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Keywords

qualitative research

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Dual-Enrolled Students' Perceptions of the Effect of Classroom Environment on Educational Experience

by
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Abstract

The researchers investigate the perceptions of dually-enrolled high school students. The researchers concentrate on the actual and perceived impact of the facility on the instructional benefits of the course. Additionally, the researchers explore the impact of combining high school and college students in a common classroom working with identical curriculum. Through critical inquiry the researchers provide a forum for dually-enrolled learners to articulate the strengths and weaknesses of the dual-enrollment model in which they participate.

Introduction

Dual enrollment is difficult to define for many reasons. Virtually every state has high schools and colleges that work within the framework of a dual enrollment system. Additionally, the very definition of dual enrollment is extremely broad. This phenomenon can most probably be attributed to the fact that there are many uses and objectives associated with dual enrollment. In its most simple form, dual enrollment is a system of cooperation between a high school and a university or community college that allows a student to attain college credit while pursuing a high school diploma; however, dual enrollment has evolved into much more (Fincher-Ford, [1996](#); School-to-Work, [1997](#)). More precisely, the School-to-Work Glossary of Terms ([1997](#)) defines dual enrollment as, "...a program of study allowing high school students to simultaneously earn credits toward a high school diploma and a post secondary degree or certificate" (p. 25).

Dual enrollment programs may be very small, involving a cooperation between one high school and one community college. Dual enrollment programs may also be very large, involving a cooperation between a community college and many schools in various counties. Very large programs such as this one usually serve a very large area and a very diverse student population (Delaino, [1990](#)). Despite the fact that dual enrollment programs vary greatly in size, purpose, goals, mission, and population, served all have one thing in common. Dual enrollment programs exist to meet the specific needs of the high school students they serve (Galloway, [1994](#)).

Current State of Dual Enrollment

Despite the fact that the number of dual enrollment programs in the United States is currently very high, this is a critical time for dual enrollment. States, community colleges, and high schools are more aware of fiscal accountability than ever before; hence, program scrutiny is at an

all time high. Any program that does not have clearly articulated objectives, methods for reaching those objectives, and data to support progress is in jeopardy of being cut. Dual enrollment programs are not exempt from this accountability. The diverse functions and purposes of dual enrollment programs in this country offers evidence to the flexibility of dual enrollment programs on the whole; however, this makes accountability somewhat difficult. Each program must have unique performance objectives and a data driven method to measure progress towards those objectives. For example, vocational preparedness is a goal of many dual enrollment programs in this country; hence, a dual enrollment program focused on preparedness must be capable of showing evidence of a smoother transition for high school students in the program to the workforce (Accountability/Flexibility, [1990](#); Running Start, [1997](#)).

Transferability and Quality of Education

It is not enough for a student to have the option to take high school and college courses for simultaneous credit; the credit must count for something. Of course, virtually no problem exists concerning the involved high school accepting the dual enrollment hours for credit; however, the transferability of the courses to a different community college or university is sometimes a difficult issue. When a dual credit agreement is reached between a high school and a community college, there is seldom an issue of transferability between those two institutions. The problem occurs when the student attempts to transfer the credit hours to a university or college that was not involved in the dual credit agreement. Ultimately, the student is at the mercy of the institution to which they are transferring. For example, the University of Florida does not accept dual enrollment chemistry hours from any college or university unless the student meets standard admissions requirements. As in any transfer, this decision is well within the jurisdiction of the University of Florida. Any university, ultimately, will have the final decision pertaining to transferability, whether the hours are dual enrollment hours or not (Brown, [1993](#); Windham, [1997](#)).

Dual Enrollment for the Traditional Learner

Contrary to popular belief, dual enrollment is not exclusively for the academically gifted learner. There are many dual enrollment programs that target the lesser-gifted student. South Dakota public schools used dual enrollment as a tool to decrease the drop out rate of their high-risk students. Often at risk students do not see the purpose of attending school. The perception is that there is very little practical application for a person that does not aspire to go to college. South Dakota utilized dual enrollment to teach students vocational skills, to spark an interest in academics and to try to teach the students better learning strategies (Hoachlander & Tuma, [1989](#); Haas, [1990](#)).

