

Back to the Future: Field Experience at North Royalton High School

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Introduction

I was assigned to observe at North Royalton High School (NRHS), the high school from which I graduated in 2006. By visiting my past, I was now peering into my future career as an educator. It was a little strange being in my old high school and looking at it from a completely different perspective. I did not recognize anybody except for a younger brother of a good high school friend of mine. However, the students I studied at NRHS were diverse and unique in a number of ways. I was actually given the opportunity to analyze a lot of different types of science classes, from special education classes to Advanced Placement courses. I was even given the opportunity to teach a class on my last day of observation, a feat I never would have expected to conquer my first semester in an education program. The insight I gained from being exposed to this sort of diversity within a school is invaluable and I am grateful for the North Royalton administration to have allowed me to learn from them.

District and Building Profile Comparison

North Royalton High School is part of the North Royalton School District, a suburban district of Cleveland, Ohio. The high school is located on Ridge Road in North Royalton, just south of the intersection of Route 82 (Royalton Road) and Ridge Road. The racial/ethnic diversity of the high school closely reflects that of the school district. The school district's ethnic diversity is 1.5% African-American, 3% Asian/Pacific Islander, 1% Hispanic, 2.1% Multi-racial, and 92.3% Caucasian (ODE Report Card, 2010). Similarly, the high school's ethnic diversity is 1.5% African-American, 2.5% Asian/Pacific Islander, 1.2% Hispanic, 2% Multi-racial, and 92.8% Caucasian (ODE Report Card, 2010). Students with disabilities account for 10.3% of the district and 9.3% of the high school. The school district is comprised of mostly middle-working class, therefore 16% of students from the district and 13.4% of students from the high school are considered economically disadvantaged (ODE Report Card, 2010).

Academic Yearly Progress (AYP) is a qualitative measure set by the United States Department of Education. The ratings in this system are, in descending order, Excellent, Effective, Continuous Improvement, Academic Watch, and Academic Emergency. Both the district of North Royalton and the high school have been assigned a rating of Excellent. In fact, NRHS has seen an Ohio Department of Education (ODE) rating of Excellent for ten consecutive years (NRHS profile, 2010). Both the high school and district have fulfilled all performance indicators set by the ODE, 26 for the district and 12 for the high school (ODE Report Card, 2010). Performance indicators are standards set by the ODE to more easily identify a district and school's progress in different areas over time. The Performance Index is a numerical value from 0 to 120 assigned to quantify these progressive measures. The district was given a performance index of 105.3 and the high school 105.6 (ODE Report Card, 2010). North Royalton School District has met their academic yearly progress, but the high school has not. This is because the previous year, the high school had scored an impressive performance index of 110.2; the near 5-point decline from the previous year has put the school's Academic Yearly Progress (AYP) to "At Risk" (ODE School Report Card, 2010).

Classroom Profile

All of the classes I sat in averaged to 22 students per class, all Caucasian with the consistent exception of one to two minorities in each class. The small representation of minorities in these classes varied from African American, Hispanic, Asian/Pacific Islander, or even just a student with English as his/her non-native language. However, the students with English as their second language were all quite fluent and did not seem to experience any problems of communication with the other students or the faculty. The city of North Royalton does have a high percentage of Easter European (Serbian, Ukrainian, etc.) immigrants, so I suspect these students come from the families of this concentrated population.

Since I am getting my Masters with Licensure in Earth Science and Chemistry Education, I tried to focus on classes within that subject content. I was given the opportunity to observe many classes, in total five different classes under the instruction of five different teachers. I jumped around the school between periods to different teachers/classes; all the teachers I met were so hospitable and energetic about teaching that they were more than happy to have me learn from them. The classes I observed were Physics, AP Chemistry, Dynamic Earth, Earth and Physical Science (EPS), and Conceptual Chemistry. The former three all consisted of upper classmen, or 11th and 12th grade students, ages 16-18. The latter two were comprised of 9th and 10th grade students, ages 14-16. However, I did spend most of my time with one teacher and his three sections of Dynamic Earth, an introductory geology course.

Topics of Observation

I really tried to focus on nonverbal queues from the students that indicated their feelings or beliefs about the topics being discussed. I noticed some patterns in the way the students reacted to certain types of information that were consistent with what we had learned in class along with what I had learned as a result of my own research. Apart from that, I tried not to look for anything in particular because I did not want a biased set of data. I took seemingly random notes and pieced together what I thought they meant at the end of the day.

Observations and Analysis of Topics

Motivation

Motivation is an inner state that energizes, directs, and sustains behavior (Ormrod, 2009). There are a number of different theories that try to pinpoint the origin of motivational drive, but what I think is relevant to my experience was the methods I saw teachers use to stimulate students' motivation. The most common method was by creating fun assignments or presenting the information with exciting stories. My host teacher liked to tell stories that had to do with the

lesson to keep the students interested in his class. For example, when the class was learning about the ocean floor, he talked about the ocean floor dwellers and the strangeness of those creatures. He mentioned “tongue isopods,” a pretty disgusting parasite present on the ocean floor, of which the details I will graciously spare you. This had many of the students going home and researching what other types of weird creatures lived on the ocean floor. The next day, a few students came in with information that they had found on their own initiative about other ocean floor dwellers.

