The Benefit of One-on-One and Small Group Instruction

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What prompted me to address the increasing need for classroom support, for both teachers and students, is my concern for the overwhelming responsibility and challenges that teachers face in the classroom today, as well as the growing needs reflected in the lives of our students. My hope was that those present would be encouraged to desire and receive additional outside support in order to help meet students’ needs, as well as to achieve their own academic goals. Education is much more than just focusing on how to present material in order for students to attain good grades. Academic learning, without acquiring the social skills necessary to succeed within our society, is not education at all. Having one teacher, in an overcrowded classroom of culturally diversified students, some with learning disabilities, some having advanced skills and abilities, some without proper language structures in place, some coming from dysfunctional families, and so on, invites discouragement, frustration, and hopelessness that can result in burn-out unless a real support system in place.

Our session began with an activity that promoted team work. The task I assigned would not able to be completed unless everyone did their part. The amount of time it would take to accomplish the task was determined by the four participants BEFORE they began the activity*. I did not set the time limit for the goal to be met*, the participants did. During the discussion afterwards, it was noted that *everyone’s work counted*. Everyone had to work *together* in order to accomplish the task. There needed to be *communication*; but what kind of communication? It had to be clear and concise, communication that everyone could understand and respond to appropriately. *The participants encouraged one another*. Several took a *leadership* position within the group. The activity was not difficult, but initially, it was challenging until the participants found a strategy. The task was to stack ten coffee cups in pyramid fashion, using only four strings that were attached (equal distance apart) to a rubber band. This was meant to be both a visual and physical demonstration showing the importance of TEAM WORK. The teamdid meet their goal. The experience was positive and laid the groundwork for our discussion.

The poem, entitled “*What is a Teacher?”* written by Barbara Cage, was read responsively. There is no mention of academic goals within this job description. The picture we usually visualize, when thinking about a teacher, is an individual who stands before a class teaching her specific subject. Teachers teach and students must pass exams based on the knowledge they learn from the teacher. Is this really a true picture of what a teacher embodies? Barbara Cage understands something about human nature that is fundamental for academic achievement and which must precede academic success.

Here are some of the questions this presentation tried to address. (1) How do you feel about your role as a classroom teacher and your ability to meet the expectations placed upon you by your school administrator and the Ministry of Education? (2) Do you believe you are being adequately supported in order to meet your instructional goals and the individual needs of ALL of your students? (3) What kind of support do you currently receive, and what other kinds of support would be beneficial to you in helping you achieve the desired results through your classroom instruction? (4) What problems are you encountering that challenge you the most? How do you find resolution? Do you find resolution?

IN SUPPORT OF SUPPORT

There are private companies throughout Israel that have been helpful in meeting some of the needs within the classroom. My first experience was with the *Jaffa Institute* located in Tel Aviv. We were all volunteers. After a short training period, we were taken, as a group, to local schools where we worked in small groups with students who were struggling. I will never forget the students assigned to me. When we sat down, they proceeded to tell me emphatically that they could not learn English. I immediately understood the instructional material I had been given would need to be modified in order for them to achieve success. Their lack of confidence and low self-image had to be addressed. I created my own teaching aids for increased hands-on manipulation and interaction. They still worked towards meeting their classroom teacher’s goals, but not in the conventional way. They enjoyed our activities which became increasingly meaningful and productive. It wasn’t very long before they realized that they were really learning English! Their educational gaps began to decrease and they began to grasp the principles and concepts of English language acquisition. What a joy when I saw them become more and more independent in doing their assigned tasks. They even began to ask each other for help, rather than always asking me. It was such a successful and fulfilling opportunity to engage them in their own learning processes. By addressing their emotional needs, I was able to facilitate academic learning. I respect the classroom teacher and the administrator for caring enough about their students to access outside support. The students gained much more than just English. (There are, of course, other private support companies within communities all over Israel that provide tutoring, small group work, after-school enrichment programs, and curriculum and material development for classroom instruction operating with some fees in place.)

