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The Effects of Student Autonomy in the High School Setting

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Research Question

How does student autonomy in the high school setting affect students' productivity and motivation?

Literature Review

- According to Kirk, et. al. (2017), "many students come to school disempowered, lacking the capability and experience to control the outcomes of their educational journey and finding an education system that promotes passivity and disengagement."
- Autonomy, or the ability to think, feel, and make decisions by oneself is a developmentally normative process and particularly important to adolescents within the school context (McElhaney, Allen, Stephenson, & Hare, 2009).
- Empowering youth through partnership, rather than authoritative, allows students to establish their own credibility through proving themselves and gaining recognition, thus pushing for more successes. (Cargo, Grams, Ottoson, Ward, & Green, 2003).

Methodology

- The study took place in an urban high school in Chicago, IL with freshmen and sophomores students.
- The school's demographic is made up with 84.7% African American, 4.6% Hispanic, 4.1% White, 3.3% Asian, 2.9% Two or more races, and .5% other.
- 63% of students qualified for free or reduced price lunches in this school.
- The school had started implementing a weekly school-wide free period the same semester I was student teaching there. This meant students had one free 45 minute period on each Wednesday.
- I recorded observations using journal entries for the first five weeks of a new free period implementation.
- I took notes on what students did during this free period, as well as where they would go in the school, such as the auditorium, cafeteria, library, etc.
- Students were given a survey after three weeks of the implementation to see how they felt about it, what they did during this time, and if they had any recommendations for improvement.

Results and Data Analysis

- Students initially took this free period as a social hour, meaning they talked with their friends and used their phones.
- During week one and two of my journal entries, most students went to the auditorium to socialize and listen to music.
- By week three, there were more students going to the library instead of the auditorium.
- By week four, students started using this time to visit teachers for help, as well as to make up work.
- In student survey replies, students generally expressed benefits in the free hour per week, many noting they were able to catch up on homework. Some students mentioned that they thought it should be implemented more frequently in the week.
- Giving students an hour to themselves during the week allowed them to be productive on their own, as well as pushed them to look for extra academic help on their own.

Conclusion

- After conducting this research project, it is important to note that students were about to responsibly use their given free time in school to work towards academic goals.
- More research needs to be conducted with a control group and specific volunteers observed longitudinally
- As a student teacher, this taught me that it is important to allow freedom to students in order to allow them to learn how to responsibly use their time