

Democracy on Lock Down: Modeling a Democratic Society for At-Risk Students through Student Government

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Abstract

This case study aimed to see what influence student government had in reducing behavioral write-ups, school violence and academic participation within a special high school. The study was conducted at a school located at a correctional facility among an all-male population between the ages of 16 to 17 years old. The school has been plagued with gang-related violence and behavioral referrals that have created a negative culture within the school.

The study examined the possible relationship between participation in student government and the impact on the number of behavioral referrals and classroom participation among students. The results of the study demonstrated an overall reduction in behavioral referrals and increased student participation within the school during an increase of student population. Student government representatives created a behavior rubric that was adapted to all classrooms. Feuding gang violence dramatically lessened within the school after the adoption of the student government's behavior rubric.

Introduction

Educational philosopher, George S. Counts (1932) stated,

We must abandon completely the naive faith that school automatically liberates the mind and serves the cause of human progress; in fact, it may serve tyranny as well as truth, war as well as peace, death as well as life. If it is to serve the cause of human freedom, it must be explicitly designed for that purpose. (3)

Schools can be centered on math, reading, writing and creating a future generation that learns about the characteristics of a democratic society within the classroom. "High school is democracy's finishing school, which shapes people upon leaving to take jobs, vote, serve in the military and buy a house next door and become your neighbor" (Woods, 2005, p.8). Education can serve a duality creating a "just" society or enhancing oppression based on the child's experience within school.

According to the Children's Defense Fund, in 2010, 22% of all children in America live below the poverty line, 1.2 million children were identified as homeless, 80% of Black and 75% of Latino children cannot read nor do math on grade level, 1,825 children are abused each day and 4,028 children are arrested each day. "Children are society's canary in the coal mine; these numbers are a bleak reminder of inequalities we have yet to overcome" (Woods, 2005, p.8). The burden is on the schools to combat the cancer that enhances social decline, by not only providing students with a liberal arts education but creating students that become agents for change.

Historically, culture is a transmitted pattern of meaning that wields power in shaping what people think and how they act (Dufour, 2008). Educational services should align with the culture of the school and the students they serve. A way for a school to measure school culture and model a democratic and civil society is through the establishment of a student government. Student government can be established to create a collaborative change process aimed at building a culture of trust that allows a safe space for students to thrive emotionally and academically. Student government's first step is to create a shared vision that is consistent with the student body. A shared vision can change the relationship between the school and students, and be the first step in allowing people who normally mistrust each other to begin to work together (Senge, 1990). Additionally, a positive school culture in which students invest in their student government can improve behaviors in challenging school environments.

Theoretical Framework

Reinforcing a positive environment is a struggle in many schools. Some schools use extrinsic rewards and incentives, such as paying students to demonstrate good behavior or get good grades. As financial incentive programs build momentum within urban schools across America, economists, educational theorists and psychologists are locked into a debate as to whether they work or not (Guernsey, 2009). Edward Deci (1971) conducted field experiments

that gave one group an extrinsic reward of money and the other group an intrinsic reward of verbal praise. Both had short-term success in motivation, but people that received money as an incentive lost interest in the task and were unable to be motivated with intrinsic rewards such as verbal reinforcement and praise. People that received intrinsic rewards and motivation tended to complete the task with increased amounts of verbal praise (Deci, 1971).

Research supported that participation in school clubs and pro social activities predicted higher involvement in political and social causes in young adults (Fredricks, 2006). Langdon (2014), expressed the open units within a correction facility received significantly higher assessments from inmates as inmates feel an increase of support for them to do better. This support can be guided by teachers and stakeholders who allow the student body to decide their expected behavior and consequences (DuFour & DuFour, 2008). Higher expectations for the adolescents to demonstrate appropriate behavior when self-imposed leads to better behavior among the whole group (Langdon, 2014).

Establishment of a student council can have extrinsic rewards for contributions to the council such as time to govern in a pleasant council chamber as well as the intrinsic value that allows students the ability to have a voice and exhibit leadership. This motivation provides the adolescent a supportive context for identity exploration and an opportunity for the adolescent to construct personal values (Ludden, 2011). The structure of a student council should develop social skills through having members meet with people within their community to resolve problems. Development of these skills is linked to reductions in negative behavior and more attention to consequences (Ludden, 2011).

