



## Changing the Homework Conversation

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### ABSTRACT

This research project is a continuation of a study conducted in Fall of 2014 by Andie Flett and builds upon a study done by Suzy Meyskens (Kinerk) in the 2011 and 2012 school year. As dormitory heads of girls residences at the same school, we have made similar observations about the status quo for study hall and we have both made individual attempts to modify and test new models with the intention of improving student achievement. In the present study, we are collaborating to test a model for study hall that is student-centered and aims to increase intrinsic motivation, personal accountability, and self-efficacy, while decreasing feelings of resistance to receiving help in the dorm during study hall. Even with the small sample size, this intervention has served as an opportunity to further refine the model and instruments with the hope of measuring a larger sample in future studies. In the present study, six girls, ages 15- 17, received the Super Study Hall (SSH) intervention in place of the status quo “supervised study hall” during the second marking period (weeks 7-11 of the school year). In our observations, the majority of the girls were receptive to this help and made progress in their ability to define their own goals and self-regulate their study habits.

- KINERK 2012

In 2011 and 2012, I carried out an action research project in my dormitory of approximately eighty 10th and 11th grade girls at an international boarding school in Switzerland. I targeted students who were not struggling to the extent that they were being monitored by our Learning Support Center, but the students just above this cohort whose underperformance was perhaps related to a lack of motivation, supervision, adult mentorship, study skills, or some combination of these factors. The grade point average (GPA) cutoff for participating in the program was 2.25, and all nine students who

participated did so voluntarily. At the beginning of each week the girls would create and give me a copy of a weekly time schedule in which they outlined their weeks' commitments and their available study time; on the back, they set two academic goals for the week and assessed the extent to which they did or did not meet the previous week's goals; and, lastly, they completed a nightly homework sheet where they wrote out their homework for every class and estimated how much time they needed to complete each assignment. On Fridays, I asked individual teachers for a brief assessment of how each student had performed and shared those thoughts with the students' parents over the weekend.

The purpose of this intervention was to create a circle of communication and support and try to involve the parents in being aware of the student's progress in order to give them a chance to participate more regularly in having conversations with and helping to motivate their daughter. The underlying purpose of the action research intervention was to try to mimic, to the extent possible in a boarding school, the kind of support these girls might receive if they were living at home with their parents.

The findings for this research were that the student's GPAs overall did not improve, and in fact most GPAs decreased (Kinerk 2012). However, every student begins with a 4.0 so the trend for nearly all students is that GPAs decrease over the semester, to varying extents. It is unknown whether these students would have had even lower GPAs if they had not participated in the study program. The qualitative data suggests that there was value in having an adult mentor who cared about their success consult with them on a weekly basis; that having someone to talk to about their classes was therapeutic in allowing them to vent frustrations and think through how to handle specific challenges; and that talking about various study skill tactics, even if not used consistently, was also beneficial for the participants.

This action research intervention was focused on changing the following elements of the status quo: students were rewarded for completing tasks that required the students to think about and plan their time (they got to study in their rooms instead of a supervised study area each night they did a homework sheet); setting short-term (weekly) academic goals; and increasing adult mentorship in

their lives. Though this intervention was student-focused to some extent, it also still involved the supervision and guidance of adults (teachers and parents) that could be perceived either as a help or as a threat. Depending on the class, the student, and the parent, this presence was either a positive and motivational element, or in some cases had a negative influence. In the current research study, the focus is on the student and their personal goals, and involves less external input and monitoring.

- FLETT 2014

In 2014, I began an action research project in a girls' grade 8 and 9 dormitory at the same Swiss international boarding school as Suzy Kinerk, now Meyskens. In my first study, I examined the relationship between goal setting academic success in a paper titled "[Is Future Goal setting related to homework success?](#)" (Flett 2014). In this study, students who had a GPA below 3.0 at the end of the first marking period (six weeks into the school year) were flagged as academically at risk. This group was selected as the study population and they experienced the Super Study Hall (SSH) intervention. The SSH intervention aimed to improve upon the status quo of supervised study hall. Historically at our school, as with many other boarding schools, students who are flagged as academically at risk are required to study in a supervised area during the evening study hall time. Students in supervised study hall may be punished for not studying during this time (for example they can incur "infractions" which take away their weekend free time) and their reward consists of escaping this structured supervised study hall by raising their GPA above a given threshold. In contrast, in the SSH intervention, a similar at-risk population, is given 15 minutes of structured coaching twice a week focused on defining a long term vision, creating short term goals, and evaluating weekly progress. The important differences between these two approaches to residential study hall support are: in supervised study hall the goals are set by the teachers (i.e. raise your GPA) thus the motivational focus is external, whereas in the Super Study Hall intervention students articulate their short and long term goals as well as a plan to achieve these goals. Since the goals in the SSH are student-centered the motivation to succeed is more likely intrinsic.

