

DEFINITIONS OF SUCCESS FROM FIFTH GRADE STUDENTS

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Table of Contents

| | |
|------------------------|----|
| Introduction..... | 1 |
| Literature Review..... | 3 |
| Methodology..... | 18 |
| Data..... | 22 |
| Analysis..... | 32 |
| Recommendation..... | 37 |
| Conclusion..... | 38 |
| References..... | 41 |

Introduction

Success is an accomplishment or outcome that we strive for throughout our lifetime. The definition of success varies by person, situation and age. For many adults, success can be divided into two categories: personal and professional. Some of us measure personal success by the size of our house, the type of car we drive, whether or not we are married, or if we have children. Professional success may be measured by a person's occupation, income level, or personal level of fame or status on the corporate ladder. Whatever the case may be, we all have different ideas about what constitutes success and how success is measured.

Success is also an important issue for children in schools. Students may determine their success by their grades, parental or teacher approval, social or extra-curricular activities, or the number of trophies lining their bedroom bookshelves. Wherever they find personal success, children receive reminders and markers of that success, or lack thereof, from teachers. On a daily basis, children receive grades for assignments, tests and papers which are then interpreted as a measure of success by the teacher, the student and parents, as well as administrators. However, this appears problematic as one attempts to define success relative to the educational experience. How do we as educators define success, and of equal importance, how are our students defining success? One student may feel that a "2" on a test is successful, while another student may feel a "3" on that same test constitutes failure. What yardstick are these children using and how is it affecting their experience in achievement in school?

In addition to the definitions children have for success, teachers, parents and administrators have their own definitions of what constitutes success. These definitions may or may not line up with their students' thoughts and feelings on the subject matter. A definition is difficult to formulate because we all have different measuring tools for what constitutes success. Are our definitions putting further stress and pressure on students to "succeed"? Do our definitions allow students to feel successful in their own right, or are they simply living up to the expectations of those around them? Is it more important for students to feel successful according to their own standards, or do they need to impress teachers and parents?

Research suggests multiple solutions for school reform, including "successful" teaching strategies: ways to successfully teach math, reading, or a variety of other subjects. However, I believe current research is missing two key elements: how students define success and how definitions of success are shaping their education. As educators, we all aim to be and feel successful. For many of us, we feel successful when our students find success, yet have we stopped to ask them exactly what this means? It is difficult to pinpoint one characteristic or attribute that will lead all children to success. The key may not even be a characteristic, rather it may be wrapped up in a feeling or emotion that children experience. Whatever their personal definitions may be, children's opinions are scarcely defined or expressed in the research on educational success, which is a major detriment to current and future educators.

Are we too quick to use the word success? As an educational community I feel we do not really know what we are conveying when we use the word. In my opinion the word has been given a good image and become so generic that we feel it is our duty to achieve success, while in reality we are unsure as to what the word truly means and how to go by achieving this goal.

Literature Review

Webster's Dictionary defines success as the following:

Noun

1. An event that accomplishes its intended purpose; "let's call heads a success and tails a failure"; "the election was a remarkable success for Republicans".
2. An attainment that is successful; "his success in the marathon was unexpected"; "his new play was a great success".
3. A state of prosperity or fame; "he is enjoying great success"; "he does not consider wealth synonymous with success".
4. A person with a record of successes; "his son would never be the achiever that his father was"; "only winners need apply"; "if you want to be a success you have to dress like a success". (2007, 1)

Success is a word that is difficult for many to explain, let alone define, for it becomes a part of the individual. For example, one person's definition of success may change periodically throughout their life, and while it remains compatible with that specific person, it may not be suitable for another person in a different situation. This

becomes the case with educational success. However, this does not mean that we should stop trying to find a working definition for success. It is important to look to the current literature for definitions and explanations of success. While definitions of the actual word success are few and far between, examples of successful students and successful programs are plentiful. In an attempt to find a definition of academic success, instead I found the path to successful academic programs and the qualities that successful students possess.

Slavin, Madden, Dolan and Wasik (1996) relate success to reading in the elementary years. "The elementary school's definition of success, and therefore the parents' and children's definition as well, is success in reading. Reading and language arts form the core of what school success means in the early grades," (1996, 42). Slavin et al. inform us that if, in the early years of elementary school, a child isn't reading well, they will begin a detrimental downward progression. The student may be required to repeat a certain grade, or they may have poor motivation skills and poor self expectations, which can lead to a lack of academic achievement. Slavin et al. describe the *Success For All* reading program and its components. The *Success For All* program begins with prevention, meaning that preschool and kindergarten programs need to appropriately prepare children with the necessary skills for reading. The program also promotes early intervention, which ensures students are on the correct path with the necessary skills for success. The last component of the program is stability, which stresses that teachers and staff need to "relentlessly stick with every child until that

child is succeeding” (Slavin et al., 1996, 44). The program has seen success in a variety of states and schools in the subject of language arts. This appears to be a solid stepping stone to ensure that children are on the right track, however it only defines success in relation to reading ability. If a child has poor reading skills are we saying they are doomed to fail? Is there success outside of reading ability? According to the *Success For All* program, reading is the key to academic success.

In an attempt to achieve academic success, studies have also demonstrated the necessary characteristics or social skills a student should possess in order to accomplish success in the classroom. Meier, DiPerna and Oster “have identified competence in the areas of cooperation and self control to be of critical importance with regard to school success,” (2006, 409). They identify eleven skills which students should possess in order to be successful in the classroom. These eleven skills involve a student who: “controls temper with peers, gets along with people, responds appropriately when hit, ignores peer distractions, responds to peer pressure, follows directions, attends to instructions, cooperates with peers, controls temper with adults, uses free time acceptably, uses time appropriately” (Meier et al., 2006, 415). Meier et al. conclude that these skills have practical implications for the classroom and would be helpful in assisting children having difficulty in the classroom. The teachers observed in this study deduce that there is a clear link between social interaction skills and academic success. It is helpful for teachers to know the qualities that will lead children to success. However, might it not also be helpful to know what it means to be successful,

or what factors constitute academic success? Meier et al., leave out of their study a definition of “academic success”.

