

The First Year Teacher in a Critical Needs School: Teaching the Content Area Or Solving Students' Problems?

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ABSTRACT

Though different students make up different classes in a secondary classroom, the situations that confront a first year teacher often do not change. Some of the common situations that may confront a first year teacher include large class sizes, behavior problems, absenteeism, and less than desired reading/writing abilities. The first year teacher must quickly learn how to deal with these issues to survive because the collaborative nature of the teacher/student relationship contributes to the success of learning in the classroom. Success in learning often brings visibility to students' life problems. Teacher reactions to these situations often determine the success of the classroom environment.

Introduction

Times are changing in the field of secondary education. Schools are becoming more crowded and increasingly underfunded, and concurrently they are becoming institutions where solving life problems of students is much more commonplace than teaching them about a specific subject area (Pedder, 2006; McIntyre, 2000; Grayson & Martin, 2001; Epstein, 2001; Whitaker & Whitaker, 2002; Abel & Sewell, 2001; Black, 2003). Really what can first year teachers expect in at-risk assignments? Can they expect to teach the content area with little interference from outside forces, or must they deal with an overabundance of intertwined personal baggage the students they teach carry into their classrooms? The following example characterizes a first year Spanish teacher who is trying to teach Spanish but is in fact trying to maintain order in the classroom.

“Mr. Vaccaro, a first year Spanish teacher, was exceedingly perplexed at trying to physically dominate a situation in his classroom. He had been reprimanded by the assistant principal for his class being excessively noisy

numerous times, but his administration did not support him and believed that if the students misbehave, then the teacher's performance should be analyzed. Mr. Vaccaro reported the situation to the administration and was summoned into the principal's office. The disobliging principal was visibly irritated and asked why he pushed the student down in the hallway (which did not occur—she did not fall down at all). The principal responded, "Do you know that we could be sued if you touch a student here at this school? Why can't you just control your classroom? I just don't understand what your problem is! This would never occur in my classroom! You're here to keep students in the classroom and quiet! That is your objective at this school, Mr. Vaccaro!"

Instructors similar to Mr. Vaccaro are commonplace in secondary schools all over the United States. These teachers are confused and disheartened by the fact that teaching at-risk students would be this entirely difficult (Pedder, 2006; McIntyre, 2000; Grayson & Martin, 2001; Epstein, 2001; Whitaker & Whitaker, 2002; Abel & Sewell, 2001; Black, 2003). Whatever happened to teaching content? Why can't Mr. Vaccaro just teach what he studies so diligently in college to learn? In order for effective teaching to ever occur, first, novice teachers need to recognize and identify problems that they will face in their new classroom in critical needs institutions. Second, it is necessary that these new teachers research strategies by experienced teachers that may facilitate the learning of the subject area more smoothly. Lastly, new teachers must be equipped and prepared to handle these situations—it's a reality! And it's not just about teaching our content anymore. It is a likely probability that Mr. Vaccaro would concur.

Purpose of the Article

The purpose of the article is to discuss common situations that may confront a first year teacher include large class sizes, behavior problems, absenteeism, and less than desired reading/writing abilities.

Identifying the Problems: Facing Problems in the First Year of Teaching

Class Size and Behavior Problems

The swelling problem of large class sizes currently exists in the secondary public schools of the United States. Large class sizes are causing novice teachers to disappear from the profession because of the demands and supplementary stress that large class sizes generate for them. Pedder (2006), in his research relating to class size and student

attainment, has suggested that class size is a significant issue for students, parents as well as administrators and that additional research is still needed to prove that class size directly affects student performance.

