Goal Setting: Weekly Student Conferencing and the Effect on Work Completion in a Montessori Classroom

By
Courtney Peterson

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Abstract

As educators, teaching students to set attainable goals and to be responsible for the completion of these goals is a life skill that we need in our education system to help our children become successful leaders in the future. This research study was developed to teach students in an E1 Montessori classroom (first through third grade) in a suburban school how to set attainable goals, to identify if weekly individual conferencing between student and teacher is helpful for students to reach these goals, and, to increase work completion throughout the classroom. The participants of this study met weekly to set attainable goals, to reflect on previously set goals, and to record work completion. Results indicated that the majority of students completed more works during the student conferencing and goal setting.

Keywords: Montessori, goal setting, work completion, conferencing

Literature Review

Introduction

As teachers, we know that if students are invested in their work, then they tend to complete the work assigned and often times more than what is assigned. However, as a public Montessori school, we know that we are committed to and required to educating the whole child, including works that they students may not find very enticing. As teachers, I was curious about what we could do to help Montessori students complete more of their work choices to further their education. We cannot simply teach lessons, and hope students will be motivated to complete the work. The Montessori method is generally opposed to reward and punishment systems, however, we must incorporate other ideas into our classroom to lead students in the direction of work completion.

Intrinsically Motivated vs. Extrinsically Motivated

Motivating students to complete schoolwork is a common concern across many schools. A summary by the Center on Education Policy (CEP) looked at student motivation, and defined intrinsic motivation as the "desire to do or achieve something because one truly wants to and takes pleasure or sees value in doing so" and extrinsic motivation as "the desire to do or achieve something not so much for the enjoyment of the activity itself, but because it will produce a certain result" (CEP, 2012 p. 3). Research examining the subject showed that "students' beliefs can affect their motivation. For example, students who believe

they have limited capacity to learn or feel they are unlikely to succeed often have problems with motivation. In a similar vein, students who conceptualize intelligence as a fixed quantity that one either has or doesn't have tend to be less motivated than students who view knowledge as something that can change and grow" (CEP, 2012, p.3).

The use of extrinsic rewards in a Montessori setting is not typically seen. This focus on grades, gold stars and treats for reading programs is not a usual part of the Montessori school day. Maria Montessori believed in the child's inner need to do productive work. She believed the use of rewards and punishment is "a means of enslaving a child's spirit, and is better suited to provoke than to prevent deformities" (Montessori,1948, p.45). Many regular education schools may use these types of rewards, in addition to punishments to get students to complete work. According to Lillard's research, Dr. Montessori "saw these rewards and evaluation as a great interference with children's learning, and the research suggests that her perception is correct" (Lillard 2005, p. 153). Research shows that, in the long term, using rewards and punishment negatively affects cognitive functioning, creativity and pro-social behaviors. Supporting this cognitive functioning is the key piece in maintaining a students intrinsic motivation. Research done in this area to encourage student ownership of learning, states that "cognitive supported autonomy may have more long lasting effects on engagement and motivation" (Sefaneau, Perencevich, Dicintio & Turner, 2004, p. 106) and that "focusing on empowering students to develop self reliance in thinking" makes a lasting impact (Stefaneau et al., 2004, p.107).

Rarely have we seen a child with a "motivational deficit. Instead, young children seem eager and excited about learning of all sorts, and the more typical parental complaints concern their children's apparent insatiable curiosity and boundless energy" (Lepper, Sethi, Dialdin & Drake, 1997 p. 23). However, these same children enter school, and we know that "intrinsic motivation in school has been shown to decline every year over the course of traditional schooling" (Eccles, Wigfield, 1993, p. 190). While we know there are many reasons for the lack of interest in school, research suggests that the intense focus on grades as a measure and external rewards for appropriate work and behavior is decreasing this intrinsic motivation by overwhelming amounts. A study completed by Lepper, Greene & Nisbett, in 1973, offered new sets of markers to students ages 3-5 years old "and watched to see which children used them a lot. Heavy marker users were then brought, one at a time, to a testing room, and a third of them were immediately shown a "Good Player Award"-a fancy note and with a big gold star and a red ribbon. They were asked if they would like to receive a Good Player Award, and all the children assented" (Lepper, Greene & Nisbett, 1973, p.169). Students then had to draw a picture with the markers. The results of the study indicate that students who were offered the award drew a quick and less creative picture than students who did not receive the award. They also found that students who were not offered the award used the markers in the classroom more frequently. This shows that "engaging in a well-liked activity with the expectation of a reward led to reduced creativity during the activity with the expectation of a reward led to reduced creativity during that activity and to

decreased voluntary participation in that activity later" (Lepper, Greene, & Nisbett, 1973, p.245).