Demographics and characteristics of this high school

This school is located at a New York City correctional facility and is part of New York City's Department of Education. Educational services provided by this school are mandated by the *Handberry v. Thompson* (1996) ruling. This case was a class action suit based on denial of appropriate educational services for school aged adolescent inmates (*Handberry v. Thompson*, 2006). The outcome of the ruling was that the New York City Department of Education and Corrections had to provide educational services in all of the city correctional facilities for inmates between the ages of 16 to 21 years old.

The average daily population of male adolescent inmates registered for educational services is 442. Students within the school who had been diagnosed with learning or mental health disabilities ranged from 40% to 60%. The population of students ranged from city sentenced jail convictions to pretrial detainees. According to the New York City Department of Education, the students are transient and have an average enrollment at the school of 32 days. Classrooms are based on housing units and Department of Corrections behavioral classification. The limit ratio of students to corrections officers does not exceed 15 to one.

Within these 32 days, students have two options; they take the Test Assessing Secondary Completion (TASC), previously known as the General Education Degree (GED); or every 28 days, they earn a high school credit for English and Social Studies and half a credit for Mathematics. Educational services are provided at Center 1, which housed city sentenced 18 years and older adolescent males. Center 2 housed 18 years and older adolescent males pretrial detainees. Center 3 housed 18 years and older adolescent female pretrial detainees. Center 4 housed 16 to 17 years old adolescent males that are pretrial detainees and city sentenced. Center 4 housed the largest school site called the Main School. The Main School experience was separated into two sessions 8:00 am to 12:00 pm, and 12:45 pm to 4:45 pm. The purpose of the split session school was to accommodate more students when another school site was closed due to health concerns. The Main School was the center for the research presented in this article.

Unique Setting for this Study

On August 2014, the United States Justice Department concluded its report on the treatment of adolescent inmates. The conclusion was that adolescent inmates were subjected to a culture of inmate and officer violence, and an extensive use of punitive segregation known as the box, which is a 23 hour lock-in as a form of punishment for inmates that committed infractions. Infractions are given to inmates for anything from fighting to loss of an ID card. A major recommendation for reform was to abolish punitive segregation for all adolescent inmates. Following the Department of Corrections abolishment of the box, misbehaviors among adolescent inmates increased and reached a peak on the Main School floor. There were ongoing conflicts within the housing units between the gangs. Before abolishing the box, the Department of Corrections would put the leaders and main players of the conflict there. This did not solve the problem but pushed the conflict to the streets outside of jail and into the city neighborhoods.

After rising tensions in the city neighborhoods and within the jail, leaders from both gangs faced off during school. The brawl lasted several minutes and seven corrections officers were injured. This resulted in several school staff members grieving their safety to their labor union. The largest blow to educational services was not the emotional and physical injuries of corrections and the instructional staff, but the students that witnessed the melee did not feel safe and started viewing the school as an extension of the jail.

School culture was always a challenge at the school, but for the most part students aspired to excel academically and this was reflected in the efforts of the students. After the brawl, this hope was lost among students and teachers. In response, the Department of Education formed a culture and climate committee to rebuild school morale and create safer operating guidelines. The development of an inclusive school council for student inmates was part of the effort to improve the school culture.

Criteria of student nominations for student council was that students had to have a course grade average of 75% or greater, actively participate in class discussion and activities, and be respectful to peers and teachers. Each housing unit that came to school during the daytime session was asked for volunteers who met these criteria. The students then voted on what volunteer they wanted to represent them. During the first meeting, the students of the council created the structure and rules recognizing that the majority of the student council members were rival gang members. Students decided that everything that happened in the housing unit stayed in the housing unit, and the meetings were a safe space for them to create suggestions and to improve the school. The students agreed that all student representatives would have an equal vote and there would be no president, vice president, or secretary. They decided on this structure because council members wanted to prevent power struggles.

