

Relational Pedagogy Project Part III

Working More Effectively with Students: My Preferences, My Biases?

For three weeks, I observed and taught in Mrs. Johnson's¹ ninth-grade world history class. The second week of class, I noticed there were students who I had gotten to know and connected with easily, and other students who were more difficult to connect with. Martin, who always said hello as he walked into the classroom, was an excellent student who was always ready and willing to participate in class activities. Oscar, who sometimes struggled with his class work, was quiet and thoughtful, rarely speaking up in class. I decided to get to know more about these two students to see why it was so easy to work with Martin, but more challenging to connect with Oscar.

Martin, a 15-year-old white male student, was one of the first students in Mrs. Johnson's world history class who I got to know. It was clear from the start that he was an academically engaged student. He did well in his studies, and always had his hand up first in class to volunteer during a discussion (See Field Notes in Appendix). He described himself as "funny, outgoing, smart..." and hopes to be a successful real estate agent someday (see Student Questionnaire in Appendix.) Both his parents are real estate agents, and he hopes to carry on his middle-class family's business.

Socially, Martin was very outgoing and talkative. He had many friends in the class he would work with or talk to, and an even larger group of friends he would socialize with in the hallway. According to Steinberg (2005, p.193), popular adolescents are more likely to be social with peers and receive more

¹ Names of students and teachers have been changed to protect their identities.

social recognition. While he was not involved in any extracurricular activities such as sports, he was very interested in and connected to his school. He often wore his school sweatshirt to show school spirit.

According to Wigfield and Wagner (2005, p.224), adolescents who are socially accepted and have good social skills have more positive academic achievement and motivation. Martin demonstrated a strong sense of motivation for learning about world history in Mrs. Johnson's class. He had very specific academic interests outlined in his student questionnaire; his favorite subject was ancient civilizations. He also described himself as having a good attitude, and being ready to learn (see Student Questionnaire in Appendix.) He would constantly speak during classroom activities, volunteer, and participate. When students such as Martin are intrinsically motivated, they tend to be more engaged in academic activities and have higher achievement (Wigfield and Wagner 2005, p.225).

As a result of Martin's outgoing personality and eagerness to participate, he received a high amount of positive attention from Mrs. Johnson and me relative to some of the other students (Cushman 2003, p.28-29; see "Am I Playing Favorites?" Quiz in Appendix). As a result, Martin received more chances to increase relatedness, or connection with his teachers. Because he was so outgoing, it was easy for us to get to know him and to be comfortable encouraging his participation in activities. This gave Martin an advantage, an opportunity to express his sense of competence through interacting with us and being highly engaged in the learning activities. According to La Guardia and

Ryan (2002, p.202), schools that are optimally challenging and provide meaningful feedback and guidance, as Martin received through his interactions, can lead to opportunities for the student to flourish.

The second week of class, I decided I wanted know more about Oscar, a 14-year-old Latino male student who I did had more difficulty connecting with. Oscar is fluent in both English and Spanish, and according to his questionnaire, is “shy, entertaining, funny...” and aspires to be an aviation mechanic (See Questionnaire in Appendix). Oscar was very friendly and polite, but also very quiet and kept to himself. Academically, he struggled and worked hard, and was described by the teacher as “almost passing the class.” During class, he worked quietly and did not socialize with any of the other students. Students who are less popular are sometimes exceptionally shy, timid, and socially inhibited (Steinberg 2005, p.193). Oscar had a small group of friends he sat with in the cafeteria, none of which were in the class. Like Martin, Oscar was not involved in any extracurricular activities; however, Oscar went to work every day after class for his family’s house painting business.

For Oscar, there were additional dimensions to his identity that may have contributed to his isolation from other students in the class. Oscar was the son of immigrants and a Latino student in a school in which the majority of students were white. Olsen (1997, p.82) wrote that immigrant students often receive the message from “American” students, “stay out of our way, if you're going to be different stay separate in your corner.” Also, Oscar contributes to his household income by working after school for the family business painting houses, allowing

him less time for social activities and extracurricular activities that the middle-class students can afford.

Oscar enjoys studying history, particularly the history of wars (See Questionnaire in Appendix). However, since he was very quiet, did not volunteer his participation, and sat in the back of the classroom, he got less positive attention and encouragement from Mrs. Johnson and me than many of the other students. Sometimes he received negative attention, getting in trouble for listening to music on his headphones while the teacher was talking.

