Organization: Can it Help a Failing Student?

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Introduction
I am a Social Studies and ESL teacher at Bell Multicultural High School in Washington, D.C. Although this is my second year teaching, I am for all practical purposes a first year teacher. It is my first year out of graduate school, and in my previous teaching position I had nowhere near the amount of professional responsibility or obligations I have now. Thankfully the year has gotten better for me, because I would be one miserable cookie if not. Reading over my journal, I can see that I am much happier now than I was before. Teaching during Bell’s 1999 summer program somewhat prepared me for the real thing. Although the director of the summer program had mentioned this new teachers’ research group to me, I didn’t think about it until later when I heard something about it and asked if I could join. Being a struggling first year teacher who needed some sort of support group, I figured I was the perfect candidate for it. The graduate credits and a stipend for participating also provided incentive. The two main results of my participation in this group are: 1) my further development as a new teacher and member of a new teachers’ community and, 2) the development of and conclusions from my action research project.

Participating in the Group
I was relieved when I found out about this group. I knew I liked teaching because I had in the past, however, in September and October of this past school year I didn’t like my job. I dreaded going to work everyday. I comforted myself with self assurances, “You just have to make it through the year, just 9 months, and then if you really are unhappy, you can get a different teaching job.” It bothered me that I had found something I loved to do, but that I didn’t like what I was doing. Furthermore, I felt that I was a failure at being a teacher. In a November 1st journal entry, in the midst of writing about having no life, and advising friends to hound me with multiple phone calls to get my attention I wrote:

The thing is, I have had no time in the past, but the difference is 80-90% of the time I enjoyed what I was doing. Now it’s the opposite. I am proud to be a teacher, of being a teacher. I can not, however, respond affirmatively to the question, ‘Do you like your job?’ Not that I don’t like the ideas behind the school, or its intentions, or the people I work with, or the students – I like all of those things. In that way, I couldn’t be happier. But, since so many of my students are not progressing (or doing their work) – for whatever reason – I am not succeeding. What can I say? I work hard. My students seem to take an interest in my classes. I take an interest in their
education, but I am a lousy teacher. I am not good at teaching what I am supposed to be teaching. I am a bad teacher. And, since I have always loved teaching and had reached a point where I felt good about where I was going with my life and what I was doing with it, and I can not stand to spend two-thirds to three-quarters of my time doing something I'm bad at (without always being tired, depressed, discouraged, in a bad mood), I must stop and do something else as soon as I can.

To me the, “as soon as I can,” meant at the end of the school year. Otherwise I would have been forced to add irresponsible and unprofessional to my self-imposed bad teacher label. Of course, that was written on one of my worst days, but at that point, those were the norm rather than the exception.

The group provided me with two things that a social creature such as myself needs: mentors and colleagues, meaning other new teachers to cry and vent to who could provide advice, comfort, and feedback, although both in different ways. I received guidance from the mentors and felt that it was important to them that the school kept me and the other new teachers; that we not quit. They understood and could relate to what we were going through; they had survived a first year too. Through interaction with my “peers” I felt much less lonely in my misery, frustration, and self-doubt, and after more meetings, I felt a certain bond with them. I had the “we’re-all-in-this-together-feeling.” Perhaps I would have bonded with these other teachers anyway. Perhaps the mentors would still have mentored me. But because of the program I saw and interacted with the other new teachers in the program beyond school hours. Moreover, because of the official roles of our mentors, I was less shy about asking them for help or just talking to them about my experiences.

Commence Action Research

I considered several topics before settling on this one. The situation I’m about to describe is one that plagues many ESL students, particularly those who come from similar backgrounds as Bell students. The idea basically fell in my lap. The work I did was work I was considering doing anyway, so I thought why not do it as my action research project?

There is a female student in my English as a Second Language Reading Development class for intermediate level students. She is 14 years old, a ninth grader, originally from Ethiopia. By the end of this study she would have been here for about one year and four months. She appears to comprehend a good deal of English. Moreover, when she doesn’t know a word or phrase she is not afraid to stop me and say, “What does ________ mean? I don’t understand.” When I ask her if she understands, she responds, “Yes, yes.” However, she doesn’t engage in the behaviors that so many beginning language minority students do, such as passively nodding the head to indicate understanding when comprehension has not, in fact, taken place. Her speech and handwriting coincidentally, or maybe not so coincidentally (another day, another project), can be hard to understand, muffled, and unclear. Also, she seems to have some
social issues, i.e., she doesn’t always relate to other students in the class and in fact, she seems to elicit a curious and confused reaction from them. Finally, her notebook is a mess!!!! Actually, she didn’t really have a notebook at first.