In the beginning of May, the student council collectively created a rubric (as seen in **Appendix A**) for student behavior. The rubric had three sections: behavior, participation, and effort. The section on behavior required students to express themselves to peers and teachers with no profanity or vulgarity, respect the classroom environment (e.g., do not write on desks/walls), and leave gang activity at the door. The participation section required students to answer and ask questions, participate in class discussion, and facilitate peer learning. The effort section required students to complete the class activity, and receive no lower than 80% proficiency on assessments. Students that demonstrated these characteristics highlighted in the rubric for a week were qualified for student of the week. Students of the week received a certificate of recognition signed by the assistant principal. Other proposed ideas included breakfast with the principal for student of the week, pending approval from the Department of Corrections.

Methodology

This case study utilized a mixed methodology. To answer research question one, "Does student government affect the number of behavioral referrals?," researchers conducted a quantitative analysis of behavioral referrals. Referrals from March 2015 were compared to May 2015 using a nonparametric, Chi-Square analysis. All analysis was conducted using IBM Statistical Package for Social Sciences, version 21.

A student government was implemented by late April of 2015. The amount of behavior referrals for each month from the main school site at RNDC were measured. March and May were used as measurable months because they were similar in the amount of school days. However, April was not used as a measurable month, due to spring break and Tactical Search Operations (TSOs), which put the building on lock down and canceled school for the day. Students within the morning session were classified by Department of Corrections as high classification. Department of Corrections defines inmates as high classification based on the amount of infractions that inmates receive. Infractions are given when an inmate gets into a fight with other inmates or is caught extorting, stealing, or with contraband, such as drugs or makeshift weapons.

A behavioral referral is given to students who distract peers from educational services. These distractions include verbal abuse to peers and staff, physically abusive behavior towards staff and peers, engaging in gang activity in the class, writing on the desk or walls, disrupting the lesson, getting out of the seat, unauthorized movement in the classroom, observed theft, and leaving the class in session. Before a teacher writes a student up they give a verbal warning or verbal redirection. Students sleeping, not producing work and/or exhibiting disrespectful behavior get a concerned meeting. A concerned meeting is when the teacher, student counselor, and student meet to discuss classroom performance and what can be done to enhance academic activity.

A verbal behavior is defined as anything that is a verbal distraction to the educational services. Verbal behavior included threats of physical harm towards teachers or peers, and derogatory insults to peers or teachers.

A violent behavior is defined as anything that is a physical distraction to the educational services. Violent behavior included throwing objects at teachers or peers, or physical fights with peers or teachers.

To answer research question two, researchers used qualitative analysis. A phenomenological design was used to answer the second research question, "Does student government increase academic participation among participating classes?" The study was conducted among four teachers who had the students before and after the roll out of student government.

The subject areas of the four teachers include English, Social Studies, Art, and Math, as shown in **Table 1:1**.

<i>Table 1:1, Participants of phenomenological study</i>		
Participants	Subject	Years employed in correctional education
1B	Social Studies	8
2G	English	13
3J	Art	17
4R	Math	10

The average years of the employment for the four teachers in correctional education were 10 years. After the interview, all patterns and themes within the interview were identified. These emerging themes and patterns were used to develop the conclusion to research question two.

The structured interview consisted of eight questions. The four sections of the interview were: professional experience with the school, class participation of student before student government, class participation after the roll out of student government, and teacher feedback of the student government. The full interview protocol is provided in **Appendix B**.

Findings

Research Question 1: Does student government affect the number of behavioral referrals?

The average morning student registration for the month of March was 57 students. The average student registration for the month of May was 69 students. The month of March had 30% of the student body engaged in a behavior that led to a referral. Student government was implemented only for the morning educational services. A Chi-Square test was used to determine if the frequency of referrals for the month of May differed significantly from the month of March.

Table 1:2, Frequencies

		March		
		Observed N (%)		
Not Reported		40	(70%)	
Reported		17	(30%)	
Total		57		

		May		
		Observed N (%)	Expected N (%)	Residual
Not Reported		56 (81%)	48.3(70%)	7.7
Reported		13 (19%)	20.7 (30%)	-7.7
Total		69		

As reported in **Table 1.2**, 69 participants were observed at school in May and 56 (81%) participants had no report in school while 13 (19.11%) participants had reports with the school. According to **Table 1.3**, the Chi-Square value is 4.092. This means that the proportion of referrals in May was significantly lower ($p=.043$) than the proportion of referrals in March. This supports the hypothesis that there could be an inverse relationship between participation in student government and misbehavior referrals.