In the first intervention (Flett 2014) as well as in the current study, an effort has been made to work with a similar population, selected by the same criteria, and to use similar human resources, thus creating a historical control group that can be compared to the present research population. Comparisons between historical populations and the populations in the 2014 and 2016 interventions can only be made anecdotally due to the small sample size. However, there is GPA and retention data available that can add some empirical strength to the discussion. In addition, we are currently developing tools for collecting quantifiable data that will be more relevant with larger sample sizes.

For the benefit of readers from outside of the school, I will explain the structure of study hall as it exists here as this bears many similarities and some differences to other boarding school programs. In this school, there are six dormitories on campus and each residence houses between 30 and 80 high school students (grades 8-12) grouped by age and gender. In every dormitory there is an evening study hall from 20:00 until 21:00 or 21:30 which is supervised by either one or two faculty members at a ratio between 1:22 and 1:40. For students whose GPA is below a certain threshold, which may be a fixed number (generally 2.5 or 3.0 on a 0 - 4.0 scale) or in relation to their peers (for example, the students with the lowest eight or 10 GPAs in the dormitory) a supervised study hall is mandated. There is little evidence to support the paradigm that increased supervision and punitive consequences have a positive effect on academic achievement and, as articulated by Kinerk (2012), there has been a growing recognition by dormitory heads of the dissonance between modern educational research on learning and motivation and the outdated model of supervised study hall. Arguably, a remaining advantage of supervised study hall is that it isolates disruptive students from those who are using the evening study hall effectively or at least quietly. Again, there is little enthusiasm for the argument that supervision and punishment alone have a positive effect on academic achievement for the at risk students. The current challenge at our school is to use our resources most effectively to support at risk students and create a peaceful study environment for more autonomous students. The intention of the current study is to use the available resources differently to fulfill the goal of improving academic achievement for the selected group and to attempt

to measure the effect of this change. The main modifications to the status quo in the current study are student-centered goal setting and coaching in self-regulated learning coupled with an overall change in tone from punishment to support.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The status quo supervised study hall model at our school is aligned with Classical Conditioning (Skinner & Campbell, 1947) and presumes that the student desires the supervising adult's approval, good homework grades, and weekend evening social time. SSH is based on rewards and punishments; the researcher observed that this may actually reinforce low-achievement by punishing students for having bad study habits while not specifically teaching good study habits. In contrast, the present study addressed low motivation by teaching students to self-regulate their learning, improve their self-efficacy beliefs, and improve their study habits. Using vision boards, specific goal setting, and regular goal reflection, the objective was to teach students to be more self-directed in their studying and thus reduce the use of external discipline (punishments) to modify student behavior.

In response to Skinner's behaviourist theory of social learning (1947), Albert Bandura began his life's work in the 1960's contributing to the field of social-cognitive theory. In a series of experiments that challenged classical behaviorism, Bandura posited that humans can self regulate their immediate impulses in the service of future rewards (Bandura & Mischel 1965). In 1977 Bandura defined his theory of Self-Efficacy; because this theory provides the theoretical framework for much of the subsequent research on goal setting, motivation, and Self-Regulation (SR) in the field of educational psychology and research, Bandura's (1977) original definition is inserted here:

This theory states that psychological procedures, whatever their form, alter the level and strength of *self-efficacy*. It is hypothesized that expectations of personal efficacy

determine whether coping behavior will be initiated, how much effort will be expended, and how long it will be sustained in the face of aversive experiences. Persistence in activities that are subjectively threatening but in fact relatively safe procedures, through experiences of mastery, [produces] further enhancement of self-efficacy and corresponding reductions in defensive behavior. In the proposed model, expectations of personal efficacy are derived from four principal sources of information: performance accomplishments, vicarious experience, verbal persuasion, and physiological states (p. 191).