Fasika had good attendance until recently (she’s been sick). She usually participated and added to discussions and seemed to genuinely try hard. However, she was extremely disorganized and often failed to turn in assignments, although she knew the information. I noticed her good intentions but also her extremely messy backpack and papers. Her papers from different classes were wrinkled and crammed together in various spiral (without pockets) notebooks. She rarely knew where any specific assignment or paper was. When her name came up with one of her other teachers, he shook his head with half a chuckle and half a moan and said, “Oh yes, Fasika. I know her. She needs help. I’m not quite sure what to do about her.”

Being the fanaticaly organized person that I am, I said to myself, “How can that child live or study that way? And no wonder she doesn’t always turn things in or they’re half done.” I soon brought a notebook and dividers for her and asked her to stay after school one day (“Nothing bad," I told her. "I just want to give you some extra help.”) Of course, she forgot to stay the first time I asked her, but the second time she stayed. We, with the help of another student who is from her native country, pulled all of the papers out we could find, punched holes in them and put them under the appropriate divider. She was so grateful. She must have thanked me a dozen times.

I was interested to see if helping her to be more organized, along with some tutoring and advising, would make a difference in her performance and achievement overall. I had helped similar students get organized once and usually not checked on them again. I wondered if some one-on-one-attention and consistent help with organization and study skills could help her (and students like her) in my class and across the board. I decided to check in with her teachers from last semester, look at her grades and progress reports, and also speak with and check in with her teachers from this semester (and that way measure progress), and perhaps make contact with the family.

Teaching organizational skills, whether it is organizing ideas or papers, is a hot topic in education. Some people are not born with a natural sense of organization, and some students are never taught organizational skills. Before this year at Bell, either I didn't recognize the importance of organizational skills or I did and didn’t face the reality of needing to teach them to high school students. Due to lack of schooling, poor prior schooling, or chaotic lives, many ESL students come to Bell without a sense of organization. Sometimes the methods of teaching and learning are radically different or have different emphases, which can influence organization of ideas and notes. Or, perhaps organization simply isn’t very important. Yes, high school students should have had organizational help prior to arriving there. The great majority of our students didn’t. Hence at Bell, whether we like it or not, to be successful teachers we are all content teachers, ESL teachers, and resource room and study skill teachers. I had heard so many people say (about other similar students) that it does or doesn’t make a
difference to engage in such teaching or tutoring. I wanted to face the reality of my teaching position and experiment with such a practice myself.

Engage in Action Research

Now that Fasika had the notebook, I had to make sure that she used it. I also made contact with her 3rd advisory teachers and her teachers from the first semester. First, I informed them about the project and most importantly that I would be working with this student on her organization. Next, I informed them of how I would be working with them and asked them to keep an eye on her, her progress, and the famous notebook. Finally, I asked them if it would be possible to speak with them about her overall performance and progress, and to see any records of hers that she had.

Her current Algebra teacher was, and continues to be as I write this, extremely frustrated with her performance, although, her attendance was nearly perfect. He said, “I don’t know what to do. She does nothing, nothing! I hope you can help.” He handed over a workbook of arithmetic and pre-algebra activities which he had given to her to do instead of what the other students were doing. The first page contained a few scribbles. Otherwise, the book was blank. During one of our meetings, I showed her the book and offered to work with her on it. She stated, “I can only do it with a calculator.” I gave a teacher-like response, “I know it’s easier to do with a calculator, but you have to learn how to do it by yourself first.” She said again, this time with more force, “I can’t!” Then it hit me; she could probably barely add and subtract. I went to her previous math (pre-algebra) teacher. According to him and his records, she failed all tests and quizzes, turned in about 30% of class work and homework, but had perfect attendance and put forth effort. She passed the class with a “D”. I understood her current algebra teacher’s frustration.

