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EDUC 350: Ethnography in Learning Environments

One Step Forward, Two Steps Back: Examining Student-teacher Relationships Within the

Context of Middle Settlement Academy

Introduction

My first experience at Middle Settlement Academy was to meet with an administrator,

Mrs. Jamison, to determine my placement within the school. I arrived at the front door, pressed

the buzzer, and made myself visible to the women in the front office through the glass doors.

After looking me up and down, the main office secretary, Sarah, buzzed me in. By the time I

stepped foot into the office, Sarah already had Mrs. Jamison on the phone and was informing her

that Michelle Romano was here for our appointment. Sarah then points to the door, telling me to

go straight ahead down the hall to the first door on the right where I would find Mrs. Jamison. I

do so, and find her door closed. I knock hesitantly, and a petite woman with a stern face opens the

door and welcomes me inside as a student exits. Before we discuss my placement, Mrs. Jamison

asks me a question: "You do know what the population of this school is like, yes?". I respond

with an "I do", but Mrs. J proceeds to inform me on the student population regardless of my

response. She tells me that the students who come to Middle Settlement Academy have a variety

of reasons for being sent, but some of these reasons include pregnancy, probation, involvement

with crime, gang involvement, poor grades, weapon possession, etc. With this as my preface for

the population, I began wondering what I had gotten myself into and was anxious for beginning

my observations the following Monday.

Only adding to my uncertainty and anxiousness was my own privileged educational

background. I had never been to public school before, let alone an alternative school for at-risk

youth. Growing up with a father involved in private education, I have only ever attended prestigious private schools. Thus, my experiences with "criminals", "gang members", and even disruptive students was limited. I was soon to learn a lot.

With this initial interaction with Mrs. Jamison as well as my own personal biases, my expectations of the first day were quite low. Much to my surprise, these expectations did not align with reality. I was struck from the very beginning by the level of care both Mr. Lloyd and Mrs. Singer put into each interaction with the students. In fact, the clear investment these teachers displayed in each student reminded me of my own experiences in my "prestigious" school. The students, of course, were different from the population I was most accustomed to, but not to the extent that I had been primed for. Certainly, at times, they were loud, disruptive, disrespectful, and angry, but mostly they seemed manageable.

Despite the similarities in warmth and care, my initial focus was on the stark differences between these two classroom environments. Ms. Singer, a tall and thin woman in her mid-thirties with dark hair and bright blue eyes, ran a very tight ship. In both her seventh and eighth grade math courses, she had explicit objectives for each period, and a strategic means of reaching them. Each class period was filled with a variety of review, practice problems on the whiteboard, vocabulary, note-taking, quizzes, and worksheets. The classroom was decorated with posters about geometric equations, mathematical vocabulary, and a "stepping stone map" which marked each textbook unit and the class' progress. In terms of discipline, she rarely used punishments, but rather took the time to explain why their actions detracted from the classroom. Her interactions with the students were always warm and encouraging, and hugs and high-fives were not uncommon. Mr. Lloyd, on the other hand, was an older man with a more relaxed demeanor and a long history at the school. Unlike Mrs. Singer's math classes, Mr. Lloyd's Government and Economics course for seniors did not have to take a Regents exam in order to pass. Because of

this, the only requirement was that the students complete the review questions at the end of each chapter for both the Government and Economics textbooks. Once these chapters were completed, the student would receive credit. Each class period was spent working individually on these chapter reviews, with much "chill time". Discipline was rare. The classroom was adorned with posters of Bob Marley, photographs of his family, posters about embracing diversity, an autographed New York Giants jersey, a miniature basketball net, and a hand-written sign that read "DON'T MAKE IT WORSE, YO".

