Undergraduate Action Research Paper No. 12

Teaching Students Organizational Strategies to Eliminate Missing Assignments

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While it is fairly common for teachers to implement a student planner to assist students in organizing homework assignments, it is much less common for teachers to implement a tool to help students organize and account for their daily in-class assignments. In this study, students were given assignment logs to help manage their class assignments. The assignment logs were designed to raise student awareness of assignments and increase student accountability for assignment completion. In addition, the assignment logs were created with intentions of providing students a place in which to organize and store incomplete work, as well as to prompt them to formulate a plan for assignment completion.

The school in which the study took place is a public elementary school located in a southeastern state. The school is a Title I school, in which 54% of the students receive free and reduced lunch. The study took place in a fifth grade classroom with 27 students. This class consisted of 14 boys and 13 girls. One student was a mix of Pacific Islander and Caucasian, 12 were African American students, and 14 were Caucasian students. The classroom was an inclusion classroom. Of the 27 students, five received special education services through an Individualized Education Plan (IEP). Three of these students were assigned an IEP due to a learning disability. One student received an IEP for Autism, and the other student for a behavioral disorder. In addition, there
were seven students who had tested as gifted. The classroom was arranged so that students sat in groups. Classroom instruction varied with whole group, small group, partners, and individual work. At this particular school, the fifth grade was departmentalized for social studies and science. My cooperating teacher taught social studies. Therefore, the students in my classroom received all subjects in this classroom, aside from science. They switched classes two or three times each week to receive science instruction. The students also left the classroom to receive physical education, art, computer science, and guidance.

**Problem**

As I observed and interacted with my students, I recognized a growing issue of students not completing their classwork or homework on time or at all. Oftentimes, students were asked to put a classwork assignment away to finish at a later time. I noticed that this was when most students’ work was lost or forgotten. Typically, my cooperating teacher or I began grading assignments a day or two after the due date. As we began grading, we found that between five and ten students had not turned in the assignment. When asked about the assignment, students could not locate it, nor could they recall if they completed it. This resulted in students needing to redo the assignment completely or receive a failing grade. Students were struggling to turn in their homework assignments. Some students claimed to have lost it between the time that they left school and the time they returned the next day. Other students claimed they simply forgot about the assignment, while others turned in the wrong assignment. There seemed to be a disconnect between students receiving the assignment instructions and students actually turning in the assignment. In order for the classroom to be more efficient and instruction more effective, this problem needed to be resolved. The question focusing my action research was therefore, based on the identified problem, “How will teaching organizational strategies impact my ability to help students who are struggling with assignment completion and submission?”

**Review of Literature**

Students in the 21st century struggle with the ability to organize, maintain, and complete the numerous tasks assigned to them. Gureasko-Moore, DuPaul, and White (2006) categorize the ability to do so as a preparatory skill that determines academic success. Cahill (2008) and Hardin (2012) suggest the problem lies in self-monitoring. Students lack the responsibility to self-regulate their actions and schoolwork in order to hold themselves accountable.

As students advance through their schooling, teachers become increase expectations for students’ ability to naturally be “self-managing learners;” thus, it is imperative that relevant self-regulation skills are instilled in students as early as elementary school (“School-Wide Strategies,” 2008). Gureasko-Moore, DuPaul, and White (2006) note these skills are often not taught in schools. Consequently, schools are not reaping the many benefits of implementing self-regulation skills. Gureasko-Moore, DuPaul, and White emphasize that by teaching self-regulation skills, students are taught responsibility. When students are taught to take responsibility for their work and actions, they are given ownership of their education. Increasing student ownership lessens the demands on teachers, and allows them to focus their efforts on the concepts to be taught.
There are numerous aspects to implementing self-regulation skills, including outlining clear expectations, setting measurable goals, providing practice, and providing feedback (Hardin, 2012; Cahill, 2008; Gureasko-Moore, DuPaul, & White, 2006; “School-Wide Strategies,” 2008). Hardin explains that in order for students to achieve in the eyes of the teacher, they must first understand what the teacher expects. She believes this understanding of expectations is best accomplished through detailed explanations as well as teacher modeling. Allowing students to witness what is expected of them helps students better understand the purpose. It is important to note that many of students will be experiencing self-regulation instruction for the first time. In order for them to feel motivated to participate, they must fully understand what it entails (Cahill).

