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Are Your Students Held Accountable?

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Abstract: How do we hold our students accountable? As teachers, that is a question we face every day. This article describes several ways to help students become more accountable. A student-led parent-teacher conference puts the student in the spotlight and allows them to speak on their own education with family. “Classroom Court” allows for students to help decide if their classmates are following a rule established by the class. Lastly, project-based learning with student choice allows students the opportunity to stretch their imagination and be more creative with their learning.

Keywords: student-led conferences, peer mediation, project-based learning

Introduction

As educators we have heard every excuse in the book as to why or how students could not get their work finished. Who is to blame for this? Teachers? Parents? Administration? Or could it possibly be the students themselves? How can we change our students’ mindsets to hold them accountable not only for their actions but also for their education? This task is much harder than one would think. However, through personal research I have found and implemented some effective strategies to help develop a system of accountability for all students. By leading and changing my classroom to a more student-centered class, I have found new and more positive ways for my students to learn. They are learning more than just state standards at this point; they are learning life skills.

Student-Led Parent-Teacher Conferences

Although this may sound strange, asking students to lead parent-teacher conferences empowers them and allows them to have their own voice be heard. According to Donald Hackmann (2010), traditional parent teacher conferences can be seen by two points of view, the teachers and the parents. For teachers it can cause stress “to explain why a student earned an unsatisfactory grade” (p. 2). Is it because the student is lacking the

skills, or is it because the student chooses not to complete the work? It can also be stressful for teachers in situations in which parents do not attend and teachers are not able to communicate the important needs of their child. For parents, many times teachers are simply “affirming what they already know: Their child is either doing very well academical or is doing poorly” (Hackmann, 2010, p.2).

This led me to wonder how I could reframe parent-teacher conferences to focus on and empower the student. My students are now asked to create a presentation to show their parents at our conference. In this presentation, students can include current and past grades, graded work, and reflections on their graded work. This is a perfect way for students to show that they are thinking about their thinking (metacognition).

Using student-led parent-teacher conferences, I have found that many of my students did not know how to talk to their parents about their academic progress. Therefore, I allow my students to practice on me or my principal. I let them know they can take the conversation in any academic direction they would like. However, they must include their current and past progress. They should show their strengths and weaknesses as well as their areas of growth and/or decline in class. According to Werra (2018), “student led conferences connect kids’ core beings- who they are at home- with the important work of learning they do at school” (para 13).

Although I had several goals in mind for my students when I started doing student-led conferences, one of the goals Hackmann (2010) describes in his article is a goal I feel I am beginning to achieve. Hackmann’s Goal 1 is “to encourage students to accept responsibility for their academic progress” (p.4). I have found that when students have to discuss their academic progress with a parent, they tend to be more honest while I am a quiet observer in the conference. Instead of saying “I didn’t know about the assignment, or I thought I turned it in,” they are now accepting personal responsibility, stating things like “I forgot to do the assignment,” or “I didn’t do the assignment.” This has led to the realization that parents and students alike have changed the way they perceive my class. This allows for new academic conversations to happen outside of school.

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Classroom Court

A second strategy I use in my classroom is maintaining a safe and respectful learning environment. Starting the first day of school, I introduce myself to my students and we, as a class, decide on the rules we all will have to follow, including myself, for the remainder of the school year.

Establishing group norms together fosters a sense of cohesiveness and belonging, and every student has “a role in this learning community that they had a share in building” (Merrill & Gonser, 2021, para 14). One rule that is a constant throughout all my classes is not bullying or “picking” on each other. This is a big rule for my middle school students. Many times, my students do not realize they are hurting each other and breaking trust that may have been built. Once the trust is broken it is hard to repair.

When students feel comfortable in class, they are more likely to ask questions and receive help without the pressure of other students bullying them. When someone breaks the rules, we hold a brief “classroom court.” The idea came to me as a form of peer mediation. The Ceceilyn Miller Institute (2021) describes peer mediation as “an early intervention resource for conflict resolution within a school” (para 7).