Her music teacher said, “Oh yes, she needs help.” He said he would mandate extra help with reading with me. When I asked her about it, she said, “No, no, I don’t need help with that.” She told me they had worked together on it in the computer lab, but that if she needed additional help she would ask. I guess she wasn’t enjoying the personal attention that much. About a month later, I checked back in with him and he said that he was actually very impressed with the work Fasika had done. She was motivated and had begun to actually play songs on the piano. It is a small class and seemed to have found ways to work with her, although she is certainly not hard to work with. He said she did decently on her project. She finished the class with a “C” (It’s an advisory long class), which for her is an accomplishment. Moreover, she always had her music papers in the music section of her notebook.

Her ESL teacher, who she had first thing in the morning, reported that Fasika had attendance problems because she was always late. Otherwise he found her performance to be inconsistent. He taught her both semesters and both times, although he said she was making some progress in the second semester, she went up and down, up and down, in both test and homework scores. That let me know in some way that her problem was not ability-based, rather it was organizationally based. She could hit near 100% on her tests and
homework, and then the next week dip down to a failing grade, probably because
she lost or forgot to turn in the homework.

In my class, I gave Fasika extra attention during class, often reminding her
quietly to put notes and papers in her notebook or helping her to find things when
she couldn’t. The nature of my class involves organization at some level; I teach
them how to better comprehend and process what they are reading. We make
various webs, organizers, and charts. The students repeat and apply the same
strategies to different readings. Occasionally, they take notes on their own.
Together we create reading notes structures or I provide them with a note-taking
frame. In addition, I am very organized, and facilitate and encourage notebook
organization as well as organizing ideas and information from the readings.
Once an advisory, I check students' notebooks and insist that papers, notes, and
readings from each unit be together and that the units be placed in the
chronological order in which we have studied and completed them. The
emphasis is on organization.

Results of Action Research for the Student

Fasika does seem to have improved in her academic performance,
although that is difficult to measure. At the very least, I have observed that she is
more organized because of my organizational tutoring. Whether or not she’ll
maintain her notebook as well for the remainder of this school year or during next
school year, as I have less time to meet with and keep on eye on her, remains to
be seen.

Academically, she made some modest improvements. She failed math.
Math, especially at the lower levels, is a subject that requires a certain amount of
repetition in formulas and organization in terms of problem solving. In her ESL
class, she’ll finish off with a D. In my class, the quality of her work has improved,
as has the consistency with which she completes it. Recently she has been ill
and frequently absent, and I haven’t had as much time to work with her due to
the end of the year crunch. As a result, recently I have fewer assignments from
her. She will finish my class, Piano, and Life Management with C’s, but she
failed PE and Computer Applications.

I am not sure how much I helped this individual student. I have no doubt
that she benefited from the extra attention, and instruction. However, I am not
confident the organizational practices will stick once she is left unattended.

Results of Action Research for the Teacher and her Teaching

Although I am uncertain as to how much I helped my research subject, the
action research has helped my teaching of Bell students a great deal. I started to
implement, unconsciously and consciously, such notebook organization and
organizational skills in my other classes, and started to truly grasp the
importance of teaching such skills to the population such as that at Bell. I have
accepted the notion that as long as I teach this population, I am an organizational
and study skills teacher in addition to being a content-area teacher and an ESL
teacher. With the teaching of such skills, especially in the area of reading, what I
ask my students to accomplish and how they accomplish it has changed as well.
As a result, I have had an easier time reaching and managing my students because they are getting more of the essentials that they, unfortunately at the high school level, still desperately need.

Conclusions

As the year has gone on, and as I have worked on this emphasis on organizational skills, I have had fewer days like the one I described in the beginning. Part of that result is due to simply becoming more knowledgeable about and more efficient in my teaching as the year has gone on. However, it helped a great deal to make connections with colleagues through this program and to focus just on one area in particular where Bell students need extra work. I feel very comfortable discussing my teaching and exchanging ideas with my mentors and colleagues. Before and while learning, Fasika needed and probably benefited from the focus on organization. Certainly, my other students did, and certainly my teaching improved because of it. Because of the time that was put into organization during the semester, when the time arrived for course-end comprehensive portfolios and exams, my students did not have to spend nearly as much time reviewing and collecting pieces of work as they might have otherwise. Now I have ideas, methods, and a system of organization to implement next year, leaving me with more time to focus on another issue or area. As they say, Rome was not built in a day.