

One Week in June Tells the Story of Five Years Work

MATC Synthesis Paper

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Introduction

During the last week of June, 2012, I attended a week long training seminar for work. All of my colleagues that had the same job title as myself were called back to Baltimore, the home of Talent Development Secondary (TDS), the organization I work for. Among other things, we learned data driven decision making strategies, implementing the TDS curriculum, tiered interventions, family outreach, and all manner of best practices. At this point I should say that TDS is a school turnaround organization, and a part of Johns Hopkins University's School of Education. We partner with schools and districts that are going through major challenges and work with them to make the changes that they already want to make. We have a specialized curriculum that meets the students where there are to bring them up to where they need to be. We support schools as they implement tiered student supports for those kids that are at-risk and nudge them back on track. We are an organization that also provides the personnel necessary to support this change process; from curriculum coaches and instructional facilitators to onsite turnaround coordinators and organizational facilitators. Last year I fell into the onsite turnaround coordinators and my job title was "School Transformation Facilitator" or STF. It was at a gathering of eighty STFs and Org Facilitators that I am referring to when I talk about the last week in June. This one week can be used to tell the story of my professional growth as an educator. From a new teacher having little to no idea what I was doing, barely treading water to survive, to an educational consultant that specializes in school turnaround.

At the same time I was working to put the final touches on my portfolio for the Master of Arts in Teacher (MATC) and Curriculum at Michigan State University (MSU). From the moment I finished my bachelors until the writing of this paper I have been working on

completing the work for the MATC. It is perfect that these two events would coincide. Both the culmination of years of work and dedication.

From Brand Spankin' New to Helping Those Who Are Brand Spankin' New

I did not come to the teaching profession directly. I took sort of an oblique route. After graduating high school in the 23rd percentile I went on to the local community college where I dropped out after a couple years of skating by with Cs and Ds. When I was finally ready to become a teacher I came back to it with a vengeance. I re-enrolled in community college to bring my grades up and earned a 4.0 the entire time. I transferred to Michigan State University where I was accepted into their Interdisciplinary Social Science program and then into the College of Education to become a high school teacher. I believe my story as an educator begins with my experience training to become one at MSU.

To understand what I mean, I have to tell you that the first time I ever stepped in front of a class I froze. I was a student teacher, it was my first day actually teaching, and as I was talking about post WWI immigration through Ellis Island I forgot what I was supposed to say and where I was going. I just froze. My mentor teacher had to jump start me again by taking over the class for 2 minutes while I regrouped. This was not the only time I was unprepared for the classroom. My entire student teaching year was an uphill battle. I had a huge learning curve, and it took almost the entire year for me to figure things out. As a part of my professional artifacts I included two things from that first year as a teacher and the beginning of my MATC: the final evaluation from my MSU field mentor Carol Steele (TE 802) and two fully detailed lesson plans from US History (TE 801). In her evaluation she mentions the work that I put into overcoming my challenges as a teacher, going so far to state that "I overcame my early nervousness and

become much more confident and direct with students.” I feel that both the Great Depression and Treaty of Versailles lesson plans demonstrate the results of that hard work and show what Carol called “strong” and that with them I am “better able to foresee and prevent problems with curriculum or instruction than [I] was at the beginning of the year.” Lessons learned, but soon forgotten.

The same process occurred as a first year teacher in New Orleans, LA. I don’t know why I have to need to make the same mistakes and learn the same lessons over and over again, but I have and I do. As a newly minted teacher sent out into the world I landed a job in New Orleans teaching at Walter L Cohen High School. I have to say, once again, I was barely surviving. I was given this curriculum, called Freshman Seminar, from an outfit in Baltimore about study skills, conflict resolution, and looking forward to college. When they handed me that giant packet of materials I thought to myself, “I was trained as a social studies teacher, not a remedial skills teacher.” That year I learned one of the driving forces behind not only Talent Development, but most of the social services industry. I had to meet my students where they were, before I could bring them to where they needed to be. I am paraphrasing what I have heard from my wife, a social worker, fellow teachers, colleagues at TDS, and also from the research behind the TDS curriculum. If you don’t meet them where there are, how can you ever understand HOW to get them where they need to be? Just like my student teaching year, I got turned around by a mentor teacher there to help me implement the curriculum. Talent Development doesn’t just give you the curriculum and send you on your merry way, they also provide coaches to support you along the way. I credit mine, a man name Tyson Giles, as one of the two reasons I didn’t quit my first year.

