

Argumentative
reasons why
students' voice
should be heard in
the teachers' period...

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Abstract

This research proposal seeks funding of \$67, 000 for a one year research project on high school student engagement in teacher assessment, specifically in the New York City Department of Education. While there is a great deal of relationship on the relationship between student engagement and delinquency, little evidence exists examining the specific relationship between giving students a voice in their education and long-term outcomes. For this reason, the research proposal suggests that examining direct student feedback of teachers and curriculum as one sustainable method of encouraging student engagement in the short-term and avoiding delinquency in the long run. This suggestion is based on an initial literature review of academic evidence surrounding student engagement, teacher assessment, and juvenile delinquency. In short, the research points to the fact that the current system of evaluation in New York is sorely lacking, and a better alternative is needed. The research project bases its subsequent study on this contention. The project will conduct surveys and follow up panel interviews with subjects in New York City to address this topic.

“ I think it’s important for us as a society to remember that the youth within juvenile justice systems are, most of the time, youths who simply haven’t had the right mentors and supporters around them – because of circumstances beyond their control.”

~ Q’orianka Kilcher

Introduction& Specific Aims

Educational success is often one of the major measures of success, and rightly so. A well-educated population is more likely to perform better economically as well as socially – and this starts with high school. This research project seeks to examine what makes students at the high school levels succeed – and, on the reverse side, what the major causes of juvenile delinquency in high school are. Based on an initial literature review and existing survey data, this research project hypothesizes that lower student engagement in school often translates into higher rates of delinquency. This is, at face value, a very broad subject and will take some specification in order to be adequately addressed.

The relationship between juvenile delinquency and engagement in the classroom are not always immediately linked. However, as the quote above points out, a student's experience in school can often make a drastic difference in terms of their long-term outcome. This contention is absolutely confirmed in existing literature, as will be pointed out below. However, there is little research on the link between how a student views his or her engagement and value in a school setting and their likelihood to turn to juvenile delinquency. This is the more specific topic to be addressed by this research project.

This project seeks to address the relationship between juvenile delinquency and engagement in school. In addition to the research supporting an empirical relationship between these two factors, the project would also like to utilize additional research to make a normative argument for how this

relationship can be taken advantage of for the betterment of both students and teachers. More specifically, the project will examine the following research question: How do students view their engagement in a school setting, how is this related to student outcome, and how can this relationship be changed for the better in the New York educational system? In answering this research question, the research project has several specific aims – all of which are related to the research question, but present their own set of research, evidence, and interpretations. Each of these specific aims are discussed below, as well as addressed in the literature review and research design.

The first aim of this research project is to form an adequate picture of the current evaluation system in New York. This will be achieved primarily by conducting an overview and content analysis of New York Department of Education material – including their own website and publications. The findings will be further supported by follow up interviews with Department of Education staff, such as supervisors, principals, and teachers. The second specific aim of this research project is to form a picture of the role of teacher-student relationship in delinquency. More specifically, the research project seeks to address how each group views engagement in the classroom, as well as their views on providing the opportunity for students to engage in the evaluation of both teachers and curriculum. This will be the crux of the research project, and will be addressed in three primary ways: a literature review of existing research on the subject, a survey of both teachers and students in the New York City school system, and follow up interviews with a small group of both students and teachers. This may be the

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most difficult from a methodology standpoint, but nevertheless is the most important aspect of the research project.

The third and final specific aim of the research project is to address what can be improved in this relationship between engagement and delinquency. This also will be addressed through a combination of literature review, survey responses, and interviews. While the main goal of this research project is to provide empirical evidence in regards to the relationship between engagement in school and delinquency in society, the research project cannot stop there. Instead, it must also address what can be done to improve engagement in school and, ultimately, reduce delinquency. As noted above, based on initial literature review and survey results, this research project hypothesizes that student-led evaluation and feedback systems, designed to give students a voice and increase engagement, will have a positive effect on delinquency rates in New York. This strategy will be particularly contrasted with existing systems of evaluation, such as standardized testing.

Literature Review

There is a great deal of research on the subject of juvenile delinquency and engagement more generally, and this research project intends to rely on this existing research to formulate its own set of survey questions, interview questions, and overall assessment of student engagement in New York.

