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CREATING THE ENVIRONMENT FOR MIDDLE SCHOOL 8TH GRADERS TO BE ENGAGED IN LEARNING

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Abstract

This article offers a snapshot view into an 8th grade English class for struggling learners. A structured, predictable interactive classroom with the teacher guiding the students through the reading, and using technology to support the writing, created the learning environment that actively engaged the students in their own learning. Students' inappropriate behaviors disappeared as they were successful in their work. The weekly computer printout of their grades empowered them to monitor their own growth.

Introduction

An old television episode of ER shows one of the main characters working feverishly on an emergency room patient. This character who had recently graduated from medical school yells that he needs a doctor in the room. One of the nurses looks at him and says, "You **are** the doctor."

After 25 years of teaching at the elementary, middle, and high school levels, I now teach at the university in the teacher-training program and remind the student teachers, "You **are** the teacher; the students need you and all your materials only support your teaching; they are not your replacement." I use this scenario to make the point that struggling learners need the teacher, not a kit or a series of books. Struggling learners avoid reading; they need good teachers to create the learning environment where they can be successfully engaged (Alverman, 2001).

Background

After being hired as a reading specialist for a middle school outside Washington, D.C., I met with each grade level team to identify students' needs. I was told the previous reading

specialist offered reading classes for students selected by the counselors and teachers. But as a teacher at the secondary level for many years, I shared with the school counselors and teachers, the idea that I would be more effective as the English teacher for each grade level working with struggling students. My experience had been that introducing students to additional reading materials during a reading class and expecting the students to be able to transfer those strategies and skills to their content areas was an unrealistic goal for middle school students. These at-risk students needed assistance during their classes, not afterwards. For many of them, they spent years not being able to read at grade level and they no longer had any motivation or interest in learning. They were just hoping to get through school. Offering a reading class or an after-school program was not enough to help them be successful in their content classes.

Before deciding on what writing and reading skills to emphasize, I checked the students' records, previous work and spoke with the teachers. My analysis revealed that the students were not able to even identify main idea and supporting details when reading on their own, nor were they able to write a multi-paragraph paper. For many of the students, their behaviors such as showing up late for class, bothering other students, sleeping during class, arguing with the teacher, walking out, etc. had interfered with their learning over the years. There is much evidence connecting the link between academic achievement and time on task (Black, 2002; Brewster & Fager, 2000; Cotton, 2001), and these students needed to understand the connection in order to move beyond hopelessness to actively engage in learning.

English Class for 8th Graders

The novel I chose for the first nine-week report period working with 8th graders as their English teacher was *The Giver*, by Lois Lowry, hoping that a science fiction story where there

were no problems in society would be of high interest to the students and keep them engaged. I provided background information on the story, discussed the main characters, informed the students that everyday they would be responding to questions, writing summaries for homework, using computers in class, presenting information to the class, and reading! (See Appendix for student activities.)

I developed questions for each page of the book. Students had the typed questions in front of them during the reading. I read aloud the questions before beginning the reading for each page to prompt discussion of what might be happening. I then read the page and students stopped me when they heard an answer to the question. We discussed their answers and when needed, I wrote what they said on the board. They then wrote the answers next to the appropriate questions. For homework they wrote summaries of what we read that day, using the questions to guide them. My initial purpose was to keep them involved in reading and paragraph writing; later I guided them in essay development.

When students arrived each day, they typed their summaries as a way of reviewing the material before continuing the reading. I signed the class up daily for the first 15 minutes of the period in the computer lab, which was conveniently located across from our classroom. What happened was that as they typed, they added more information and improved their sentence structure. After I showed them how to check the reading level of their summaries using Word tools, they worked at raising the reading level of their writing. They liked using the computer for their writing; many came in during lunch to work on their writing. For most students, this was the first time they had work to be proud of and commented about how they had never written so much before. It seemed they now saw themselves as capable students. They wanted to read their

papers aloud for the class. Some students stepped outside the door and practiced reading aloud before they read to the class. Wanting to share their work was a new behavior!

Besides responding to the questions each day and continuing the reading, I also worked on vocabulary development. I selected the words, provided an easy to understand definition and a sentence, and they were held responsible for creating their own sentences and using the words in their summaries. They regularly were tested on the words.

The predictability of each class contributed to the students' success; they were comfortable with the tasks and not fighting the learning. Each week they were given a computer print out listing all grades for class work, homework, and tests results. For some of the students who initially avoided homework, the concept of average now made sense. Much to my surprise these same students asked if they could do make-up work and get another report printed out.

I held debates where students had to argue for or against this "perfect society." For several of my students this futuristic community seemed like a great way to live, even though memories, emotions, and choices were missing. Some shared that they liked that life better than their own.

Another activity involved the students creating Power Points and presenting them to the class. They each chose their own focus for the presentation. Some summarized the story and added their own interpretation for the ending. Others presented the story along with comments critiquing the society. Others outlined their own ideas for a perfect society and asked their audience for additional suggestions.

We had many discussions which not only contributed to their understanding of the story, but also provided them with the opportunity to speak up, something they rarely done in their previous English classes. They apparently felt more confident in their ability to participate

openly in discussions. They also wrote essays as a follow-up to the discussions. They responded to issues concerning living in an imperfect society and learning from mistakes. Although their writing had significantly improved, I still provided them with incomplete frames to help them get started. Since we had computers available, they always typed their work. They were much better at proofreading their work when it was typed than when they read their own handwriting. When students were engaged in written work, they were free to work with another student in order to provide support, but most chose to work alone. They wanted to produce on their own and show that they could do it.

Outcomes

The class worked with *The Giver* for the 9-week report period. They were reading and writing every day. They reread some parts to make points in discussions or to ask clarifying questions. Inappropriate behaviors had disappeared; students were actively participating in their own learning. The weekly grade report empowered the students. Instead of comments about a teacher failing them, they saw the computer printout as an opponent they were competing with to increase their grade point average. (See Appendix B for students' comments.)

I attribute their successful engagement in reading and writing to providing the environment where they could succeed. For the remaining of the school year I chose what I considered other high-interest novels, but once the students were feeling successful after reading *The Giver*, I realized that the choice of what to read was not as important as the classroom environment that supported their growth. These students needed more than being assigned readings; they needed the teacher to structure the material into meaningful units. By my reading and thinking aloud, making predictions, clarifying understanding, I modeled for the students how to approach reading. However, I also knew that at this age, these students were not going to pick

up books for reading enjoyment. Reading and writing were still a struggle, but good teaching kept them actively engaged in reading and writing during class. Hopefully they felt empowered to break out of the cycle of failure and actively engage in their own learning.

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Appendix A: Student Activities

Student Activity	Purpose
Response to chapter questions	Sentence Development Sequencing Skills
Written Summaries (Homework)	Paragraph Development
Software: Word Typed Summaries	Previous day's review of the reading Sentence/Paragraph Development
Software: PowerPoint	Oral language Development Demonstrate Synthesizing Ability Demonstrate Analysis Ability
Software Grading Report	Immediate feedback to provide students with achievement information
Class Discussions	Listening Skills
Essays	Writing Skill Development

Appendix B: Typical Students' Comments

- ✚ I never wrote so much in my life. It's not so hard.
- ✚ I like the way my stuff looks when it's typed.
- ✚ I could've gotten better grades before if I had done stuff like this.
- ✚ Can you get the other teachers to use the computer grades report? I like seeing how I'm doing.
- ✚ I like this kind of story where we can guess at what the ending is. What else are we going to read?
- ✚ Can we write our own future story where we decide how people live? We can type it and do a PowerPoint to show everyone.