In a similar study, Lane, Wehby and Cooley (2006) concluded that there are ten skills critical for academic success. These ten characteristics can be divided into two categories, self-control and cooperation. Success is depicted as a student who: “controls temper in conflict situation with peers, responds appropriately to peer pressure, uses free time in an acceptable way, controls temper in conflict situations with adults, follows/complies with your directions, responds to physical aggression (when pushed or hit), ignores peer distractions when doing class work, attends to your instructions, easily makes transitions from one classroom activity to another, gets along with people who are different” (Lane et al., 2006, 161). These skills are consistent with the Meier et al. study previously discussed. There is one major difference between the findings of this study and the Meier et al. study. Lane et al. express that it is the students’ job to correctly determine a teacher’s expectations for success in their classroom. Lane et al. explain that, “students who fail to navigate successfully teachers’ expectations may be at risk for a range of deleterious outcome (Academic underachievement)” (2006, 162). As with the Meier et al. study, we see here that teachers have deemed ten skills necessary for academic success. Now we have the skill set, however we don’t know what goals we are trying to reach with this skill set to accomplish “academic success”. When the researchers use the words “academic success”, what do they mean? We also learn from this study that it is the job of the

student to determine what each teacher deems necessary for “success” in their classroom.

Success can be achieved in a variety of ways, with a variety of programs. The Merritt Elementary School, in Washington, DC, has implemented a plan that encourages parents, teachers and staff to collaborate in order to create a school environment that is “centered on developing children and nurturing their success” (Woodruff, Shannon, Efimb, 1998, 12). At the Merritt school, “teachers, staff members, and teams guiding the school share an underlying concern for improving school climate and student outcomes”(Woodruff et al., 1998, 12). At the core of the school’s program is a positive climate, the foundation from which the school environment and student learning may be improved. The school has worked to implement characteristics of a School Development Plan (SDP) and a Comprehensive School Plan (CSP), in order to obtain a positive school environment. Part of the CSP involves recognizing student achievement. The Merritt School has created their own honor roll and has “test busters” which are students that motivate other students to do well on their achievement tests. Upon implementing the program the Merritt School has seen a rise in test scores. For example, they have seen a 72% improvement on the California Test of Basic Skills over the last four years, and “mathematics scores have gone from the 52nd to the 74th percentile, a 42% improvement” (Woodruff et al., 1998, 13). The Merritt School is an example of a flourishing integration of the SDP and CSP programs, however a definition for success is still lacking. The study mentions success multiple times, and appears to define success

in relation to high test scores on standardized tests. However, the specific test score which exemplifies success, or for that matter the word success itself, is never explicitly explained.

The Wheeler School in Louisville, Kentucky, adopted a similar quality education program. The Wheeler school's motto quickly became "Expecting the best, producing success". Brown and Thomas (1999) conclude that the three main areas for success at the Wheeler School were collaboration, involvement and achievement. Collaboration refers to interactions between teachers, school staff and parents, as well as district, state and national liaisons. Brown and Thomas explain, "the success of Wheeler is enhanced by the partnerships that develop between the school and the home" (1999, 6). When speaking of involvement, they are referring to parental involvement in the school setting. As for achievement, Brown and Thomas explain that "areas of professional development emphasis have resulted in student achievement" (1999, 8). Students in the school have made gains in the areas of reading, mathematics, arts, humanities, science, social studies, practical living and writing on state mandated tests. According to the study, the Wheeler school has achieved success in these areas, however we don't know by what margin they consider themselves successful. The discussion becomes problematic when we fail to define "success". Success for the Wheeler school may mean achieving test scores one percent higher than the previous year, whereas success for the Merritt School may mean achieving test scores that are forty-five percent above the previous years' scores.

Another study relates academic success to discipline problems and disruptive classroom behavior. Luiselli, Putnam, Handler and Feinberg demonstrate that “establishing effective discipline practices is critical to ensure academic success and to provide a safe learning environment” (2005, 183). They found that by implementing the positive behavior support system (PBS), “student discipline problems decreased and academic performance improved” (2005, 192). Academic performance consisted of test scores for the Metropolitan Achievement Test–Seventh Edition (MAT–7), measuring student’s skills on reading comprehension and mathematics. The study showed that as behavioral incidences in the classroom decreased, academic success increased by eighteen percentage points in reading comprehension and twenty–five percentage points in math (Luiselli et al., 2005). In addition, teachers expressed they felt better learning was occurring in the classroom with less disruptions. From this study we see that another key to academic success is proper classroom behavior. It is important that the learning environment be focused on learning and not on disruptions or problematic behavior to ensure optimal academic success.

Brigman, Webb and Campbell (2007) discuss the implementation of the *Student Success Skills* program with students in grades five, six, eight and nine. *The Student Success Skills* program, or SSS, is based “upon research identifying skills related to academic achievement and social competence” (Brigman et al., 2007, 1). Previous studies have shown a group of skills most necessary for student success, and the SSS program emphasizes these skills. “These skills include (a) cognitive and meta–cognitive

skills such as goal setting, progress monitoring, and memory skills; (b) social skills such as interpersonal skills, social problem solving, listening, and teamwork skills; and (c) self-management skills such as managing attention, motivation, and anger” (Brigman et al., 2007, 1). Students involved in the study showed higher test scores in the subjects of math and reading. Brigman et al. report that although test scores increased, the increases in their study were not as significant as those in previous studies of the same program. They also report that sixty percent of the students showed improvement in classroom behavior. Students in this study experienced greater academic and behavioral success when participating in the *Student Success Skills* program. The students in this study demonstrate that behavioral skills can lead to academic achievement, however, the report failed to mention what they consider “successful” math and reading scores.

