in the first week with their peer

mentors already starting to ask more questions.  One day I wrote down "Elyssa's peer mentor

called me over and said Elyssa had to ask a question.  Her peer mentor asked the question on her

behalf first - she wanted to know if she could go to her locker.  But later in that class I wrote

down, "Elyssa raised her hand and asked me for help on the writing assignment."  This was

monumental, coming from the student who would sit there all period without a pencil because

she wouldn't ask to borrow one.

Kathryn, too, made small strides over time with her comfort level in asking questions.

There would be days before the study that she would go all period without saying a word in

class.  By the middle of Week 3, though, her comfort level strengthened in class.  I could see it in

her demeanor and actions.  On her observation template during Week 3, I noted that she asked

questions or provided insight twice each day:

> **Wednesday, February 4, 2015**
> Today, Kathryn raised her hand during share-out time for the do now.  She shared an
> answer and also asked for clarification about one of the answers.  Later, she added
> additional insight to a comment a student had made about the test we are reading.  I even
> noticed a smile on her face when I praised her for being accurate with what she said.  Her
> shoulders seem to be more relaxed than usual.  She even dropped off a note in the parking
> lot about an upcoming test.

Even though she was inconsistent, her comfort level in asking questions and the fear of "being wrong" seemed to subside a little bit. For Kathryn, it wasn't about making huge steps but taking little steps at asking questions and adding commentary to a class discussion.

The boys also had their share of successes with asking questions. When asked in the preliminary class engagement questionnaire, many commented on wanting to ask questions but feeling embarrassed. For example, Wes scored "feeling comfortable raising his hand to answer a question or add insight" a "5" and wrote "I do want to answer questions but it still creeps me out when everyone looks at me." Though, after the study, he scored the statement an "8" and commented "I'm not the best at it." Even though he hasn't totally committed to feeling 100% comfortable, peer mentoring had encouraged him to take risks and participate beyond his comfort zone.

*Building Community*

One comment that all of the teachers noted in the teacher surveys for my focus group students was that the students had trouble when working in groups. They had difficulty sharing ideas and often took the back seat role - agreeing with ideas even if they weren't correct and minimally doing hands-on activities because they were afraid of incorrectly representing the group. This often resulted in lowered project grades, because they were not proactively contributing to the group work.

From the beginning, I knew that I had to cultivate strong peer relationships and keep the peer mentors active in working on building strong social skills to improve group work communication. Peer mentors agreed that it was important that focus group students knew they always had someone to work with in a group, so they wouldn't have to panic in that moment when a teacher announces, "Find a partner." Over the four weeks, peer mentors would slowly

begin to take a backseat role in initiating group work partners and also encourage taking

leadership in the group role.

Possibly the most thought-provoking data came out of the sociograms.  My intention for

the sociograms was to track social interactions and see if, by the end of the study, more students

chose students from my focus group as students they would want to work with as a partner.  But

what came out of it was something completely different than what I imagined.  First, I decided to

look at whom the focus group students chose before the study and the compare those findings

amongst each focus group student and then to whom they chose after the study.  (See Appendix

E for Whole Class Sociogram #1)

Sociogram Data for Focus Students
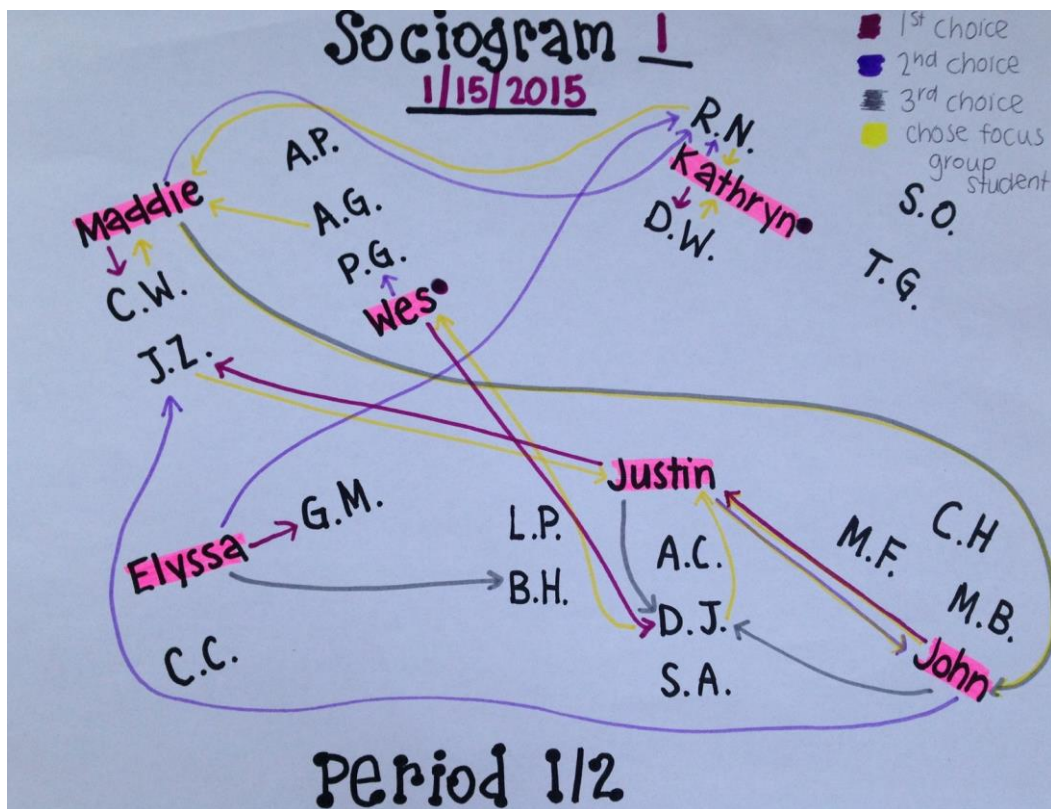
Sociogram Data from Sociogram #1 for Focus Group Students

