

Understanding Grade Point Average Perspective in the Ninth Grade as Part of an Overall College Plan

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Abstract: This case study explores intervention strategies for social capital improvement of ninth grade students so that they can gain a grade point average perspective.

Schooling can be a system of activities, assignments, tasks, and communications that needs to be understood holistically and not as individual events by students. If this system is used by students properly, it can lead to rewards such as academic success and support (Russell, 1997). Social capital theory suggests that some students have the advantage of relationships, access to resources, and a kind of cultural mindset that allows them to understand how the education system works and interpret the valuable codes of schools and how to use it to their advantage (Coleman, 1988). Students with enough social capital often self track into college and those without it are tracked out of it (Bowles & Gintis, 1976). Some students, for example, are taught by parents or others early on to be able to see assignments, tests, and other activities as part of the larger process of planning for college. Consequently, the attainment and maintaining of a high grade point average (GPA) is a major factor in deciding what educational future students can attain and what support such as scholarships they can gain along the way (Zimmerman, Caldwell, & Bernat, 2002). Some students can gain a GPA perspective wherein everything is judged in terms of how much it supports the highest GPA possible. In college, this can be a problem because students do not learn for the sake of learning (Rabow & Hernandez, 1988).

The ninth grade can be a major turning point in the development of a good GPA and an overall academic career (Neild, Stober-Eby, & Furstenberg, 2001). College students may have too much of a GPA perspective (Rabow & Hernandez, 1988) but many secondary students lack a GPA perspective, lack the social capital to succeed in school, and consequently may find themselves unprepared for college and even drop out of high school (Newman, Lohman, Newman, Meyers, & Smith, 2000). Intervention programs between colleges and public schools could help improve the situation, but most students do not have access to them and find themselves on their own. Many students see their teachers as social capital resources who could help them improve their chances for academic success (Peterson & Stroh, 2004). The problem is that many researchers look at GPA in technically narrow ways, such as the way it is self reported or how it differs amongst groups (Zimmerman et al., 2002). There needs to be more research on how educators can raise social capital within the secondary school to improve how GPA is perceived amongst students. The purpose of this study is to add to the literature on social capital, GPA perspective, and academic success by exploring the case of two secondary educators and how they intervene in the lives of ninth graders to help them develop a GPA perspective. The research question examined in this study is: What in depth understanding can be gained from educators developing a GPA perspective amongst ninth graders that can improve their students' social capital for college?

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This study is important because secondary educators are not only the primary educators of their students but also the primary educators of themselves, their institutions, and their communities. First, this study explores the concept of GPA. Then social capital theory is presented as a conceptual framework. A case study of two secondary educators and their intervention for ninth graders who lacked a GPA perspective is explored and discussed. Finally, conclusions are made for improving interventions for creating a GPA perspective throughout a secondary school.

GPA Perspective

In college, where the situation is more organized and where students can select and assess their professors, students can take the perspective that achieving a high GPA is more important than developing critical deep thought and learning. College students often organize themselves and examine what is expected in coursework with an eye to position themselves for getting the best GPA possible and avoid courses that could hurt their GPA (Rabow & Hernandez, 1988). At the secondary level, many minority urban students from less affluent backgrounds lack a GPA perspective. Although they are prepared for college, the lack of a GPA perspective can keep them from ever going to college. The ninth grade is a critical point for urban students because if they do not transition well into high school, they are more likely to drop out of school. Bad math and reading instruction in middle school makes students perform worse in high school because more math and reading is promoted in high school in preparation for college (Neild et al., 2001). Students describe the transition from middle school to high school as including new academic challenges, a more complex environment, new social demands, and new interactions with teachers. High GPA performers mention fewer challenges than low performers. High performers receive more support from family and many have friends who support their academic goals (Newman et al., 2000). The higher the GPA, the more high school students attend to other activities in the school (Hossler & Stage, 1992). Secondary students beyond ninth grade are employed more, may have more homework, and may study more to maintain a GPA as high as ninth graders who do not face these challenges (Peterson & Stroh, 2004).

Although calculating GPA may seem to be a simple matter of calculating a weighted mean to some math experts, many students have trouble correctly calculating and understanding GPA. GPA deals with the relationship between credits assigned to a course and the number of courses taken by a student. Lack of quantitative understanding among students often inspires basic errors in calculating GPA (Pollatsek, Lima, & Well, 1981). Furthermore, GPA and class rank are calculated at the high school in a variety of ways depending on the district. Parents and students can find transcripts and classwork not jiving with the actual GPA because districts can decide not to count certain classes taken and weigh them differently (Siegel & Anderson, 1991). Public school students often self-report the wrong GPA and tend to report a GPA much higher than what is actually on their transcript for a variety of reasons. This flawed self-reporting affects minority students differently than other students (Zimmerman et al., 2002). For Hispanic students, language proficiency can be a major factor in predicting GPA (Adams, Astone, Nunez-Wormack, & Smoldaka, 1994).

