

Spring Semester at Spring Ridge

This spring semester I took two different education / psychology courses that each required twelve volunteer hours at a local middle school. I visited the school twice a week and attended 2 different classrooms for the duration of the semester. Not only did these sessions help me observe how educational theories were applied in the classroom, they also showed me a school and culture that was in stark contrast to the ones I had attended.

I consider myself well-cultured and well-traveled. As a kindergartner I went to an Italian school because I lived in Italy at the time. In fourth grade, I was enrolled in a gifted/talented program for all classes at my elementary school (in the U.S.). In fifth and sixth grade, I lived in Belgium and attended a neighborhood school where none of my peers had ever seen an American before. But despite these multiple schools and cultures, the teaching styles in all of them were markedly similar. One of the teachers I worked with utilized the traditional classroom model and her teaching style made sense to me. The other teacher was very informal in her classroom and permitted behaviors that I would have been punished severely for, had I enacted them in my elementary schools. This is not to say she permitted any behavior, she made it clear when a student had crossed a line without shouting at them (most of the time). But what made her style so alien to me was that she did not expect or illicit any respect for her position as teacher. She behaved as if she was “one of the kids” and her students responded well to that kind of genuine attention. She frequently went on tangents during the lesson discussing current pop-culture or local culture with the students. My first impression was that she would not be able to control her classroom without at least a modicum of authority. But she ended up impressing me with her mastery of her own teaching style. She would frequently ask students to answer parts of questions that the class as a whole was completing on the Smartboard. When other students

were talking while one student was explaining the answer, she would scold them for being rude to their classmate for talking while their classmate was explaining an answer. This I thought was ingenious. I taught the students to respect each other instead of simply demanding respect for authority.

In matters of perspective, the students were more of an eye-opener than the teachers. In my schooling experiences, there had always been individuals who struggled with the material or failed more tests than they passed. But I had never seen so many students who struggled with basic concepts as much as some of the students I worked with here. I do not mean to sound contemptuous, but I had previously thought it safe to assume that by the sixth-grade level, *every* student would have the ability to add and subtract. I had not occurred to me that a child could simply not come to school for years on end. I had been under the impression that parents would want their children to obtain some type of schooling, if not in public schools, at least at home. But, I kid you not; one of the teachers I was working with informed me that one of the children I had assisted that day was having such great trouble with his schoolwork because he simply hadn't been in school to learn the material. The fault here certainly wasn't with the school. The teacher told me they had been trying to meet with the boy's parents since September to no avail. Sometimes the child came to school, most of the time he didn't. The teacher did what she could when he did attend. If I had an unexcused absence in my (public) high school, I would have truancy officers out looking for me, courtesy of the county.

Naturally, these experiences made me question the educational theories we'd learned in class, national education policies, and motivations for teaching, but they also made me question our society as a whole, and people in general. How can we have a national education policy that keeps standards achievable for schools like Spring Ridge, but also mean something to middle schools like the ones I attended? When I was in middle school, my peers and I all passed the national standardized tests with ease regardless of our class standing. To us, the ever-lowering standards were a laughing matter. But a

good amount of students in Spring Ridge, and I'm sure around the country too, genuinely and earnestly struggle to achieve the same standards. A top-down national standards policy now strikes me as a one-size-fits-none plan. For some schools it is genuinely unachievable, for others, it is largely irrelevant. And what do we, as a society have to show for all this policy making? Numbers and statistics that tell us what we already know. That "this school" is good and "that school" isn't. Furthermore, it places more restrictions and specific demands on teachers, forcing them to teach certain material by certain days all the year round.

Teachers aren't really free to instruct their classes in the way they see fit anymore. This semester at Spring Ridge Middle School I watched both of the teachers I was assigned to struggle to cram all the material they could into their lessons so they could make the deadline for the MSA standardized tests. The problem I have with this is that the teachers, through no fault of their own, are now more responsible to the state than they are to their students. And what happens if the students fail their role in this and do not meet standards? The school as a whole is punished and given less funding. I'm not trying to come off as an Orwellian alarmist and blather on about state control, but I feel that this kind of standardized testing and national policy isn't making anyone's education much better in the end.

When working with the students, I encountered a new difficulty. I found it hard to commit my time or energy to the true progress of the individual students. I wanted to, but by the same token, I believe I know better than to commit emotional energy into a person who I will only interact with for but an hour, and then in all likelihood never see again. And again I felt even more difficulty knowing I was working with children that the teachers themselves were having trouble keeping up to par with the material. Perhaps I would be more invested in the students if I would be spending more time with them. As it is, I feel that if I were to invest myself in their success, I would be disappointed at my inability to really do much about it except for this one semester.

The sentiments in the last paragraph without a doubt turn me off from potentially becoming a teacher later in life. That being said, I teach martial arts on a weekly basis. I am the founder, president, and Longsword Captain of the Historical Swordsmanship Club. Every week I teach a new set of movements and techniques to the class, and review what we learned last time. I thoroughly enjoy leading these classes and teaching my art to others. The reason I enjoy teaching here may be for the same reasons I disliked observing and tutoring at the middle school. Here, I can get emotionally invested in the students, who are my peers and friends, and watch the results of my work during practice. I feel like there are results for my work here, whereas in Spring Ridge, my work was appreciated, but ultimately did not contribute anything lasting or meaningful to the school or students. It may be pessimistic to assume that I didn't have an influence on the students I worked with, but I always got the impression that they knew as well as I that I was only there for a short time to help them on a case-by-case basis. I got the feeling that they had no desire to devote emotional energy to a one hour relationship.

Though my experience in the middle school this semester did give me a better perspective for the educational system, I do not feel that it taught me any life lessons or impacted me all that strongly. This is not to say that the experience was a waste, but having spoken to some of my peers who have expressed their desire to teach... I think they got more out of this than I did. My observational experience allowed me to see how real teachers ran a real classroom. But I find it hard to directly apply the lessons I learned from this experience to my teaching experiences in swordplay. I did learn that I don't want to teach in a regular classroom. And, in my opinion, learning what you don't like is just as important as learning what you do like. My girlfriend is a music education major at James Madison University, and she plans wholeheartedly to apply her major and become a teacher. Maybe my experience in the schools is best used advising her, because though I have no interest in teaching, she does, and I want *someone* to get something out of this experience. Either way, though my experience at

Spring Ridge was not life-changing, it *was* relevant. And I think I'll be putting my experience to good use either way.