Though it took some time to see past the surface, I ultimately recognized that these two classes have more in common than any level of superficial assessment could ever address. It first began noticing that these two teachers were special during my walks from the middle school to the high school. These three minutes were never pleasant, and there was a palpable difference between the atmosphere in these classrooms and in the hallway. Hall-monitors and teachers were always standing outside of their doors, arms crossed, shouting at the students to "move it" or "get going". On one instance, a student was put directly into in-school suspension for looking at me and saying "ooh, an Asian girl!" After subsequently hearing horror stories from fellow researchers at Middle Settlement Academy placed in different classrooms, my suspicions that Mr. Lloyd and Mrs. S were exceptions were confirmed. I soon began to focus on the less-obvious similarities between Mr. Lloyd and Mrs. Singer. More specifically, I will address the effect of student-teacher interactions on student success. Additionally, I will take a closer look at the hindering and limiting effects that the greater system present. From here, potential solutions and conclusions can be posited.

Defining an Effective Alternative

In a world where the high-school dropout rate continues to dissapoint, alternative education programs have become increasingly more prominent (National Center for Educational

Statistics, 2011). These schools have been faced with the challenge of helping these unmotivated, violent, disruptive, and delinquent youth to become successful and functioning members of society. Despite the increasing prevalence of alternative programs, relatively few studies have been conducted to evaluate their effectiveness. Those that have been conducted are most often quantitative and quite removed from the schools themselves. Before evaluating the success of an alternative school, it is first necessary to examine the constructs that will indicate this "success".

Most often, alternative schools are assessed by the state in numeric terms such as attendance rates, suspensions, write-ups, arrests, and academic achievement. Though the goals of alternative schooling do include reduced violence and disruptiveness, higher attendance rates, and more academic success, these quantitative assessments exclude one factor that I believe should be at the very top of their list: changing students' attitudes. This leads us to the prevalent and pervasive question: what exactly defines student "success" within the alternative school? Furthermore, how can we reach these goals for success? Without a clear vision for the former question, the later cannot and will not ever be achieved.

It does not take an extensive amount of research on the topic to learn that there is a great deal of inconsistency across the country about what the main goal of alternative schooling is. However, many stakeholders in alternative education have agreed that factors such as reducing violence, increasing attendance, and improving academic achievement will not sustain individuals in the long run without a change in attitude towards school and the future (Raywid, 1998). Many alternative schools across the country have found great success using this strong vision and commitment to altering student's attitudes. For example, an alternative school in San Marcos, Texas, states its goal in the very name of their school: Positive and Responsible Individuals Desiring Education (PRIDE). With a strong focus on changing attitudes towards learning, PRIDE has created an atmosphere where students feel a part of a "family of learners"

(Barnes, 1991). Success at the PRIDE school is measured based on both qualitative and quantitative measures of students' change in attitude, behavior, and academic improvement.

On many occasions, I was able to witness this attitudinal change first-hand. This change can only be instituted in a way that is constant and immediate to the students. That is, though it is vital for the school system on the whole to have an explicit goal, this goal is not achieved through institutions, but ultimately through teachers. While both Mr. Lloyd and Mrs. Singer recognized their duty to change these students, most others did not, which greatly hindered their ultimate success. Schools that have set explicit goals and implemented common practices between teachers have found that the key to success is in improving student-teacher relationships. Gottfredson (1997) contrasted an alt school program that emphasized the personal involvement of staff with students to another program emphasizing external control and discipline. Their findings showed that while the latter program improved academic persistence, it had a negative effect on student attitudes toward school and delinquent behavior. The relationship-building program was associated with an increased commitment to school, attachment to school, belief in the rules, and fewer arrest records. What both Mr. Lloyd and Mrs. Singer recognize, and research has supported, is that an alternative school calls for an alternative approach to the three R's: "relationship, relationship, relationship" (Lamperes, 2006).

This relationship begins with dedication to the students, and portraying oneself as a "kind, caring, competent, and approachable" (Gottfredson, 1997). Additionally, Mr. Lloyd suggests that "meeting the students where they are" is of the utmost importance. In order to better understand and relate to the students, Mr. Lloyd would eat lunch with his students in the cafeteria rather than eating in his classroom. He would speak to them using their slang, play reggae music during class, and sometimes "shoot hoops" with the students with balls of paper and the miniature basketball net in the classroom. While many of Mr. Lloyd's practices strayed from the ordinary,

his plans were strategic, as he mentioned during an interview: "Students think adults don't understand and adults can not understand why students won't listen to them. I listen closely to what they're saying, try to bring myself to their level, talk about the things they're talking about, show them I do understand and I do care, and then *they* will listen to *me*. It's a process, but it hardly ever fails me".