Improving GPA is often up to student agencies, their relationships, and how they view themselves (Newman, et al., 2000; Anderman, Anderman, & Griesinger, 1999). An academic self-concept where students can see themselves in the present and in the future doing scholarly work is related to changes in GPA. A social self-concept where a student is concerned with fitting in at school, being popular, and working on relationships, however, does not support a change in GPA. Arguably, students with a bad GPA may lean more towards a social self-concept

than an academic self-concept since they may feel they can succeed more socially than academically (Anderman et al., 1999). Urban students improve their social capital with in schools to improve GPA with three kinds of coping strategies. Individually, students try to cope by being dedicated and staying focused on their work; their academic coping strategy can manifest itself through studying and keeping up with homework, and their social coping strategy can lead them to congregate with the right people (Newman, Lohman, Newman, Meyers, & Smith, 2000). Many students believe that teachers and counselors are potentially the most helpful in helping students learn about college planning although they report they get little actual discussion or help from teachers and counselors. Many students believe that high school has not prepared them for college (Peterson & Stroh, 2004). Intervention programs between university and school systems can help improve the college awareness of students in the public school system. These programs can create awareness of the requirements for college and the positive and negative realities of college but many students do not have access to them (Carlisle, 2006). It often falls to individual secondary teachers to intervene in some way.

Theoretical Framework

Social capital is access to actual and potential resources through networks of obligations and connections. Social capital can sometimes be converted into other forms of capital (Bourdieu, 1986). Coleman (1988) interprets social capital as norms and social controls through social organizations of relationships and interactions via structures and actors. Social capital is intangible, defined by its function, consists of levels of trust exemplified through obligations and expectations, access to information channels, and the promoting of the common good over self-interest through norms and sanctions. Parents, for example, with social capital can help guide their children to better options by contacting other people and institutions in their network (Coleman, 1988). The structure of capitalism affects schooling (Bowles & Gintis, 1976). Social class leads to social capital access that students can use to affect learning and life outcomes (Coleman, 1988). Uneven capital distribution across schools and communities supports suffering, inequality, and injustice (Kozol, 1992). Culturally biased educational content, materials, and processes favor students from higher class backgrounds (Berliner & Biddle, 1995). Lower class children are hindered by a culture of poverty (Lewis, 1961). Social class is constructed differently in American schools, arguably creating a structure where students from different social classes are segregated, given different sets of opportunities, and given different expectations (Bowles & Gintis, 1976). Many factors in school can make the social class of students visible and easier to track and regiment (Coleman, 1988). This study takes the perspective that educators can help improve the social capital of ninth grade students by improving their grade point average perspective through classroom intervention.

Method

This is a qualitative case study used to gain in depth knowledge of GPA perspective interventions to answer the research question: What in depth understanding can be gained from educators developing a GPA perspective amongst ninth graders that can improve their students' social capital for college?

Two ninth grade educators were convenience and purposely sampled for the interviews. A third was observed only. This was in part because there was a pre-established relationship with the educators and because the study could also work as action research to help these educators in their day to day work.

The two educators who participated fully in this study are Mrs. Greer (pseudonym) and Mr. Martinez (pseudonym). Greer is a veteran language arts teacher who teaches in a Florida

secondary school and helped Mr. Martinez with the curriculum of his language arts classes. Greer developed a GPA calculating worksheet and pedagogy used in the ninth grade classes of both teachers early in the school year. Students are basically given a worksheet with sample grade data and a formula and shown how a GPA is calculated from that data. Then students are asked to add their own grade data to the worksheet and calculate their GPA along with their goals, expectations, and plans. The assignment is tied to the release of progress reports and grades at the school so students can get an accurate representation of their situation.

Data was collected using semi-structured interviews, note-taking, and observation. The researcher was able to observe how educators dealt with GPA perspectives by noting how the educators used a GPA worksheet to teach a lesson on understanding GPA, progress reports, and other related materials. The researcher took notes on how the lesson progressed and how the educators dealt with the subject. The researcher developed notes after the observation sessions, transcribing what happened and also discussing the lesson before and after it was presented with the educators. The researcher was also able to observe more educators using the worksheet than the two who were interviewed.

Semi-structured interviews were done before and after the lessons. Much of the structured part of the interview was simply about making sure the educators and the class they taught dealt specifically with the subject of the study. These were questions like: Which periods do you teach primarily ninth graders? There were also structured questions about the subject taught and the demographics of the teachers for the sake of background.