Flashing forward once again to STF Training the last week of June, 2012. One of the sessions on the docket is how to use Freshman Seminar (FS) and Mastering the Middle Grades (MMG), which is Freshmen Seminar for Middle School, to organize the school for tiered interventions. That means intensive supports for those who need it most, target supports for those who are slightly off track, and preventative measures for our students that are doing ok that we want it to stay that way. This curriculum, FS and MMG, is meant to help our highest need students become successful in school. And during that week, sitting in that session, I was no longer a new teacher, I was not a teacher at all, but School Transformation Facilitator, helping other teachers implement FS and MMG. I was in that session because I want to live up to the impossible standard that Tyson has set for me. I want to grow professionally as a curriculum coach, as a support person for teachers who are on the “front lines” of education. It was in this vein that I also chose to complete my final curriculum project for the MATC capstone course (included in my professional artifacts) on Talent Development’s FS and MMG classes. To better understand the material so I can help new teachers understand it better as well.

The Data Nerd

A major part of my work for TDS is with Early Warning Indicators (EWIs). EWIs are data points that can tell us as early as 6th grade if a student is at risk of dropping out of school later on in their academic career. Those indicators are attendance, behavior, and course performance (the ABCs). These indicators are nothing new. In fact, they follow simple logic. If you don’t show up on a regular basis, do not behave while in school, and do not complete the work or understand the material, then you are not going to graduate. The process that TDS developed to use the EWIs to intervene with students who are off track involves an

interdisciplinary team of teachers getting together to discuss their students. A requirement for this meeting to be successful is that every teacher at the table has to share the same students, so this requires them traveling from teacher to teacher in cohorts, and then giving those teachers a common planning time to discuss students. This process was used at the first school I ever taught in: Walter L Cohen High School in New Orleans, LA, and it was a process that I fought tooth and nail.

Every morning all the Ninth Grade teachers would assemble behind the library in the school's conference room. For most of first period we would talk about our students, what worked, what didn't, and how we could help each other work with our most challenging students. I did not feel that this process worked for me. Nothing the other teachers were talking about would apply to my classroom, and the students they were discussing as improved or well behaved were not so in my classroom. It got to the point where I would ask the secretary to call on me when a teacher needed a sub. First period was always the hardest to cover. Things happen and teachers show up late. When I wasn't able to get out of it I would always bring grading that I needed to do. After ignoring the work done at EWI Meetings for most of the year I was not improving as a teacher. I started thinking to myself, "Maybe its not them. Maybe its me." I was telling this story to our people from Guam when they asked, "And, how did you finally make the decision to buy in?" They were having trouble with a few obstinate teachers. In the end, I had to admit that it wasn't anything the school did to force me across the chasm from no to yes. It was the meetings themselves. By nature they are meant have us work collaboratively on our common challenges and celebrate our successes. When my challenges were not getting the same collaborative effort as my colleagues, they remained my challenges

and did not go away. I also could not share in the success, because I was not having them either. From there it was simple to make that final step to buy into the process.