As Cahill (2008) explains, once students grasp what is expected of them, they are able to formulate goals for themselves. After expectations are defined one should work with students to help them identify problem areas in which to focus their goals (Gureasko-Moore, DuPaul, & White, 2006). Cahill teaches that self-regulation skills allow goals to be achieved; thus, goal setting is an extremely important step in the teaching process. Teachers should explain to students that through examining themselves they will be able to monitor the effort they are exerting to meet their goals. Such explanation will help motivate students to hold themselves accountable.

Once the rationale, instruction, and motivation for self-regulation skills have been established it is important to put the self-regulation skills into practice. Hardin (2012) emphasizes the importance of establishing routines so students are able to get into the habit of utilizing these skills. To fully establish a routine of self-regulation, teachers should implement the following three strategies: self-observation, self-evaluation, and self-reaction (Cahill, 2008; Gureasko-Moore, et.al., 2006). Cahill describes self-observation as the step in which students measure the progress they have made towards their goals and then record their findings. Following self-observation, students should self-evaluate. Self-evaluation includes an evaluation of what actions were satisfactory, what actions were unsatisfactory, and how improvements could be made (Gureasko-Moore, et al.). Finally, students should initiate the self-reaction step. Cahill explains the self-reaction step “allows students to problem solve and brainstorm potential strategies to meet their goals or further enhance goal achievement” (p. 6). Essentially, the self-reaction step is the final phase, allowing students to review their analysis of their actions and create a plan for the future. While students are practicing their self-regulation skills, the teacher monitor and assesses students’ enactment of these skills in order to provide sufficient feedback to the students (Gureasko-Moore, et. al ).

The final aspect to the implementation of self-regulation skills is teacher feedback. While students are working towards taking ownership of their actions and self-evaluation, it is important that teachers continue to provide guidance and feedback on how students are performing and insight on how to proceed (Cahill, 2008). The U.S. Department of Education suggests holding weekly meetings with each student (as cited in “School-Wide Strategies,” 2008). Similarly, Gureasko-Moore, DuPaul, and White (2006) believe meetings should take place with students, but on a daily basis. Both sources emphasize the need to meet with students as they are learning how to self-monitor in order to praise their progress and assist in areas of weakness (“School-Wide Strategies”; Gureasko-Moore, et. al.).
By teaching the strategies of self-observation, self-evaluation, and self-reaction, students will develop self-regulation skills. Self-regulation skills should improve students’ abilities to organize and maintain their schoolwork as well as maintain appropriate classroom behavior.

**Plan of Action**

Based on the research, I chose to implement an assignment log to teach students self-regulation and organizational skills. Through the assignment log, students would be able to practice self-observation, self-evaluation, and self-reaction to improve their accountability and responsibility. The students were instructed to record their daily assignments and observe their progress in completing these assignments. After the time frame ended for each assignment, students were to evaluate their work by recording whether they completed and submitted their work or recording that it was incomplete. Students then were instructed to form a plan of action on how they will react to their evaluation. If students had not completed their assignment, they were instructed to create and record a plan to complete it. Students stored their incomplete assignments inside their assignment log folder to prevent themselves from misplacing it. My goal was to facilitate students development toward becoming more successful in completing and submitting assignments through being taught accountability and responsibility through the assignment log.

To begin this study, I observed students’ normal routines and collected data on how many assignments were incomplete or not submitted. The data were collected to serve as a comparison for the results of the assignment log implementation. After two days of observation and data collection, I introduced and implemented the assignment log. Just as the research literature suggests, I began by explaining the rationale for the assignment log. I explained how to correctly use it and provided students with clear expectations. Then, the students and I created goals for the assignment log. I emphasized a focus on having more completed assignments rather than a perfectly completed assignment log. I explained that the assignment log would provide them a way in which they could work towards having fewer missing assignments.

To stimulate students’ desire to maintain their assignment logs, I provided students with a motivational factor. This class utilized a reward system called, “class kudos.” Students collected points towards their “class kudos” to earn a class party. I chose to implement this reward system with the assignment log. For each day the entire class maintained their assignment logs, they would receive one point. Additionally, students would receive three bonus points at the end of each week if the entire class had 100% of their assignments completed and submitted for that week.

I made plans to check students’ assignment logs each day and provide feedback. Though much of my research suggested individual daily meetings with students, this would not be feasible for a class of 27 students. Instead, I created a time at the end of each day in which I would walk around the room to check students’ assignment logs. At this time, if I saw any unsatisfactory logs, I would take note and meet with these students at a different time.