A study by J. Brophy concluded that the key to student achievement, for low achieving students, involves “maximizing the time that they spend being actively instructed or supervised by their teachers,” (1988, 235). The article emphasized four points: a) “issues in instruction (how to teach) rather than curriculum (what to teach)”, b) “it concentrates on empirical research in classroom settings”, c) “it concentrates on research designed to develop knowledge about relatively general principles of classroom teaching rather than principles unique to instruction in particular subject-matter areas”, d) it “places heavy emphasis on realism and practicality” (1988, 237). Brophy found two common themes in his research: “academic learning is influenced by the amount of time

that students spend engaged in appropriate academic activities; students learn more effectively when their teachers instruct them actively by structuring new information and helping them relate it to what they already know, and then monitoring their performance and providing corrective feedback through recitation, drill, practice and application activities” (1988, 280). Brophy explains that the road to student achievement and success begins with effective teaching strategies, guiding the students in the correct direction.

Another study by Logue found that academic success can be affected as early as pre-kindergarten, in children aged three to five. She argues that “despite differences in children’s skills and knowledge on entering kindergarten, students are held to the same level of academic expectation at the end of the year” (2007, 37). Currently, teachers are expecting children to come to kindergarten with specific math and literacy skills, in addition to a sense of social maturity. While some children have these skills, others are lacking and this is due in part to the quality of their experiences in pre-kindergarten activities. Logue explains, “unless children are given an opportunity to learn social skills in context, they may not benefit from the academic instruction offered” (2007, 37). When children display disruptive behaviors, they take away from their academic learning, and are therefore at a disadvantage. Logue feels that the solution is then to develop “prevention and intervention” plans to get the students on the appropriate track for academic success (2007, 42). This is also important for other students in the class, not only for the disruptive students. When one child is displaying inappropriate

behavior, it is the role of the teacher to address the behavior. Once the teacher does this, they are then taking instruction time away from all children in the classroom, thus affecting their preparation for academic success. The solution, according to Logue, is then, for pre-kindergarten programs to collaborate with the school districts to provide high-quality experiences and prepare children to succeed in school as well as preparing them for a future of academic success.

Okpala, Smith, Jones and Ellis (2000) discuss a foundation for academic success and achievement in their study of schools in North Carolina. North Carolina uses what they call the ABC's of public reform, a program that is intended to better the states' education program. The aim of the study was to identify a potential relationship between specific school characteristics, specific teacher characteristics or family demographics and students' reading and math scores. The study found that class and school size did impact reading and math achievement; in addition "the percentage of teachers with masters degree was significant in explaining changes in mathematics achievement" (2000, 491). Family demographics also had a small impact on reading and mathematics achievement. The study concluded that for students to achieve academic success children must have smaller class sizes, experienced teachers and high quality educational and correctional services.

E. Collinson (2000) suggests that a correlation exists between elementary students' learning style preferences and academic success. He explains that there are three factors critical in school achievement: "a student's attitude for learning, capacity

for application, and emotional stability” (2000, 1). In addition, as educators, it is essential that we begin to recognize the way that students learn if we want to increase academic success. Collinson defines learning style as “a biologically and developmentally imposed set of personal characteristics that make the same teaching/learning strategy effective for some and ineffective for others” (2000,1). In his study, the low achieving group showed a preference toward a formal learning environment. In addition, these students preferred to learn in groups with one or more of their peers, and showed a preference for learning in the afternoon. Conversely, students in the high achieving group preferred to work independently and in an informal class setting. An informal class setting would be one in which there were soft chairs and couches, with more of a lounge feel. These high achieving students also preferred to select their own objectives and procedures and worked best at their own pace, encouraged by the teacher. The middle, or average group, showed no significant preferences as compared to the low and high achieving groups. According to Collinson, we can increase student achievement by catering to the learning needs of each student.

Borland and Howsen (2003) suggest that school size has an effect on student achievement. There appears to be a fine line between a school being too small or too large. That fine line is where student achievement appears to be optimal. Borland and Howsen report, “both movement to optimal school size and increased school competition result in higher student achievement” (2003,471). The benefits of a larger school include a larger budget, greater resource opportunities, more diverse curriculum,

and more qualified teachers. Smaller schools on the other hand enhance relationships, have greater student participation in extra-curricular activities, have more effective school discipline and a better school climate. The problem then, lies in the increasing school size. "As school size increases further, students feel less of a connection to the school, and this effect outweighs the absolute increase-in-resources effect resulting in a net decline in student achievement," (2003, 465). Borland and Howsen conclude that the optimal school size is around 760 students. The closer that all schools in the district are to this size, the less competition among schools and the stronger each individual school remains. The main idea is that, if schools in a district can remain close to 760 students, student academic achievement will continue to increase.

Tucker, Herman, Pedersen, Vogel and Reinke (2000) asked a group of African American elementary and high school students what the keys to academic success are for African American youth. Student responses were divided up into four main ideas. First, students "readily identify important aspects of academic preparation and class participation," (2000, 7). The students noted that to help improve their grades, they needed to study and participate during class. Tucker et al, report that it is important for educators to recognize that these are behaviors that students need to be taught. Second, the students noted that peer influence is significant and it is important to avoid those that frequently get into trouble. The students reported that peer pressure is of high concern and it is important to seek peers that are positive and stay away from "bad crowds". Third, the students noted the importance of self-management strategies.

“Students commonly recommended cognitive strategies to acquire self-control over one’s behavior and emotions,” (2000, 8). Fourth, students emphasized the importance of encouragement and praise from teachers and parents. These four aspects are crucial to the academic success of today’s youth, and the findings can be extended to all racial and ethnic groups.