| Focus Group Students | Pre-Study Students Listed as "Students They Would Want to Work With" | Pre-Study Students Listed as "Students They Would Want to Work With" |
|---|---|---|
| Elyssa | GM, **RN**, BH | N/A |
| Maddie | CW, **RN**, JF | CW, AG, RN |
| Kathryn | DW, **RN**, Self | RN, DW |
| Wes | **DJ**, Self, PG | DJ |
| Justin | JZ, JF, **DJ** | JF, JZ, DJ |
| John | JV, JZ, **DJ** | JV, MP |

----- = Introverted Students, ---- = Extroverted Students, ---- = Focus Group Students **----** = Same Students Chosen
*(Initials used to protect identity)

In the initial sociogram, every single focus group student chose at least one student they thought would be someone good to work with in class, who could be labeled as introverted. More significantly, every single girl chose the same girl as one of the three people they would want to work with and all three of the boys chose the same boy they would want to work with. The girl and boy that the focus group student chose, while outside of the focus group, are definitely introverted and take a less prominent role in initiating class discussion or asking questions in this. This speaks to the notion that people are attracted to people like them. In this case, both the girls and the boys chose students who were "just like they" in terms of personality. Only two girls out of the six students, Elyssa and Kathryn, chose a student who regularly raises their hand and demonstrates more extroverted traits - contributing to the class discussion regularly, asking questions, etc. For Kathryn I think this is because the student she chose is already in her social circle. She has been friends with the student she chose for years, so she sees him as an asset and a good team member. Elyssa, on the other hand, looks up to the student she chose because that student has many friends. The student is valued and admired by many of her

peers because she is outgoing and maintains a strong social circle.  My analysis is that Elyssa figures if she works with more students like this in the future, it may help her gain friends or start to be more like those students.

Another observation that came out of the initial sociogram was that three students out of the six in the focus group chose someone from the focus group as a good person to work with and two of the students listed themselves as someone they would want to work with, despite me saying they could not write down that they would rather work alone as any option.  I was most surprised by Maddie who chose John as someone she would want to work with.  Considering they sat on the opposite sides of the room and they never talked, I thought it was interesting that she picked him as someone she would feel comfortable working with in a group.  What this told me early on in the survey was that the feeling of community was minimal in this class.  These focus group students gravitated to students who were most like them, otherwise they didn't want to work with anyone.

After the study, some interesting results surfaced from the second sociogram.  (See Appendix E for Whole Class Sociogram #2)

