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Tutors Help At-Risk English Language Learners Succeed through Encouragement

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Abstract: This article talks about how three tutors supported at-risk secondary English Language Learners in one-on-one tutoring sessions through different forms of encouragement. The three tutors were observed over 7 weeks working with students and findings from the observations show that the tutors helped the student's progress in the tutoring sessions through encouraging interactions.

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The population of ELLs in the US is increasing dramatically. In grades K-12, ELL enrollment increased by 104% in the 1990s and it is estimated that by the year 2030, 40% of the United States school population will speak English as a second language (ESL) (USDOE & NICHD, 2003). In 2005, the number of school aged children with immigrant parents was 12.3 million and by 2020, it is projected that 17.9 million school aged children will have immigrant parents (Passel & Cohn, 2008). The increase in school enrollment of ELLs is concentrated in urban locations where ELL secondary students make up 56% of the student population (Berube, 2000). The study is geared towards at-risk secondary ELL students. An at-risk secondary ELL is defined as a student who has one of the following academic struggles: 1) low scores on standardized testing for reading 2) evidence of struggling in their content area classes or 3) poor attendance or behavior. The definition of an at-risk ELL secondary learner is influenced by how the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) defines an at-risk learner. The indicators for an at-risk learner, according to NCES are: the student tends to be from a lower socioeconomic status, a single parent home, receives below average grades in school, has older siblings who left high school before completion, and is around negative peer pressure.

With the increasing ELL school population, more research should focus on how instruction can support the academic success of at-risk adolescent ELL students because these students struggle to stay in high school and pass standardized tests. First, this struggle in high school will be discussed and then standardized tests. Specifically, the dropout rates of

adolescent ELLs are increasing. The United States Department of Education reported in 2010-2011 that nearly half the states graduated less than 60% of students with a limited proficiency in English. Pennsylvania, the site of my study, has an ELL graduation rate of 63% compared with Vermont and South Dakota that have the highest graduation rate, at 82%. Arizona has the lowest graduation rate, at 25%. In light of this report, it is not surprising that ELLs accounted for the highest population of high school drop outs in United States public schools (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012). The U.S. Census Bureau (2012) reported that the highest percentage (13%) of ELL students who drop out of high school are Hispanic students. The National Center for Education Statistics (2004) noted that 51% of Hispanic identified high school drop outs reported having difficulty speaking English, compared to 18% who reported speaking English well. August (2006) further concluded after conducting an extensive literacy review on secondary ELLs that "[s]uccessful completion of high school is associated with the ability to speak English" (p. 24).

More research needs to be done on how federally funded programs, such as volunteer tutoring, is supporting at-risk secondary ELLs. Currently, the largest federally funded program in the United States is Title I. Title I money is largely used by schools to help at-risk students and in 2008 alone, 26.4 billion dollars supported Title I services. Recently, the government has noticed the negative impact that a decline in federal funding and high standards has had on at-risk students. As a result, intervention programs that support struggling school districts and help at-risk students have been established. One of the programs that has been funded by Title I is Reading Rockets. Reading Rockets provides reading resources for a variety of audiences via the web and educational programming. It is widely used and geared toward early reading initiatives although it does provide some help regarding ELL strategies. Hardly any research has been conducted on how federally funded

interventions are supporting at-risk ELL adolescent students. The only studies conducted to my knowledge have been a series of meta-analyses that provide an overview of some interventions, but do not offer substantive insights regarding a group of participants within one particular volunteer tutoring structure (August & Hakuta, 2007; Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998).

This qualitative case study examined how volunteer tutors are interacting with at-risk adolescent ELL students in one-on-one tutoring sessions.   As a non-participant observer, the researcher used ethnographic methods, including observations, interviews, and document analysis to understand how three tutors were interacting in sessions. The following question guided the research: How do volunteer tutors interact in one-on-one tutoring sessions with at-risk adolescent ELLs? The study found that tutors are interacting with their students in an encouraging way during tutoring sessions and that the tutor's encouragement helps the student progress forward in the session. This manuscript describes the findings of the article and then discusses the findings.

Tutors as Encouragers.