GPA perspective was explained before the interviews and examples were given of it as it occurs at the university and secondary schools. Social capital promotion was also briefly discussed and examples were given. The semi-structured interviews began with the main research question: What in depth understanding can be gained from educators developing a GPA perspective amongst ninth graders that can improve their students' social capital for college? This question was reiterated in the interview in various forms such as the following: (a) How are you helping the students develop their social capital with this lesson? (b) How is this lesson going to help them get to college? The researcher also used open ended questions during the interviews such as the following: (a) What comes to mind when you think about GPA perspective? (b) What happens in your class?

Since this was a case study, the researcher also developed questions based on the context. This meant, for example, that notes were taken about the organization of the room. Then the educator would be asked to explain if the organization of the room affected the way they developed a GPA perspective in their classroom. Depending on the response, probing questions would be used. For example, the researchers asked about how the seating arrangements and the use of a Smartboard affected the promotion of a GPA perspective. The educators were also asked to bring up anything pertinent to study from the past as well as the specific classes observed.

The researcher also developed several questions that dealt with how GPA lessons were handled in the past and how it would be followed up in the future. The researcher also asked several questions dealing with the construction of the GPA lessons and what supports there were in and outside the school for that kind of lesson from administrators, department heads, parents and other interested parties. The participants were interviewed again after the data collection was analyzed. The observations occurred over several days through several periods. The interviews occurred over several days in several sessions that lasted ten to twenty minutes.

The data was analyzed in terms of social capital promotion through the development of a GPA perspective. The data was member checked and put into themes.

Results

The themes of (a) practice, (b) system illustration, (c) contextualization, (d) interpretation, and (e) reinforcement developed from the study.

Practice

“Do you know your GPA I ask students. Is it a good GPA?” Mr. Martinez says. The practice of manually calculating the GPA demystifies the concept of GPA and reveals the thought processes of students. Mr. Martinez, for example, argues that GPA is easy to find in college but then challenges secondary students to actually find a GPA score in their documents. Many cannot find it. Both Greer and Martinez have their students practice with each other to see where they have gone wrong in thinking about GPA. “If two students have the same grades than they should have the same score. If they do not we can see why.” Mrs. Greer says.

Greer also makes the worksheet a kind of contract between the student, teacher, and parent by demanding that the student return the worksheet with a parent signature so that all of them are aware of the GPA and what the student’s expectations, plans, and goals are. “I tell them to take it home and get it signed,” Mrs. Greer explains. Greer may refer to the worksheet during future student, parent, and teacher conferences. Both Greer and Martinez see students reassessing their expectations, goals, and plans when they realize they are put to the light of teachers, parents, and other students. “Sometimes they joke around but when they realize that their parents are going to see it, they get serious and rewrite it.” Mr. Martinez says. These relationships thus inform new norms and offer new resources of social capital.

System Illustration

“I tell them that they can get out of here early. They can start college early. They don’t have to be in high schools for years. They have to be proactive.” Mr. Martinez says. Illustrating the GPA related system is necessary on many levels. The educators discuss various elements of the school system such as how Honors and Advanced Placement classes lead to higher GPA points and the possibility of eliminating college classes. “We can work it out on the board,” Greer says. Greer also incorporates PowerPoint and Smartboard technology in the teaching of a GPA perspective to help visual learners.

“They need to look at every assignment as an important step.” Mr. Martinez explains. Greer carefully links GPA calculation to the assignments and expectations in her class so that students can predict their GPA in her class as well as their cumulative GPAs. Martinez pushes students to figure out what they have to do to get a good grade in other classes. “People are well meaning. They are warning kids that they should avoid summer school and that there might not be a summer school. It is more than summer school or the semester. It is their whole lives,” Mr. Martinez explains. The educators also discuss scholarship, degree, and job requirements as part of the system of education. Martinez discusses Bright Futures, and asks students to ask counselors about it and to look it up online. Bright Futures is Florida’s scholarship program that gives students with high GPAs opportunities to attend a Florida public college or university for free or for reduced rates. By having students become open about plans, expectations, and goals, the door is open to discussing realistic routes to their attainment. “They have to know what they can do,” Mr. Martinez says. A common point Martinez makes in his class, for example, is that degree and job requirements can guide decisions in high school. Martinez often notes that students lacking the social capital of a doctor or engineer in their family who seek to be in those professions are already off track in secondary school when they do not take math seriously. For example, degree and job requirements for doctors and engineers reveal the need for calculus. To become a doctor or engineer, that student has to have the agency and self-marketing skill to

succeed in class and prove to teachers and counselors before their senior year that they can handle a calculus class. Without early calculus exposure, these students are at a disadvantage in college. Students with similar goals but different social capital levels are encouraged to work together and help each other in this regard. Greer and Martinez have and share social capital to illustrate these issues.