Sociogram Data for Focus Group Students
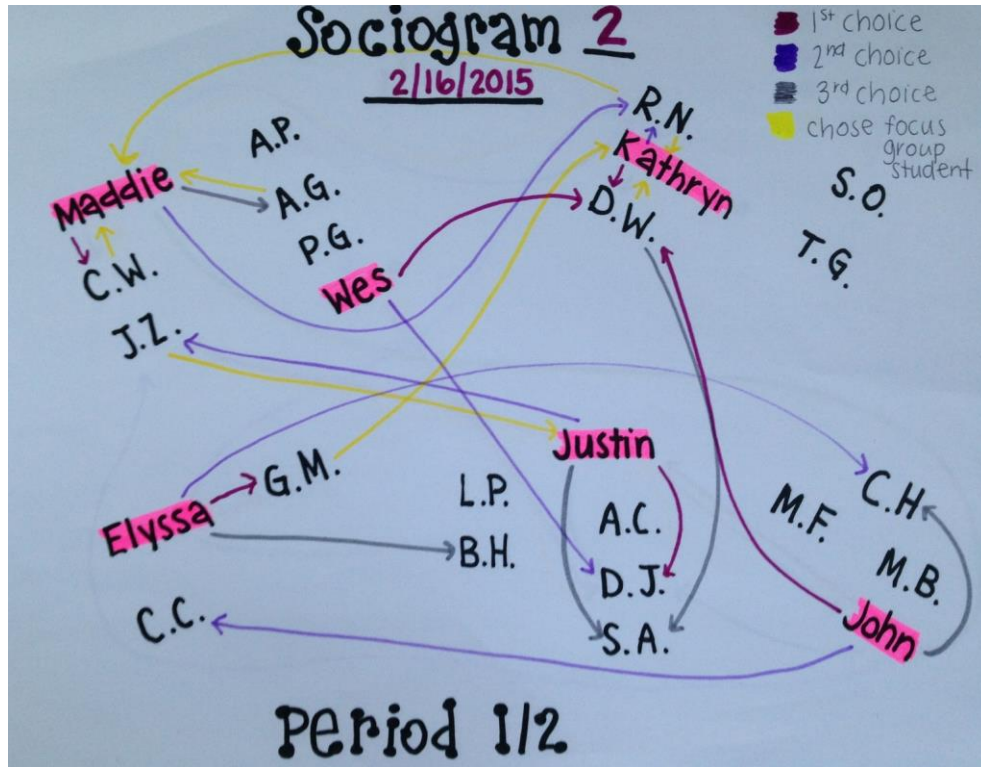


Sociogram Data from Sociogram #2 for Focus Group Students

| Focus Group Students | Post-Study Students Listed as "Students They Would Want to Work With" | Post-Study Students Listed as "Students They Would Want to Work With" |
|---|---|---|
| Elyssa | GM, CH, BH | N/A |
| Maddie | CW, RN, AG | CW, AG, RN |
| Kathryn | DW, RN, SA | RN, DW, GM |
| Wes | DJ, DW | N/A |
| Justin | JZ, DJ, SA | JF, JZ, DJ |
| John | DW, CC, CH | N/A |

----- = Introverted Students, ---- = Extroverted Students, ---- = Focus Group Students ---- = Repeat Choice
*(Initials used to protect identity)

While everyone except John repeated at least one person they had chosen for the first sociogram, four out of the six of them had chosen at least one student who could be defined as extroverted and the other two students, Kathryn and Justin, both chose the same third student, "SA," who does take a more extroverted role in class, just not as often as some of the others. What this told me was that the study had impacted how the focus group students perceived others in the class. The most surprising results came from John who chose three extroverted students he would want to work with in class. This stood out to me because prior to the study, I would have never imagined him working with those students. Not only are they extroverted but at the top of the class academically. What this could show is that he recognizes what traits good partners and he wants to shift away from his friends and more towards students who are better role models in the class.

Also, I was intrigued by how drastically the data changed from the first sociogram to the second sociogram for students choosing focus group students as students they would want to work in a group with on an assignment. For the first sociogram, twelve students chose focus group students, compared to only seven after the study. This can be attributed to a few factors. First of all, having a peer mentor could have isolated these students from branching out and working with more students in the class. Likewise, since they were spending a lot of time with a peer mentor, they were spending less time with their usual friends, so their friends might have formed new relationships as well during that time. Glancing at the class results as a whole, most of the students did change their choices and gravitated towards two or three main students in the class who they saw as people they would want to work with on an assignment. However, this does not devalue that the focus group students formed bonds with new students and now saw certain students in a new lens with more comfort to work with them in a group.

What I found interesting to note is that both students, Kathryn and Wes, who initially listed working alone as an option for group work did not document that in the post-study inquiry. Also, while five out of six of the students initially listed a focus group student as someone they wanted to work with in a group before the study, after the study, every student listed someone other than students from the focus group. What this tells me is that they recognized other students in the class who represented positive role models or assets to a group they would want to be a part of in class. The study changed how they perceived "quality group members" and as a result, they chose students outside of their comfort zone.

*Making Meaning*

Ultimately what all of the data told me was that my students had made progress. Even though for some, the progress was minimal, based on my observations and the results from the surveys and sociograms, they were thinking about peer relationships from a new lens. From their peer mentors, focus group students had acquired social skills to help them improve participation in a class discussion, ask questions, initiate group work, and choose new partners for class work. Even though not all of the student progress initially stood out, the feedback that I received from the students on their post-study class engagement surveys and my observation of increased peer relationships demonstrates the influence of peer mentoring in the classroom.

In the future, I would want to start peer mentoring in the second month of school, rather than wait until the middle of the school year. I would wait a month, prior to starting, so that students would have an opportunity to get adjusted to the classroom, develop peer relationships on their own, and I would be able to get to know the students personalities and behaviors. By piloting peer mentoring earlier, I would be able to organize strong peer relationships as part of my beginning of the school year, rather than waiting until the mid-way point in the year. One of

the themes that came up time and time again in my observational notes and their survey results was a fear of being embarrassed.  At the middle school level, self-esteem can cripple a student's social status if they fear being wrong or looking "stupid."  This is period of development where most adolescents prioritize developing a strong social status, and their actions are often driven by the need to fit in (Kalkan, 2011, p. 548).   At the start of my study, I knew this was a barrier I had to overcome.  By having students work together as a team and create a system where self-confident students are looking out for their less-confident peers, educators are not only teaching content but also skills for lifelong learning.