Another problem occurs when students already have the skills being taught in the classroom. Why aren’t these students given enrichment, enabling them to continue to grow in their academic pursuits, learning higher level structures and skills? These students need additional challenges to keep them involved and interested in their classroom experiences. As educators, we have no excuse for this. Why should students put time in, and do boring homework, that will not teach them anything new? Why risk taking from them the desire to learn? Some become so stagnant, so unmotivated and so inattentive, and the worst part is that we are the ones responsible. Why not give these students a higher level book? For middle school and high school students, another consideration might be to assign an independent research project, followed by a 3-page written report that would include teacher directives. With the help of a classroom assistant, the work done by these students could be monitored and checked several times a week. Students love technology. With all the technology that is available today, could an on-line course be permitted with the approval of the parents and the administrator? I am talking about independent learners who are being held back by their classroom instruction. We are responsible for stretching our students and enabling them to move forward, and if they are not moving forward, they are moving backwards. How is the classroom teacher addressing these needs within their classroom? How are they assessing and providing for these students? We cannot expect one classroom teacher to do it all. Education is becoming more and more a team effort and we must look for support from a variety of sources within and without our institutions.

I wanted to bring to the teachers’ attention another resource that has become available to teachers. This is an initiative, taken by the Ministry of Education and Pensioners from the Secondary Teachers’ Union, to provide support within the schools. *Friends of Education* is a non-profit organization headed up by these professional pensioners. They are responsible for recruiting volunteers and then training them to be classroom aides. Last year, *Friends of Education* placed volunteer support in 35 schools with approximately 300,000 teaching/mentoring hours recorded. While this initiative is commendable, the Ministry of Education has a lot to answer for since nothing has been done (since 2007-08) to implement initiatives that were specifically passed to lower the number of students per class and provide additional teachers. Many teachers have had to deal with up to 35-40 students per class. This whole situation came to a head this past year when parents began keeping their children home from school in an effort to bring attention to this problem. In light of this, the new initiative by the Ministry of Education, along with these pensioners, is an attempt to begin to focus on alleviating the problems teachers are facing in the classroom by offering them additional support. Throughout the year, they continue to mentor, support and guide these volunteers to insure their effectiveness and success. Teachers and administrators need to be aware of what is available to them. I found this article in the magazine, *קשר עין,* July 2015, #251. The benefit of having these volunteer aides in the classroom is unlimited. Teachers need to consider them as part of their team and communicate clearly with them what responsibilities they will share. I did hand out copies of this article to the participants.

An article from the *Jerusalem Post*, May 15, 2015, page 20, reported on the winner of the Distinguished Citizen of Jerusalem award, Cissie Chalkowsky. “*She became aware of girls from different backgrounds who were intelligent but not succeeding in school and not able to attain matriculation levels. Turning to experts, she discovered they had learning disabilities.*” Two quotes from Cissie: “*The students often lacked motivation and had a low self-image…The purpose wasn’t just to pass the bagrut [matriculation] exam but to change the lives of the students*.” Had this need not been discerned, her students would never have been able to successfully complete their education. Many went on to receive higher education and are professionals in many fields. (This article was not included in the presentation but was intended to be shared.)

The importance of collaboration and team support within a school is crucial. It is necessary. Citing other examples from a study done by the Center for Strengthening the Teaching Profession (CSTP) entitled, “*Teacher Case Stories: Student Growth,*” helped us see another perspective related to student growth. **Kristin-Baily-Fogarty’s** honesty is refreshing, as she relates her experience after a 10-minute classroom observation and feedback from her principal. She teaches reading, language arts and history in middle school. Her own words sum it up quite nicely: “What I’ve learned is that relevant student growth measurements, partnered with an effective instructional coach, are what move classroom instruction.” Her instructional coach was her own school principal. Kristin had to process the feedback she originally had rejected. When she implemented the advice her principal had given her, much improvement in student ability resulted. **Tom White’s** creativity and application of a class project (building and racing toy cars) reveals how easy it is for teachers to reflect a lot of improvement without a lot of real learning taking place. He calls this “cheaching.” He says, “Cheaching defeats the purpose of teaching without breaking the rules.” Teachers are pressured by administrators and others to bring student scores up. When focusing on making the data look good, Tom noticed he was less effective in meeting student needs. His analogy exposes the importance of using student data from assessments as a *diagnostic tool* rather than as a means of teacher evaluation. It addresses the question, ‘What is the strategy behind our teaching? Should our focus be on improving student test scores or on improving student learning?’ There is a difference. Tom’s school uses expert support from outside for students testing low in the skills being taught. They have also begun The Teacher and Principal Evaluation Project (TPEP). In addition, the fourth grade teachers meet as a team along with the principal, the psychologist and the learning support teachers several times a year. Now, Tom focuses more on using collaboration and student data *together* to make instructional decisions that better meet the needs of his students. **Heather Byington** works in a high poverty elementary school. Her report focuses on the need to teach empathy as a pre-requisite before teaching inference skills to her students. She understood that their academic success was related to their ability to correctly interpret social cues. Due to their cultural and economic backgrounds, as well as lacking experiences outside the classroom, she knew they would need *“…ample opportunities to practice considering empathy and drawing conclusions about others’ behavior based on concrete evidence.”* While Heather’s report was not discussed at the conference, its importance is self explanatory. She closed by stating her need “…*to meet with her grade-level team to develop a rubric to access and score elements in order to reflect students’ abilities to make inferences more accurately*.” All of these teachers appreciate and acknowledge how beneficial team support is. These articles can be accessed at: [**http://cstp-wa.org/teacher-leadership/nbct-grants/resources/teacher-case-stories-student-growth/**](http://cstp-wa.org/teacher-leadership/nbct-grants/resources/teacher-case-stories-student-growth/)