The Pervasive Effects of Prejudice

Though Mr. Lloyd may illustrate an extreme example, counseling students and shooting hoops, studies have suggested that an initial attitude adjustment needs to occur on the part of the educators prior to entering into alternative education (Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968). That is, due to the social stigmas of the population in these schools, those involved with the students may be interacting with them in negative ways without being conscious of it. Certainly, these teachers don't purposefully treat these students poorly, but their personal biases affect the way they interact with the students in a way that is evident to the students. Scholars call this principle the Pygmalion effect, which suggests that expectations affect not only one's own behaviors, but the behaviors of others as well. More specifically, research suggests that teachers holding particular expectations can bring about the expected behavior and performance in students (Bellamy, 1975). The theoretical explanation for this phenomenon holds that teachers who form an initial expectation about a student transmit this expectation through their verbal and non-verbal cues, which are then internalized by the student. With this effect in mind, alternative schools only contribute to the problem when they accept the idea that their clientele is a particular kind of student: at-risk students, pregnant girls, criminals, expelled students, or underachieving and unmotivated students. Additionally, this effect will only be exacerbated if each time a new face enters the school, Mrs. Jamison primes their experience with these negative expectations.

As I mentioned earlier, I felt an immediate difference between being in the classrooms

with Mr. Lloyd and Mrs. Singer and being in the hallways. It is important to note, however, that I am not alone in feeling this. In fact, one of the first things a student said to me in Mrs. Singer's class was: "This place sucks, they treat us like criminals. Except for her. She's aiight". This comment was made only two weeks into the school year. Within such a short period of time, Mrs. Singer was able to convey her level of care through her demeanor and language used in their daily interactions. Mrs. Singer would often push a struggling student to continue with a problem on the board encouraging them by saying "keep going, I believe in you" or "you've got this", and she would address the class as her "friends". Mrs. Singer also set high expectations for the students and made these expectations clear. Though students were most often found complaining about these expectations or the frequency of quizzes, studies by the Educational Trust show that one of the characteristics of "high impact schools" (those with higher performance from minority and low-income students) is that they have higher expectations for all students, regardless of prior academic performance (Educational Trust, 2005). Though the process of changing prejudices and altering expectations may be slow, change won't happen at all if alternative schools continue to accept this imposed identity.

Disorganization Leading to Disorientation

My conversations with both Mr. Lloyd and Mrs. Singer have made it clear that the general consensus is that the district doesn't have a clear plan of what they are trying to accomplish at Middle Settlement Academy. No one knows if the focus is on academics, changing student attitudes, or simply warehousing the students. A lot of this disorganization comes from the larger school districts; the Middle Settlement Academy is seen as a place to dump kids for whom the only other option is expulsion. They serve as a relief valve for districts that don't know what to do with disruptive and troubled students, or students who have trouble learning in a traditional environment. The ultimate goal at Middle Settlement is to receive no suspensions over

the course of a marking period, and then the student is sent back to their previous school district. In an interview featured in the Utica Observer Dispatch, the principal of the school, Mary Lourdes Tangorra, was quotes saying, "The vast majority of students are here because of a discipline issue. Our goal really is to come here, turn some things around and have them go back to their home district" (Bader, 2011) However, Mr. Lloyd has expressed his frustrations with the half-hearted efforts at reform and limited organized assistance in "turning things around".

One student that I tutored throughout my time in Mrs. Singer's class was one of the lucky ones to be sent back to their original districts. When Antonio informed me about this news, he was smiling from ear to ear. I was proud of him, and asked if anything in particular motivated him to work so hard to be good. Antonio responded quickly and without hesitation: "A'int nothin' motivated me. I was just tryin' to get the hell outta here", and I don't blame him. The school offers no organized effort at changing student's attitudes. Certainly, teacher dedication is one issue to be addressed, but Mr. Lloyd also mentioned that "discussions about anger management, prosocial behavior, and strategies to prevent violence are few and far between". He explains that these talks are two-hour workshops held within the first month of school, but because students come and go throughout the year, the majority of students miss these workshops.