Nonetheless, Pedder (2006) suggests that large class sizes may produce a teaching environment in which teachers infrequently apply diverse teaching strategies; therefore, this may have a considerable impact on student learning. McIntyre (2000) furthermore proposes that classroom size directly affects student learning, and he proposes solutions to this problem. McIntyre affirms that the environment of the conventional classroom which incorporates a larger number of students than non-traditional classrooms should be altered. His research concluded that teachers and administrators should press for restructuring in the classroom. He concludes that if classroom sizes continue to remain large, further time for individual contact between the teacher and the students should be made available throughout the class day. Common sense suggests that our classrooms are oversized; yet, there seems inadequate response to correcting the problem. Consequently, large classrooms should take steps to alleviate their individual problems as McIntyre (2000) has suggested in his research. Furthermore, teachers must press state legislative officials for increased funding to hire additional teachers in the classrooms. This hiring of additional teachers would assuage the overflow of students in oversized classrooms. For overwhelmed teachers in critical needs school districts, it is imperative that we make our voices known concerning class sizes.

Reading and Writing Abilities of Students

Research currently suggests that reading and writing abilities of students in the public schools of the United States are relatively insufficient. Extensive research in the reading and writing abilities of students suggests that the decreasing reading and writing levels of students are becoming quite apparent to the school community and beyond. Kennedy-Manzo (2006) has completed explicit research in reading and writing capabilities of students, and she asserts that many secondary school students are deficient in reading texts when they enter the university setting. In her research, along with research from her colleagues associated with the American College Test (ACT), she suggests that the more underprivileged the student is, the more likely the reading and writing abilities of the student are deficient; consequently, reading and writing will become challenges for disadvantaged students who are accepted to community colleges and major universities. However, Kennedy-Manzo (2006) suggests that many students from a variety of socio-economic backgrounds may exhibit reading or writing problems. Not only are disadvantaged students facing challenges in their beginning years in college, but middle-class students are as well. This reality is a result of the lack of the application of comprehension-based teaching strategies in the secondary schools. This is not a problem that any teacher wants to face in the classroom, but it must be faced. Most teachers are forced to face the problem in their first year of teaching with many of them ultimately leaving the profession all together. Kennedy-Manzo (2006) believes that

teachers should receive more professional development opportunities to learn strategies to improve the reading and writing abilities of struggling students. Blackford (2002) additionally suggests that more resources for teachers are needed to assist them in the teaching of more complex material.

Excessive Absenteeism

The majority of America's secondary school teachers can easily point to pupil absenteeism as a major problem in the current public school systems. Pupil absenteeism not only disengages the teacher and the student, but it also prevents the student from receiving a comprehensive education which is extremely fundamental in life progression. Current research suggests that the problem of pupil absenteeism is actually much greater than ever. Grayson and Martin (2001) in their research study regarding student absenteeism have resolutely stated that student attainment in the classroom is directly associated to consistent student school attendance. Their research is only one of many studies which concur. They have also suggested that if students are not present for integral courses they need for college preparation, their success in these courses is at risk of considerable decline. Hinz, Kapp and Snapp (2003) furthermore concur that students must be present in the classroom in order for the proper retaining of knowledge to transpire. Research has proposed a solution to pupil absenteeism, and an increase in parental involvement can dramatically increase student performance and presence in the classroom (Epstein, 2001). If parents are actively involved in their children's education, then it is more likely that parents will ensure their children are in school consistently. He suggests that teachers and administrators should be more involved with parents of students who are consistently absent from school. Consequently it is critical that the school administrators and teachers develop parent-centered programs that may ensure that parents become additionally involved, but this task must be carefully structured in order for constructive effects to transpire (Epstein, 2001; Whitaker & Whitaker, 2002).