I actually find this observation interesting for two reasons. The first reason is because I appreciated that he had reached a number of students to investigate the ocean floor on their own. The second thing I found interesting about this example was that I noticed that many of the girls in the class were turned off by the description of tongue isopods. They made grimacing faces and tried to busy themselves as if to focus on something else. As a female myself, I found the story repulsive. I wrote a research paper for another class about girls trailing behind in the sciences. The moral of that story was that teachers tend to favor boys in the sciences without even realizing it. This was a perfect example of how a teacher would unintentionally favor boys in a science classroom. Telling a story about marine parasites would not appeal to girls en masse. Although not deliberately, I think this would quietly drive girls away from science.

I noticed that all of the classes I observed had seating arrangement at tables that sat more than one student. Sometimes it was two people per table, everyone facing the board. Other times it was arranged four people to a table, as if designed to be more collaborative and hands-on. I think both of these methods were helpful in social and moral support in self-regulation. Both sets of arrangements had another student present to keep one on task. It encouraged group collaborative efforts and group goal setting.

My host teacher did a quarterly project with the students in which they were given the flexibility to choose their own topic within some boundaries and create a project. The assessment of these projects is what I found most interesting. The teacher was uninterested in how the project looked, although that was usually a good indication of how much time the student spent on the project, but he was more concerned about what the students had learned from it, demonstrating the intent of a learning goal. He would sit each student down and just have a casual conversation in which he allowed him/her to informally present his/her project to the teacher. He asked the students questions about how they performed the project and what they had learned. Then, he asked each student what grade s/he thought s/he deserved. Every time the students were entirely honest (“I don’t know, maybe a C, I guess I didn’t spend a whole lot of time on this,” or “I worked really hard, see? I looked up how to make other kinds of crystals! I think I should get an A”). Listening to these quarterly project evaluations gave great insight on student attributions. Whenever the students did not take responsibility, the teacher would use attribution re-training and brought the students back into valid self-evaluation. Here is an example of a dialogue that I caught during one of these project evaluations (March 18, 2011):

Teacher: So what happened here?

Student: I don’t know. My crystals wouldn’t set.

Teacher: Why not?

Student: Because it didn’t work. The solution was bad.

Teacher: You know you should have started this weeks ago. Crystals need a long time to set. When did you start?

Student: I don’t know, like Wednesday.

Teacher: So is it the crystals’ fault they only had two days to set?

Student: No.

Teacher: So if you were me, what grade would you give you?

Student: Probably a D.

Teacher: That sounds about right. I know you have it in you. You're a great student. I want to see you do your best. And we both know this isn't your best.

Student: Yeah...

At the beginning of that conversation, the student was blaming a failed project on bad luck, ("the crystals didn't set") suggesting external and unstable conditions. The teacher redirects the blame to make the student realize that his attribution sounded ridiculous, that inanimate objects do not choose to sabotage experiments. By using attribution re-training, he allowed the student to internalize the situation and take responsibility for the failed experiment. In addition, he encouraged self-evaluation, let the student know that he has not given up on him, and assured the student that he knows he has the ability to do great work.

Instructional Strategies

One thing I noticed in particular is that the classes that were designed for higher achieving students were more flexible than the classes designed for lower achieving students. The AP Chemistry class that I observed was entirely a lab, where the teacher gave probably a ten minute lecture on what the students would need to know to complete the lab, then let them do whatever they needed to do to get the assignment done. The Conceptual Chemistry class was designed for lower achieving students that have no intention of going to college and simply need to fulfill the science requirement to graduate. This class was much more structured and had assignments that related more to everyday life. When the AP Chemistry class was titrating acids and bases with phenolphthalein indicators, the Conceptual Chemistry class was designing a grocery store to understand classification. Most of the teachers I observed preferred to lecture

with a visual aid (Power Point, chalkboard diagrams, foam models) and would often end the lesson or unit with a hands-on activity.

In one of the classes I studied, the teacher would lecture about a topic with notes on the board, but would often take one to two breaks in the middle of class to either chat with a student about something completely off-topic or he would set up an experiment; in any case he would allow the rest of the class to chatter for a few minutes. At first I thought this was a lack of focus on the instructor's part, but he told me later that he does it on purpose because he understands that the students have short attention spans. The time he allows the students to talk in the middle of class is deliberate mental regrouping. He recommended somehow breaking up the class into segments; otherwise no matter how exciting you are, someone will be sleeping (personal communication, April 4, 2011).

At the end of each unit/quarter is an assigned project, described above. The students seem to like the projects, because they actually asked for an assigned project when the instructor gave them the option to choose whether or not to do a project. However, I do suspect they requested a project because some students needed the opportunity to raise their grades. Nevertheless, the fact that the students understand that self-disciplined hard work is necessary for life success is proof that these teachers have already successfully conveyed valuable life lessons to these students.

Reflection and Conclusion

My final day of observation, my host teacher had encouraged me to teach the lesson planned for that day. He had three sections of the same class and he wanted me to teach all three sections. I had prepared a lecture ahead of time, along with a few class activities. I used every tool I had learned from this class and my other classes up to this point to teach this lesson. I wrote some notes on the board, I told some stories, I had the class color a map, and I encouraged

divergent problem solving. The experience was invigorating and I got better with every section that I taught. My host teacher said he never would have guessed that was my first time in front of a classroom. I made a pretty drastic career change over a short amount of time and it crossed my mind a few times that I had made a rash decision, but after that experience, I am confident that I am in the right place. I am so grateful to have had this opportunity my first semester in an education program because the knowledge I have gained, the experiences I have had, and the people I have met have been immeasurably inspiring in my educational journey.

References

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