Sternberg (2002) proposes that the key to academic success lies in the teaching strategy, specifically what he calls “teaching for successful intelligence”. Teaching for successful intelligence means to teach all students in a variety of ways so as to address all students’ strengths and weaknesses. It means “alternating teaching strategies so that teaching reaches (almost) every student at least some of the time (2002, 392).

There are four ways in which to teach: teaching for memory learning, teaching for analytical learning, teaching for creative learning and teaching for practical learning. According to Sternberg, each student will excel in at least one of these areas, therefore if we can teach to these areas we will always be hitting at least one students’ strength.

The areas in which students need to improve are important as well. They need to recognize these areas and be given skills to improve their knowledge in these areas.

Sternberg adds, that as teachers we do not need to know each students’ strengths and weaknesses, but by teaching in all of the ways one is addressing some students’ strengths at the same time one is addressing students’ weaknesses,” (2002, 389).

Mosenthal, Lipson, Torncello, Russ and Mekkelsen (2002) studied six schools in Vermont to assess their success in obtaining reading level achievement. Each of the six

schools “made changes in response to a time of struggle and low performance,” (2002, 363). Mosenthal et al. noted four common factors among the six successful schools. First, each school had “administrative and curricular leadership in literacy, and the schools’ commitment to literary improvement had remained consistent for 8–10 years” (2002, 351). Second “the school community was focused on a vision or belief in children’s ability to learn, and there was ongoing communication among the faculty” (2002, 351). Third, the K–4 teachers were considered to have a high level of expertise and were knowledgeable and articulate about their work. Fourth, students were provided ample opportunity and time to read and talk about their books. Mosenthal et al. concluded that the “success” of these schools was “a complicated process that includes time and leadership, community and autonomy, expertise, and opportunity to read” (2002, 363).

From the research described above, it is clear that there is a goal we are all striving for, a goal commonly referred to as “success”. The literature suggests steps to creating a successful reading program and a successful math program. We have read about the qualities a successful student must possess, and ways in which this student must act. In addition we have learned ways a teacher can elicit successful behaviors from their students and appropriate teaching methods. We have heard from teachers, administrators, experts, even parents. However, the voice that is missing is that of the students, the very people that we are trying to help reach the ultimate goal, success.

It is problematic that the word “success” is frequently used in educational language, however, the educational community often fails to create a specific definition of the word. If we want our students to achieve success we need to communicate to them what that means, we need to give them a goal to strive for. In creating this definition for our students, we need to first find out how students define and look at success, and then use this knowledge to help create a working definition. For my research project I focused on student definitions of success and how these definitions affect the students’ experience in school. First, I was curious how students define success and second, who influences this definition. Do students base their perceptions of success on what they see and hear at home, do they come from the classroom or school setting, do they come from within the child and their personal opinion, or do they come from another source? In addition I wanted to know what it is that makes students feel successful? Do they feel successful when they get a certain grade on a test or assignment, or do they feel successful simply completing the test or assignment? I feel it is extremely important to get the student’s perspective on success, rather than just giving them a definition and having them work towards that goal. If the students are part of the defining process, and thus part of the goal setting process, they will be more motivated to reach the goal that they have set.

Methodology

Rationale

This research project involves an ethnographic case study focused upon understanding how fifth grade students define success. I uncovered what I consider to be lacking in the current research on success in education: how students define success and what it is that makes students feel successful. I chose to do an ethnographic case study because I wanted to become a part of the classroom culture in addition to better understanding the greater culture of the educational community. One day I plan to have my own classroom, and I wanted to begin to form an understanding of the culture in which I will one day be immersed. In addition, I feel it is important for teachers to encourage their students to strive for success. If we know what makes children feel successful we can help them reach their goals and make their feelings of success more attainable. I feel this research has helped me to better understand my student's needs, in addition to helping my students feel successful at school.

Sample: Research Site and Participants

Eaglewood Elementary¹ was the research site for this study. Eaglewood is located in western Washington, in a large urban environment. At the time of research, Eaglewood had 425 students, grades kindergarten through fifth. Fifty percent of the teachers held their Master's Degree or Ph.D. The school is home to children from a wide variety of socio-economic backgrounds. The majority of students are at the lower end

¹ I am using a pseudo-name here in order to maintain the anonymity of the participants in my study.

of the socioeconomic bracket in the community. My sample included sixteen fifth graders in one particular classroom at Eaglewood. For this research project I observed all sixteen students, and distributed surveys to each student. This is the classroom that I was student teaching in during the winter and spring. I feel this research not only gave me a better understanding of “success”, but also provided me with a better understanding of the children and classroom in which I was student teaching. In the future, this research will help me to further motivate and better relate to my students.

Instrumentation

For this research study, I collected data in three ways: observation, face to face interviews and surveys. I started by observing the students in the classroom to get an understanding of the routine of the class, the expectations and the class culture. I watched the students’ reactions to different lessons and questions posed by the teacher. I also paid close attention to their reactions and behaviors when they received a grade for an assignment or test, or when they chose to answer a question in front of the class. I looked for physical markers of success: for example did the students look happy and proud, or frustrated, discouraged or upset. I also wanted to observe the children to gain a familiarity with their personalities. One student may have looked happy to me when in actuality they were really confused. It was very important for me to attempt to understand the students and their personalities to better read their body language.

I also had students complete surveys about success and motivation. Surveys were an effective method to get children thinking about the topic of success and helped

me to draw general conclusions. If students were shy or unwilling to share their thoughts and feelings in an interview, a survey allowed them to remain anonymous and still participate in the research. This also provided a way for both myself and the students to become better acquainted with one another. The questions on these surveys were aimed towards gaining a better understanding of how students look at success and define success, and were asked questions about these topics. The survey included the following questions:

- Do you feel successful when you get a 2 on a test? Why or why not?
- Do you feel successful when you get a 3 or better on a test or assignment? Why or why not?
- Who motivates you to get good grades? myself parent teacher
- How does that person(s) motivate you to get good grades?
- Do you feel successful when your parent compliments you about school?
Why?
- Do you feel successful when your teacher compliments you about school?
Why?
- Do you feel UNSuccessful when you are put down by others? Why or why not?
- Do you feel UNSuccessful when you receive a poor test or assignment score?
- How do you define success in school?