“Constructive” Misbehavior

Academic misconduct of students may come in many forms. The top two forms of academic misconduct to which teachers refer are academic cheating and misbehavior in the classroom. Academic misconduct has plagued the secondary schools in America for many years; nevertheless, its presence is not decreasing but escalating. McCabe (2001) has stated that cheating has become more prevalent in the last ten years. Abel and Sewell (2001) have suggested that teachers are indefatigably bombarded with indifferent behavior from students and that this paucity of motivation to learn may generate further stress for the already overworked teacher. Black (2003) has stated that troubled students

have a significantly negative effect on teachers who are already coping with their demanding positions. Due to academic misconduct in the classroom, teachers are becoming exhausted and their perspectives are becoming considerably pessimistic about what the future holds for the condition of secondary education. Still, there are many proposed strategies that may assist the teacher whose perspective is unbalanced. Tye (2002) proposes that teachers who appropriately employ class management skills will ultimately have more positive results in the classroom. It is necessary for teachers to learn how to prevent students from cheating, conceivably researching innovative strategies and alternate assessments that would prevent this misbehavior from occurring. Comparably, teachers must moreover research proven classroom management skills when behavior problems are consistently present. Teachers should frequently research various classroom management strategies from administrators and veteran teachers. In response to assisting distressed teachers, research additionally suggests that administrators can provide teachers with practical work assignments, frequent opportunities to formulate decisions in the school and unambiguous discipline for students who demonstrate persistent behavioral problems in the school environment (Black, 2003; Sargent, 2003). Employing strategies that work may possibly alter teachers' perspectives about the current condition of education.

Is There Any Hope—So What Are Teachers Supposed To Do Now?

According to research, the current condition of education is not where it should be—but it can be! Thus simply saying that everyone can learn would not be appropriate. Kilpatrick (2003) suggests that, given the proper opportunities, most students can be successful in learning. Even though funding has increased and teacher salaries are rising, problems still linger within the schools themselves. In the public schools, there is an unambiguous need for an adjustment in standardized testing implementation as well as a radical need to create alternative education for those who are apathetic to the learning process. So what are all of us supposed to do now? First, students must take responsibility as well as parents and teachers, if positive effects are to occur. Second, we must frequently strive for critical thinking in the classroom. Simply allowing students to reflect on their possibilities in the classroom actually increases their critical thinking skills and that this type of assessment should always be on the teacher's mind when teaching in any subject area (Bennett, 1995).

In critical needs school districts, it is imperative that we as teachers know the personal backgrounds of our students, simultaneously teaching them that one culture is not specifically omnipotent to another. Morris, Ervin, and Conrad (1996) suggest that learners should make connections with their background knowledge in order for their critical thinking skills as well as literacy skills to expand; hence, schools will become better institutions of learning at the same time. Allington (2001) suggests that meaningful lessons for diverse students require risk-taking on the part of teachers in meeting the diverse needs of the students. Finally, we must create an environment where we take no excuses for the inhibition of learning. Creating this type of environment may assist struggling teachers, and in order for success to occur in the classroom, research

suggests that in all cases students should be exposed to the modeling of specific behavioral expectations in and out of the classroom (McCurdy, Mannella, & Eldridge, 2003). Hoagwood (2000) would concur that students being exposed to positive role models will possibly prevent much of the problems from occurring in school settings.

A significant ingredient of an effective classroom involves teacher modeling as well as assessing and evaluating student behaviors in the classroom. Harvey and Goudvis (2000) suggest that paying close attention to how students are interacting with their peers and observing what they say and do when engaging in various behaviors in the classroom are all important ways to assess student behavior in the classroom. Teachers who simply observe students in an informal conversation or cooperative group and who take notes on what the students say and do can gain a momentous quantity of information about how a student is performing in the classroom. Harvey and Goudvis (2000) have additionally suggested that teachers can determine if students are exhibiting certain behaviors through listening and understanding students when they talk. For example, teachers should have students write down connections they have made when they interact with their peers, or the teacher should write them down and keep a record of what they say when they exhibit behaviors. Modeling is significantly important when implementing positive behavior support strategies in the classroom, and it is the most important feature of positive behavioral support. Teachers need to be role models for our students—in word and in deed!

Working with students is a rewarding experience for teachers who love to teach. The experience should also be a rewarding learning experience for students and this depends to an extent on how each relates to the other. This successful cooperation between teachers and students will not only greatly reduce disturbances in the classroom but will also greatly enhance the possibility of student learning.

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