Obstacles

In a perfect world, peer mentoring would begin at the start or near the beginning of the school year. That way, students would be able to cultivate relationships and allow them to develop throughout the year. However, since my study was not implemented until January, I had to work around that. At the start of the year, we establish the classroom culture and expectations within the first thirty days. For this study, I had to do a little backpedaling for the pairs to foster peer relationships. Even though it worked out, at times it felt a little uncomfortable and awkward that suddenly, students worked with others they had rarely worked with before and would actually be socially learning from them for several weeks while my study was in progress. Even though it was successful, I would have preferred to start this off at the beginning of the school year. That way, it would not feel too fragmented from my start of the school year routines.

A part of my research I really regret not being able to explore was cross-age mentoring. A good portion of my research emphasized the benefits of cross-age mentoring; however, for the purpose and timeline of this study, it was not feasible. Especially since these students are going into high school next year, I think it would have eased some of the high school anxiety if they could have formed relationships with some students in their future school. Also, sometimes it can be really hard to foster relationships with classmates who already have their own circle of friends in the room. By testing cross-age mentoring, it could have provided me valuable data for future years on the effects of cross-age mentoring. I was really inspired reading about this topic and think it could have provided my students with a different type of reassurance and confidence that they might not have received from their peers.

In terms of actually carrying out the study, a significant obstacle I faced was maintaining records. First, I had to keep on top of the prior year teachers to provide me with information on

the students I was interested in studying. Since a teacher's school day is filled with paperwork, the teachers I reached out to were very enthusiastic but very forgetful to complete the surveys. It became exhausting tracking the teacher surveys and making sure I had them all. I had to provide teachers with numerous emails and copies of the form to complete. I even had to email a few to teachers who have retired or left since teaching my students. Then, during the survey, I had to remember to take daily notes on each of the six students. Some days, it would be really easy to pull out the binder during or right after class where I kept all of the templates to fill them in. But other days, I would be so preoccupied with what was going on in class or I had a team meeting right after class, and I would forget to fill out the sheets. Then, it took me more time to fill them out because I had to think about what had happened and what I observed in class. It would have been easier if I had fewer students to focus on, but since I had six sheets to fill out every day, maintaining records became daunting and time consuming.

Additionally, while collecting data, I would have really liked to utilize the sociograms more effectively. I was using them as a measurement tool to evaluate social change, but these could have been very valuable for group work as well. Sherman (2002) outlines many ways that teachers can utilize sociograms including recognizing students who are stars, at the center of attraction for other students, or islands, who are those who few gravitate towards (p.1). If I had done more research on sociograms early on for my literature review or had more time, I think I could have obtained even more information from my sociograms. This could have helped me create pairings for activities and possibly could have impacted the results for my post-study sociogram. To overcome this obstacle, I recognized the value of the data I was using and reassured myself that I was still getting a picture of the outcome, even if the data was not as deeply involved as it could have been.

Lastly, I faced the obstacle of making meaning of the data. My own subjectivity coupled with the volume of data I collected became very overwhelming very fast. When I started coding information for key themes, I felt like I was unweaving threads that would not stop unraveling. My mind kept trailing off on different paths, based on what I was seeing and I had trouble keeping up with recording what I was finding. To help with this obstacle, I organized my ideas on paper and used post-it notes to record general themes at the end of evaluating each source. For example, when looking at the student class engagement questionnaires, I made a pre/post chart and transferred the likert scale ratings so I could look at them side-by-side. I also did the same thing with the student comments, but I paraphrased what they wrote so it would be easier to code. This helped a lot because it condensed the information and I was able to look at each sources pre and post information on one page, instead of flipping across many pages. Then, I jotted down themes on post-it notes and stuck them on each page to keep my information organized. It was extremely important that for each data source I kept my theme codes and findings organized so that I would be able to decipher clear implications, rather than making assumptions about what the information meant. This really helped me to obtain an organized visual for my data and pull key outcome information quickly.

Overall, I faced a few obstacles through the course of my study, but nothing that inhibited me from wanting to continue. These hurdles, if anything, strengthened my desire to achieve what I set out to do - help my social disengaged students establish skills for engagement and utilize them in our daily routines.

Emerging Questions

At the start of my study, I aimed to answer the overarching question: What happens when I implement peer mentoring in my classroom?  What I found by the  conclusion of my study was that when I implemented peer mentoring, magic happened.  Students gained social skills that they can carry with them beyond my classroom, and those who mentored them along the way became role models.  These students who once found difficulty in raising their hands and contributing to class discussion, have found their place within the classroom community.

Two sub-questions I had at the beginning of my research were: How does peer mentoring impact other students in the classroom who it did  not intend to impact? And how does peer-mentoring influence social interactions?  What I found, through my study, was that the peer mentors also gained self-confidence and increased peer relations by helping the focus group students.  I informally observed this as they worked with the focus group members and saw changes in their choices for partners in the post-survey sociogram.  By the end of the study, they were able to recognize traits that make good group members and were utilizing the skills they taught to their focus group teammate.  Even though the peer mentors were not the focus of my research, they inadvertently benefited from the study as well.