- What makes you feel successful at school?
- What makes you feel UNsuccessful at school?
- Is it important to you to be successful in school? Why or why not?
- Do you feel pressure to be successful? Why or why not?

In addition to observations and surveys, I also conducted face to face interviews with four children in the class. After discussion with my cooperating teacher, I chose four students with a range of abilities with whom to conduct one-on-one interviews. By having a wide range of students I was able to discover how children who are currently excelling in class define success, how children who are having a bit of difficulty define success and how children who are struggling define success. I wanted to hear directly from the students how they verbalize a definition of success, what this means to them and how this can be achieved. For this portion of the interview I asked the students to tell me in their own words what “success” means to them. I also wanted to know what it is that makes them feel successful and why this is desirable, and who or what encourages their motivation. During the interviews I asked questions along these lines. I feel that face to face interviews provided the best quality information in finding student definitions for success in the academic field. This interaction also allowed me to clarify what I witnessed during the observations and gathered from the surveys.

After collecting my data I processed it and drew conclusions, as outlined below, then conducted a second round of interviews to make sure I drew my conclusions correctly. This allowed me to demonstrate to the students that I understood what they

were speaking about and clarify ideas when necessary. This triangulation helped to ensure that I was both drawing conclusions correctly and completing trustworthy research. It is important that my work be trustworthy so that others may also benefit and learn. I also needed to review my data to ensure that I had enough information upon which to draw my conclusions. This allowed me to go back and collect more data when necessary.

Procedures

After collecting my data I sorted my way through it to look for similarities and differences. I also took some time to look for trends or patterns. I was curious if there would be a multitude of similarities between the children's definitions and their sources, or if the opposite would occur and there would be many differences. The reality wound up somewhere in the middle however, and each child did in fact define success in their own unique way, with similarities throughout. Finding trends and patterns helped the students as well. They found that other students had similar thoughts and beliefs and made them feel less alone in their thoughts. This was also a way of helping the students better understand their peers and classmates.

Data

The first step in my data collection consisted of observations. I spent a great deal of time in my cooperating classroom prior to the start of my student teaching observing the students and the climate of the classroom. I paid close attention to when students would answer a question in front of the class. The classroom climate was very

nurturing and encouraging so many students felt comfortable answering questions regardless of the certainty of their answer. In addition, these students wore both their grades and attitudes towards their grades on their sleeves. When handing back an assignment or test it became very clear who did "well" and who could have done "better". Some students would break out in a huge grin, others would smile and then immediately turn to their friend to compare grades, while other students looked at the score and put the paper in their desk. A few students, typically those that tended to do poorly, wouldn't even look at their grade, they would simply stuff the paper in their desk.

The first time I observed the teacher handing back a math test was an eye opening experience for me. This taught me much about the students I had spent very little time with. The students that did well stood out right away and for some reason, many of those tests seemed to be handed back first. Those that got "3's" smiled as they flipped through to see which few questions they missed. These few then proceeded to look across the room and hold up fingers according to the number grade they had received. The students that did this discretely were the girls. I can remember one student, a male, looking across the room and loudly saying, "hey x, I got a 2, how'd you do?". The teacher frowned, literally, upon this. Those that knew they wouldn't do well, just a couple, looked at their score quickly and then shoved the test in their desk and went back to their handout or book. I still remember the look on one boy's face. He was the lowest achieving student in the class and math was his toughest subject. He

waited anxiously, tapping his pencil on his desk, then got his paper, one of the last few. Not even bothering to look, he shoved the paper in his desk and put his head down on his desk. The look of defeat on his face was heartbreaking, especially when I realized he had yet to look at his score. I watched him for a while to see how long it would take to build up the courage to look at his score. Eventually his head peered down to grab a pencil or something of the sort and I watched as inside his desk he flipped over his paper and looked at the score, grabbed his pencil and brought his head back up. His face was like a reader board for his score, he had clearly done poorly, as the look of disappointment reflected on his face. Most tests that were handed back worked in exactly the same fashion. These children truly are creatures of habit.

While observing, I also paid close attention to when students would volunteer to answer questions in front of the classroom. There were a select few that would volunteer all of the time, regardless of subject or their certainty of the answer. A couple of these students were the higher achieving students, while others were more average. The interesting thing to me was that the two highest achieving students in the classroom rarely raised their hand. When no one was available the teacher would call on them because he knew they would have the answer, or at least point the class in the right direction. Then there were the students who would raise their hand only in their subject of confidence. One student in particular always wanted to read in front of the class or come up to the document camera and show her work. It was odd if she didn't raise her hand and she would get very upset with the teacher if he didn't call on her.

She would say things like “come on”, “aw man”, “what”, etc. As an outsider this made it easy for me to figure out the students’ self determined strengths and weaknesses.

Math time was a very telling ninety minute period. The school district had just adopted a new math curriculum that involved a heavy pace. Half way through the year the students had reached their math limit and the topics were way above grade level. While observing a geometry lesson, the teacher was determined to get the lower achieving students on the same page as the higher achieving students. I could sense this when he only called on the lower achieving students and worked until they reached his goal. One student could not grasp the current concept so the teacher went through an example with him in front of the class. Repeatedly this student would throw down his pencil and put his head in his book, obvious signs that he felt he was being unsuccessful. The teacher worked with him until eventually he got it, and he response “man, that was it, that was easy”. It clearly was not easy, but it appeared he felt he had to make a comeback in front of his peers. Simply by being in the room and watching these kids, it became clear who deemed themselves a success and who a failure. Body language is very powerful, even to those who don’t know us very well.