Goal Setting

Since we know that intrinsic motivation has lasting effects, how can we encourage intrinsic motivation to affect work completion in students? Research has shown that students "who are not motivated by love of learning alone may do better in school if they can see learning as a gateway to something else they value" (CEP, 2012 p. 3). If students see that they can set goals and attain them, "they begin to take responsibility and ownership of their learning goals. This goal-directed behavior as a result of goal setting can be both empowering and proactive for students" (Elliot & Fryer, 2008, p. 235). We also know that students who invest in their goals, demonstrate greater persistence, creativity and risk taking in achievement of goals that they have set (Dewett, 2007 p. 197).

The Center on Education Policy states in the Summary of Student Motivation, that "goals can help motivate students to work harder if certain conditions are present" (CEP, 2012, p. 3). Evidence from several studies indicates that a "good goal" should be attainable, mastery based instead of performance based, and not implied or imposed by an adult. In order to make the goal attainable, students must see a clear path to the goal and if the goal is too difficult, students will go down a road of failing which will have grim consequences for the student (CEP, 2012, p 4). Research also indicates that defining a goal as mastery based versus a performance based goal are more appealing to students and are more likely to be reached. A mastery based goal

can be defined as demonstrating a steadily increasing understanding in a content area, and a performance-based goal can be defined as reaching a predetermined level of performance and comparing that performance to others. "Motivational theory suggests that assessments that reward growth and effort encourage a mastery-based mindset and therefore have a stronger motivational effect" (CEP, 2012, p.4). There is a distinct relationship between students setting goals on their own that increases this intrinsic motivation and includes autonomy, effort, achievement, self efficacy and satisfaction (CEP, 2012, p.4). In addition to this, if the goal feels as if it was implied or imposed upon the student, they are less likely to feel ownership for the goal or be able to see a clear path to the finish.

However, is it enough for students to simply just set the goal? How else can we support students and encourage this lasting intrinsic motivation? In a recent research directed towards student-led conferences, students were asked to fill out a form prior to their conferences to use as a guide during the conference. While students filled the form out, and completed their conference based on the form, most student input stated that "on the whole, they would rather create their own proforma or abandon it all together" (Tholander, 2011, p. 248). The researcher knew that students were able to lead their own conference with the help of an outline; however, he then realized that students desired even more input in the process. It seems that students are often more capable and desire more input than we readily give them. This input leads the way towards the intrinsic motivation that we desire for our students.

Feedback on Goal Setting

Research shows that while goal setting does lead to improvement in student performance, goal setting combined with feedback leads to greater performance than either component alone (Koenig, Eckert & Hier, 2016, p. 275). "Performance feedback is defined as providing information to an individual regarding one or more aspects of an individual's performance" (Hattie, 2012 p. 277). "Locke and Latham (1990) argued that goal setting is only effective when provided with feedback regarding progress toward the goal. It was demonstrated in several literature syntheses, that the most effective interventions provide specific immediate feedback regarding progress toward a salient goal in an effort to reduce the amount of time between the delivery of feedback and the reaching of an established goal. This is commonly called the "feedback standard gap" (as cited by Koenig, Eckert, and Hier, 2016, p. 278). By reducing the amount of time between the goal setting and feedback, students are more likely able to draw a clear connection between their goal and the outcome.

Teacher Interaction

Schools and teachers can play an important role in boosting student motivation by providing this feedback component of students' goal setting. Teachers can influence students' motivation on a daily basis by encouraging them to "do their best, set high expectations, allow students some choice where possible and using lessons that involve higher order thinking, collaboration, and student participation among other strategies" (National Research Council, 2004, p. 6). When teachers take the time to provide this feedback to students, the time

spent one on one with the student can have a positive impact on the teacher/student relationship. According to studies cited by Hardre and Sullivan teachers are the most effective partners of the students in this goal setting feedback when they tend to focus on "interpersonal dealings with students, link education with things students value, and encourage autonomy more than control in their classrooms" (Hardre & Sullivan, 2009, p. 6). When students perceive teachers as caring about these interpersonal dealings, they are more motivated (Wentzel, 1997). Studies have also shown that the "higher levels of teacher–child closeness predicted higher levels of different types of behavioral engagement of the child in the classroom." (Wentzel, 1997). This shows us that if students perceive or experience a close relationship with their teacher, then they are more likely to be engaged in a positive manner in the classroom.