The tutors interacted as encouragers in their one-on-one sessions. Encouraging is being defined as praising students and encouraging the students in session interactions to complete work or feel better about their abilities. All tutors would encourage their students in sessions. Two of the tutors, Hannah and Pete consciously talked about how giving encouragement was important. Hannah really thought about being positive and encouraging is her sessions. She said in her pre interview, "Well, the first thing I think my ELL students will benefit from knowing is to try and never give up. I really want to give my students a lot of time and

4

support with what we are talking about" (Pre-Interview, 10-2-2014). Even before she started

tutoring students, Hannah wanted to support and cheer on her student's success. In her post

interview she stated, "The tutor needs to have set the high expectation in a session. The tutor

needs to be able to get across the message to the student that they can do their work, think

about the future, and that they can get their current assignment done" (Post-Interview, 12-27-

2014). Pete made a similar statement about high expectations in his post interview. He said,

"Setting high expectations for me are telling the student that whatever they are working on,

they can get done and get through it" (Post-Interview, 12-28-2014). Even though there is

evidence showing how she would cheer her students on as they were working together,

Molly did not directly talk about how she was trying to encourage students in a session.

There was one key type of session where tutors demonstrated being encouragers for

their students: challenging sessions. A challenging session is being defined as a session

where students struggled with the English content, did not have the background knowledge

needed in order to complete a task, or when they needed to complete more work than time

allowed. The tutors would find ways to encourage their students to forge ahead when they

might otherwise have become frustrated. An example of how each tutor acted as an

encourager in a challenging session will be shown below.

Molly

For Molly, being an encourager in a session was evident especially when the student

either struggled with a concept or could not understand something due to the student's

language level. When the student would demonstrate signs of being frustrated, Molly would

emphasize and encourage. In one session, Molly was placed with the lowest level ELL in a

class that needed help understanding how to set up problems in order to complete an

algebraic equation. The student began to get frustrated when she could not explain in English or understand the English Molly was using to explain the concept. In order to encourage the student to keep going in the session, Molly began praising the student's understanding of concepts even if the student was demonstrating their understanding using Spanish. Molly encouraged the student to communicate in any way she knew how and the student stayed in the session and was able to demonstrate the ability to line up variables in a math equation by the end of the session (Observation, 11-10-2015).

The field notes show this interaction:

Molly is working with a student on completing an algebra worksheet on equations. The student did not want to come to the session and the teacher told Molly that this is the lowest level ELL student, explaining that she is still learning the alphabet. Molly looks at the students' work and starts to help her by showing her how to write an equation as she talks in English. The student seems to start to get overwhelmed in the session, she takes a deep breath and Molly sees this and chooses to encourage the student in the session by even starting to use some Spanish she knows in order to make the student more comfortable. Molly also attempts to understand what the student is trying to say, even if they were talking in Spanish. (Field Notes, 11-10-2015)

In the reflection log of the session, Molly talked about how the student progressed during the session but did not mention encouraging her to continue trying. Molly said, "The student needed a lot more assistance at the beginning of the session and by the end of the session, she knew how to write each problem over top of each other" (Reflection Log, 11-10-2015).

Molly was aware that the student made progress during the session and it is evident from the data that this progress was related to how Molly chose to be an encourager for her student and believe she could make progress.

Hannah

Hannah, unlike Molly, consciously viewed herself as an encourager and made it a point to become a cheerleader in her sessions when students seemed frustrated or made self-deprecating comments. She also chose to be an encourager in order to build up a student's self-confidence. In one session, Hannah was working with a student who needed to make up a lot of work at the Cyber School. The student was daunted by the amount of work they needed to do and the student was also making comments about being lazy, not reading the right way, and how she gets bad grades (Observation, 11-17-2014).

> The field notes further explain this interaction:
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> Hannah is working with a student on trying to make up missed work. The student plops down her computer and says that she is lazy and doesn't know how she will get caught up. Hannah does not acknowledge the student's self-deprecating remark. Hannah chooses to tell the student that she is on the right track trying to get the work done and that hopefully, they can make it through everything. Throughout the session, the student makes comments about reading to fast, getting F's, and not being able to write answers properly. Repeatedly, Hannah cheers the student on; telling her that it is okay if she reads fast, that she can do the work, and write responses. As a result, the student sits up a little straighter and they begin writing out the answers on

7

an assessment and get through three lessons, receiving an 88% on the assessment when she said she usually gets a 70. (Field Notes, 11-17-2014)

Hannah continued cheering former students even in her reflection log. She wrote, "I think my student felt very accomplished and happy about catching up! She's a very bright student; she just needs to find time to complete her work. She did a really good job" (Reflection Notes, 1117-2014). Because Hannah chose to act as a cheerleader, her student benefited.