After six days of requiring the log to be utilized, I withdrew the requirements and allowed students to choose whether they would use it to keep track of their schoolwork. I also removed the daily checks of assignment logs accompanied by the daily reward for the class maintaining
their assignment logs. However, I explained that our goal of 100% assignment completion and submission remained. The reward of three bonus points towards the “class kudos” for meeting our goal at the end of each week also remained. I explained to students that it was up to them to decide how the class would be most successful at reaching this goal, whether that would be using their assignment logs or not.

The following timeline was planned.

Days 1-2: Observe students’ daily routines and collect data on assignment completion and submission
Days 3-8: Implement mandatory assignment logs
Days 9-10: Remove requirement for assignment logs

Data Collection and Interpretation

On days one and two, students were observed and data were collected before implementing the assignment log. On day one, seven students were recorded as missing an assignment. On the previous day, students had written a plot summary in reading. Many students did not finish their work before lunch. They were instructed to use the 15 minutes of free time following lunch to complete it. When the assignment was graded the next day, which was day one of this action research, seven students had not turned in the assignment. When asked, students were unaware that they did not turn it in and could not locate the assignment.

On day two, nine students were missing a math assignment. Two days prior, students had been given a math worksheet. Students who did not finish the worksheet were instructed to do it for morning work the next day. After two days passed, these students were unable to locate the worksheet and had to re-do it entirely.

On days three through eight, students were introduced to the assignment log. It was a requirement that all students in the class complete it. With the assignment log as their guide, there were zero missing assignments on days three through five, as well as day eight. On day six, five students were missing a writing assignment. On day seven, two were still missing the same assignment.

On days nine and ten, the assignment log became optional. The goal remained of having the entire class turning in all assignments. Of 27 students, 24 chose to continue using their assignment logs. On days nine and ten, only two students were missing assignments each day. Both students were students not participating in the use of the assignment log.
As evidenced by the data in Figure 1, the assignment log was associated with a reduction in the number of assignments not submitted. It did not completely eliminate the issue of missing schoolwork, but appeared to be helpful. In days one and two, when students did not use an assignment log, an average of 70.4% of assignments were submitted on time. In days three through eight, when students were required to use an assignment log, an average of 95.7% of assignments were submitted on time. It is important to note that in four of the six days during which the assignment log was mandatory, the class turned in 100% of their assignments. In days nine and ten, when the assignment log was optional, the students who elected to use assignment logs turned in 100% of their assignments.

**Conclusion**

After analyzing the results of my action research study, I conclude teaching an organizational strategy such as the use of an assignment log enables me to help students who are struggling with assignment completion and submission. Many students’ folders and desks are cluttered therefore making it difficult to locate missing schoolwork. The assignment log provides students with a place to store unfinished work, as well as to keep track of what they have accomplished and what still needs attention.
Though the assignment log did not eliminate incomplete or not submitted assignments, it heightened student awareness. Before the implementation of the assignment log, students were taken aback when they were told they were missing an assignment. With the assignment log, students who had not completed their work would approach me and tell me they were still working on their assignment. If I asked for an assignment, they had no trouble locating it and easily explained their plan for completion. Thus, the assignment log proved to teach students self-management skills and instilled responsibility and accountability.

In addition to data indicating that the assignment log was successful, observation of student behaviors and interactions also indicated its success. On days nine and ten, students were no longer required to use their assignment logs. I witnessed students encouraging other students to keep up with their logs and holding one another accountable to follow through with their plans to complete their work. The process helped build a stronger classroom community, as well as taught students organizational skills.

While there were a few students who continued to not turn in assignments after the implementation of the assignment log, it was more an issue of motivation than organization. These students were aware that they were not completing their work. It appears that whether they make use of an assignment log or not, they choose to not complete the majority of their work. They were noted to be spending much of their time off-task and avoiding their classwork. The suggested lack of motivation is another problem to be addressed in future action research.

In order to more thoroughly judge the success of the assignment log, I suggest implementing it for a longer period of time, as well as at the start of the school year. If students begin the school year using the assignment log, it could become natural part of the daily routine. Much of the time during which I implemented the log, I had to remind students to check off their assignments and create plans for completion.

I would also suggest creating a log that has room for all five days of the week. Without room for a full week of assignments, a new assignment log sheet had to be added in the middle of the week. Space for a full week of assignments is not only ideal for time management reasons, but also for organizational reasons. When a new sheet was added on top of a sheet from earlier in the week, students often forgot about their plans they created on the sheet behind the new one.