My belief in the EWI process has led to the development of three major projects and one huge presentation for both my work in TDS and for this master's program. The first two occurred while I was working as an onsite turnaround coordinator for a single school in Detroit. For the second half of the 2010-2011 school year I was brought in to a middle school that was making the transition from an elementary (K-5) to an elementary/middle school (K-8). Looking at the data for this school, most of the problems were occurring in the middle grades, and it was here that I focused my attention. The first step was to restart the school's EWI Meetings, which had fallen to the wayside in the absence of a fulltime onsite person. To facilitate the process I created a database using Microsoft Access that linked the school's student information system with the interventions we developed in our teacher team meetings. I was linking student achievement data with implementation data. A year later, working with several schools in the Detroit area, as well as East Baton Rouge, LA, I developed a series of training modules in my Teaching K-12 Students Online course (CEP 820). Instead of developing a fake course that I wasn't teaching, I used the course to create a training regimen for K-12 teachers to implement the EWI&I Tracker. The end result was that teachers were able to see the fruits of their labor through progress monitoring. We could follow a student's progress as they either responded or rejected our interventions. This database and the training modules that accompany it are available in my professional artifacts as the Early Warning Indicator and Intervention (EWI&I) Tracker.

The second major project I developed while still at that single school was a redesign of the basic quarterly report card. It is a part of TDS protocol to implement report card conferences

for the student as well as their parents. The purpose is to ingrain them with the idea that the report card is theirs. They must take responsibility for it and ownership of it if they are to succeed. It was to facilitate this process that I attempted the redesign to reflect the EWIs. A caring adult sits down with the student and goes over their report card with them. What grades they are getting, why they are getting them, and what they can do about it. It also brings in a student's attendance and behavior referrals in an attempt to make the link between showing up, behaving well, and better grades. Like the EWI&I Tracker, the student report card was developed using Microsoft Access and the district SIS. Also like the EWI&I Tracker, the student report card redesign was done in conjunction with my MSU coursework. As a teacher researcher I was learning to develop action research projects that could be applied right away to the classroom and teacher practice. The report card redesign was submitted to my TE 808 class, Inquiry in Classroom Teaching and Learning. As the son of an accountant and an art teacher it was great being able to put my data/number side together with my design/creative side to develop a report card that used color, graphs, and some of the basic elements of design to convey extremely relevant information to the student.

The final project using Early Warning Indicators was a whole school Positive Behavior Intervention and Support (PBIS) mini lesson. After looking at the school's data, I noticed a large up-tick in fighting amongst our middle school students. To tackle this problem I developed a series of lessons and activities to be held during the school's advisory period. Bringing in my work from MSU (TE 848), and knowing that the students needed support in reading and writing, I added a large journal writing and reflection component to the lessons. The most important part of this project was how horribly the implementation went. The plan was well thought out, we had buy in from most of the teachers, and a group of volunteer tutors working with us. Timing

was against us. It was towards the end of the year and things kept popping up during advisory getting in the way of the lessons. Student attendance dropped significantly after spring break. And finally, not a single poster was made at the end of the month. From this experience I learned an important lesson in not letting the perfect get in the way of the good. Voltaire said “The perfect is the enemy of the good.” I take this to mean that if we wait to do anything until it is perfect, then nothing will ever get done, and no good will come from our work.

It was all of this work with student data that led my supervisors to ask me to develop a presentation for the last week in June, 2012, around data driven interventions and data driven school turnaround. It was all about data. I was asked to create this presentation for the entire room, eighty people. I would like to remind you of what occurred the first time I was in front of students and apply that to a room of peers and colleagues. The entire time leading up to my presentation, which was on Wednesday, I kept going back to that first time. Because of that fear I chose the same remedy that worked way back then: over planning. I developed a complicated, intricate, and detailed plan for this session, which is another artifact included in this portfolio. I knew that I would be more confident and prepared to deviate from the script if I had a detailed script to deviate from. The end result of that presentation was that mine, along with another colleague from Detroit, were the only two presentations mentioned by name in the participant evaluations as being conducted extraordinarily well. I thank Carol Steele for teaching me how to plan so I can improvise if need be.

In Conclusion

This paper is the most recent iteration of my reflective practices as an educator. From debriefing with fellow teachers to providing feedback forms at PD sessions, I am constantly

looking at what I have done, what I am doing, and what I intend to do. I am looking at my practice through different theoretical models and methods of implementation. The last artifact I have included in this portfolio is the blog I first started writing several years ago, and with a few interruptions, have kept up since then. It is a representation of that reflective practice.