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When Repeat Doesn't Mean Repeat: Developing and Evaluating a Literacy Curriculum for At-Risk High School Students



BY **DR. CATHLEEN D. RAFFERTY, PAMELA S. KLIMENKO AND DR. DIANE HOLT-REYNOLDS**

What happens when both the students and the teacher are dissatisfied with an English class? As Pam, the teacher, explained it:

After the third or fourth year of teaching this repeat English 9 class, several realizations crystallized: the discipline was terrible, the interest of the students left much to be desired, and I was drained and regretful that not much seemed to be happening for these students' growth as learners. I really wanted to change the format and some of the goals for the class.

Several factors allowed Pam to explore necessary changes. She was searching for viable alternatives, her high school became a Professional Development School, and she joined forces with several university colleagues. The recent emergence of Professional Development Schools (Holmes Group, 1990) holds much promise for collaborative endeavors that seek solutions to complex educational dilemmas such as creating successful programs for *at-risk* students. This article documents how a teacher and teacher educators in a Professional Development School (PDS) developed, refined, and evaluated a reading/writing curriculum for at-risk high school students partially retained in-grade. Before describing our collaborative, action research project we will briefly explore: 1) definitions of *at-risk*, 2) teaching methodologies recommended for *at-risk* students, and 3) the role of teacher research or action research in facilitating necessary instructional changes.

How do we define *at-risk*?

A recent synthesis of research on effective programs/practices for *at-risk* students (Slavin, et al., 1989) offered at least four viable definitions: 1) students who, on the basis of several risk factors are unlikely to

graduate from high school; 2) students who are unlikely to leave school with an adequate level of basic skills; 3) students who are unlikely to pass criterion-referenced graduation tests; and 4) students who are presently eligible for special or compensatory education (p. 5).

These definitions refer to students of normal intelligence who for one reason or another have yet to achieve basic skills necessary for success in schooling and/or life. One or more of these descriptions characterized all students in the English 9 repeat class. Therefore we combined the descriptions for purposes of this article.

What do we know about teaching *at-risk* students?

Consensus about effective teaching behaviors and/or programs for at-risk students, especially at the upper grades, is elusive. However, in our search for structural guidelines for the redesigned English 9 class, we extrapolated teaching behaviors advocated for elementary educators of at-risk students: 1) Establish a highly structured, well-organized environment in which there is little transitional or noninstructional wait-time or student off-task behavior. 2) Provide positive feedback to students responding correctly and ask clarifying or helping follow-up questions if a second chance is necessary. 3) Provide instructional materials that will ensure success. 4) Create a supportive, non-threatening classroom environment (Slavin, et al., 1989).

In addition to teacher behaviors most likely to ensure success for at-risk students, curricular considerations were also necessary. Because students in Pam's project had previously failed a traditional curriculum of grammar and literature concepts, alternatives were explored. The success of Fader (et al., 1976) was an early indication of the power of a literature-based reading/writing approach with

secondary students. More recently Atwell (1987) and others (e.g.: Beach and Hynds, 1991; Commeytras, 1989; Farnan, 1989; Gambrell, 1990, Kreisberg, 1989; Smith and Bowers, 1989;) have helped to reconceptualize English/Reading curricula. More and more it appears that those "who use literature-based reading instruction to challenge the basal tradition [and hopefully other English/Reading traditions as well] boast stunning levels of success with all types of students and particularly with disabled and disinterested readers" (Tunnell and Jacobs, 1989, p. 470).

What is the role of teacher research/action research?

Teacher research/action research has been an accepted practice in schools for a number of years. Recently it has been linked to restructuring and the change of practice (e.g.: Goswami and Stillman, 1987; Lomax, 1989; Perrone, 1991.) Because PDS schools are designed to create variance in teaching and the study of teaching and learning (Duffy and Barnes, 1991), they are ripe locations for classroom inquiry. Action research has been described as an analytical, dialectical process through which teachers can understand their own practice (Lomax, 1989). Such research projects are the norm in Professional Development Schools and ultimately led to the collaborative inquiry described herein.

Although there is a growing knowledge/research base on at-risk students and various methodological and programmatic recommendations, we still lack qualitative analyses of teacher and student perceptions of a literature-based reading/writing curriculum for at-risk high school students. The remainder of this article provides such information about one program.

