

March 1st, 2007
EDTEP 562

RELATIONAL PEDAGOGY PROJECT
Part III

#3

Throughout my field experience, I immensely enjoyed getting to know the 9th grade students in _____ High's biology classes. In college, I spent three summers working as a counselor at a high school summer camp, thus the relational aspect of teaching energizes and inspires me. During my time in the field, I noticed that I had relatively little difficulty getting to know the female students. I felt like I easily made connections with them, and can't recall any significant negative experiences with female students. Analyzing the role of gender in my student interactions challenged me to think more critically about my interactions with male students. I have less experience working with male teenagers, and I am especially aware of the importance of professionalism in my interactions with students of the opposite sex.

For this assignment, I chose to focus on two students who displayed vastly different student identities. "Positive student identities characterize adolescents who have histories of positive academic performance and relationships.... Negative students identities characterize adolescents who have histories of academic failure and difficulties with peers" (Wigfield & Wagner, 2005). Both students were Caucasian males, but had very different styles of clothing and appearance. Van had short blond hair, and wore a baseball hat and jeans everyday. He was using crutches because he was in rehab for a recent surgery after a sports injury. Caleb had long black hair and wore only black

clothes and a long black trench coat every day. He walked with a limp and a cane, and I never learned why he used the cane. Both students attended class every day.

Van introduced himself to me on the first day of school saying, "Ms. [redacted], I wanted to introduce myself and apologize for not being my normal gregarious self today. I just had ankle surgery and have been taking lots of strong pain killers." Once he stopped taking the pain medication, Van proved to be a very gregarious, engaged participant in the honors biology class. He worked well with other students and interacted with his classmates often. On his survey he mentioned, "I am passionate about learning and hate people who come to school and disrespect the teacher." My cooperating teacher confirmed that [redacted] is a great student who is likeable and goes above and beyond what is required in class. Van demonstrated his passion in continually asking about the topics we were covering in class. His goal for biology class this semester was to, "learn quite a bit about physiology if possible." He was very attentive during class and even offered to come into tutorial to do supplementary work. Van's personality made it easy to get to know him. He readily offered information about his family and interests and himself, and asked me questions about Africa on a daily basis. I honestly did not feel it necessary to intentionally use any type of strategy to get to know Van; our interactions occurred naturally and frequently. There were times when Van raised his hand a bit too often, but after gentle reminders from the teacher and myself, he was able to monitor his participation more diligently.

My first introduction to Caleb involved reading his survey that said, "I don't like people. Don't try and socialize with me." From my first day in the school, Caleb was extremely abrasive towards me. His survey also said, "I rarely learn. I'm already a

genius.” He did say that he was interested in medical science, but otherwise, his survey responses were almost entirely negative. I had never had an experience where a student told me not to socialize with him, so I knew that I needed more information and some help. Fortunately, my cooperating teacher was able to offer at least *some* insight into Caleb’s attitudes and behaviors. It turns out that Caleb is a sophomore who failed biology last year, and he is retaking the course this year. It is worth noting that because uses district curriculum, the course is exactly the same as last year. Although Caleb does describe himself as a genius, my cooperating teacher disclosed that his perception of his intelligence is inflated. Throughout first semester, Caleb did absolutely no class work whatsoever, but did do well on the quizzes and tests so he received a D in biology (which is considered passing). I did not see Caleb do any class work at all while I was in the field, but he did receive A’s on his quizzes. Caleb has an IEP, but according to my cooperating teacher, it only offers him extra time on assessments and was implemented to appease his mother. The counselors have told the teachers that Caleb experienced something traumatic in the past, but they are not at liberty to disclose any details. Caleb was always alone, and my cooperating teacher said that he doesn’t have any friends. The student who sat next to him asked to change seats, claiming that Caleb gave him headaches, so Caleb sat alone in class most of the time. On the survey, I asked the students whom they would like to eat dinner with if they would eat with anyone, dead or alive. Caleb responded, “Nobody. Just me.”

My relationship with Van and my relationship with Caleb felt like polar opposites, except for their common desire to receive affirmation. The district curriculum allows little room for autonomy within the curriculum, thus neither student

was receiving a great deal of autonomy within the classroom. However, both students appeared to crave any form of positive attention. “[Students] want to know that when you work hard it will be rewarded or acknowledged” (Cushman, 2003). With Van, he was complimentary of my teaching and course material, and my intuition is that he expected me to return the compliments. With Caleb, things were a little bit more complicated. I felt like he made comments with the intention of shocking me. For example we were discussing how genetically modified foods might help combat worldwide nutrition, and he commented, “Why should we help them anyways? It would be better for all of them to die and decrease overpopulation.” Another time, in front of some of the students, he said, “I can’t think of a last name that I hate more than _____.” When his peers chided him for his meanness, I told them, “Don’t worry you guys, I’m pretty tough.” Caleb said, “You don’t look tough at all.” And I ended the conversation with, “Caleb, remember that you really don’t know very much about me.” I did not use a harsh tone in my response, but I did not want him to feel like he could boss me around. “Teachers don’t need to be scared of children. Don’t let us intimidate you. When you let your student walk all over you, they’re not learning the essentials of respect, of how to act properly” (Cushman, 2003). I honestly believe that there are legitimate reasons for Caleb’s behavior, and I trust that there are reasons why he acts the way he does. “I think the teachers have to get to know each one of the kids. That’s key. So there wouldn’t be anybody who was a loner, or feeling so unhappy that somebody didn’t know about it” (Garbarino & deLara, 2002). Thus I will persist in getting to know Caleb, but I will maintain professionalism and dignity in doing so. And despite all of Caleb’s negative comments towards me, I could tell that he sought out my affirmation when he answered a question correctly or did

well on a test. However, I was careful to not give him any more praise than I gave to his classmates.

I want to be comfortable with myself as a new teacher. “You can be friendly and still be strict. You have to let them know that you’re not one of their peers” (Cushman, 2003). This applies to my interactions with both students. Van was so friendly that I had to be wary to maintaining a professional distance and not favoring him over the others. With Caleb, I felt as though I had to assert my authority as his teaching, while making sure he knew that I was not going to let him make the decision that I wouldn’t interact with him. I hope that as I continue my work at _____ in the spring, I will be able to help students make meaningful connections between the course content and their lives and interests. For Van, I will try to connect some physiology into the content if appropriate, and for Caleb, I hope to connect medical science to the curriculum. Ideally, this will help me get to know each of them better.

Analyzing interactions with my students has challenged me to face my preferences and biases. I prefer to work with outgoing, friendly students. Moreover, I fear that physical appearances also play a part in my preferences. A 1992 study found that “physically attractive students received higher grades, higher scores on standardized tests, and more academic assistance; they were also considered to be more friendly, attentive, popular, and outgoing, as well as better-behaved” (Gay, 2000). I gravitate towards students who remind me of my friends and me when we were in high school, and I need be intentional about distributing my time, energy, and efforts more equitably. I want to connect to each and every student, and not let my superficial biases influence my treatment of students. “Many teachers profess to believe that all students can learn, but

they do not expect some of them to do so” (Gay, 2000). I want to be a teacher who really believes that *all* students can learn, not just the ones who appear to want to learn. “A most effective way to be uncaring and unconcerned is to tolerate and/or facilitate academic apathy, disengagement, and failure” (Gay, 2000). Caring for all students, in a non-superficial manner, is of the utmost importance to me.