Therefore, it is beneficial to conduct an initial review of literature here and establish how this existing research will serve to inform the research project as it is conducted. The proposal does not intend to delve into each of these

studies in detail, but rather to provide an overview of findings on all of the topics relevant to the research question of this project. This overview is presented here.

The first instance of research supporting this research project's question and hypothesis is the Nissen&Lemire (2014) study on outcome measures for students. The study acknowledges that there is a "robust connection between a positive alliance between teacher and students, whether the teachers' way of teaching facilitate the learning processes of the students, and high expectation of the students" (Nissen&Lemire, 2014, 26). Despite these findings, the scholars' own research also shows that these connections have not led to a "specific tool for the teacher to use on a day-to-day basis" (Nissen&Lemire, 2014, 26). Therefore, this research demonstrates a connection between better teacher-student relationships and academic achievement, but fails to produce specific tools for this connection and feedback. This research project intends to produce this tool.

However, New York has attempted to implement specific tools along these lines. According the New York State Union of Teachers, "Every child deserves an effective teacher...and every teacher, when evaluated for effectiveness, deserves an objective process that integrates evaluations into ongoing professional growth" (NYSUT, 2015, n. p.). With this in mind, the organization has established the Teacher Evaluation and Development (TED) system, which was created to "integrate evaluations in a continuum that advances teacher practice and student learning" (NYSUT, 2015, n. p.). This research project will examine the TED system in more detail, including how it

has benefited both students and teachers and where it falls short in the long run. For instance, a New York Times article states that “ early results in states where new evaluation system shave been in place for more than a year are not much different from the old results” (Baker, 2013, n. p.). This project intends to address why this is, particularly from a teacher and student point of view. The goal of systems such as TED is to “ improve teaching through more detailed and regular feedback” (Baker, 2013, n. p.). However, the results pointed out in this article and more show that this goal has not necessarily been achieved. In addition to addressing why this accomplishment has not been met, the research project intends to address how the system can be improved.

Other research also supports the idea that there is a lack of adequate teacher assessment – particularly in the standardized testing method. One Washington Post article points out that the “ use of student standardized test scores to evaluate teachers” holds dire “ consequences for the students... and they are just starting to be seen” (Strauss, 2012, n. p.). More specifically, the article points out that “ Teachers who have students whose prior test scores were higher were advantaged, while teachers whose students have lower prior achievement were disadvantaged”; in the long run, this translates into the best teachers and principals leaving schools and students to avoid the “ ineffective label” (Strauss, 2012, n. p.). For this reason, the research project is sure to find that standardized testing is not an adequate method for assessing a teacher’s performance, let alone the engagement between students and teachers. As the Washington Post article concludes, “ How can an evaluation system in which the evaluators

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themselves have little faith possibly be productive?” (Strauss, 2012, n. p.). It is for this reason, among others, that the research project will forward the suggestion of student-led evaluation and engagement as opposed to the current model.

The idea that students should be actively engaged – not only in the classroom but in the evaluation of their teachers – is supported in further research as well. For instance, one study found that “ Student perceptions of caring on the part of their teachers were found to be substantially associated with the students’ evaluation of their teachers, their affective learning, and their perceptions of their cognitive learning” (Teven&McCroskey, 1997, n. p.). In other words, a better relationship between teachers and students affects not only learning but also their own self-perceptions – which can ostensibly go a long way in avoiding juvenile delinquency. Perceived caring, then, can have long-term as well as short-term benefits. This research paper will examine how the direct evaluation of teachers by students can further help this relationship and subsequent self-perception.

Again, the current system of evaluation does not appear to be adequate to achieving this bettered relationship and self-perception. The research of L. Darling-Hammond, presented in two separate studies, serves to reinforce this point. As the scholar points out in a co-authored study, “ Practitioners, researches, and policy makers agree that most current teacher evaluation systems do little to help teachers improve or to support personnel decision making” (Darling-Hammond et al., 2012, 8). Not only that, but the study finds a “ growing consensus that evidence of teacher contributions to

student learning should be part of teacher evaluation systems, along with evidence about the quality of teacher practices” (Darling-Hammond et al, 2012, 8). It is clear that the current system of standardized testing does not come anywhere close to evaluating this aspect of the teacher-student relationship and student performance in relation to teaching practices in school.