From this study, new questions have emerged that I might be interested in exploring down the road.  Since I will not be providing direct emphasize on peer mentoring now that the study has ended, I wonder:  Will peer mentor relationships continue in the future or will they dissipate when there is no active instruction for social engagement?  It would be very interesting to see how this study impacts social relations for the long-term and if students could maintain those relationships beyond the school year.

Another aspect of social engagement I noticed along with way but did not further explore was related to gender.  At times, I wanted to go off on a tangent to compare the relationships between boys and girls, but ultimately, I decided to keep it objective.  For this reason, I wonder: Is gender a factor for peer mentoring success?  Would the outcome be different if the study was a gender-based study on the effects of peer mentoring or would the outcomes be the same?  I wonder if results would change if I performed a gender-based study to see how boys and girls interact or react to certain situations.  It could also provide a more in-depth perception for myself and other teachers on how to approach certain social skills to provide optimal success for boys and girls in the classroom.

Lastly, a topic I really was interested in but due to the immensity of my data, I did not want to undertake would be to evaluate the relationship between academics and social achievement.  I wanted to keep academics out of my study because I didn't want the study to be about peer mentoring for academic success.  However, I think even for students who are doing well and are socially disengaged, it might be worth seeing how peer mentoring has an impact, if any, on academic achievement.  For that reason, these questions emerged:  Is there a correlation between academic achievement and social engagement in the classroom?  Can social relationships improve or strengthen areas of academic achievement?

My study on peer-mentoring in the classroom truly left me thinking about all the possible outcomes and new threads of research that could be done going forward.  Peer mentoring research should continue, as it can apply to many environments inside and outside of the classroom setting.  Hopefully, in the future, more research will target some of these sub-topics related to peer mentoring in the classroom.

Conclusion

Using various data collection sources, I evaluated the role of peer mentoring on my eighth grade Language Arts classroom.  I explored how it impacted various facets of social engagement for my socially disengaged students, including their levels of participation in class discussion, asking questions, and social contributions to group work.  I also analyzed how peer mentoring impacted peer relationships, by having students identify peers they felt would make good group members who they would want to work with, before and after the study occurred. Even though progress appeared minimal for some of the students in my study, without a doubt, everyone involved benefited from peer mentoring.  It gave students the opportunity to interact with other students in the class they might not normally interact with and provided them with skills they could use in other classes and beyond the classroom.  It also enabled students to act as role models and take a leadership role to help foster community, as well as improve social engagement within the classroom.

Building community was an overarching theme in my research that peer mentoring relies on to succeed.  Without fostering strong mentor relationships, it makes it very difficult for any progress to occur.  My peer mentors loved having the opportunity to help someone in the classroom and their devotion towards this mission really made it all possible.  They spent a lot of time encouraging and modeling social skills.  Their help empowered students who once felt socially disengaged, now feel part of a community and confident to take an active role in class. Positively impacting six lives, is better than not impacting any.  Even my most socially disengaged student, Elyssa, volunteered answers during class activities and asked questions with ease by the end of the study.  This shows that sometimes even the most socially disengaged students can make strides when given support and skills to succeed.

A seed starts out looking dull and like the rest of the seeds in its packet.  The seed that is given the proper amount of light, nourishment, and care will be the most likely to blossom into something beautiful.  The same thing can be said about a student.  The basic human need is to feel valued.  A proverb once said, "It takes a village to raise a child."  Students need people around them to support them and when those on the outside can help them to overcome their deficiencies, success happens.  It cannot be done alone and it takes time.  Even students can act as peer mentors for each other and help teach skills they use to be successful in the classroom.  As that seed blooms into a flower, I, too, will continue to grow my knowledge professionally of best practices to help my students be academically and socially prosperous.

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Appendix A (Subjectivity)

At the start of my study, I thought my results would be in black and white; I believed that I would either see results and my students would act like I defined as socially engaged, or they would not improve and my study would be a fail.  Overcoming this subjectivity was challenging because I had to recognize that little achievements are still achievements.  I had to observe all of the little pieces of the puzzle on social engagements and determine how the outcomes I recorded fit into the larger picture.  Going into this study, I had expectations and knew what I wanted to see, but I had to remain objective so that I did not draw bias conclusions or overlook valuable data.

Prior to collecting data, I had one specific student in mind who I wanted to target.  I was hoping that this study would help my most introverted student, Elyssa, overcome her socially disengaged tendencies and increase peer relations in class.  What I came to realize was that by involving more students in the study, I could not just focus on her.  What I also realized was that even though her behaviors were extreme, she was not the only one in the class who exhibited them.  That caused me to really have to open my mind to accept looking for change amongst several students.  By accepting this, it helped to ease the pressure off creating change in one student.

Knowing my own organization, I knew studying my whole class would be too overwhelming.  The student engagement questionnaires helped to eliminate subjectivity, in terms of choosing whom I would specifically be studying.  Since I had obtained initial data, I was able to code those student responses and choose students who acknowledged disengagement in the study.  This was more beneficial than me just choosing students who I had informally observed as appearing disengaged.  Instead, I had data to pull from and hard evidence that students were

recognizing their own exclusion from the class community.  I was able to narrow my focus group to a reasonable number of students, who I would be able to effectively reach without feeling overwhelmed.