This brings us to another challenge the teachers faced at Middle Settlement Academy: the continual enrollment of new students. It seemed almost every time I observed in Mr. Lloyd and Mrs. Singer's classrooms, twice weekly, there was a new face. In fact, Mr. Lloyd once showed me the attendance sheet, and counted the number of names on the list. He counted twenty-five names on the attendance list, but only eleven students in the classroom, and mentioned: "thank god, half of them don't show up for class, right? Otherwise we wouldn't even have enough space for everyone." Beyond space issues, there are larger issues. That is, these students are thrown into the classroom with no orientation, no opportunity to build a sense of community, and, of course,

they have missed the school's only organized effort to adjust behaviors and attitudes. The teachers, at this point, have already established classroom rules, climate, and expectations. It is difficult enough to catch these students up on the class material they have missed, not to mention orienting and welcoming a new student so far into a marking period.

The effect of a new student extends not only to the teacher and the student himself, but also to the class on the whole. That is, each time a new student would join the class, I would notice the group-dynamic change. This phenomenon is supported by Tuckman's theories of group development, which propose four stages of group formation: forming, storming, norming, and performing. During the beginning stage, group members begin "forming" their identity as a group. The group leader, or teacher, must be direct in expressing the goals. This stage is considered one of the most important because the group members get to know one another so they can face the challenges ahead together. In terms of the classroom, during this phase Mr. Lloyd and Mrs. Singer were both successful in portraying themselves as a dependable, dedicated, and "aiight" teacher, while the students became friends. The "storming" stage is one in which students challenge one another. They challenge each other's ideas and power. In this stage, Tuckman suggests that without patience and understanding, the team will ultimately fail, as it will become destructive and lead to lowered motivation. If conflicts are high, a group may potentially stay in the "storming" phase for an extended period of time. The next stage, "norming" is when the team has agreed upon a unified goal, and is willing to put aside their differences to work towards it. Finally, "performing" occurs when the group is able to operate smoothly and without conflict. They are self-motivated and carryout their goals. It is important to note, however, that each time a new member joins the class, their progress reverts back to the very start of the "forming" stage. This leaves the group in an almost constant state of "storming", trying to understand and challenge the group dynamic (Tuckman and Jensen, 1977). As the classes grow

larger, and this scenario ensues (with no more supplies, teachers, or space), many teachers end up abandoning their personal goals and care for easier strategies.

Though I eventually grew used to the constant addition and removal of students, I was shocked when, halfway through the marking period, the school took *Mrs. Singer* from the classroom. This was the ultimate illustration disorganization. The school's reasoning was that the GED program had grown so large throughout the marking period that they needed Mrs. Singer to transfer over to the high school. This meant that the seventh and eighth grade students were left for no teacher for what they were originally told would be another week. The students were hurt and confused, and ultimately ended up believing that Mrs. Singer had chosen to abandon them, due to a lack of trying to explain the situation to the students. The students were handed worksheets on material that they had never learned before, and told to complete them by the end of the class period using only the help of one teacher's assistant and myself. Needless to say, no one completed the worksheet. By the end of the week, the class was still left without a teacher. With a great deal of resistance, Mrs. Singer fought her way back into the classroom to teach these students once again. She told the school that she was unwilling to let these students sit here with no guidance due to the school's inability to fill the position. By the time she had returned to the classroom, however, the students had already began to distrust her again, and their anger was clear. For their last week together, the students were more disruptive, outwardly rude, and less motivated to do work. The school had managed to deconstruct one of the only aspects of their experience that was positive.