WHAT WERE QUESTIONS AND ISSUES?

How can students who have failed one or more semesters of English 9 acquire necessary motivation and literacy skills? This was Pam's primary project interest. In addition, she wanted to help students develop appropriate social and interactive skills necessary to make connections into other classes and real-world/work situations. Specific goals targeted: 1) developing a fluency in literacy through

exposure to a lot of reading and writing, 2) valuing reading and writing as solutions to personal situations, 3) seeing reading and writing as enjoyable leisure activities, and 4) developing appropriate discussion, thinking, and problem solving techniques.

Who participated?

At the beginning of Fall 1990 the class contained eighteen students—three girls and fifteen boys ranging in age from fifteen to eighteen. One was a foreign exchange student, a senior, with very low English language skills. Three students were on a special education case load. Five students were seventeen or eighteen years old, trying to make up their English 9 required credit, in some cases even after they had completed higher grade level English classes. The rest were regular sophomores who, for various reasons, had failed English 9 at the junior high.

Attrition eventually reduced the class size. By mid-semester we were working with a total of fourteen students, eight of whom we were able to interview during the second semester. Pseudonyms are used in the personality and classroom performance sketches in Figure 1.

What was the classroom context?

Traditionally, the English 9 class had been a one semester make-up class for students failing English 9 at the junior high. Its existence made it possible for students to move on to high school while allowing them to repeat this particular course. Previously, much of the work done in the repeat class was synonymous with the term *repeat class*—a repeat of the same material, text, basic concepts of literature—probably even the same work sheets on parts of speech were used.

However, 1990-91 signaled significant changes. Although many of the following techniques are probably familiar to teachers of *more skilled* students, too often students labeled as *less skilled* or *at-risk* receive more routinized, skills-based instruction (Allington, 1991). Anticipation guides laid the conceptual framework for novels. Oral reading, reader's theater, and silent reading were utilized, supplemented with reader-response think sheets to facilitate student understanding of literary

Figure 1 **PROFILES OF ENGLISH 9 STUDENTS**

Micky was a bright student, although he could have cared less whether or not he turned in any work during his experiences in 9th grade at the junior high. He commanded a lot of attention from his peers in the repeat English 9 class. He could speak and people listened. Micky brought some thought-provoking issues to the discussion platform and he certainly had his opinions. Sometimes he would complain about the work if he did not think it had any application to reality. He loved to read, and tackled some pretty complex problems. Despite his "apparent" confidence, he was definitely insecure about his writing skills. He could see flaws and that made him impatient with himself.

Short Stuff had high level skills but low application levels. Lack of follow-through caused his return to English 9. His big, showy behavior in class had to be an attempt to make up for his self-perceived small, "unmacho" stature. After he was recognized for his outstanding reading and writing skills, some of that compensating behavior dwindled. He was a "ham" and interpretive reading was his gift. So were the creative projects and he became the one with whom to work collaboratively. He was very interested in reading and found a "buddy" in class who had the same reading interests. Consequently, he came to enjoy the time he spent in English 9.

Sonny was extremely difficult to get to know because he was so quiet. He had tried but failed academically in earlier years resulting in extremely low self-confidence. Getting him to speak above a whisper was quite a challenge. Although he worked cooperatively in groups and did talk with others in that setting, when working independently Sonny was right back to being his quiet, shy self.

Jake had some serious reading problems that he managed to hide for a long time. He always carried a huge novel for SSR time, but was usually disruptive during that quiet reading period. He was also a poor writer; sounding out words to spell was extremely difficult for him. He finally confessed, with great dread, that he doesn't understand anything he reads not only in English class but in any class that requires textbook reading. At year's end he had quite a depressed, give-it-up attitude. Although he worked well in groups, he rarely turned in individual assignments.

Lenny was a joy to watch "bloom." He was a loner because he really perceived himself as being above the "stupid" behavior he noticed and looked down upon in class. He would rather read to himself at ALL times, whether or not his attention was required for in-class activities. Early in the semester Lenny did not care enough about work to turn anything in. Fortunately, by semester's end he produced some quality things. He was one of four students who turned in a research project for the first time in several academic years. His comments were usually quite humorous and well-conceived, although at times, unkind. By the end of the semester, he actually cared enough to smile and say "good morning."