Table 1:3, Test Statistics

Chi-Square	4.092
Df	1
Asymp. Sig.	.043

Research Question 2: Does student government increase academic participation among participating classes?

Before the roll out of student government, Participant 1B, the Social Studies teacher, expressed, "students did not respect staff nor each other and the classroom felt as if it was unsafe for teachers and students." The average grade among the students was 60%.

Participant 2G, who taught English, stated, "before student government students were not engaged or invested in the school programming. They disregarded the school and the rules and kept referring to the school as not real or jail." The average grade among all students during English class was 65%.

Table 2:1, Themes, Patterns, and Discrepancies: Before Student Government		
Theme	Pattern	Discrepancy
Students did not participate in educational programming within the class.	All teachers interviewed responded, by describing the students as not displaying respect for the teacher's work or one another.	
Student grade averages were low.	Prior to student government teachers reported student grades were 60-70%.	

Themes, Patterns, and Discrepancies: After the roll out of student government		
Theme	Pattern	Discrepancy
Some students were willing to participate in the educational services.	All teachers reported that a significant number of students that were not only members of the government but of the class increased academic participation and had more respect for the school staff.	
Average grades of the students increased.	All teachers reported classroom grade averages increased an average of five points to an estimated 75%.	

Teacher Feed Back:

Participant 1B: "Student government gave the students the ability to create a safe space and provide a voice to the students. This allowed student leaders to communicate a shared sense of responsibility among the other students."

Participant 3J: "Student government allowed the students to create their own class rules, which made them feel like they had a voice."

Participant 4R: "Student government provided the students with a sense of community that they were lacking in the hostile setting."

Limitations

This study was limited to one maximum adolescent correctional facility in New York City and one section of educational services for high classification inmates. Additionally, the student population is transient, with the average student registered within educational services for 32 days. Another limitation was that the study examined only males aged 16 to 17 years old.

Conclusion

This mixed methods case study was designed to see what influence student government might have in reducing behavioral write-ups, and school violence within a special high school for students in a correctional facility.

The school had been plagued with gang related violence and behavioral referrals that created a negative culture within the school.

This study set out to explore the possible effect of student government on the amount of behavioral referrals and academic participation in class. Researchers found that there was a significantly lower proportion of behavioral referrals after the institution of student government. All teachers interviewed expressed a significant change in class participation, academic grades, and respect levels of students. Teachers expressed that the success of student government was that it provided a safe space that created a voice for the students to give input on educational programming and influence the school practices.

Findings in this study indicated that the student council in this setting provided students with a feeling of shared ownership of their education and security. By achieving the goal of shared ownership to the school, students shared common understandings that could not be achieved individually. The student council pulled students together into a whole system (Senge, 1990).

In response to having a unified school with shared goals and shared ownership, the culture made a steady shift from the students feeling that they were in a dead end to an opportunity to achieve academic successes. Recommendations for future research on student councils within corrections facilities should include a larger sample of both males and females, and a distinction between verbal or violent behavior referrals.

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Appendix A

From the Student Council:

Students grades in class and behavior is to be based off of this rubric below. In addition please review the items below and select a student or students who demonstrate above average behavior and academics for student of the week. These students will be rewarded with a certificate of recognition.

Student Achievement Rubric:

Behavior 50%	Participation 25%	Effort 25%
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Expresses themselves to peers and teachers with no profanity or vulgarity - Respects classroom environment (Does not write on desks/walls.) - Leaves gang activity at the door. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Answers and ask questions - Participates in class discussions - Facilitates peer learning 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Completes the activity 100% but receives no lower than 80% proficiency.

The student of the week program only applies to AM classrooms 55, 70, 68, 69.

Student Name	Student ID#	Counselor

Appendix B

Student Council Questioner

Professional Experience within the school

1. *What subject do you teach?*
 2. *How long have you taught in this school?*
 3. *Based on your observation of the student, describe the student class participation levels before student government was implemented in the class.*
 4. *Prior to the roll out of student government what was the average grade in your class?*
 5. *Based on your observation of the student, describe the student class participation levels after student government was implemented in the class.*
 6. *After the roll out of student government what was the average grade in your class?*
- Teacher feedback*
7. *Describe your feeling of student government.*
 8. *Do you feel student government has increased student academic participation? Explain.*