Pete

While Molly and Hannah demonstrated being a cheerleader and offered encouragement throughout their sessions, Pete would concentrate on acting as an encourager specifically during the independent practice part of many of his Math sessions. For example, in one Math focused session, Pete was working with a student on how to rationalize binomial radical expressions. The student was working with Pete for over an hour and was starting to try to apply the concept on her own. When she did not get the right answer on the first problem, Pete had to encourage her to do more problems by letting her know how close she had gotten to the right answer. The student was encouraged and decided to try one more (Observation, 11-17-2014).

The field notes show this interaction further:

Pete's student just had a "Bing" moment where she connected how the numbers cancel out when she is rationalizing binomial expressions. Pete has been tutoring her on this concept for the past hour. The student is confident enough to try her own problem. She gets the wrong answer and seems frustrated enough to quit. Pete, seeing

this, goes back to her work and shows her all of the parts she got right in the problem

by circling them and telling her, you got this. The student is encouraged enough to do

one more practice problem and she gets it right, puts both hands in the air, and says,

Yes! (Field Notes, 1117- 2014)

Pete wrote in his reflection log, "I thought this session went well. I was encouraged that

my student didn't give up on her work. She was persistent and persevered." As a goal for

future sessions with the student, Pete said, "I would like to help her develop more confidence

that she can do Math" (Reflection Log, 11-17-2014). Pete encouraged the student in the

session to push through and she did. He was her cheerleader and then she was able to cheer

for herself.

All of the tutors encouraged their students to move forward. They affirmed their

belief in the student's abilities and thus created a positive tutoring experience. In terms of the

literature, the tutors were demonstrating the socio-educational model of learning (Gardner

1985, 2000) which means that they created an environment that motivated their ELL students

and provided a positive learning experience because they encouraged students. The fact that

all of the tutors continued to encourage their students when things became frustrating is

important. It demonstrates that they all had the ability to remain positive in a frustrating

moment which helped their students have a positive experience at the end of the session.

Tutors as Encouragers Discussion.

The tutors encouraged their students during difficult sessions and as a result, the student progressed academically. Two of the tutors, Hannah and Pete, recognized that part of their role was to be an encourager. Molly did not explicitly say that she encouraged her students during difficult sessions but demonstrated it in her interactions. Pete chose to encourage students when they took a risk and tried something on their own. He encouraged in the part of learning when the student is attempting to take a concept and internalize it for themselves. Pete recognized that when a student decides to try something on their own, they need an encourager. Hannah and Molly waited until the student demonstrated signs of frustration before they would become a cheerleader. In a one-on-one interaction, the tutor was able to cheer on and encourage their student more specifically. The tutors would personalize the encouragement for their students and this made a positive difference in how the students progressed in their academics and academic attitude. The ESL coordinator at the school felt that giving encouragement to the ELL students was one of the most important ways the tutors could interact. She said, "I think that the tutors need to understand that the students might not have an appetite for what they are taught. The tutor might have to help the child buy into education every day" (Interview, 1-7-2015).

When a tutor became an encourager for their students, it also shifted the relationship the tutors had with their students to a new level of caring. The encouragement that was shown in session's mirrors some aspects of the socio-educational model introduced by Gardner (1985, 2000). The socio-educational model is said to support ELLs second language acquisition because the learners are motivated to achieve, enjoy the learning task, and give more effort because of the motivation. As encouragers, the tutors were practicing the socio-

educational model by creating an environment designed to motivate their ELL students and promoting a positive learning environment.

The findings of this case study are important for educators in the field who work with a population of English Language Learners. Being able to find strategies that help to encourage students through difficult learning task could end up resulting in whether or not the student actually masters a task or not. Encouragement could come in the form of words of praise or motivation that helps let students know how much educators believe in their ability to learn. This study proves that a little bit of encouragement goes a long way.

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