Brandy was as good-natured as kids come. His skills were somewhat low, but his lack of motivation for completing tasks was the real reason for repeating the class. He was socially accepted and regularly completed work in class. However, any outside work was an effort for him. Group projects were fun for Brandy and he made the most of them. Finally, he did complete an independent novel and wrote a report on it. This was his first completed outside-class project in two years.

Chip was a quiet, collected type of guy. He did not socialize very well and seemed to have a chip on his shoulder due to being in the repeat English 9 class. Apparently he did not get along at all with his ninth grade teacher, so by not doing the necessary things to pass, he failed. He liked to read, but did not want to contribute much to the class—he was usually in his own element. He did complete assignments but they were usually late.

Kelli moved to this school district from a district in rural Georgia. In her previous English classes she said they did no reading, only sentence writing, word analysis, and parts of speech. She was thrilled to read novels, especially orally so that she could hear how the expression enhanced the reading and meaning. Kelli had very poor writing skills, but she stuck to her tasks, tried very hard, followed through on a research topic, and really felt she learned from this class. When in groups, Kelli contributed a lot, even though she was somewhat shy. She seemed to enjoy working with others.

devices and students' construction of meaning. Prior to paper-and-pencil tests, extension projects like posters, radio plays, newspaper articles, talk-shows, and rap songs further engaged students in meaningful literate activities.

Sustained silent reading (SSR) of self-selected novels was another important aspect of the redesigned curriculum. We were delighted to discover that *at-risk* students would read when afforded the opportunity. A book report and related creative project culminated this component.

As preparation for the required sophomore research paper, English 9 students were introduced to *I-Search*, a type of *research* report in which students used community-based data collection techniques. For example, for her report on Potter Park Zoo, Kelli wrote the zoo for informational brochures and actually interviewed zoo employees by telephone. All students finished this project, and at least four confirmed that it was the first report they had actually completed in years.

An additional significant factor was the class atmosphere. Rather than rigid and autocratic, it was more relaxed and democratic. It took a while for students to adjust and accept responsibility for the kind of mutual respect necessary, but in time techniques like *fish-bowl* discussion helped students to learn to appreciate each others' viewpoints.

WHAT DID WE LEARN FROM THESE STUDENTS?

From our observations, debriefing sessions, and interviews with students and their second semester teachers, we discovered numerous reasons for initial failure and subsequent success in English 9. In addition, we gained valuable insights into students' perspectives and reactions to the revised literacy curriculum and related projects. Findings are discussed in the following sections.

Why the need to repeat?

Students repeated English 9 for three basic reasons: 1) inability to get work in due to time constraints and/or lack of organization, 2) completing work but not doing well, or 3) deliberately not completing work.

Three students who evinced the lowest

skill levels, Brandy, Kelli, and Jake, reported that time and/or organization were problematic. As Brandy explained, "[I] didn't have enough time...they weren't too hard...I just didn't finish them." For both Kelli and Jake, however, time and organization were the culprits. Kelli noted that, "All they had all the time was lots of paperwork and it was hard to keep up with all the paperwork...they gave you so much of it, it was hard to keep up." For Jake the frustration was, "[I] couldn't get the work in...it was due too soon for me and I'm late turning things in anyway but...or I got it done and I'd lose a lot of my papers."

Only one student specifically stated that he had not done well on work completed for class, or that he had tried and failed. For Sonny it seemed more an issue of quality than quantity.

For many of these students, however, time, organization, and quality were not key issues. Four deliberately chose not to do the work. Not surprisingly, these same four exhibited ability levels that were anything but remedial in nature. Micky freely admitted, "[I] didn't do any work...because I had better things to do...I thought the assignments were dumb cause in all the English classes it's just grammar and stuff and you do that a couple of years in a row and it gets pretty monotonous." Short Stuff had a similar response. "I didn't put forth the effort I guess...and me and the teacher didn't...really like each other. [The assignments] weren't too hard...I just didn't feel like doing them because it was mostly the same stuff all the time." Lenny said he failed because he "didn't do his work." He sometimes handed in daily work or projects if he "felt like doing it." Primarily he "just didn't like the subjects" and thought that many assignments were "insignificant, and unimportant to our lives." Finally, Chip admitted that he "wasn't turning in everything...so [it was] the [final] report, pass or fail." He also claimed that because he didn't turn in the final report he failed English 9 "by four points."