Many non-gifted students are capable of having success in college; however, they often have trouble in the transition from high school to college. Some dual enrollment programs are focused primarily on aiding an average student in making this difficult transition (The Continuum, [1992](#)). Some students simply will not have success in the traditional education system of our country. Unless they are given an opportunity to learn job skills and ways to have success in the American workforce, they are destined to fail in life. Traditional high schools often fail in

preparing these students. Dual enrollment programs gives them a chance at success (Galloway, [1994](#)).

Promoting cultural pride and acceptance of diversity is another purpose of some non-academic based dual enrollment programs. David E. Bogert ([1995](#)) describes a community college system in Florida focused on bettering students academically, increasing cultural awareness and acceptance and granting dual credit for high school and college. Many primarily minority districts are utilizing dual enrollment to better prepare students for a success transition into college or the workforce (Chatel & Cimochoowski, [1997](#)).

Problems with Dual Enrollment

Although there are many advantages to the dual enrollment system, there are some drawbacks. Many courses do not meet the specific needs of the students they are supposed to serve. For example, a course may not be rigorous enough for a gifted student and too rigorous for a non-gifted student. Transportation to the site where the courses are offered and transferability of hours post graduation are also potential problems with a dual enrollment program (Reiss & Follo, [1993](#)).

Cost is another potential drawback to the dual enrollment system. The method of funding dual enrollment varies greatly. For some, the cost falls directly to the student and his or her family. In other instances, it is subsidized in part or whole by the state. Some colleges offer scholarships and other forms of aid to entice students to enter a dual enrollment program (Fincher-Ford, [1996](#)).

Dual Enrollment and Climate

School climate undoubtedly has a significant impact on student learning. School climate is simply the atmosphere and morale in a particular school. There has been no research conducted specifically on the impact of climate on co-enrollment. This fact can most probably be attributed to the fact that dual enrollment is only now becoming a readily accepted and even expected part of high school curriculum. There are an infinite number factors that contribute to the climate of a school. Howard, Howell, and Brainard ([1987](#)) argue that proximity and school facilities contribute greatly to climate; hence, there are clear climate implications that should be considered when selecting which facility to use for a dual enrollment course, the college or high school.

Purpose and Significance of the Study

The purpose of this study was to determine whether the location of dual enrollment courses on the high school or college campus affected the educational experience of dual enrollment students. Because most community colleges encourage high school students to co-enroll in college classes for credit, dual enrollment is one of the fastest growing services offered by community colleges. Both high schools and the colleges benefit from these dual enrollment arrangements. High school students can complete some of their college core curriculum before they graduate from high school, and the college benefits immediately from increased revenue

while building a student base in the area. A high school student who is co-enrolled in college classes is likely to attend that community college after high school graduation.

The study focused on the effect of location of those classes. In some community colleges, the college instructor travels to the high school, usually one evening a week, to teach the class in that environment. In some cases, the college class is limited to current high school students and is offered during the regular school day. Usually these classes are taught by a regular high school faculty member who is working as an adjunct community college instructor. In other situations, the co-enrolled students come to the college campus. At a time when all educational institutions are trying to offer more opportunity for students with fewer resources, administrators have to be concerned about offering the choices that allow the student to complete his or her goals. If one location (either the high school or college campus) proves to be more conducive for the success of the college student, this would allow administrators to make wiser course scheduling decisions.

Theoretical Framework

There is not a strong literature base concerning the effects of dual enrollment course locations on climate; however, there are several strong theories concerning dual enrollment on which the researchers based their work. Bogert ([1995](#)) contended that the benefits of the dual enrollment system are potentially endless. He explained that dual enrollment systems can be used to enhance academic performance and to bridge gaps in race relations. Windham ([1997](#)) shares Bogert's enthusiasm. Windham contended that while there are still many kinks in most dual enrollment systems (transferability and rigor primarily) there is still potential for great benefits to come from this strategy.