The second step in my data collection involved a general survey. After receiving the survey, we went over each question as a class to eliminate questions or confusions. The data has been organized into the following chart.

| Survey Question | Actual Student Responses |
|---|--|
| How do you define success at school? | getting good grades; getting along with everyone, or other students; receiving a compliment; doing your best work and giving your best effort; making good choices; behaving well |
| What makes you feel successful at school? | getting good grades, a three or a four; trying your best or your hardest; teaching somebody how to do something; getting spelling words correct; getting done what you put your mind to; getting along with others; the teacher compliments you by saying "good job" |
| What makes you feel unsuccessful at school? | know or feel you did bad on a test, or get a bad grade; get a two or a one on a report card; when I am being mean to others; when I don't understand something; when I am doing a math test; when I get the opposite answer in math; not trying my best, knowing I could have done better, when people laugh at you or make fun of you |
| Who motivates you to get good grades? Myself Parents Teacher | Two students responded "myself" only. Four students responded "parent" only. Three students responded "myself" and "parent". Two students responded "parent" and "teacher". Five students circled all three options. Comments on this topic included the following: tell myself I can do it; be proud of myself; I want a better life with a lot of opportunity; my parents cheer me on; my parents tell me to take my time; I want to show my parents I am doing well in school and make them proud; when I do well my parents brag; my parents reward me; my parents want me to have a better life with opportunity; my parents aren't smart and they want me to complete their dream and make them proud; I want him (teacher) to be proud; I am here to learn and push myself; my teacher helps me learn and understand; my teacher says take your time. |

The third step in my data collection was to conduct one-on-one interviews with four students from the class. These four students ranged in ability from low to high. Student number one, female, is a moderately high achieving student receiving mostly threes and some twos. She defined success as "getting good grades and trying your

hardest, giving it your all.” She felt she was successful at school because she “receives good grades and is congratulated by her parents”. “I think a good grade is a three or a four. To be successful at school a student needs to get good grades by studying a lot, listening carefully and taking notes. When asked who wants her to be successful she replied, “my teachers, parents, grandparents and myself”. When asked if there is a reward for being successful, she replied, “sometimes my parents will take me out for ice cream. When I’m older they might take me out shopping or something.” I asked if she felt it was important to be successful at school. She said, “it is important to be successful at school if you are a good student, if you aren’t a good student it is still important but these kids might not think that it is as important.” She told me that, “a bad grade would be like a 1 or a 2, and that is not successful. If I got a 1 or a 2 I think I would feel bad, like I didn’t try very hard.” When asked if she talks about success at school or grades with her friends she replied, “Not really, I talk about it with my parents sometimes. Sometime me at my friends talk about like tests and stuff out at recess, but not really.” When asked if she worries about grades she replied “sometimes”. When asked if other students worry about grades she said, “I think some students worry about it, yeah.” I asked what she thought success at school leads to and she replied, “Um, like a good life and a good job and stuff.”

Student two, a female, is a high achieving student, receiving mostly threes and a few fours. When asked how she would define success, student number two replied, “success is when you do a good and you feel proud of yourself for doing good.” When

asked if she feels she is successful at school she replied, "um yeah, sometimes. I think I am successful when I get a good grade or I improve on something". I asked how a student becomes successful, she replied, "they have to try their best and feel good and confident about what they are doing". I asked her if they try their best and get a poor grade then is this still considered successful? She replied, "yeah, because they tried." I asked who wants her to be successful and she said, "my parents and my teacher. My parents know that I can do good, I do it for myself too". When asked if there is a reward for being successful she said, "yeah, it's not like a physical reward, it makes you feel good when you do something well." I asked about rewards later in life and she told me, "if you are like a business person and you do successful, you may earn money or something". I asked if she is rewarded for her success, "my parents tell me that I did good and that they are proud of me." I asked if success at school is important and she said, "yes because then that shows that you are doing your best and you can get your best grades as you can." I asked what would be considered unsuccessful at school, "something that you didn't really pay attention to or that you struggled with but you never asked for help. This is bad." When asked what makes a successful student she replied, "if you try your best then that is the effort and if you get a good grade, you get a good grade because you try your best." I asked if she and her friends talk about success at school and she said, "We talk about stuff like if we, we ask each other questions sometimes, like do you know how to do this, or can you help me with this or whatever. Its different if you get it from an adult or someone that is your age explains it to you because you

get it better if someone your age explains it to you.” I asked her if she talks about these things on the playground and she said, “sometimes like if we are standing in line for four square or something. I asked if she thinks success at school matters to other students, and she told me “it depends on the student if they really want to do good and they are trying their best then that’s a good thing, but if they don’t care about anything or doing good in school then it’s a bad thing.” I asked who she talks about grades with besides her friends, she replied “I talk about like if I get a bad grade my dad will explain to me stuff.” I wanted to know if being successful at school is something that she worries about and she said, “sometimes maybe like if I’m not doing really well.” I wanted to know what being successful at school meant for the future, she replied, it leads to something good, like if you do good at school you will do good in the future.” I asked what she considers good grades, she said, “three and four are, but if you try your best and you didn’t really get it then that’s okay.”

