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Question

Can it be too late for Teacher-directed, child-centered, nurturing interventions to positively impact fifteen underachieving, at-risk Sixth Grade students' motivation to learn (academic achievement)?

Problem

Should there be a place for Moral Education in today's Middle School? What is learning? Is there an age and developmental stage when Social-learning most beneficial to young people?

Last school year in Fifth Grade, the students of my homeroom all achieved FCAT scores for Mathematics and Reading in percentages below what's measured as Level One on those examinations. Severely low scholastic achievement and deficient social dispositions locked my students into recurring failure at school. Severely low scholastic achievement and deficient social dispositions locked my students into recurring failure at school. The students in my class focus (in varying degrees) on conversations with one another, complaints, insults among themselves, and negative attitudes such as disgust. They avoid teacher and school authority but admire students being reported to administration for breaking school rules, students reported for defiance to authority, fights, name calling and anger towards one another, or students reported for lack of attempt at home learning (homework).

My students are fortunate to attend an elementary school so their first year of middle school expectations still provided them a self-contained homeroom experience with one teacher along with a familiar school environment of administrative leadership, school mates and friends.

Research

Middle School education is the critical link in Dropout Prevention for at-risk, disadvantage students. Abraham Maslow's, Needs Gratification theory is built on the premise that each stage of needs has to be SATISFIED before an individual is able to psychologically, emotionally, and socially able to go forward to meet the next stages of needs to finally become a Self-actualized, creative person. Disadvantaged, at-risk students are usually identified because needs of 1) clothing, shelter, 2) safety, protection, 3) sense of belonging, 4) love, friendship, affection, 5) self-esteem, and 6) self-actualization are denied, compromised and unmet in some way. As such, young learners are unable to progress satisfactorily forward to achieve scholastic learning success.

Middle school years encompass a time when adolescent, pubescent teens have to face growth and developmental bodily changes. A less personal school environment, stresses of challenging curricular management, numerous teachers and time periods in addition to their dependence on peers' acceptance (peer pressure) all present challenges for sixth grade students.

Tools and Data

FCAT test scores, teacher observations, student surveys, interviews and seating charts will all be studied for data regarding this action research project. I wrote two grants for my students. One used literature anthology to grow their vocabulary, comprehension, fluency, memorization and FCAT writing strategies. The other grant focused on Creative Business Matters to teach Moral education tips, the 7 habits of effective teenagers and community responsibility as they worked with first graders. Implementation and observation of these grants plus focused use of time on their grade level curriculum were also specific tools used to guide these students towards academic and social achievements.

Analysis

We await FCAT scores from this year's examination. However, on posttests in Reading and Mathematics sixty percent of my students have experienced negative progress and though this is contrary to their focus, concentration and effort on their FCAT examination, they told me, "we worked (studied, tried) for the FCAT exam, but now that that's over we don't have to work hard any more". What? Has learning happened? Honesty from my students is more common now as a response to a question. Tears are common among them when male or female receive severe consequences for deviant behaviors. Labeling me as "cool" because I listen to them nonjudgementally and don't deceive them, cause these students to share more of their personal stories and challenges with me. Trust has developed between they and I in our student-teacher relationship.

Policy Recommendation

Could it be that because these at-risk, disadvantage students are struggling with both personal, social needs and the need for academic gains, that they have chosen to focus on the satisfaction of the more emotionally pleasing need? My major recommendation is for legislators, school boards and schools to provide Middle School students the experience of nurturing environments with subject specific, challenging curriculum. Support high teacher certification programs such as National Board Professional Teaching Standards. Time should be provided in a teacher's work day for Teacher Collaboration Learning Communities because the teacher in a classroom still makes a difference with the social development and academic gains for each student before him or her.