It is also interesting to note that the English 10 and Communication Skills teachers who had these students during second semester 1990-91 were often surprised that they had been in the repeat English 9 class. When asked for possible reasons why these students had to repeat English 9, one responded that, "I

don't feel these kids have any real major intelligence deficits or anything. I think there has been a series of things that traditionally affects these kinds of kids and their lives." A second was "very surprised that [Short Stuff] had to repeat English 9 because he really seems to be feeling confident." The third teacher declared, "I have no idea."

How did students react to the changes in English 9?

All students interviewed basically expected the English 9 repeat class to characterize its label. Most were pleasantly surprised that it was structured differently. There was not consensus from which particular assignments or activities students learned the most or why they were perceived as interesting or valuable. Apparently the class offered something for the wide range of interest, motivational, and ability levels present. Meaningful assignments fell into three major categories: 1) novels and accompanying worksheets, 2) writing reports and scripts, and 3) various group projects/activities. Not surprisingly, the same project or assignment was often valued for different reasons.

The *novels and accompanying worksheets* routine was valued by Micky, Short Stuff, Kelli, and Lenny because the worksheets asked for "personal feelings and applications," "made me think," and "helped me remember." Kelli in particular commented that she "learned to read with feeling...and that made it sound more real." *Writing reports* was cited as important by Brandy because he "hadn't done this in quite a long time." *Various group projects like radio plays and scripts* were cited by Sonny, Chip, and Jake primarily because they liked to work in groups and these particular activities "helped [them] to understand and remember better."

Of the four characteristics recommended as teaching behaviors for working with at-risk students, only one was not consistently evident in English 9: a highly structured, well-organized environment in which there is little transitional or non-instructional wait-time or student off-task behavior (Slavin, et al., 1989). One might predict that students who had previously struggled with time management and/or organizational skills (Brandy, Kelli, and Jake) would be negatively impacted by this

lack of structure. This was not the case. In addition, those students who had purposely avoided doing English 9 work at the junior high because it lacked significance for them, commented favorably about the structure of the class. Micky noted, "you've got all these people who have failed English for various...reasons...[and] the way you let us have a lot of freedom in there..., to kind of pick what we wanted to do and what we wanted to stay away from [helped too]." For those students who were already independent, absence of a restrictive environment was perceived as positive and rewarding because they felt they were treated as adults. In fact, student input often shaped the activities. If students questioned the importance of certain tasks and we couldn't defend our rationale, we altered the plan. This helped students have ownership and feel important.

How did students' attitudes and skills improve?

A major English 9 objective was to help students acquire motivation and literacy skills from the reconceptualized curriculum. With few exceptions, students expressed more positive attitudes toward English (and often school in general). Most also agreed that English 9 had prepared them for success in either English 10 or Communication Skills.

Motivation is a complex construct. However, it seems that if students are motivated to read, write, and complete assignments, a more positive attitude toward a subject matter is implied. Regardless of reasons for earlier failure in English 9, students reported improved attitudes toward English (English class) for a variety of reasons. Improved motivation/attitude resulted from a combination of not only what was done but how it was done. This combination of content and process yielded more success and self-esteem for some, a growing appreciation for reading for a few, and a reduction of resistive or rebellious tendencies in others.

As an example, Brandy reported that he thought the repeat English 9 would be "hard or boring" but that he had changed because he discovered that, "[I] can (do it)...it's a lot easier for me now...I kinda got caught up thinking it was too hard for me." It seems that Brandy was indeed "caught up" in a self-fulfilling

prophecy mode until successes helped him realize that the repeat English 9 work was "stuff that (he could) actually get done and feel good about."

Short Stuff commented that "before ninth grade I didn't really pick up a book and read it...now I'm picking up more books and reading them...now it's just like natural for me to pick up a book...I read now." When probed to describe why/how this change had occurred, he responded that, "I was made to (read) in that class and it was a 'fun make.' It wasn't a 'you do this and you do that,' it was like 'now we're going to do this' and it wasn't—it was an order—but it was a soft order, it wasn't a harsh order." Content (SSR) and process (classroom climate) were both influential in this development.