This is because the standardized test model of evaluation is based on the assumption that “ student learning is measured well by a given test, is influenced by the teacher alone, and is independent from the growth of classmates and other aspects of the classroom context. None of these assumptions is well supported by current evidence” (Darling-Hammond et al., 2012, 8). In other words, standardized tests do not take into account all of the relevant aspects of student performance, engagement, and the relationship between teachers and students. This is confirmed by another study from Darling-Hammond (2015), which states that “ Standardized tests in the United States are criticized for their narrowness and focus on lower level skills,” and that this type of test design “ translates into bias against those teachers working with the lowest-performing or the highest-performing classes” (132). Therefore, this research project will examine alternative methods of evaluation – particularly those that involve the direct feedback of students.

The approach of ‘ giving students a voice’, so to speak, is supported by further research on the topic. One study, while based in Australia, supports the idea of involving students in feedback processes as much as possible: “

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The benefits of such a targeted program cannot be underestimated, not only for the students who are actively involved, but also for the teaching staff and speakers who support the events”; more specifically, the program “ provides students with the opportunity to share and test their opinions and, most importantly, to be heard” (Murray, 2012, n. p.). Giving students the chance to speak – and to be heard by administrators and teachers alike – can certainly increase not only their engagement, but also their self-perception. This is confirmed by another study, which directly asked students to identify their wishes in terms of engagement. The study found “ A uniform voice identified in participants’ responses clearly expressed a desire to be viewed as partners and have a more active role in the program in terms of their own learning processes” (Flavian & Kass, 2015, n. p.). While this was a relatively limited empirical study, it provides the basis for further research into students’ perspectives for this research project.

One final note on existing research is in regards to juvenile delinquency itself. According to one book on the development of child delinquency and effective interventions, the authors find that “ Interventions can take place on either the supply or on the demand side of delinquency” (Slot & Hoeve, 2016, 17). Demand side intervention is through the penal system, and is a response to existing delinquency. In contrast, supply side intervention helps to avoid delinquency in the first place, and “ aims to cut off the supply of future chronic, serious and violent offenders” (Slot & Hoeve, 2016, 17). In this way, the research project will examine supply-side (or preventative) interventions for delinquency – including student engagement and feedback. While this is not the only response, it should be the starting point for

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educational administrators and policymakers. The research project intends to address specific methods that these parties can take to enact more effective preventative interventions - particularly in New York.

Design & Methods

New York state - and the New York City Educational Department more specifically - is the focus of this research project. The region represents a great opportunity for research, as the New York City public school system is the largest public school system in the entire nation (NYCED 2015). In fact, the district serves over 1.1 million students and manages more than 1,800 individual schools (NYCED 2015). With an annual budget of close to \$25 billion, the school district would benefit from effective programming in student engagement and teacher evaluation - as well as suffer if effective programs are not in place. For these reasons, and more, the research project posits its research and focuses its methods on the New York City Department of Education. The research project will involve teachers, administrators, teachers, policymakers, and even parents in this district, as well as an overview of existing literature relevant to New York. With this in mind, the research project has three specific methods for gathering data relevant to the research topic: a more robust review of literature, a survey of the three different populations mentioned, and follow up panel interviews with relevant research subjects.

The first method that this research project intends to utilize is a more robust review of literature relevant to student engagement, juvenile delinquency, teacher evaluation, and the current systems in place in New York. As the

initial review of literature, presented above, reveals, there is a very clear and conclusive body of literature that supports several points. The first point supported is that there is a link between student engagement, self-perception, and juvenile delinquency. While the existing literature supporting this specific contention is relatively low, the literature does point to the fact that student engagement can affect self-perception, and subsequent research reveals that self-perception can certainly affect delinquency rates.

The second point that the initial literature supports is that existing methods of teacher evaluation and student feedback is not sufficient. Standardized testing lacks a holistic approach to the evaluation of teachers and their relationship to students, and does not allow for the direct feedback of students. The final point that the initial literature review supports is that increased student engagement (both with teachers in and out of the classroom) can directly translate into better self-perception. This research project aims at exploring each of these points in further detail, and will utilize both academic, empirical studies on the subject as well as primary sources related to education to do so.