Schools that nurture a caring and supportive atmosphere by actively and consistently meeting to share experiences, to problem solve, to receive professional advice, etc., enjoy increased honest communication that transitions the school into a TEAM. When a school functions as a team, it undergoes a relational change that enables schools to function more like a family. A deeper level of concern and caring develops, the commitment level becomes greater, there is more ‘ownership’ of the education process by everyone and parents will cooperate more with you so their children will reach the educational goals you set.

We are all unique individuals having very different experiences both professionally and personally. There is much we can learn from one another. Our backgrounds differ, some of us have had international experiences, and some of us have learned more than one language. We have so much to give to one another! So why is it that we stubbornly persist in our own ways? I refer to one situation in which a more tenured teacher was approached by a less tenured one. During an observation, the less tenured teacher (who was a native English speaker) observed the classroom teacher instructing the students incorrectly in one specific area. After the class was over, she approached this teacher to share and explain what it was that was being taught incorrectly. Pride does exist within our profession. This instructor did not change her instruction. She did not look into whether or not what she had been told was correct or not. She continued to teach what was wrong to her students. Are we that threatened by our colleagues that we cannot be open minded enough for the sake of our students? We need to cultivate a better climate within our schools and between one another as educators. We expect our students to be willing to learn. Why aren’t we willing to learn from one another?

The participants shared their need for support in their classrooms. One of the teachers told how an outside pensioner from the community had approached her and offered her assistance in the classroom. This pensioner provided emotional support to some students by giving them the one-on-one attention they needed. She also helped them to understand the teacher’s directions. In this way, the teacher didn’t have to stop the whole class in order to attend to this student. This pensioner’s presence in the classroom also met a need in the teacher’s life. She said just having someone else in the classroom with her was supportive. This particular teacher is not part of any school support team, nor is there any other kind of support offered to her. *We cannot assume that all schools offer support to all of their teachers*.

Students with special needs are being (and should be) mainstreamed more and more into our classes but this presents a challenge for the classroom teacher. Assistants need to be available to give these students additional reinforcement and more hands-on, concrete learning opportunities. Qualified aides with an educational background and knowledge of the special needs this population requires could be given the responsibility of finding or creating instructional materials for student success.

This lack of support within the schools was reinforced by another teacher present who said that she also had no support at her school. She has an over-crowded class and has trouble maintaining the attention of all of her students. Some of the reasons for this have already been discussed. That this teacher is not getting any support from her administrator or other colleagues on staff, concerns me. Every teacher needs to be part of a support team that meets regularly. Every administrator needs to be accessible on a regular basis. Our teachers face many problems in the classroom and regular support is not an option; it is a necessity. Outside support can be found; community resources need to be explored and welcomed. Relief needs to be extended to classroom teachers before they reach burn-out.

