A Phenomenological Perspective of Educating Students at the Matt Garcia Learning Center: Resiliency Development, Responsibility Development and Relationship Building Development Skills

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The professional educators of Matt Garcia Learning Center (MGLC) have undertaken a monumental task of providing education to students considered to be significantly at-risk in a public school of choice. These educators are focusing on quelling the negative success trajectory prevalent for each of the students of MGLC. Understanding the perceptions of these educators regarding their ability to create positive changes in the lives of students at MGLC is an important component in further understanding the successes occurring at MGLC. The purpose of this study was to gain insight into the professional educators’ perceptions of their efforts and strategies to teach their students to become resilient, to build personal responsibility, and to engage in positive interpersonal relationships.

The following questions guided the current research study: 1) How do the professional educators of MGLC describe the strategies they use to teach students to become resilient, build personal responsibility, and engage in positive interpersonal relationship building skills? 2) What perceptions do the professional educators of MGLC have of the effectiveness of these approaches? 3) How do the professional educators of MGLC describe the lessons learned about these approaches, and how might those lessons inform future strategies to assist students at MGLC? A phenomenological research design was employed. Participants consisted of eight certificated educators who have provided direct service to the students of MGLC. Data were gathered in the form of semi-structured interviews, observation, and review of artifacts.

The study included six major findings: 1) Passionate Belief in the Power of People, 2) Making Connections with Students to Build and Leverage Relationships Makes a Difference, 3) A High Level of Commitment is Required by All Stakeholders, 4) Communication is an Essential Element, 5) Consistency of Protocols and Practice Sets the Tone, and 6) It’s a Process: To See Success You Only Need to Open Your Eyes. Results of the study included: 1) The successes that occur at MGLC every day may not be noticeable to many, but, nevertheless, the significance of each small success, which is incumbent on the passionate power of people, builds further opportunities for student transformation; 2) The professional education staff of MGLC engages in extensive, intentional, purposeful strategies to connect and communicate with students; 3) The professional education staff at MGLC is committed to applying consistent, focused, actionable strategies to engage and support students in finding success; and 4) Developing, opening, and implementing MGLC to meet the needs of an evolving at-risk student population has been an extremely challenging endeavor, but one well worth the effort.
The study conclusions were: 1) The professional educators at MGLC display intentional and purposeful actions with clear communicative focus attached to actionable behaviors with specific and targeted goals of initiating success for students; 2) The significance of recognizing each small success, which is incumbent on the passionate power of people, builds opportunities for student transformation and is described as an important characteristic of the MGLC; and 3) Creating MGLC has been a process that, though challenging, has been well worth the effort given the successes being realized by students and the evolution of the staff as a unified collegial unit. Recommendations for actionable improvements to MGLC, for the broader educational community contemplating initiating such a school, and for future research are made.

As school leaders, policy makers, and broader educational communities seek to support the structures of schools in California to provide more opportunities for students, a continuous focus on the need to support the development of each child, as a unique being, exists for us all. Thus, for each educator, and supporter of education, a conscious focus on each student’s successes is imperative to reaching this goal. Acting in purposeful, intentional ways to support children as they traverse their personal educational paths may be characterized as an onerous responsibility, yet one which belongs to each educator, and must be addressed. To meet this challenge our educational institutions must seek to employ strategies that engage students, to provide rigorous and relevant challenges, and to support our California children, as they face their individual adversities in reaching their goals. By supporting students’ resiliency development, responsibility development and relationship building skills, we, as educators, are uniquely positioned to ensure that our systems are employing and advancing strategies that support students, build their personal empowerment skills, and further their asset development and personal skills to overcome any adversity placed in their way.