Developing Confidence Through Group Discussion & Reflection

Molly Mullally
'The Boys' Latin School of Maryland

Introduction

In an effort to increase confidence and positive attitudes in the classroom, the boys in my 12th grade Math class participated in a reflective journal activity. This took them away from content and allowed them to get to know one another better. The ultimate goal was to allow them to be more open to challenges they face in the classroom.

The Research Question

How might intentional group reflection and discussion affect boys' learning confidence and sense of community within a 12th grade Math classroom?

Research Context and Participants

Boys' Latin's motto—Esse Quam Videri—"To Be Rather Than To Seem"—emphasizes the development of one's integrity, courage and compassion for others and has been the core value of a Boys' Latin education since 1844. The school welcomes young men from diverse backgrounds and educates them in a supportive student-centered environment. A low student-teacher ratio fosters positive relationships, thereby challenging each student to reach his maximum potential while empowering him to mature with an increasing sense of self-worth and an awareness of his responsibilities toward himself and his community.

The participants in my project were the six Grade 12 boys in my College Algebra class. These boys have struggled through their math classes in our Upper School and have been recommended specifically to participate in this study. The boys praised each other for their courage and creative work, and acknowledged each other for their hard work and dedication. The boys were comfortable with each other, and they allow them to get to know one another better. The ultimate goal was to allow them to be more open to challenges they face in the classroom.

The Research Action

In order to address my students’ lack of confidence and motivation in my College Algebra class, I infused a structured discussion period into my classroom instruction. The lesson began with a reading of a response to a journal prompt. The students then took some time to write some 250 words on the topic of the day, all class members were required to give feedback on what they heard.

“Every summer, I sweat above a griddle, grille, and fryer putting blood, sweat, and tears into making and cooking burgers, chicken tenders, French fries, wraps, and sandwiches just to name a few things.”

“My role model was Sean White when I was younger. I would beg my parents to let me snowboard…I wanted to be just like him.”

“We Listen…And React”

“I see that you are a social leader and that is something that we all need.”

“‘The best experience in math class was my 9th grade year when I had a big project on creating a cereal box.’”

“I liked how you talked about something that I can relate to.”

“Making and cooking burgers, I learned a lot about teamwork and compassion for others.”

“The ultimate goal was to allow them to be more open to challenges they face in the classroom.”

Data Collection and Analysis

• The same survey entitled “Math and Me” was administered before and after the journal exercise period.
• Each journal entry was submitted to me; no grade was given.
• Each session was recorded in full. This recording contained all the journal entries and the reactions of each boy to what was being read aloud.
• Each student created a film in which they recorded their overall impressions of our journal work.

Key Findings and Discussion

• As the boys shared their stories, they truly got to know each other. Taking a break from the daily lessons allowing them to appreciate each others' stories and strengths.
• As I looked through my data, I found several examples in which the boys praise each other, with statements such as “I liked how you described that” or “I like how you talked about something that I can relate to.”
• Another theme that resonated through our discussion came in the form of pedagogical suggestions. On the subject of homework, one boy expressed frustration: “I wish they could incorporate videos and other stuff to make you learn rather than just memorize.”
• Survey results did not yield a significant change in their thoughts towards mathematics in general. There was, however, a discernible growth in their willingness to step up to a challenge in the classroom.

Conclusions

As I reflect upon my results, it appears as if my students’ collective attitude improved as a result of our time in discussion. They became better acquainted with each other, which in turn helped to open lines of communication. The structure of the discussions allowed all to voice encouragement to each other and even to me. Taking in the value of this team building, a possible next step might be, for example, building on classroom community by forming peer review/peer support pairs or groups to tackle math challenges. Taking the time out to appreciate your collaborative team could possibly lead to richer overall results.

Key Readings