The current educational research in Self-Regulation (SR), Self-Regulated Learning (SRL), and multiple goal theory is grounded in Bandura's work on Self-Efficacy. Suffice it to say that for nearly 40 years, social-cognitive psychologists have challenged behaviourism's simplistic model of rewards and punishments and have proposed that learning is a complex experience greatly influenced by both the external environment and the learner's internal beliefs and motivations.

Several researchers have applied Bandura's (1977) theory of Self-Efficacy to the field of educational psychology and specifically to the question of how students learn how to learn and, how students either do or do not set goals and systematically work towards achieving these goals. Self-Regulated Learning (SRL) is a field of study born from and still connected to Bandura's work; research in this field is being led by Barry Zimmerman, Lyn Corno, Philip H. Winne and others; the field of SR and SRL research is linked closely to research on goal theory and motivation as well as Carol Dweck's (2006) work on mindset. Self Regulated Learning teaches students to use a cyclical feedback loop to regulate their learning. The feedback loop passes through 3 distinct phases: a forethought or planning phase, performance control phase, and self-reflection phase. Each phase informs the following phase and

adjustments are made at each stage; these adjustments are the Self Regulation processes. Central to the psychology of SRL is that Self Regulation can be taught, that individuals can improve their ability to Self Regulate, and that self-efficacy beliefs as well as future goals and expectations greatly influence learning (Zimmerman & Schunk 2008). Barry Zimmerman has published multiple papers and books describing the theoretical framework, instruments of measurement, experimental design, application in schools, and reviews of educational research; these are the essential reading on this topic (Bandura 1965, 1977; Zimmerman 2000, 2008; Cleary & Zimmerman 2004; Ramdass & Zimmerman 2008; Schunk & Zimmerman 2008).

In a related study in Australia, Mansfield (2010) reviewed and added to the body of research relating student goals to academic achievement and in particular to the study of multiple goal theory. In her study of 195 secondary school students, Mansfield measured four major categories of goals consistent with multiple goal theory: achievement goal, future goals, social goals, and well-being goals. Achievement goals are divided into mastery goals and performance goals; mastery goals are deeper and are generally more internally motivated whereas performance goals are surface goals that involve demonstrating competence to gain external rewards, notably grades in school. Much of the design of high school, and certainly supervised study hall, is based on the assumption that students are motivated to learn by performance goals. Future goals include career aspirations, material desires, and the need for success and happiness. Social goals include compliance – the basis for the infraction model of discipline - pro-social behavior, affiliation, approval, and status. Well-being goals include self-confidence, self-esteem, happiness, and safety. It is notable that well-being goals may also be maladaptive, for example, the need to feel safe may inhibit risk-taking behavior if failure was a negative experience in the past. In answer to the question: “Do you want to do

well in school? Why?” Mansfield (2010) reports that 100% of her sample of 195 high school students replied “yes” to the first question and their significant stated goals were as follows: 85% related their “Why” to future goals, 29% to performance goals, 10% to mastery goals, 10% to the social goal of approval, and 9% to well-being goals. Mansfield (2010) found that 85% of the high school students wanted to do well in school and related this aspiration to their future goals. Mansfield’s (2010) study is pivotal to the current study as it inspired me to ask the following question: do the students at my school also have future goals that they believe can be reached by being academically successful?

## METHOD

Our academic program is divided into two or three “marking periods” each semester, which last approximately five weeks. The intervention group for this study was selected by the following criteria: students with a GPA below 3.0 after the first marking period were invited to participate in the Super Study Hall (SSH) program. In the Vermont dormitory, three girls met this criterion (in 2014 there were 8) and in Beau Site there were five girls with a GPA below 3.0. The population in Vermont was reduced to two since one girl’s low GPA was essentially an error and she chose not to participate in the SSH program; and in the Beau Site dormitory one of the five girls declined participation, leaving four girls in Beau Site.

The SSH intervention began in Week 1 with the students creating a “Vision Board” using an iPad app (Jack Canfield’s Success Vision Board) with which they use images, words and phrases to make a picture that represents what they want their future to look like. This initial vision is intentionally broad and unstructured; for example, students might include in their vision university, general happiness, a family, a general career path, or a desired location to live in. In the visioning phase, the researcher provides very general guidance such as asking “where do you see yourself after high school” or “can you illustrate what that looks



like?” Students then share their vision with the researcher, explaining the various elements in more detail. In Beau Site, the girls were first asked a series of questions about helping students create a vision for their future in order to help them think more deeply about what is important to them in life and in their futures. Each student’s vision board is printed on A4 paper and they and the researcher each keep a copy; the students are encouraged to post the vision board in a place where they will see it daily, for example by their desk or on the inside cover of their agenda.