Even when collecting and analyzing the data, I struggled with eliminating my own bias and making assumptions about the feedback students were giving me.  For example, I was really preoccupied at first because I could not understand why John scored statements "high" in his questionnaire, but it did not reflect the behaviors he demonstrated in class. He seemed extremely self-confident about being "comfortable" raising his hand and working in groups, but I think I was misinterpreting what he was trying to write.  As I mentioned in my implications, I think he interpreted my questions as being about introverted behavior.  In his mind, he did not identify with students who are "shy" or socially disengaged, even though that is what I was observing, so it makes sense that he scored the statements as he did.  Several times during and after my study, I caught myself looking for certain behaviors or reading behaviors through a bias lens.  For that reason, I had to step back and remind myself to be objective with my evaluation.  This again goes by to my point about start the study at the beginning of the school year, which might impact my bias.  If I was not as familiar with the day-to-day behaviors of my students, it would have been easier to analyze the data for what it was, instead of what I wanted it to be.

Ultimately, I had to analyze my data for what it was on paper and use my system of coding on post-its to provide me with information to draw conclusions.  It is extremely hard when the subject is personal to you to not want certain results to come out of it.  I needed to accept that whatever would happen would happen and no matter what, trying something and failing is better than not trying at all.  The study was a success, even if little progress was made, because I was taking a giant leap at improving social engagement in my classroom.

What I learned about myself through the study was that peer relations is a topic that is very important to me.  I want every student to feel connected and engaged within the classroom environment.  I thought I knew what that meant, but by the end of my study I redefined what engagement meant.  For years, I have been overlooking introverted behaviors and not truly maximizing the community experience within my classroom.  Also, behaviors that I thought bothered me actually matter little in hindsight.  What I really care about and shape my teaching philosophy around is building community.  This study helped show me that I have the capability to influence that in my classroom.  Now, I am able to see my students through a different lens and recognize that there are ways to identify and help foster community through peer mentoring.

Appendix B (Implementation Plan)

Reflecting on my teaching experience, I recognize that this is not the first year I have taught socially disengaged students; it is just the first year I have really paid attention to it.  By researching peer mentoring and taking part in a class study, I learned a lot about the many facets that make up social engagement and community building within a classroom.  Without a doubt, I would want to recreate this in the future, after seeing the positive outcomes of peer mentoring in my classroom.  Since I did so much research on peer mentoring, it would be a waste for me not to utilize my new knowledge about the positive effects it can have on building community.  I would like to start my initial data collecting within the first thirty days of school, before I build any bias towards my students' behaviors and then focus my target students as their personalities develop in class.

Also, I feel very confident speaking on behalf of implementing peer mentoring in the classroom.  I am very interested in presenting what I learned and some of the strategies I used to my colleagues.  Then, hopefully they can take away some of what I learned and apply it to their own classrooms.  Especially at the middle school level where self-esteem is challenged everyday, this would be really beneficial for sixth and seventh graders, as much as eighth graders to strengthen their social skills and confidence.  Since our school is fairly small, in terms of staff, it would be easy to reach a lot of teachers and provide moral support on this topic.  Change seems to happen more effectively when more people are on board.  This is a topic any teacher can use at any level and if done correctly, it can have remarkable outcomes.

For my own professional development, I would really like to do more research on sociograms and utilize them more for group work.  A minor obstacle I faced while researching was related to expanding my knowledge of sociograms, since my time was so limited.  However,

going forward with the research I have already done and future research I plan to do, I want to use sociograms as a tool to evaluate peer relations in my classroom. Looking at students through the lens of a sociogram can really expand how teachers understand the class dynamic and I plan on making this a pivotal part of my classroom structure in the future (Sherman, 2002, p.1).

An aspect of my research that I explored but did not test was cross-age mentoring. If possible, I would like to reach out to the high school to attempt cross-age mentoring or take it a step further and advocate for a peer mentoring club. Often, we assume that we need to "bring in the best specialists" or "receive professional development" in order to improve our teaching practices. Peer mentoring relies on students taking a leadership role in helping each other and utilizing what we already have at the school. I think this could really help give students who might not ordinarily take leadership roles feel like they are making a difference in their educational community.

Lastly, I might be interested in revising this paper down the road to be published. Peer mentoring is a topic that can be applied to any school and any classroom, as well as many other work places; this is not a topic that stands alone at Matawan-Aberdeen Middle School. Around the country, students can benefit from a peer mentor program to influence social success amongst their peers. Even for students who are not socially disengaged, they can benefit for a peer mentor to rely on for social or academic support/advice. For example, a junior student in high school might be interested in a peer mentor to help him or her with college search advice. Likewise, a new student in fifth grade might benefit from a peer mentor to help familiarize him or her with the school and procedures. Even in other fields, this information could be translated into adulthood for peer mentoring in the workplace. Peer mentors can be useful for many different beneficial reasons and are not limited to my classroom..