Conclusion of Literature Review

In conclusion, there appear to be many variables that assist students in successful completion of work. If we can follow this path to intrinsically motivate students by helping them set attainable goals with a clear path, and improve teacher relationships by providing feedback in accordance with these goals, it seems as if student work completion will increase. As this work completion increases, students will in turn feel more connected to their work and intrinsically motivated to complete it.

Research Purpose

The purpose of my action research project was to see if students' work completion would be affected with regular weekly conferencing and goal setting. Work completion is something that I have seen many students and Montessori teachers struggle with throughout the four Montessori schools in which I have worked over the past five years. As Montessori teachers, we hope that students are interested in the lessons and follow up work that we present to them; however, we know that individual students are drawn to different subject areas and neglect other subject areas. My hope was that by connecting to students in a positive way by intentionally having a 10-15 minute conversations with them regarding current work choices, having them set a weekly goal regarding work completion, and reflect on previously set goals, their number of works completed weekly would increase.

▶ **Research question**: Does regular student conferencing and student-led goal-setting effect work completion?

▶ **Subsidiary Question**: If conferencing with student occurs every week, will they feel more supported to complete their work plan?

Method

Participants and Setting

        The setting was an E1 classroom in a Montessori public school located in a small Mid Western town. The participants in this study included nineteen (19) students varying in ages from six to nine years old. Four students were in third grade, eight students are in second grade, and eight students are in first grade. Nineteen (18) of my participants were Caucasian, and one student is Chinese. One student is an English Language Learner. The school has a population of approximately 180 students in 4K/5K or Children's House, Lower Elementary (1st through 3rd grade) and Upper Elementary (4th through 6th grade). The school has few children with an IEP, typically for speech or ELL services. Three students receive Title Services for reading. During the 2017-2018 school year, data was collected between the months of January through April.

Procedure

Classroom resources for tracking Work Due.

Students used a work-planning sheet that they had been using since November (See Appendix 1). This remained a constant during my research. The planning sheet enabled them to keep track of work that is due the day they are filling out the sheet, work that is due the following day, as well as reminding them to check for overdue work on the lesson board. There is also a spot of the planning sheet to list three works that the student will do during the morning work

period, and spaces for older students to record the time that their work started and ended. The lesson board (See Appendix 2) is located in a central part of the classroom. It has the three grade levels listed, with subject areas for each day of the week. In the appropriate boxes, are the works due for a particular age group and subject area.

Record of works completed.

For four weeks prior to weekly conferencing and goal setting, I kept track of works completed for each student. Marking the work completed meant that the student finished the work in the allotted time, which is typically one week. If the work was not completed, then they did not receive a mark. Students had differentiated assignments, and various levels of "completed" work and this was taken into account according to skill level.

Weekly conferencing.

Each week during my study, I met with 3-4 students a day for approximately 10-15 minutes. During the first meeting, I asked students what their knowledge was of goal setting. Their responses varied and included:

- "something that you say you want to finish, and so you finish it,"
- "it's when you want to make sure you do something, so you set a goal, and then do it."

When asked for examples of goals, students gave examples such as:

- "wanting to be the fastest runner at recess"

- "solving a Rubix cube for a world record."

Goals that students set during the first meeting varied between work completion goals, various goals at school, as well as at home. Examples were:

- "to stop fighting with my brother"

- "to finish reading all of the Diary of a Wimpy Kid books"

- "to find more friends to play with at recess"

- "to finish my time zones and regions maps"

I did not anticipate that students would choose goals outside of school work; however, it was very eye opening and a good reminder that students are focused on so much more growth than simply work completion. During this first meeting we also discussed what an attainable, or reachable goal is. I gave examples to the students such as reading an entire chapter book during our 30 minute silent reading time may not be a reachable goal if the chapter book was 200 pages long. Students went on to say about how many pages they could read during the 30 minutes to set an achievable goal.

During the next three meetings, we began with reflecting on the student's goal that was previously set, and then moved on to discuss a goal for the following week. Often times, students did complete their goals that were set, and if they did not complete their goal, then we focused on the parts that they did complete and positively talked about what they needed to finish in order to

complete their goals. Data was not kept on whether or not students reached their goals.