Challenges of Punishment

With a strong emphasis on positive student-teacher interactions and teaching the students to take responsibility for their own actions, both Mr. Lloyd and Mrs. Singer did not often use punishments. From my observations and sense of the hallway and having heard from other

researchers, many other teachers were quick to react and dole out punishments. The options for punishment for disruptive behavior were few, but mostly ineffective. Students could be placed in in-school suspension, which was a small room with no windows where they would sit monitored by teaching assistants for a full class period. After-school detention was not an option due to lack of busing. Students could be sent home for the remainder of the day, but this was likely seen more as a reward for the students than a punishment. In an interview with Mrs. Singer, she mentioned "these students need a place where they can share their feelings with another person. Most often, these emotions erupt as discipline problems, and then teachers send them out or tell them to be quiet." Perhaps rather than being seen as discipline problems, these acts would be best seen as teachable moments. This is largely how I witnessed Mrs. Singer dealing with misbehaviors. On several accounts, when students would be disruptive in class, gossiping about others or shouting in one another's faces, Mrs. Singer would first calm them and then be sure to tell them why what they were doing was wrong or hurtful. For example, she would mention: "how would you feel if someone were talking about you that way", or "would you like Jenna to be shouting in your face?" Treating these situations with such care not only has the potential to teach these students a lesson better than in-school suspension, but it also shows the students that Mrs. Singer is a calm, patient, and compassionate teacher.

Though there are certainly times when in-school suspension would be a valuable means of discipline, new practices need to be put into order. In-school suspension, it seems, is used so much at Middle Settlement that it seems to have lost any disciplinary value that it may have once held. For example a student I worked with closely, Judith, often mentioned one of her teachers who "has it in for [her]", saying that she "swears he has ISS slip written up before [she] even walk[s] in the room. I swear I give up." Mrs. Singer finds this practice problematic as well. I once

asked her why she never sends students to in-school suspension. She responded without a pause, saying:

> "Well, if you send everybody to the office, how are you going to teach someone? And if you keep sending them different places, when are they going to learn that they are responsible for being somewhere, or that they're responsible for their work, or that they're responsible for themselves!" She paused and thought for a second, and then continued: "And what kind of role models are we if we keep dismissing *our* responsibility to them?"

Similarly, Mr. Lloyd points to the "lack of intermediate discipline" as the source of the great inconsistency: "we can either yell at them or send them to ISS. There's nothing in the middle". What this might suggest is that, in the end, it is not the teachers who are to blame. If there is no or limited guidance or means and strategies given to address these students, then how can we expect every teacher to be exceptional. It is comforting to know that teachers such as Mr. Lloyd and Mrs. Singer do exist within such a disorganized system due to their true compassion and dedication, but these exceptions do not change the rule.

I once ran into one of the assistant principals in the hallway. They are always so glad to see that I am interested in being there, and potentially working at a place like Middle Settlement Academy one day. Perhaps it was in an attempt to persuade me to persist with the school, but he proceeded to give me a motivational speech about those involved in the school: "People often say that we become immune to it all. They think we stop being affected by these things, that we stop caring. But those are the bad ones. The good ones never stop caring, and we never stop trying." While I was glad to hear this, I couldn't help but wish that the students were getting this same level of persuasion to love the place. Though certainly it is a start to accumulate dedicated teachers, their power is limited. Of course, frustrations are abundant, but Mrs. Singer expressed

that she feels her "complaints fell upon deaf ears", so she stopped complaining and "tr[ies] to make do the best we can".

Though there is limited research on the field of alternative education, there *is,* enough research to know what has proven to be effective. More importantly, there should be enough common sense and dedication within the school to understand what is outwardly ineffective. Certainly, disparities about philosophy and practices *between* alternative schools are to be expected, but what is disconcerting is the inconsistency I witnessed *within* Middle Settlement Academy. The disorganization, lack of attitude-changing advances, challenges of punishment, and negative prejudices held by staff are often so pervasive that they overshadow any progress that is made in positive student-teacher interactions. In order to implement effective change, a uniform vision must be identified, as must some means of reaching this goal. A smoothly running machine is compromised of various working parts, but they must all fit together to get the job done.

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