This approach allows students to take more ownership of the classroom they spend so much time in. This strategy can have a very positive impact on the classroom environment. Many times, the harshest critics in the classroom are the students. During this court, we have a jury of the student’s peers, and the jury decides if the student accused of bullying is guilty or innocent. If a student is found guilty, their punishment includes a personal apology to the student affected as well as a classroom apology for disrupting student learning. If the problem persists, I as the judge will take further action.

As a classroom teacher, you are probably wondering how in the world you would find time to conduct a classroom court. However, when I think about the time I have spent in the hallway addressing a student’s behavior one-on-one, or the amount of time I have had to stop students from arguing in the middle of class, or even the time that I have had to spend writing disciplinary referrals, all of that time adds up. In addition, the long term benefits make the investment of time worth it. As explained by Ersoy & Pehlivan Yilmaz (2018), “the learners’ level of maturity increase” when exposed to the idea of a classroom court (p. 6). The article continues to acknowledge that this method also “improved inquiry skills and certain moral and

democratic values such as respect, affection, trust and empathy among the learners” (p. 6). Now back to my original question: How do I have time to conduct classroom court? The answer is simple; our classroom court takes on average as long as an average bell ringer/class opener, and the occurrence of the classroom court dwindles as the school year progresses, as do the interruptions.

Project Based Learning

Throughout our nation today, many teachers are faced with students taking ownership of their own learning. Teachers near and far are trying to improve classroom climate and increase student engagement. Stephen Merrill and Sarah Gonser (2021) provide “a powerful argument to provide more student choice across every grade level: to shake up inflexible social and academic schedules, reduce one-way learning, and place more responsibility firmly in the hands of students” (para 2). By centering student choice, educators can “offer students scaffolded opportunities to practice decision-making, explore their academic identity, and connect their learning to interests and passions” (para 4).

A final strategy I use in my classroom is through project-based learning, which features student choice. According to the authors of *Peculiarities of Educational Challenges Implementing Project Base Learning*, “by transforming students’ work habits, the implantation of PBL (project base learning) initiatives brings new learning-teaching experiences and intangible changes to the education system (Vasiliene-Vasiliauskiene et al, 2020, p.42). Many times, when giving a project, I give my students a specific topic and a desired outcome. However, how they choose to define and deliver the project is entirely up to the student. For example, when my students finished learning about the Pythagorean Theorem, their project outline was to tell a story using and defining the Pythagorean Theorem in the real world.

Which platform they chose to tell their story is up to them. I had students create children’s stories, PowerPoints, Sways, Movies, and even podcasts. Their imaginations went wild and they looked forward to working on this project in and outside of the classroom. This allowed for their creative juices to flow in more ways than they even imagined.

Since my students were able to choose their layout for the project, they felt more connected to the project. My students were so eager to submit their projects that over half of them submitted it early. They were constantly wanting to show me their work and looking for positive

reinforcement, which was given to them. I have found that students respond positively to their learning when they get a say in how they are learning. My students took a greater interest in their own learning and learning outcomes. When thinking about what project based learning is to myself and my students, the following quote describes it best: “PBL (project based learning) is a student-centric methodology that allows opportunities in the educational environment” (Vasiliene-Vasiliauskiene, et al, 2020, p.147).

Conclusion

Allowing students to take charge of their education now will set them up for a more successful future. Sometimes our students can only see what is right in front of them. We as educators need to be role models and show our students what leadership, ownership, and pride in education looks like. We can show our students the places education can take them and the success it can bring them. We must show our students they can be great, but it all starts with them.

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About the Author



Shauna L. Bashline is a middle school teacher in Aiken County, South Carolina. She has been teaching for a total of 8 years. She has a B.A. in Middle Level Mathematics and Middle level Social Studies, and a Masters degree in Mathematics Education. She is a devoted mother of 3 precious fur babies and the very proud aunt of Nora, Liam, Maddy and Michael. When she is not at school teaching you can find her refereeing the school volleyball games, hiking with her German Shepherd, or traveling around the Asheville mountains with her mother and father.

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