Contextualization

Contextualization means looking at GPA perspective and social capital level in the student's environment. The make-up of Greer's school allows for students of differing social capital levels, cultures, and GPA perspectives to interact. "I have the classroom set up this way on purpose," Mrs. Greer says. Greer uses group seating and group work to promote interactions. Greer also seeks a more transformational teaching approach, heavy on reflection and with access to college level reading materials and resources to prepare everyone for college culture. Martinez uses his bilingualism to communicate to immigrant students the need to develop a GPA perspective and to learn English to counteract their lack of the social capital needed for college culture. "Even if learning English doesn't help their GPA in high school, they can avoid remedial classes in college," Mr. Martinez says.

Martinez exemplifies the problems with the larger academic system within the classroom by having students represent education statistics for the nation that show that at each stage of education from secondary to post graduate work, half the students participating fail or drop out. "If this class is the USA, then those students in the rows left of center represent the high school drop outs." Mr. Martinez says. The half who succeed have a smaller and smaller proportion of minority students with low social capital.

Greer and Martinez recontextualize a GPA perspective and the attainment of social capital as not just a struggle for free college or a classroom assignment but as an acknowledgement of socioeconomic struggle, the pursuit of justice, and an opportunity for this generation of students to honor, help, and transform others. "In California, a college class that once cost a thousand dollars now costs a thousand and three hundred dollars and that is a public university. When you look at the history of Education you have to wonder if they are trying to keep certain people out," Mr. Martinez says.

Interpretation

"It is one thing to have a tough calculus class hurt your GPA but often students have a bad GPA because they did not do the easy assignment or pass the easy classes," Mr. Martinez says. Interpretation of the GPA perspective means that educators have to encourage students to judge every detail of their lives in GPA terms by going over examples in and out of class. For example, Martinez quizzes his students on their physical education classes. Martinez notes that by not dressing out, students can gain an F in a relatively easy class and hurt their GPA for the day, the semester, and for their entire secondary school career. Martinez then asks students to imagine how they will feel as seniors knowing they could have dressed out and improved their GPA.

"A college student has an easier time picking the class that works for them. A high school student is more locked into a particular class," Mr. Martinez says. Martinez also helps students with mixed messages they receive from counselors and other educational stakeholders by discussing the messages and asking students to be realistic about what they can do. Martinez may encourage students to try to switch out of classes that do not work for them or to take Honors and AP classes. However, counselors cannot offer every student the classes they want and are weary of putting students in higher level classes for fear that they will fail. The requirements of

administration goals for secondary graduation rates and other extra curricular activities at the school like sports and band also promote a passing GPA level students believe to be good. Greer and Martinez make it clear that this is at odds with the thriving GPA levels necessary for not only graduating high school or getting to college but for getting college free or at a discount.

Reinforcement

“Yes. It is about a chance at free college too,” Mrs. Greer says. Reinforcement of a GPA perspective is necessary. Martinez asks off task students if they are rich, if they are willing to take on a job, or if they hate their parents since by being inactive they are purposely hurting their GPA and guaranteeing that college will not be free.

“Mrs. Greer does not want them to just pass the class. She wants them to change their lives and the lives of others,” Mr. Martinez says. Greer has dedicated a wall in her room to pictures of her standing with former students at graduation, allowing current students to visualize when they could be there. Upon entering the room, students read inspiring words. A GPA perspective discussion is not a one class event but brought up formally and informally throughout the rest of the school year during teachable moments, problematic moments, or when grades are raised as an issue.

Conclusions

Exploring these themes gives an in-depth understanding of the work of developing a GPA perspective as political, personal, social, and complex. It is political because these educators paint the attainment of a high GPA as part of a social justice struggle for their students. It is personal because they try to link the GPA perspective to how it affects the lives of their students. It is social because they highlight how a GPA perspective is affected by everyone in the social environment of the student. It is also complex because of the mixed messages about GPA that must be analyzed. GPA perspective work should occur in all classes because the work of Greer and Martinez are only small moments in a busy curriculum in a busy school year. The implication of this study is the need for more research in this area.

Attention should be paid to making GPA awareness interventions a formal school-wide and school system-wide phenomenon and not the informal work of a handful of educators. Attention should be paid to how technology is affecting GPA perspective. Although in many school districts it may be easier to find a GPA calculation electronically, many students do not really understand its importance or how it can be transformed. Many parents also do not understand it. A GPA calculation can seem to hide in plain sight if a student does not have the social capital to identify and use this information. There is also a major focus on standardized testing in the United States that often places more importance on a test score than it does on an overall GPA. The concept of a GPA perspective is also important because it is becoming increasingly harder both academically and financially to attend college.

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