By continuing to reflect and revise my teaching practices, I will strive to create a peer mentor program that I can use for years to come.  Even though my study has ended, I plan on continuing my research on this topic and reaching out to educators who have established peer mentor programs in their districts.  The best we can do as educators is to challenge ourselves to overcome hurdles we face in our classrooms.  I am determined to improve social engagement within my classroom so that my students recognize these tools as lifelong skills that they can carry with them into adulthood.

Appendix C (Impact on Student Learning)

Without a doubt, my study on the impact of peer mentoring in the classroom has enhanced my students' educational experience.  I established community within my classroom through team-building activities at the beginning of the year, but prior to peer mentoring, I did not see the true meaning of the word 'community,' as it could exist in my classroom.  For the first time in my six years of teaching, I truly saw students looking out for each other.  This also positively influenced their academic achievement.  For example,  Maddie's peer mentor was truly devoted to helping her improve class participation and even helped her organize her materials.  Not only did the work for her peer mentor help Maddie with social engagement, but because she felt more confident and organized, her grades improved as well.  Her peer mentor's grades improved too because now she felt like she had to be a role model for someone in the class and lead by example.  Academic improvement was not a part of my intended study but it is noteworthy to recognize how academics may have been influenced by peer mentoring in this study.  The graph below (Figure 6) shows focus group student averages in Language Arts at the end of seventh grade through the beginning of marking period three when the study ended.
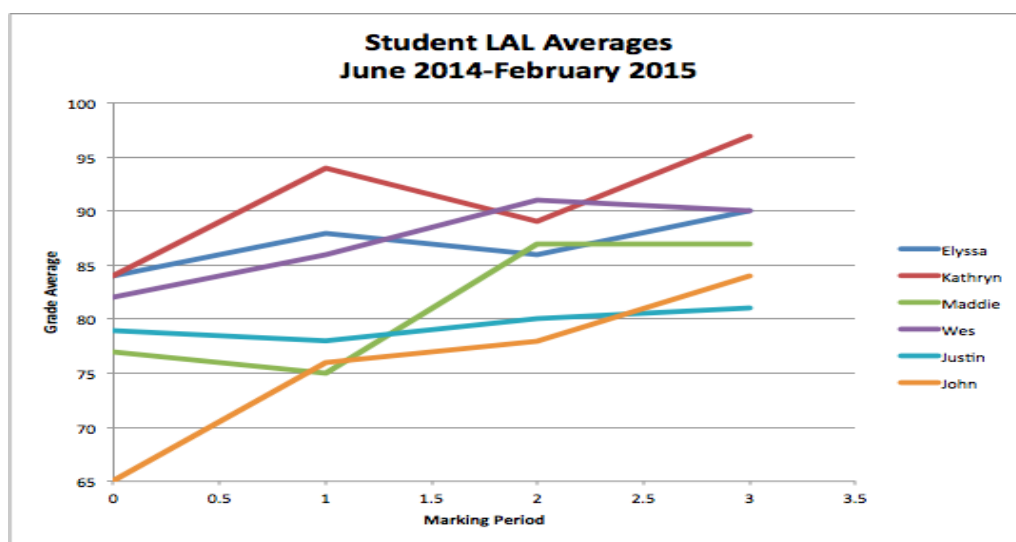


Figure 6

It is obvious that during the time of the study, students were able to maintain or improve their academics and every student is currently performing better than they did the year.

My study on peer mentoring has also influenced student motivation in the classroom.  As I discussed in my Literature Review section, one of the most basic human needs is to establish relationships with people.  The peer bonds formed as a result of this study have motivated my students in many ways.  Wes and Kathryn, who initially admitted they would rather work by themselves than with others, are now motivated to work with others.  That same seed of motivation has now enabled them to ask for help when they need it and work more effectively in groups, even if the progress is minimal.  What I see as most fascinating is that through their body language and actions - appearing attentive, seeking help, etc., they show signs of motivation to impress their peers.  They are trying even harder because now that they see they can do it, they want to continue to do well to continue to receive affirmation of their successes.

This process taught me a lot about my teaching practice and where I want to go in the future.  Fostering positive peer relationships and improving social engagement in the classroom is clearly a topic of interest for me.  I had not noticed it prior to this year, but I clearly am invested in trying to help my students learn academic skills as well as life skills that they can use even in the future workforce.  For future years, in my career, I want to build upon the idea of creating classroom culture through peer mentoring, regardless of the social makeup in my classroom.  It is important that students are taught how to learn from and mentor others.  This practice is a great experience in a microcosmic form of what they can do in the real world down the road.  Peer mentoring provides students with an opportunity to practice developing social skills in a small setting and promotes taking risks beyond their comfort zones.  Without a doubt,

my students' learning experience this year were positively impacted by peer mentoring and will

hopefully take what they learned with them for years to come.