Student number three, a male, is a moderately high achieving student, receiving mostly twos and threes. When asked to define success, student number three replied, “it is when you get things right a lot and you are happy about it.” I asked if he feels successful at school and he said, “yes, because I get a lot of answers right and I can figure answers out easily.” A successful student knows “what they are talking about, they can’t just start talking about something and not know what it means. They feel proud of themselves.” Success is about “the grades, feeling good and about honors and awards and stuff.” To be successful, “get homework in on time, just hopefully you know

what you are talking about when you talk about it.” I asked who wants him to be successful and he told me, “my parents want me to and I want to be.” I asked if he is rewarded by his parents for being successful, he said “sometimes, unless I get good grades, I get rewards at school for earning a certain amount of AR points. My mom wants me to get at least a two or higher on everything, or improve on a certain grade, like get a three or higher, then they take me out to dinner or something.” I asked if there is a reward for success later in life. He replied, “yeah because you get paid and you get raises, and you get promotions.” I asked if success at school is important, he said, “it is important because if you are not successful you can get held back and get bad grades and you won’t be able to do things.” I asked what would be unsuccessful, he replied, “just laying back in class and not paying attention. This is a bad thing. Two and lower are unsuccessful.” I asked if he thinks success at school matters to students, he told me, “some students. I think it does, I know like somebody in some other class don’t think of it.” I asked who he talks about school with, and he said, “I talk about it with my parents and my family a lot because sometimes I bring home a poor grade and they ask me to tell why and stuff.” I asked if success at school is something that he stresses out about, he said, “not really, sometimes. I don’t know about other people that much, but I think they might.” I asked what success in school will lead to, he replied, “it will lead to you graduate from high school and pass on tests that you need to take and get certain jobs that you want.” I asked if success is all about the grades or if it is more than that, he said, “it’s about the effort and how it makes you feel.”

Student number four, male, is a low achieving student, receiving mostly twos and ones. When asked to define success student number four replied, "getting an A on a math test. Getting the grade is more important." I asked if he feels successful at school, he replied, "sometimes, well sometimes I'll get all my spelling test right, like all the words right, then the next week, I'll get like four right." I asked what makes a student successful and he replied, "probably being smart, straight fours, A's, and really good at stuff." To become successful, "practice, have tutors, study like every night and stuff, practice hard and study hard. Practice and when you get done with something really quick you can practice, or when you are done go straight to reading." I asked who wants him to be successful, he replied, "friends, family, my teacher, I want to be a chef, so I watch my dad cook." When asked if there is a reward for being successful, he replied, "there used to be, but no. Like in third grade I got an A, we got a sundae, or if I got all my spelling word right, I got ice cream from Dairy Queen. The sundae came from my teacher, the rest from my parents." I asked if there is a reward later in life, he told me, "yeah, vacations." He considers being unsuccessful, "just don't pay attention, fool around, laugh, don't care about your grades, sometimes you just try hard, try hard and you still can't get an A on your test. You might get it once but it's not that common. This is a bad thing." I asked if he talks about success at school with his friends, he said "no". I asked if he thinks it matters to students, he replied "yeah, some people are like oh my gosh I must get this right." He talks about school "with my parents." I asked if success at school is something that he worries about and he replied, "yeah, sometimes.

Get like homework done, I just forget about it cuz I don't really want to spend an hour and a half just doing a piece of paper when I will get most of the questions wrong except for a couple and then just throw it away. The WASL was pretty bad, it took me like four hours to do it. I try hard, I try hard, then I'm all happy, then I get back my test, then bam, I get like a one." I asked if success at school leads to anything, he replied, "a woo-hoo, good job. After high school, people say good job, then you live your life, that's all." I asked him what he thinks is successful, he told me, "a three would be pretty nice, a four would be great. One and two are not good".

Analysis

After analyzing my data, I have concluded that my original hypothesis was correct, we all have a different definition of success. Each student appears to view success in a slightly different light. Student number one felt that success involved getting good grades and giving it your all, while student number three felt success was getting things right a lot and being happy about it. After spending time with these students, these definitions match their personalities. Student number one tries her hardest all the time, and is very critical of herself. On the other hand, student number three frequently answers questions and is a very happy-go-lucky kid. Both definitions match the personality of the students. And while there may be similarities in our thoughts and definitions, our definitions are as unique and individual as we are, and may be fit to change as we make our way through the educational process and even life itself.

After reading through the surveys, I had the notion that success was really a measure of the grades these kids were receiving. There was a unanimous sense that a score of one or two was considered unsuccessful and a score of three or four was considered successful. In addition to grades, to be successful one must try their best. For example, one student wrote, "doing your best work and giving your best effort." Another student wrote, "getting done what you put your mind to." This became a qualifier for some students, if they were trying their best and still received a one or a two, then they would consider themselves successful. So the initial response of "success means that you get a good grade", does not hold true. Success then becomes the product of trying your hardest and getting the best possible grade that you can, based on your abilities. This definition will then mean different things for each student. For many of the top students in the classroom, trying their hardest would ensure them a three or a four. For other students in the classroom, trying their hardest would ensure them a two or a one. All are able to find success, it simply is accompanied by a different number grade.

In addition, I discovered that parents play a major role in the academic success of their children. Eighty-six percent of the students wrote on their survey that their parents motivate them to get good grades. One individual wrote, "I want to show my parents I am doing well in school and make them proud." Another wrote, "when I do well my parents brag." Other student responses included, "my parents reward me", and

“my parents want me to have a better life with opportunity.” All in all these children are clearly motivated by the praise, approval and acceptance that their parents provide.

After reading the surveys I had the impression that each student had a somewhat similar view of academic success. As mentioned previously, every student included that a three and a four were considered successful, while a one and two were unsuccessful. In addition, many students included ideas about trying your best. The students felt that academic success involved trying your hardest to get good grades, while receiving encouragement and praise from your parents. As I began my one-on-one interviews with the students, I began to realize that generalizations, such as those just mentioned, were not always accurate. Each student had a different take on the word success and how it fit into their life, as highlighted below. This is when I was convinced that there is no universal definition for success among students, as it applies to each individual student.

For student number one, success was wrapped up in grades. As a higher achieving student, good grades came naturally to her and it was easy to see success as a number grade on her report card. If she tried she would receive a good grade and consider herself successful. She defined success as “getting good grades and trying your hardest, giving it your all.” She was doing this for herself, but also for the praise and adoration of her parents. She felt that success in school was important and that later in life it would lead to “a good life and a good job”. She only worried about grades and success in school “sometimes” and when she wanted to talk about it, she spoke with

her parents. For this student good grades come fairly easy, and she regularly tries her best, thus it is easy to see how her definition of success fits her current academic mindset.