During these intentional meetings, the students were not aware that I was having a "meeting" with them. I wanted the interaction to feel natural, so I joined students where they were working, and did not record parts of our conversation until I left the student. However, students were aware that I was going to record their goals and whether or not they were completed. I felt that if the students were called to the lesson table for our meeting, and if I were to record information during the conversations, that student would feel pressure and may give me responses that were not accurate. After my weekly conversations with the students, I recorded the information on a tracking sheet (See Appendix 3).

Results

To display the results, I chose a clustered bar graph for every student in each grade level. The pre-conferencing bar shows works completed over the course of 4 weeks. Students were in their normal routine of filling out their daily planning sheet. The amount of works assigned over the 4 weeks of pre-conferencing data collection totaled 15 works. The post-conferencing bar shows the works completed over the next of 4 weeks. The post-conferencing weeks included students continuing to fill out their daily planning sheet, and included a 10-15 minute weekly conference to include what goals for work completion they set, and if they were successful in completing their previous weeks goals.
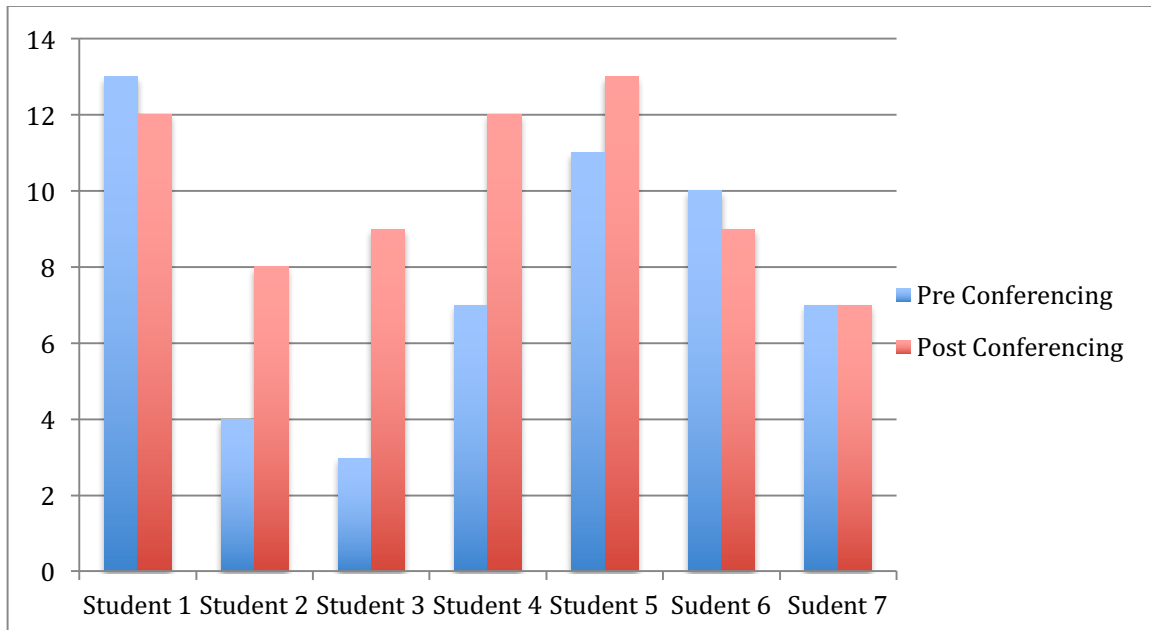
Figure 1 Impact of Conferencing on Work Completion for 1st Grade

