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Re-Engaging Students Who Had Left School Early: The Importance of a Well-Designed Approach

DESCRIPTION

According to this study, a gap in academic achievement tends to form between students of higher and lower socioeconomic status during the early years of high school. However, the authors' analysis of a local after-school program on the French island of Réunion demonstrates that a well-conceived, school-based and community-supported program can successfully engage and support students to help minimize the achievement gap.

The authors interviewed a group of 12 students who had left high school and then re-engaged by attending an after-school program called *Il faut tout un village pour éduquer un enfant* (*It Takes an Entire Village to Educate a Child*). A community-supported initiative, offered at the school, the program was developed to combat the high rate of youth leaving school without a diploma. The program offered mentoring and tutoring support with the goal of encouraging students to re-enroll. The program aimed to:

1. Improve student retention;
2. Reduce absenteeism;
3. Motivate students to learn;
4. Promote a better rapport between the students and the school by fostering the development of skills and key competencies, including self-confidence.

METHODOLOGY

The authors interviewed 12 students who had left school early without obtaining a diploma and had since attended *It Takes an Entire Village to Educate a Child*. Among these students were 5 girls and 7 boys who had a median attendance rate of 78.5%, median age of 14, came from disadvantaged backgrounds, and attended a "priority school". Semi-structured interviews were carried out at two intervals: after the students had left school and after they had been attending the program for 4 months.

KEY FINDINGS

Before attending the workshops, the students had a significant fear of failing in school, to the point where they no longer wanted to attend: "My teacher humiliated me one day, which upset me, so I didn't do any more work. Later, my mother came to get me because I was sick, and my teacher told her that I was lying. I saw well and good that they didn't like me, and I've refused to do my work since" (p. 13).

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The interviews also showed that a socioeconomic achievement gap begins to form around the age of 13 between students from higher and lower socioeconomic backgrounds. "In 6th year (7th grade), I was a good and average student and then I started to drop in 5th year (8th grade)" (p. 14). Some began to disturb the classroom during this time, "In 5th year (8th grade), I started to get wild (disturbing everyone in the classroom). It's how my friends and I were. I was going down a bad path" (p. 15).

However, the study found that behaviour improved after the students started attending the program workshops. The youth seemed to show more self-confidence. "Before [the workshop] I was disturbing the classroom and yelling at the teacher, and now I'm doing well. I think that my teachers see me as a calm, intelligent kid" (p. 16).

The study also showed that the participants went from having a negative perception of school as a hostile environment to seeing school as an environment from which they could benefit. "Before, I saw school as an obligation, I was always having to learn, but, actually, it's meant to serve us in the end" (p. 16).

After attending the after-school re-engagement program, the students no longer saw school and their teachers as being unsupportive of their needs, and began to believe that the school and the teachers were there to help them succeed. They began to see school as essential to helping them achieve their future goals.

WHY THIS MATTERS

This study shows that after-school community-supported programs aimed at helping students successfully reintegrate and stay in school can be successful. Solutions can be found when different community stakeholders mobilize their resources and work together to develop a program designed to re-engage and support students in returning to school. Indeed, the authors found that the support provided at the school by *It Takes an Entire Village to Educate a Child*, was crucial to "stopping the contempt and stigmatisation" (p. 17) often directed at students who leave school early.

Secondly, students who had left school slowly made their way back and accepted the idea that finishing school would help them in the future. The program helped the students abandon their perception that the teachers and the school system were there to cause them difficulty and embarrassment, and it helped them understand that their future success depended on high school completion.

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ABOUT THIS SUMMARY

This study assesses the impact of an after-school program designed to re-engage and support students who had left high school. Based on interviews with 12 students, the authors outline how a well-designed program helped students re-engage with the school system, re-enroll, and change their perception of the high school experience and education.

Lastly, this study highlights the fact that the vast majority of students who decide to leave school early will return to obtain their diploma. Understanding this process and how best to intervene is crucial. Thus, this type of research could be beneficial to practitioners in tailoring their approach to students who have shown this type of disengagement.

"The complexity of leaving school early without obtaining a diploma requires us to take a holistic view of the issue so that interventions avoid piecemeal approaches that address only one or two key factors."

Pelletier & Alaoui, 2016

RECAP

In this study, the researchers interviewed students who had left school early after experiencing several negative interactions with their teachers or school officials and associating their school with negative outcomes. The program designed to re-engage the students was highly successful in the sample population: the students gradually began to see the teachers and the school as valuable to their future success.

APA CITATION

Pelletier, L., & Alaoui, D. (2016). Du décrochage provisoire au raccrochage scolaire : l'importance de la reconnaissance. *Questions Vives. Recherches En Éducation*, (N° 25). Retrieved from https://questionsvives.revues.org/1918