Student number two, one of the highest achieving students in the class, felt that success came to those that tried their hardest, regardless of grades. It is interesting to me that when asked if she feels successful, her response was "sometimes". This student regularly gets threes and fours and is at the top of her class. This surprised me, but also was a large indicator that grades were not the all encompassing factor of success for her. Maybe she doesn't always try her hardest and this is when she feels unsuccessful, even though she receives above average grades.

Student number three is one of the more confident boys in the classroom. His grades range from twos to threes and he is a regular participant in classroom discussions. For this student, success means participating in class and being confident in your answers. Success is not dependent on grades, rather it is seen when you receive awards and honors for your accomplishments. Again, this student doesn't have to try extremely hard to earn acceptable grades. His definition of success and explanations of how to achieve academic success fit his personality exactly. He actively participates in classroom discussions and is a regular volunteer. It is easy to see that he regularly tries his hardest and encourages those around him to do the same. After observing him and listening to him speak about success, I can see that he feels successful in class when he contributes to a discussion and is able to demonstrate his confidence.

Student number four has very low self-esteem and little to no confidence in academic matters. His toughest subject is math and he brought up this subject frequently as we talked, as well as spelling, as areas where he does not flourish. He felt that success was getting an A on a math test. Even when trying your hardest, if you don't receive a good grade, you have not been successful. In addition this student receives minimal parent encouragement, which I believe is a factor in his attitude towards school. While observing him I noticed that he doesn't try very much, he has found ways to make it appear as though he is participating in the lesson, but in actuality is staring off into space. Unfortunately this student is learning to compensate for his lack of academic ability with unhealthy strategies. He explained to me that even when he does try his hardest he rarely receives a good grade, so does not see the point in continuing to give it his all. I truly believe that if this student could receive a minimal taste of success, it would change his whole outlook on school. I think that if he could get a three or a four on a math test he would feel successful and would have more motivation. Hopefully he will experience this in the near future.

Interestingly the first three students, all average or above average, saw academic success as a means to success later in life. When asked, they all commented that success would either lead to a good job, raises or promotions, or happiness after college. All three of these students have strong parental support and are doing well in school. Student number four on the other hand had a much different idea about the future. As a lower achieving student, he regularly receives ones and twos on his report

card and is taken out of class to receive extra assistance. He did not see a connection between academic success and success later in life. Instead he felt that academic success in later years, would receive the same response he sees now, a pat on the back followed by a "good job".

Recommendation

I began this research with the notion that the definition of success is dependent on a person, their attitude and their situation. The above research, however, has shown that definitions of success extend much further than this. Student definitions of success give us insight into their strengths and weaknesses. Each individual definition is unique to that person, as are their strengths and weaknesses. I could not help but notice that the two go hand in hand. For the student who earns threes and fours easily, success is a product of trying your hardest. On the other hand, for the student who has only seen ones and twos on his report card, success is a matter of receiving that three or four. Each definition of success is unique, a voicing of the innermost thoughts of these children.

As we as adults continue to strive to meet our own definitions of success, we encourage our students to do the same. While we each have our own definition, we are all reaching for something unique. To truly be able to assist our students in their quest for success, we must first ask them what they are reaching for. Only then can we begin to point them in the right direction. In addition if we sit down and ask students how to define success, we are engaging them in the decision making process. If they feel that

they are a part of the process they will have greater motivation to reach the goals that they, themselves have set. This can also provide insight to us as educators, helping us to better see where our students are experiencing areas of need. In these definitions of success are hidden cries for help, not for all students but for some. If a student is desperately trying to accomplish a three on a math test, this will be reflected in their definition of success. After discovering this we can better accommodate our students and their needs. The idea that there is a one-size-fits-all definition is not realistic, nor is it necessary. Maybe the beauty of a unique definition of success is that it forces us to engage further with our students and find out exactly what they need and how they can be successful.

Conclusion

It is human nature to want to be successful, in life, in school, at our jobs, at home, and in our relationships. What constitutes success will not only be different in each of these areas, it will also be different for each individual. We all want different things in life, have different goals, and thus have a different measuring stick with which we judge ourselves and our accomplishments. As we progress through life, this measuring stick will change and morph to fit our lifestyle, beliefs, needs and strengths. As children, however, we are encouraged to believe that success means the same thing for all people, and is attainable in a variety of ways.

When asked what they want for their future, many children will answer “to be successful”. For each child this response will have a different meaning. Whatever the

meaning this word holds for these children, it is our job as educators to ensure that we are preparing these children for a life they deem “successful”. This goal begins with a definition for the word “success”. We cannot begin to encourage children to achieve when we do not have a working definition for success. It is important for us to go directly to the source and ask the students how they define success and where these definitions come from. I grew up in a home where I was constantly encouraged to do my best. When I slipped and made mistakes I was encouraged to try again and again until I felt successful. I want my students to feel this same encouragement and feel that they too can achieve success. Upon the realization that success holds a different meaning for each individual, it becomes increasingly important to find out what this word stands for in each child and assist them in their journey to feel successful and utter the phrase “I am successful”.

This idea of a unique definition for all brings about more questions and opens up new doors for the future. In the current literature, successful programs and successful qualities students possess are discussed. Maybe we are trying to fit all children into the same mold, when we should be allowing them to break this mold. Every child will not find success in the same math or reading program; such a unified view of success seems illogical. Instead each child will find success in their own right, if they know what they are searching for. The question then becomes, how do we ensure that each child finds their own definition? How do we make sure that each child is able to taste success? Why are we trying to set a standard which surely every child will not

meet? The questions are endless, however, if we know that each child is unique and has their own unique definition of success, then why are we trying to make all children meet standards that force them to be the same? Maybe we should be spending less time making students the same and more time exploring their unique gifts.

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