How available is your support team when you need help? Are schools developing leaders who can train other staff members to become leaders? Do schools have a communications liaison to help schools and parents remain connected? Are there opportunities to involve parents at some level with the education of their children? Has your school considered or used ‘Vertical Team Meetings?’ These meetings are for the purpose of discussing curriculum needs and ‘scaffolding’ (the building of knowledge on previously learned knowledge) that enables continuity from grade to grade? It is definitely harder to find secondary grade-level texts and materials due to complex language, concepts and vocabulary related to high school subjects. Building a connection between family and school could be facilitated more quickly if a bi-lingual school secretary was hired. Consider what your needs are and then seek ways to actively partner with your community and other organizations who can provide support to you. Perhaps there are students who could volunteer from local universities and colleges. More options can be read about on-line at <https://depts.washington.edu/ctpmail/PDFs/ELLStudy-July2009.pdf> The article is entitled: *Building Systems of Support for Classroom Teachers Working with Second Language Learners*. I would recommend exploring the CTSP site for additional articles and information in support of teachers.

A substitute teacher was once told to teach the students who wanted to learn and to ignore the rest. As a teacher, I can’t justify that attitude. It goes against my philosophy of education. What it does say to me is that help is desperately needed. Within this class, one student was totally withdrawn, disengaged and unresponsive. The teacher found out he hated to be in the class because he was not academically challenged. He is an intelligent boy and had probably been placed in this class because there was no more room in the higher level classes. The teacher tried to motivate him by giving him hope. She became his support system because he knew she cared. Trust was built into their relationship. He began to move forward when he saw the potential of being transferred into a higher level class the following year. In this same classroom was another student suffering from low self esteem and a lack of confidence. Wanting to be accepted by his peers, he had allowed himself to become the class clown, but deep down, the teacher knew he was hurting. He was picked upon by his classmates and he became the subject of all their jokes. The teacher began planning activities to help him gain confidence. He began to realize he was able to learn and he also began to enjoy the learning experience. He perked up and came alive. The impact this student’s teacher had upon him was profound. He responded to her constant encouragement and faith in him by trying harder to understand and by not being afraid to make mistakes. He encountered success and as he did so, he acquired the power to ignore his peers and choose a better way. When school ended, this teacher met him one day on the street. He was so excited and couldn’t wait to let his teacher know that his mother had hired a private tutor for him. Now, his mother is involved and is part of his support team. The other students in the class needed their instructional material modified. Their pranks and bad behaviors caused many disruptions on a large scale. Without the necessary support, this teacher was frustrated. She was unable to meet all the needs of her students. We must find ways to help our teachers do the job we expect them to do. We can’t ignore the problems; the root of the problems must be dealt with and one classroom teacher cannot possibly do this alone.

Teacher development courses are beneficial and appreciated when they are teacher sensitive, addressing real needs that teachers have. It was noted by some that at times, these courses are repetitive and therefore, not very worthwhile. Teachers need to be included in the planning of these development courses that are offered to them. Perhaps a survey could be conducted by administrators to find out what areas of need teachers are interested in. Another alternative might be to provide a box where teachers could submit suggestions about relevant topics that would be helpful to them.

As I reflect back on this day, my presentation was geared primarily for classroom teachers rather than private tutors. Making the needs of students known can help all teachers address some of the problems they will encounter. Conflict is part of life; and life is conflict. Why are we so surprised when it exists within our classrooms? Conflict resolution is part of life; and life is conflict resolution. How we equip our students to solve problems in their lives should be central to our teaching? Lesson material needs to be relevant for the students if we want them to ‘own’ it. I believe our discussion was meaningful and helpful. My hope is that teachers will be aggressive and productive in finding the support they deserve in their classes.

At a time when there is so much dissatisfaction within our present educational system, the need to consider other ways to offer support to the classroom teachers should be encouraged and welcomed. Part of the changing role of teacher (and teacher expectations) is the need to see the larger social need of the students. Having a classroom assistant would help to facilitate this. As our teachers receive additional support, student needs will be met, educational gaps will be closed, academic goals will be achieved and social skills will be strengthened, which will guarantee the future success of our students.

I propose more non-threatening team effort for the building up of school moral and for the opening up of more possibilities to brainstorm, exchange experiences and knowledge, create additional strategies, and enable collaboration and cooperation among administrators and teachers to reach full potential. As the New Year begins, I commend our teachers for accepting once again the challenge and responsibility of being teachers. Thank you for helping to develop our children so they will become thoughtful, responsible and contributing members of our society. We are never too young, nor are we ever too old, to re-evaluate how we relate to the world around us and more importantly, to how we relate to one another on a daily basis.