The results of the first level students indicates that four students increased their work completion, two students decreased their work completion, and one students work completion remained the same.
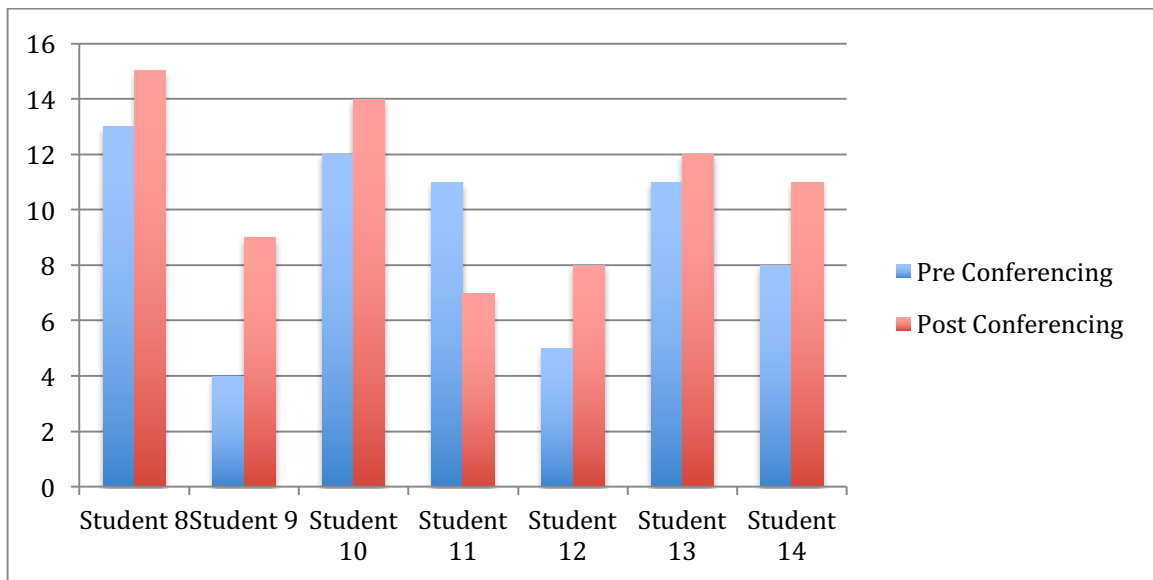
Figure 2. Impact of Conferencing on Work Completion for 2nd Grade

The results of the second level students indicates that six students increased their work completion throughout the weekly conferencing, and one student decreased their work completion.
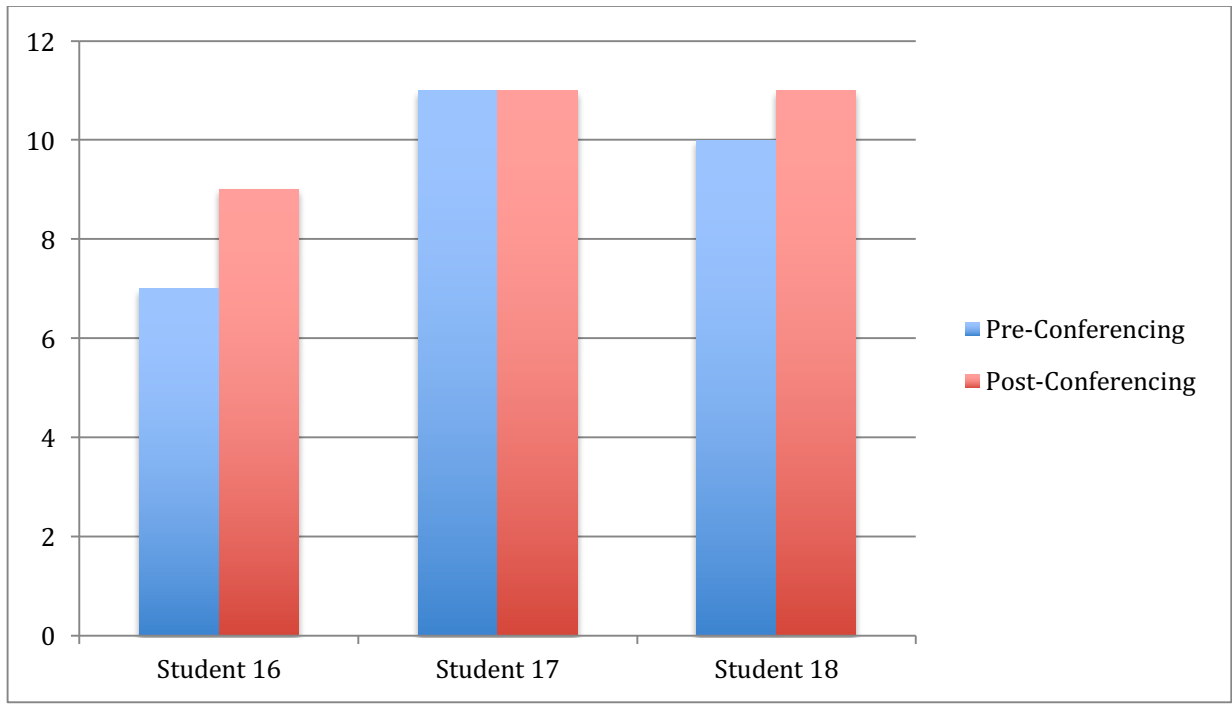
Figure 3. Impact of Conferencing on Work Completion for 3rd Grade

The results of the third level pre and post conferencing indicate two students increased their work completion, one student decreased work completion and one student remained the same. (Student 19 has completed 7 works during pre-conferencing, and 9 works post-conferencing).

