

A Toolbox

by Valerie Laiho

As I looked around my empty 6th grade classroom in June, I was struck by how different and stark it appeared. Gone were the warm fabric-covered reading corner walls with the soft lamplight spotlighting the array of high interest books for perusing. Gone, too, were the discussion-stimulating tables, stacks of chart paper filled with student thinking and learning, and the State ELA Standards. Surrounding the Standards had been student examples of approaching, meeting, and exceeding standard along with suggestions for goals to set. They were all gone, but one missing part struck me the most. The voices. The quiet hum of purposeful voices discussing, coaching, questioning, explaining, citing evidence, describing the joy of being lost in a beautifully written story, and learning. The voices, some heavily accented, some halting and shy, trying out new techniques, new ideas, new words. That was what I was truly missing.

We had had a very good year. We cemented long term friendships, and mentor relationships. Many students had been successful in their academic growth goals, and were going on to middle school better prepared and with higher confidence than many of them had thought possible in September. The students who hadn't quite met their goals yet, had had coaching to strengthen their skills, had been given new tools with which to fight their battles, and encouraged to keep trying and building. A good year.

I thought back to September as I was meeting them for the first time, and how overwhelmed I had been at the task set before me. I was the ELA Literacy teacher for all three 6th grade classrooms. Our numbers were a little low so instead of 90 students, I only had 76. Within those 76, there were hugely diverse cultural backgrounds and first languages (English, Marshallese, Egyptian Arabic, Farsi, and Turkish), multiple skill levels, diverse behavior and emotional needs, and 85% of my students came from households immersed in poverty with all the obstacles that can include. I was petrified by the sheer volume of needs my students had, and worried that I would not be able to meet them all.

Then, I took a deep breath, tried to pull out all the learning and researching I had done in preparation to take my National Boards, and dove in. I remembered reading *Instruction That*

Works, by Marzano, et. al, and how research showed that great gains in academic scores across content areas were produced when the students were explicitly taught the skills of comparing and contrasting, so we emphasized those skills using part of a series by Harvey J. Silver on Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) called: *Compare and Contrast: Teaching Comparative Thinking to Strengthen Student Learning*. Then back to Marzano with *The Art and Science of Teaching*, and his framework that included Routines and procedures. There were daily read-alouds and think-alouds, Positive Behavior Intervention routines and rituals, building trust and community. We grouped our students into three groups, and rotated these groups. I taught ELA Literacy, one of my colleagues taught Science and Social Studies through ELA Informational, and the other colleague taught the math.

Using the techniques I had gleaned from Lucy Calkins' fabulous Units of Study, I established Reading and Writing Workshops. I looked at our initial assessments and went about planning my interventions, mini lessons, and other instruction to match the standards and the holes. We didn't have an adopted ELA curriculum, just the standards, a pacing guide for writing, and an assessment calendar. (We have since adopted a new curriculum).

I spent my days in the "Traveling Chair" going from table to table while they were in varying stages of writing projects, or in their leveled "Book Clubs". I carried sticky notes to write down coaching, areas of focus, or new goals for each of the students in the group. They would produce the stickies from last session and show me where they had worked on a goal, responded to their reading, annotated, compared, contrasted, or whatever else the coaching had entailed. We asked critical thinking questions and answered them citing text evidence. My mini lessons were on thinking strategies (a la Ellin Keene), text structures, academic vocabulary, elaboration, dialogue, elements of writing, or anything else they needed to help them progress. Using the strategies I learned from our GLAD and ELL Strategies trainings, we illustrated, gestured, and color-coded our way to understanding. I modified, differentiated, built decoding, comprehension, and fluency skills, discussed,



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explained, modeled, listened, and laughed. Almost every session involved laughter.

My evenings were spent searching, researching, calling, and lots and lots of talking. Pulling up my observations from the day and trying to find new ideas, new research as to best practice, trying to help move a student along the continuum who was stalling or regressing. Talking to families, interpreters, ELL specialists, Title I interventionists looking for ways to help, arranging for additional instruction time to help a student keep moving. Many of my students had been exposed to trauma, and had emotional, behavioral, and self-regulation difficulties. I worked with my building care teams, our Special Services Department, and my principal and colleagues trying to minimize the eruptions and maximize the learning for all. I had an MIT candidate working with me and we spent many a late afternoon coming up with behavior plans and ways

to help students self-regulate. I had never worked so hard in my life.

Yet, by June, thanks to the strong relationships we had built, and the “team” approach to educating a class of children one child at a time, we had found a way to make it work for these kids, for this year, for these needs. I had learned so much since September. I had been so worried about being able to meet all the needs by myself. I didn’t have to. I could count on support and ideas from my team: intervention specialists, colleagues, Special Services, my principal, my MIT candidate, families, and community. By using the Workshop instructional techniques, I had been able to differentiate for academic and even emotional/behavioral needs, and helped keep the love of reading and writing alive. I had become way more organized because I had to keep track of so many goals and progress monitor the growth, but I KNEW where each student was and next steps. And through it all, I had

built lasting, positive relationships with my students. I knew them. In knowing them, I could reach them. I needed a toolbox: Knowledge of Students, Team, Strong Pedagogy, Community, Humor, and Caring. These tools made all the difference.

Next year, I knew I would not be in this classroom. I had accepted a new challenge to become the Title I interventionist for fifth and sixth grade ELA. It made me a little sad to think I would not be the Classroom Teacher, searching, analyzing, creating, designing, coaching, and laughing. But then I realized I will still be a very important part of the team and contributor to the toolbox. There will still be mentorship, bonding, searching, coaching, workshops, book clubs, family communications, strategies, and gaps to be bridged. And laughter. There will always be laughter.

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