

The Prospect Review - October 2006

Tawnya Tiskus
Westfield High School
Grades/Subject Taught: Eng. 9-12
Began Teaching in 2003

Affirmations in my Third Year of Teaching

After the winter break Matt^{*} looked terrible; he had stitches in his hands and the skin over his swollen knuckles was shiny and tight. He didn't take his jacket off the whole class period and never logged into his computer. Our class, Career English, comprised of juniors and seniors, was designed for students who might not be college bound and is intended to offer skills and resources for a world beyond high school. We met in an outdated Mac lab to work on various forms of business writing, reflected on personal goals and values and researched career options.

During the first quarter, Matt had slipped a lot. He had too many absences to pass the class, mostly because he overslept. When in school, and more rested, he was sincere in his desire to do well. The fear of failure had worked and he'd started coming after school for extra help. He confided in me, "I started smokin' too much, you know how I looked every day. I've cut that out. Completely. I want to graduate." Quarter 2 had been a huge improvement. Matt often needed assistance with assignments - it took him longer to think about his topic and longer to get what he wanted down on paper. Then came a major set-back over the break,

and coupled with that, the Matt hadn't completed his research paper.

I think the breaks are difficult for many of our students. I don't pry into their lives but I know from my own reflection that December is one of the darkest times of the year. Holidays can be hard for all types of families - our relationships with our parents or extended family are challenged by the stress of the time period. We might be all thrown together expecting to have a happy time, forgetting that we weren't always satisfied when we did all live under one roof. On top of that, we believe that *this* is the pinnacle of the year. Messages in our culture tell us that we should be thankful or jubilant to be part of our family circle. Families are complicated; each of us has our own desires and goals and the holiday season seems to trample individuality.

I can't begin to imagine what it's like for kids who don't have strong families at home. Usually the week before the winter break there is a rash of physical fights. The guidance counselors become overloaded. It gets tough in the school. When I was a volunteer for Big Brothers/Big Sisters, a social worker explained to me how summer could be stressful for the kids in the program, who are typically labeled as "at risk." "School provides structure, and even two meals a day for some of these kids. When summer comes, they can fall apart. They're home all the time, maybe there's no parent watching them, and the

The Prospect Review - October 2006

neighborhoods don't have safe places for them.

I don't know Matt's whole situation but I know some of it. I know he lives with his grandma, and he has for his whole life. It's just the two of them and she's strict.

"I'll be 18 soon, and I want to move out. I love my gram, but we get on each other's nerves. My big brother said that I can move in with him."

"How old is your brother?"

"He's like 35, but he's not actually my brother. I call him that because he's always been there for me, like a brother. He's helped me out a lot. He was my mom's friend."

"Would this be a good place for you? You know, he'd be supportive of you finishing school?"

"Oh yeah, definitely. He'd kick my ass if I didn't finish." I worry about this possible arrangement because of Matt's vulnerabilities - not because of his brother. Matt's easily tempted; if he's not assisted by good influences he could fall into trouble with absences, fighting, drugs or alcohol.

I've now had Matt in three of my classes. The first one was a literature class during his sophomore year. It was the spring of my first year as a teacher. The previous Fall had had normal ups and downs for a first-year teacher, and I was ready to try again with new classes in the spring. I was completely unprepared me for that

class of sophomores. Although I remembered that I had had Matt that year, I wasn't sure if it was that particular group of students, so I asked him.

"That wasn't the class with Yolanda and Michael in it, was it?" Matt thought about it for a moment. Then he smiled, "Yeah, it was. That was a crazy class." I still feel a bit badly about it. Those were some of my darkest moments as a teacher. Yolanda was a whirlwind of emotions and seemed to direct her hatred and contempt of authority right towards me. At the time, I really didn't know what to do. She was the girl who needed to be at the center of attention, not academically but socially. She was in charge and it was her story for the day's lesson. In retrospect, I know now some strategies which would have worked better. Classroom discipline is all about the hierarchy. In a class with good dynamics and a smooth relationship with the teacher, this is unnoticeable. This isn't taught in grad school. Whether we like it or not, our current system of classroom discipline is about power, and if the teacher doesn't appear to have any, she gets manipulated by her students and everyone in turn is miserable.

That's why I regret that class of sophomore literature. I lost control of that class early on, and I didn't even realize I'd lost the power until it was too late. Yolanda eventually dropped the class and the dynamics improved but I wonder how much learning actually took place that semester. I suppose most of the

The Prospect Review - October 2006

learning was mine. The next time I have a student like Yolanda, I will recognize her. I'll see her need for someone who cares about her, and I'll know that she's a student who requires immediate structure. I know enough not to blame her for the destruction of our classroom, she's just the challenge of the moment. The change in environment has to come from me - I am the adult in the room, the one who has control, and (sometimes it feels this way) maybe the only one who cares at all.

After Matt's winter break set-back (the details of which he never completely divulged) Matt began coming after school about once per week. One-on-one time helped him focus. He was able to ask questions and then get right to work. Class time can be less productive, especially since these kinds of classes have a similar composition of distractible students. We worked on his research paper, step by step, starting with his interest, fire-fighting.

Once he had note cards on his research, I showed him how to organize them in a visual manner, spreading them out on larger, blank sheets of paper. This is a technique which came from a reading specialist in our school. We drew boxes around them indicating what belonged in each paragraph. I handed him the tape dispenser to fix the order.

"See how it all fits together?" He nodded. That would fill one afternoon. As the weeks continued,

Matt made progress and he finally turned in his paper. He'd learned about his career of choice, the salary ranges as well as the risks and rewards. He was even more determined to pursue his goal, and much like the arrangement of note cards on the desk, he had a plan.

"I'm going to join the coast guard after high school. I think that discipline will be good for me and I can learn how to be a firefighter too. I want to go places, do some traveling, but I think I want to settle down too, someday."

After the fall semester and my classes switched I'd still think about how Matt was doing. I checked in with his new English teacher, gave her some tips for helping him. Sometimes I'd still see Matt in the halls, stopping in to visit that new teacher for after-school help. He always says hello to me, smiling broadly, his eyes clear. I don't have to ask. I know he's going to be ok.

*All names have been changed. When I asked Matt if I could write a story about my teaching, and include him in it he was thrilled. I gave him an early draft to make sure he thought it sounded like him and was accurate. He had no edits and "thought it was great." We should always have such enthusiastic readers!