Lenny, who earlier had failed English 9 for deliberately not doing the work because it lacked significance for him, liked the reorganized English 9 curriculum "'cause we're treated more like adults than at the junior high." Upon further probing he elaborated that he didn't "like working out of books" but instead liked "doing more independent projects." For this student, both content and process accommodated individual learning style preferences.

Students' self-assessment of improved literacy skills followed a similar pattern. Regardless of reasons for repeating English 9, most students felt they had acquired requisite skills necessary for success in English 10. Furthermore, students were remarkably accurate in their perceptions of how English 9 had prepared them for their subsequent English classes. Depending on the class and the teacher, second semester assignments included: reading plays like *Romeo and Juliet* and *Our Town*, reading adolescent novels with written responses/reactions, doing research projects, oral communication and demonstration speeches, and personal management skills.

Kelli described the aspects of English 9 which had helped her as, "Reading and we got to write. We went over, we didn't go completely out of English, we did verbs and nouns and we got to read some different kinds of books and made posters and stuff." When asked to explain how that had prepared her for second semester, she replied, "I

was reading a lot more. And we [had] to read out loud and stuff and we learned how to use our voice in a classroom." Even Chip, who was quite resentful that he had to repeat because he had only failed by four points, admitted that this year he "got prepared for reports and other things [he] got a grade on."

In addition, second semester English teachers were almost unanimous in their favorable reports on most of these students. Even students who had previously struggled with time management and organization were being more responsible. The lone exception was Jake. His story, supported by data from his second semester teachers, is a powerful one that cannot be addressed in this context. It will be the focus of another paper.

SUMMARY, ADDITIONAL INSIGHTS, AND IMPLICATIONS

Although students had been placed in the repeat English 9 course for a variety of reasons, almost all responded favorably to the redesigned curriculum. In essence, the vast majority of English 9 students and their second semester English teachers agreed that they had indeed acquired both the motivation and literacy skills necessary to succeed in the academic school environment. Further examination of recent research yielded additional support for a literature-based reading/writing curriculum.

Tunnell and Jacobs (1989) identified ten commonalities, some overt, some subtle, in their review of literature based reading programs. In one way or another, these ten were identifiable in the redesigned English 9 curriculum: premises learned from "natural readers," use of natural text, neurological impress method, reading aloud, sustained silent reading, teacher modeling, emphasis on changing attitudes, self selection of reading materials, meaning oriented with skills often taught in meaningful context, and process writing and other output activities (pp. 474-476).

Several thematic articles in a recent *English Journal* identified additional characteristics of approaches that successfully engage students in literate activities. Survey results from 175 middle-school students yielded five factors that figured most prominently in creating avid readers. Many became apparent near the end of the English 9 semes-

ter: 1) reading is social, 2) reading fosters independence to create your own world, 3) being able to read more and better than others is personally gratifying, 4) role models provide motivation, and 5) "adventure" is often cited as reading's appeal (Martin, 1991, p. 50). Although many English 9 students could not be classified as avid readers, they had taken significant steps toward permanent membership in the "literacy club" (Smith, 1988).

Literate behavior does not develop overnight. In a search for tenets to guide instruction, Lesesne (1991) discovered five themes that consistently emerged in fifty years of research into the formation of literate behavior: 1) Lifetime readers are made, not born. 2) Children and young adults need role models to emulate. 3) Children and young adults need time in school to read for pleasure. 4) Free reading can be used to develop lifetime readers. 5) A curriculum rich in response will aid the development of lifetime readers (pp. 61-63).

Moffett and Wagner (1991) described additional student-centered reading activities designed to foster reading maturity and involvement in literature. Four in particular were successfully utilized in the redesigned English curriculum: dramatizing and performing texts, listening to and watching performed texts, transforming texts, and discussing reading. Although the suggestions offered by Martin, Lesesne, Moffett and Wagner were not published until a year after our 1990-91 English 9 experience, we were indeed gratified to learn that so much of what we had attempted had been validated by others. In addition, this quote—also discovered after we had completed our study—seemed particularly germane as we all continue to address the needs of at-risk learners.

If you treat individuals as they are, they will stay as they are, but if you treat them as if they were what they ought to be and could be, they will become what they ought to be and could be.

—Johann von Goethe

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