Data Analysis

Overall the results show that thirteen out of nineteen students had an increase in works completed, with two students remaining at an equal number of works and four students decreasing in the number of works completed. It appears that weekly conferencing and goal setting had an impact on students work completion; however, there were other variables that could have affected

Variables

One of these variables could be the work choices during the pre and post conferencing weeks. While many of the works due remained the same such as language and math, we did introduce vertebrates into our science curriculum. These works tend to be more interesting to students, and tend to have more creative and art related follow-ups.

A second variable could be that students are further along in the school year, meaning they are more settled in the classroom with the routines and ways to make work choices. This could have affected the outcome of the results showing that as students are more comfortable and have grown throughout the school year, they are able to more effectively complete their assigned work.

A third variable is that students that have been in the low reading category throughout the school year, and therefore not as motivate to complete works that are difficult because of the reading components, seem to make leaps in their reading during this time of year. Students that feel more confident in their reading abilities and are able to work more independently and done have to rely on a

partner to read information or directions for them, may be more inclined and motivated to finish their work.

Reflection and Action Plan

I went into this research with a very unambiguous attitude regarding the importance of work completion in a Montessori classroom. I have worked in various capacities as an Assistant, a substitute, and a teacher in five Montessori schools over the past five years, and a very common theme that I noticed was a lack of work completion and record keeping regarding work completion. I noticed that teachers were very intentional about preparing the classroom, and teaching inspiring lessons accompanied by interesting follow up work, however, I have seen a general lack of teachers following up on whether or not work was completed. Any teacher could tell you impromptu which students in class generally complete their work, but without adequate record keeping and student conferencing, it is difficult to draw connections between specific areas of work completed or not completed.

However, I have remembered a great deal about what entails "work" in a Montessori classroom. Work in a Montessori classroom encompasses so much more than students completing 5 follow up paragraphs for the systems of the amphibian. Perhaps an older student helped a younger student with a project, and so they were unable to fully complete their own work. An example of this happened recently in the classroom where a very capable and advanced third year student helped a first year student complete a beautiful poster that

described the parts of a fish. The younger student is a low level reader, and was not able to independently read the descriptions of the body parts that were a part of the follow up work. While I could have differentiated the material for this student, I chose to create a partnership that was beneficial for both of them. The third year student loved helping, and the first year student was able to complete a work at the same level as other students in the class. Both felt proud of their work. However, the third year student did not have enough time to devote to a travel brochure for a state project. The experience of her being a leader and helping another student was definitely more beneficial to her. She was able to help this younger student feel really good about their work. Maria Montessori says that "there is a great sense of community in the Montessori classroom, where children of differing ages work together, in an atmosphere of cooperation rather than competitiveness." If this third level student felt pressure to compete her work or she would face a consequence, then I would have missed out on this experience.

As a Montessorian, I know that work in a Montessori classroom should be self-directed for a reason. If I truly believe that students will choose work that they need physically, socially and emotionally, then I need to give them the freedom to do this. However, as a public Montessori school, the pressures of meeting specific standards and ensuring that students are learning according to state standardized tests. There is a middle ground that I have come to in this research to making sure that students have the freedom to meet these social and emotional needs that may not always be easily visible to the teacher.

Encouraging students to do the academic work from lessons that they are given, but being flexible when the work is not completed is in the best interests of the student and the teacher. This takes knowing your students, weekly conferencing, record keeping, and intentional observations to be successful.

In the future, I intend to keep this weekly conferencing with students, but will focus more on having students set their own goals for work. This will allow students to have more choice in their follow up work, and will also keep the important aspect of individually checking in with students to strengthen the student/teacher relationship. Areas of future research possibilities are to focus on how the weekly conferencing affects how the student feels about the student/teacher relationship, as well as the impact it has on how the teacher feels about the student/teacher relationship. Future research plans may also include a long term research of how student-led work choices and interests over the three year cycle affect overall academic performance.

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