The second methodology this paper plans to utilize is a survey of high school teachers, high school students, and parents of high school students in New York. This will be a structured survey, with questions based on the literature review and a similar survey that serves as the basis of this research project. Some of the sample questions that will be included in the survey to all parties are:

1. Should high school students be given responsibility to evaluate teachers? To help decide the curriculum? To help punish offenders?
2. Do the current systems in New York accurately assess both teachers' performance and students' engagement? Please explain why or why not.
3. What is your personal experience with juvenile delinquency (either as a student or in your classroom?)

These questions are just a sample of what the full survey will be, but nevertheless give a picture of what types of questions will be asked. The aim of the survey is to assess both individual perspectives on the issue of student engagement and teacher feedback, as well as to gauge personal experiences with issues relevant to the topic. The various types of questions will be combined to create a full picture of both the perspectives surrounding and realities of this research topic. This topic will be distributed to at least 1, 000 students, 1, 000 teachers, and 300 parents throughout New York City. The distribution will be across at least five different schools to ensure different perspectives are recorded. The survey results will then be assessed, and the third methodology begun.

The third and final methodology that this research project plans to employ is follow up panel interviews with survey respondents. The research project plans on conducting at least three panel interviews for each population under consideration students, teachers, and parents. This is a total of nine panel interviews, and represents the most time consuming and costly portion of this research project. However, it is also a crucial aspect of the research project, as the researchers will gain the most detailed picture of

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perspectives, expectations, and experiences regarding teacher feedback and student engagement. While the second methodology (survey results) provide an empirical basis for the research project's subsequent discussion, the follow up panel interviews will provide more material for the researchers to assess and to make a qualitative assessment of the processes currently in place. In this way, the research project does not plan to treat each of these methodologies as separate; instead, each one will build upon the other and will be assessed as a whole. Therefore, the data analysis in this project will largely be qualitative rather than quantitative.

Budget & Justification

The budget for this research project is relatively straightforward; the breakdown can be found here:

- Survey Printing & Distribution: \$3, 000
- Travel in NYC: \$3, 000
- Panel Interviews: \$9, 000
- Computer & Communication: \$2, 000
- Research Assistants: \$7, 000
- Compensation Grant: \$37, 000
- Unforeseen Expenses: \$1, 000

The proposed budget is still well below the \$100, 000 limit, and has the benefit of being completed in just a year. The survey represents one of the least expensive costs, and opens up the budget for a more in depth examination of the topic. More specifically, this justifies the spending of \$9, 000 on panel interviews (\$1, 000 per interview of 5-10 people), as it will

provide further insight into the survey responses, as well as delve deeper into perspectives and experiences than could be accomplished with just a survey. This is the same justification for the research assistants, as the research project will produce well over 20, 000 pages of qualitative data that will need to be sifted through. The cost of \$3, 500 per research assistant over the course of several weeks is certainly justified, as it will keep the timeline of this project to a minimum. Finally, the compensation of the main researcher is justified, as this will be a full time project through the course of the year. Altogether, this brings the total budget to \$62, 000 – well under the limit.

Schedule/Timeline

As noted above, the timeline for this research project will be limited to one year. The timeline allows for roughly one month leeway on each of the segments of research, in order to allow for changes in the plan or hiccups in its execution. The breakdown of the timeline is as follows:

- Months 1-3: Literature Review, Survey Design and Testing
- Months 4-5: Survey Distribution and Collection
- Month 6: Assessment of Surveys
- Month 7: Follow Up Panel Interviews, Based on Survey Assessment
- Months 8-12: Data Interpretation, with two months of research assistants and 1 more for follow up interviews
- Human Subjects Issues

This research proposal does not foresee many human subjects issues in the course of its research. Of course, the surveys and interview questions will be

written and designed according to academic guidelines, and no inappropriate personal questions will be asked. Additionally, with the exception of a few top level interviews with administrators and policymakers, the surveys and interviews conducted for this research project will be completely anonymous. Names will be collected with the survey to allow for follow up interviews, but none of this information will be shared in the final research. For interviewees, names will be changed when they are mentioned in the resulting report. In this way, the researchers do not expect any human subject issues to arise in this research.