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Title: Does giving time and space in the library to explore topics of interest result in better research questions?

Setting and Hypothesis

Our school's instructional focus was "teacher as coach, student as worker." We want to support and coach our students, while they are the ones working. As a co-worker put it, 'we should not be working harder than our students.' I believed that giving time for students to explore topics of interest before choosing their research question would create stronger research questions and in turn promote student engagement in their research. I also believe that students with strong research questions will not end up changing their topic.

Purpose

When teachers bring classes to the library for research, they often jump directly into what is considered the "Gather" phase of Guided Inquiry. Students were not given the chance to explore potential topics of interest, and instead were often assigned topics. This is not an example of teacher as coach, student as worker, so I wanted to see if giving students time at the "Explore" stage of Guided Inquiry creates stronger research questions and more interest in their topic.

Literature Review

Intervention Plan

I will partner with our Senior Humanities teacher to begin integrated Guided Inquiry in our senior research project. Students will be given time to Explore topics of interest, falling under one umbrella topic to help guide their search. Students will not be asked to identify a potential research topic until they have explored options. Finally, after exploring students will create a project proposal, including a research question.

Data Plan

Students will be asked to write a project proposal with a research question. We will track the number of students who end up changing their research topic. Previously, we have had about 10% of students end up changing their topics. With stronger research questions and interest in the topic they chose, a lower percentage of students should be changing their topics.

Post Research

Intervention

Partnering with our Senior Humanities teacher, we created a time for “pre-search” where students were given lists of potential topics, and an assignment to explore three in depth. The list of topics was created in partnership with the Humanities teacher and librarian. Each topic was a hyperlink to a short news article on that topic. Students were instructed to choose three topics to explore by reading the article. They took notes on the article and as they were reading thought of possible keywords for that topic and at the end they ranked their interest. Then, they were required to produce a project proposal containing a research question.

Reflection

I had always felt that we were doing students a disservice when we assign them research topics, rather than letting them choose, but I did not have hard evidence for why exploring is an essential part of research. When I learned about Guided Inquiry Design, it gave me a reason to reach out to our teachers and introduce them to another way to conduct research. For most, it meant adding in time to explore and generate their own research questions on topics of their choosing. Our students were much more engaged in the whole research process because they had choice over their topics. This engagement was also born out in our data.

Data

Out of 78 students who took part in this assignment, only two students ended up changing their research topic. We had wanted to further expand on this and ask students to reflect on the research process but unfortunately there was not enough time in the school year to squeeze that in. Going forward, we will purposefully build in reflection time so students can reflect on the process.