According to Cushman (2003, p. 44), teachers should think of students who cause problems as being partners in achieving learning goals, building up trust with a commitment to fairness and respect. Helping to develop Oscar's interest in history and finding ways to engage him in the activities may have helped his relationship with the teacher.

However, because the class was structured in such a way that students had to be willing to raise their hands and volunteer to participate, it was difficult for Oscar to develop relatedness and connection with his teachers. According to Wigfield and Wagner (2005, p.227), changes in social relations and school practices when students reach secondary school are often developmentally inappropriate, and contribute to negative changes in motivation and achievement. Since Oscar had fewer chances to participate, he had fewer chances to express competence by engaging with the learning activities, which can often lead to a decrease in intrinsic motivation (La Guardia and Ryan 2002, p.202). He also was not given much autonomy, since the classroom activities

were closely controlled by the teacher and there were few instances in which he could express his abilities and choose his own problem-solving strategies (Stefanou et al. 2004, p.101). Oscar said that he prefers “hands-on” activities (See Questionnaire and Interview Notes in Appendix), so the “lecture/discussion” format of the class was not particularly motivating to him, even though he expressed an interest in learning about history.

To get to know the students, my plan was to distribute questionnaires on the second day of class, and then get to know more about the students and make connections through interactions. Both Martin and Oscar participated in the questionnaire, providing valuable information about who they are as students and as people. However, getting to know Oscar through classroom interactions was much more difficult than getting to know Martin. When I greeted Oscar at the door, he very quietly mumbled “hello” and hurried towards the back of the room, whereas Martin was ready to have a conversation. Martin was also more willing to ask questions and to initiate interactions.

Since it was difficult to get to know Oscar through classroom interaction, I sat with both students one-on-one, separately, for approximately five minutes for a short interview to see what else I could learn about them. I asked some of the questions from Cushman's “Identifying the Assets of Your Worst Behaving Students” quiz (Cushman 2003, p. 46-47); although the students were only rarely or occasionally disruptive, I felt that information about interests, strengths, and daily life was important to know to know about any student (See Interview Notes in Appendix). In a one-on-one setting, Oscar was eager to share his ideas about

school and life outside school, more so than through everyday classroom interaction. According to Cushman (2003, p. 46), "Looking carefully at other sides of a student's life can often give the teacher insight into disruptive behavior in the classroom..." In this case, seeing the other dimensions of Oscar's life, such as his after-school job and his need for more explanations and hands-on activities, gave me more insight into why he was struggling with his class work and how a teacher could help him improve his performance in school.

It was easy to get to know Martin because of his outgoing personality and his eagerness to participate during class. Out of 150 students I worked with every day, it was the students who were outgoing, engaged in the activities, and raising their hand to volunteer information, contribute to a discussion, or ask questions who stood out from the crowd, including Martin. It was easy for Mrs. Johnson and I to be more attentive towards students like Martin, or as some might say, "play favorites," choosing those students who made themselves known in the crowd. I observed that outgoing students are immediately receptive when teachers interact with them, and welcome any sort of attention from the teacher. Cushman (2003, p.26) describes teachers who push the "good" students a lot more than the others, or who give more of themselves to students who succeed.

Unfortunately, the attention the outgoing students receive comes at the expense of quieter students like Oscar. It requires additional effort on the part of the teacher to reach students who are shy, quiet, socially less popular, or have less confidence in their academic abilities. According to Steinberg (2005, p.194),

students who are unpopular or withdrawn are "excessively anxious and uncertain around other children, often hovering around the group without knowing how to break into a conversation or activity." These students are less likely to initiate interactions or participation, so it is the teacher's responsibility to ensure that they are participating equally. Even students who know the material may be reluctant to participate and draw attention to themselves (Cushman 2003, p. 71). Mrs. Johnson and I had to be conscious of Oscar's presence in the classroom, even though he was very quiet; we tried to find ways to draw him into the activities, and made an effort to talk with him to see how he was doing.

With so many students in the classroom, the task of ensuring everyone's participation may seem daunting. However, all students have not only have psychological needs, such as relatedness, competence, and autonomy which are often not met in the secondary school setting (La Guardia and Ryan 2002, p. 195), but each student has something valuable to contribute and deserves opportunities to learn and grow. Teachers should push every student to do his or her best, and give each student an equal chance, building a classroom climate of caring, fairness, and trust. (Cushman 2003, p. 26).

Sources

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