There is a general lack of research on dual enrollment. Specifically, there is no research on the impact of course location on climate. The limited amount of applicable research suggests that dual enrollment serves multiple purposes in contemporary American schools: cooperation between institutions is essential, and dual enrollment will continue to grow and become more inclusive in scope (Reiss & Follo, [1993](#); Fincher-Ford, [1996](#); Windham, [1997](#)).

Method

Participants and Context of the Study

Six students were selected as the sample, two males and four females. One researcher interviewed three students who were in high school but co-enrolled in a community college class. These subjects were enrolled in college level courses that met on their high school campus. The other researcher interviewed three high school co-enrolled students who took their class at the college campus. All six subjects are from seventeen to nineteen years old, and all have similar grade point averages.

The sample method used was the purposeful sampling method, described by Gay ([1996](#)), from the co-enrolled student population at two community colleges in Southeast Texas. After

obtaining lists of co-enrolled students in a college undergraduate class, classes were identified by location. Three students from each list were selected.

Research Question

Because colleges have recognized the need to start recruiting students earlier in their education, many community colleges encourage co-enrollment of high school students. While some of these students come to the college's campus to take their classes, in other areas the instructor travels to the high school to teach. The research question: How does the location of a co-enrollment course (high school or community college) impact the climate of the classroom?

Research Design

The study was designed using the analytic induction method (Bogdan & Biklen, [1998](#)). After selecting appropriate subjects for the study, each was interviewed regarding their experiences in a co-enrollment program. The data was classified and categorized using the "perspectives held by subjects" technique discussed by Bogdan and Biklen ([1998](#)). After analyzing the transcripts of the interviews, the conclusions emerged naturally from the data.

Data Collection

As stated in Bogdan and Biklen ([1998](#)), "Individuals who share a particular trait but do not form groups can be subjects in a qualitative study, but interviewing is usually a better approach here than participant observation" (p. 56). Six subjects were interviewed who had completed at least two-thirds of the semester in the co-enrolled class. The interviews took place in either the high school or college where the student attended class. Each student was interviewed alone.

Instrumentation

To insure reliability of the interview questions, the questions were tested with a sample group of students, checking for unclear questions and bias. The interview technique was modeled on the Bogdan and Bilken ([1998](#)) methodology. The questions were the primary data collection method and were open-ended to ensure interview validity. The interview questions follow:

Table I: Interview Questions

1. What motivated you to take a college class (or classes) while still in high school?
2. Do your classmates know that you are still in high school? If so, how do they treat you?
3. Do you find the class environment to be conducive to learning?
4. If you have taken a college class at the campus (or, conversely, at an area high school), what differences do you see in the environment? Is one more conducive to learning than the other?
5. If you have taken classes at both locations, which do you prefer, and why?
6. Are there any physical factors in the differing environments that affect you either positively or negatively, such as room temperature, attractiveness, background noise, color, etc.?

7. Have you found either environment more convenient for your needs? Which one? Why?
8. Have you made a decision to continue or discontinue in the co-enrolled program based upon its location?

As expected, the interviews deviated slightly from these questions as the subjects shared their impressions.

Data Analysis

Categorization and transcription analyses were completed shortly after the interviews. The interviews were coded separately as a form of triangulation. After gathering the interview transcriptions, the data was sorted by perspectives held by the subjects (Bogdan & Biklen, [1998](#)), such as influence of physical environment on the experience, convenience of classroom location, and the environmental influences on participation and desire to continue. The following validity issues were considered:

1. Construct validity. Because the study focused on students' perception regarding co-enrollment and environment, questions were asked about their perceptions.
2. Internal validity. As this study seeks only students' perceptions about environment and does not attempt to determine causal relationships, the concept of internal validity is irrelevant.
3. External validity. Because this study illuminated students' perceptions regarding environment and satisfaction, it can perhaps be generalized to most co-enrollment programs, since the basics of high school classroom and college classroom vary little.
4. Reliability. This study discussed students' individual perceptions and opinions. Therefore, other researchers, using the same subjects, the same interview instruments, and the same procedure would probably arrive at the same conclusions. The issue of importance here is students' perceptions, which would remain constant and not be influenced by the individual researchers.