The second session (ideally completed in the first week) involves creating SMART goals for the current marking period that provide tangible steps towards reaching the future vision. The SMART acronym stands for specific, measurable, attainable or achievable, relevant, and time-bound and is attributed to Peter Drucker's management by objectives concept developed in the 1950s (Drucker, 1954). At this stage, the researcher is very involved as typically the students need a lot of coaching to develop their SMART goals. The goals don’t have to be all academic, but if the student agrees that their high school outcomes influence their future then the researcher will guide the student to create at least one specific academic goal. In general, each student created three to five goals; examples include “no grades lower than B”, “finish my iMaths every week”, “go to my activities”, and “work in my sketch book every day”. The student and the researcher each keep a copy of the SMART goals and the student is asked to also post their SMART goals available for daily reference.

In weeks 2-5, the researchers met with each student once or twice a week for approximately 15 minutes to discuss their current situation and to forge a connection between their long term goals and how their current action and performance was helping them to or hindering them from reaching those goals. A critical element of these meetings was the language used with the student. All questions were intended to direct the student to

self-reflect and assess on their own actions and habits and to ask if these strategies were effective and then to fine tune their plan for the upcoming week. Here is an example of how I would frame a typical weekly check-in:

- How did it go this week with your SMART goals? (open-ended, student directed)
- Did you achieve your goals? (student centered, self reflective)
- What worked? What did not work? (self reflective, non punitive)
- Do you still have the same vision and goals? Did you look at these during the week?  
(re-focus on intrinsic motivation for a future outcome)
- What is your plan for next week? Do you need to make any changes to what you are currently doing?
- I'll stop by again next week to check in and see how you are doing with your plan; you can also contact me if you need help before then (student centered, supportive role)

While every teacher will find their own language to use, these are examples of phrases that worked for me: the conversations they started were non threatening, self reflective, and student centered.

## FINDINGS

For the population in Beau Site, the program flagged five potential students, but one declined to participate so I followed through with four. Two of the girls had a clear idea of how they would like their future to be shaped, while the other two had only vague ideas and one of these girls felt quite comfortable and confident that she didn't need to have a vision yet at her age. Each of the vision boards reflected these various levels of development of their future goals.

As a broad observation, I can comment after three trials of this intervention in Vermont (Fall 2014, Winter 2015, and the current study in Fall 2015) that most girls like to talk about their future dreams and that they all appreciate the extra attention and focus on helping them to articulate and move steadily towards their goals. In my experience, beginning the school year with this intervention sets up a nurturing academic relationship that can be leveraged as the year goes on. More specifically, I can comment that one girl in my Vermont sample did achieve her SMART goals and is still keeping her GPA above 3.0 (actually, she has a 3.7 after the fourth marking period). Regarding the second girl in my sample, her outcomes were not as successful. She had self-management and health issues that crippled her academic success despite her motivation and her observable intelligence.

## DISCUSSION

The Super Study Hall (SSH) intervention is most effective for girls with a GPA after the first marking period between 2.5 and 3.0. In this range, the minimal level of support provided with SSH in the dorm can maximize the student's potential to self regulate and to learn strategies that help to move them from a C average to a B average (i.e. above 3.0). In our observations, once a girl's average falls below GPA 2.0 over several weeks, our intervention did not provide enough support. At this level of need, our school's Extended Learning Support Program is a more suitable intervention as this program provides roughly 8-10 hours of support per week. With the population of girls that we have worked with who have a GPA between 2.5 and 3.0, we found that we were able to teach them simple and effective study strategies and to provide personal coaching on goal setting and goal monitoring that moved them out of the academic danger zone (below 3.0 GPA). Once they are out of this danger zone, many girls appear to have reached an academic tipping point where they can view themselves as successful students. This higher observed level of

self-efficacy may then encourage a beneficial study environment where the adults in the dorm are there to help and support, rather than to punish and supervise, and the student may gain motivation from their experiences of success and autonomy. Often these student-teacher interactions are the ones that impact the students over a longer period of time than is able to be assessed within the parameters of a semester or year long study. Hopefully some of the content of these meetings and reflections helped these students think more deeply about their habits, strengths and weaknesses, and likely had some impact on their future studies.

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