Appendix D

Name: _____

Class Engagement Questionnaire

DIRECTIONS: For each statement, rank how you feel by circling the number that best correlates to your opinion.  Then, explain (in detail) why you ranked how you did.

**PARTICIPATION**
1.      I feel comfortable raising my hand to ask a question.

STRONGLY                                                                          STRONGLY
DISAGREE                                                                          AGREE
1        2            3            4            5            6            7            8            9            10

Explain:

_____
_____
_____
_____


2.      I feel comfortable raising my hand to answer a question or add insight to the class conversation.

STRONGLY                                                                          STRONGLY
DISAGREE                                                                          AGREE
1        2            3                4                5            6            7            8            9            10

Explain:

_____
_____
_____
_____


3.      I feel comfortable initiating a discussion in class or presenting a project in front of my peers.

STRONGLY                                                                          STRONGLY
DISAGREE                                                                          AGREE
1        2            3            4            5            6            7            8            9            10

Explain:

_____

_____
_____
_____


## GROUP WORK

4.      I feel comfortable working in groups with my peers on projects or classwork.

STRONGLY                                                          STRONGLY
DISAGREE                                                          AGREE
1       2       3       4       5       6       7       8       9       10


Explain:

_____
_____
_____
_____


5.      When working in a group, I feel comfortable sharing my ideas without fear of being put down or made fun of by my peers.

STRONGLY                                                          STRONGLY
DISAGREE                                                          AGREE
1       2       3       4       5       6       7       8       9       10

Explain:

_____
_____
_____
_____


6.      I feel comfortable asking questions within my group when I am confused.

STRONGLY                                                          STRONGLY
DISAGREE                                                          AGREE
1       2       3       4       5       6       7       8       9       10

Explain:

_____
_____

_____

_____

**PEER RELATIONS**

7.      I feel comfortable finding a partner in the class to work with on an assignment.

STRONGLY                                                    STRONGLY
DISAGREE                                                    AGREE
1        2        3        4        5        6        7        8        9        10

Explain:

_____

_____

_____

8.      I feel like I have at least two peers in the class I can go to if I need help with something.

STRONGLY                                                    STRONGLY
DISAGREE                                                    AGREE
1        2        3        4        5        6        7        8        9        10

Explain:

_____

_____

_____

9.      I feel comfortable contacting one of my peers from class outside of class if I need to ask about an assignment.

STRONGLY                                                    STRONGLY
DISAGREE                                                    AGREE
1        2        3        4        5        6        7        8        9        10

Explain:

_____

_____

_____

Student Inquiry Questions for Teachers

Student's Name: _____

Grade Level taught: _____

Grade received: _____

Academics

1.   What were _____'s *successes* in your Language Arts class? (topics to
address may include – homework, class work, class participation, assessments, and group work)

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

2.   What were _____'s *weaknesses* in your Language Arts class? (topics to
address may include – homework, class work, class participation, assessments, and group work)

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

## Peer Relations

3.  Think about how _____ worked with peers.  Rank how often s/he quickly found someone to work with for group work.

NEVER                                                                          ALL THE TIME
1        2        3        4        5        6        7        8        9          10

Explain your choice:

_____

_____

_____

_____


4. From your memory, how well did _____ interact with his/her peers?  How well was s/he perceived by peers?
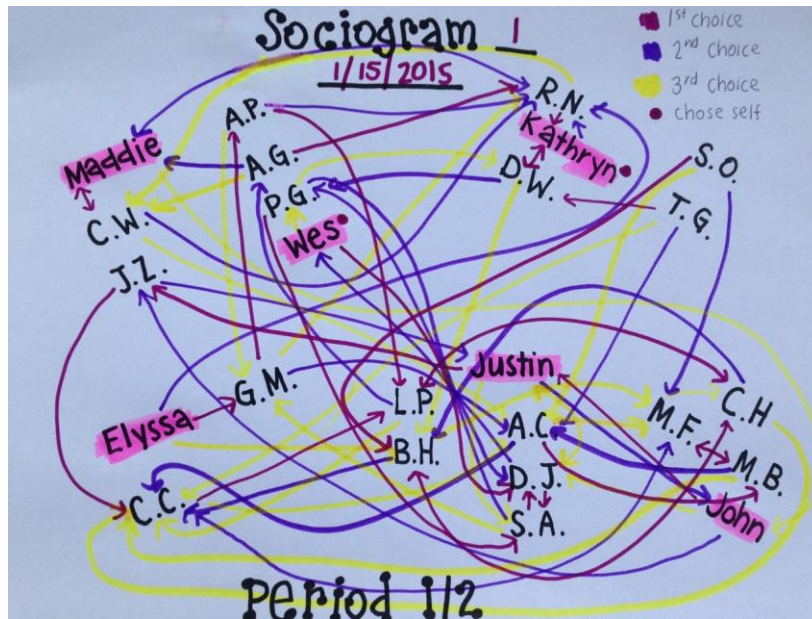
_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

Appendix E (Original Sociograms)

Whole Class Sociogram #1



Whole Class Sociogram #2