Results and Discussion

The findings can be categorized into three areas: overall satisfaction with the dual-enrollment experience, increased sense of independence, and increased desire to continue with college classes.

Satisfaction with Dual Enrollment Experience

All subjects felt that participating in the dual enrollment program was a positive experience. The experience was alternately described as "fun," "a step up," and made it "easier to switch gears" between high school and college. This concurs with assertions made by Galloway ([1994](#)). Overall, the students who participated in the courses on the high school campus appeared less satisfied than those that participated on the college campus. Janet, a student whose dual enrollment course was held on her high school campus, explained, "It is just like having another high school class. Don't get me wrong, it serves me well; however, I wouldn't describe it as either extremely rewarding and/or rigorous." Amy has experienced dual enrollment courses at

both the high school and college campus. She explained, "There is simply no comparison. The course I took at the college was of greater value, clearly." While all six participants expressed satisfaction from their dual enrollment experience, the three that took courses on the college campus appeared more satisfied.

Increased Academic Independence

Two of the subjects who took classes at the college campus felt that they had benefitted from their experience at the college. Sherry felt the class made her more responsible and independent, stating, "You were expected to be on time for yourself, you had to know when your classes started, there were no bells or teachers telling you where you need to be." Additionally, she felt that the college environment made her feel "more grown up or mature...." Sherry admitted to feeling a little intimidated at first, but once she found her way around, she said she "was proud to have faced [her] fears" about coming to the campus. Another subject, Colin, liked going to the college campus because it was "exciting and new, and everybody's older." Instead of being intimidated by the age gap, he felt that it was "...a lot looser...more comfortable. People talk more freely." While he did admit he felt more comfortable in the high school because it was what he was used to, he also admitted that he felt he would have an advantage over his classmates when going off to college after graduation. Because he had been exposed to the college environment, he said he "won't be scared to take classes."

Amy argued that both experiences were positive; however, courses hosted at the college were of greater value. She explained, "There is a certain level of familiarity at the high school. After all, I have spent more time in this classroom than the teacher or my classmates. At the college location, I literally felt my concentration increase and I was more meticulous with my notes. I guess it doesn't make sense, but I took it more seriously." Amy and the other two participants who were taking a course on the high school campus concluded that they approached the course more seriously than their regular high school courses and they did feel very responsible for their own performances.

Desire to Continue with College Classes

All subjects reported a desire to continue in the dual-enrollment program. For example, Trent decided to take two college classes during the last part of his senior year, even though he started in the dual enrollment class simply to placate his parents. However, due to his positive experience with the class, he increased his course load to get a jump on his freshman year at college.

All three participants that attended a dual enrollment course on the high school campus were unable to take additional co-enrollment courses because of a lack of time; however, all three reiterated the value of taking a dual enrollment course. The participants, on the whole, contended that dual enrollment was of greater value if the college course was taken on the college campus; however, all participants agreed that taking a course from either location was indeed a worthwhile endeavor.

Conclusions

The purpose of this study was to examine the effect of class location on student satisfaction with dual enrollment classes. While the results supported the current findings about the positive aspects of dual-enrollment, such as increased independence and desire to continue in college, the study did not identify significant conclusions about the effect of climate on satisfaction. It is obvious that all subjects perceive significant value in participation in a dual-enrollment program. The research also suggests that participants perceive dual-enrollment courses taken on a college campus to be of greater value than those taken on a high school campus. Because this study examined only perceptions of dual enrolled students, it is not possible, based on our findings, to make a statement on the comparative value of co-enrollment courses based on the location of the course. Clearly, more research on climate in dual-enrolled classes is warranted.

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