

Exploring the World of a Struggling Student: A Case Study

Introduction:

Students attending class 8 hours a day, 5 days a week, do not always develop a relationship with their teachers, despite the amount of time spent together in the same location. This can be problematic. To get the most of their educational time, teachers and students need to connect. Teachers need to develop a trust-based relationship with their students in order to establish a connection with them and to create a safe and effective learning environment. This relationship does not just affect the student's classroom experience. A relationship established between the teacher and the student can have effects that permeate throughout each individual party's life. To create this very important relationship, teachers must establish and maintain a line of communication, understanding, and compassion with and for their students.

As part of a project assigned by Dr. Thomas Peterson in the Culture and Society in Education Course, I am completing this case study in an attempt to understand the world through the eyes of a struggling student. By using the interview format of question-and-answer and entertaining small discussions, I attempted to understand the reason behind choices, the relationships attained and maintained, and the general aspects of existence and education that shape my student's life. The question that drove my interview was, "What does the world look like through the eyes of my student?" This expansive question was answered in many forms and at many levels.

Purpose of the study:

In a society of great diversity; an ever-changing environment; and a new generation of youth progressing through the educational system, teachers must try to understand the lives of their students. A trust must be built between student and teacher before any true learning can occur. By true learning, I mean learning that encompasses more than rote-memorization and facts. Learning about one's Self and other individuals' importance and opinions occurs when the environment is "safe" and a trust between parties is established. Establishing that essential trust between teacher and student can be hard. Students that struggle in school, approach education with a "guard" up that essentially protects them from creating trust and establishing a relationship with the teacher.

By speaking with students, teachers can try to understand the circumstances that alter and influence a student's surrounding environment, life, and eventual decision making. A connection must be made between student and teacher for communication to occur and understanding to prevail. Only teacher-student communication, resulting in compassion for student and teacher alike, will allow true understanding and deep educational learning (true learning) to occur. Students will learn more from teachers if teachers first learn about their students.

With open communication, a trust-based relationship can be built and nurtured. This trust-based relationship is crucial. Many studies have been conducted on trust, or the perception of trust, between student(s) and teacher(s) within classrooms, and its effect on learning and the establishment of safe learning environments. Kim and Cho (2004), for example, attained

evidence that relationships between student(s) and teacher(s) built upon mutual trust are extremely important for the attainment and sharing of information and knowledge, and the establishment of a healthy classroom environment. To build this relationship, communication is key.

There are many reasons that students act the way that they do and make decisions that teachers and family members question or praise. We must establish a trust-based relationship with our students in order to understand them and where they are coming from. The purpose of this study is to attempt to understand the environment that my student is enveloped in; the strength, depth, and quality of relationships he has; how he sees the world around him; and how he relates to his success, or lack thereof, in his educational career.

Throughout the interview process, my secondary objectives are to identify and understand the struggles and joyous moments that my student encounters in his life and in his education, and to understand and identify the influence(s) and effect(s) that society's and the school's culture have on my student. I will question and discuss my student's past experiences, present life, and future dreams and aspirations. By understanding this information, I hope to alter my perception of this student, his life, and the lives of students like him. In addition to altering my perceptions of the student I am interviewing and students like him, I hope to understand the perception(s) that my student and his peers have of me.

Research question: "What does the world look like through the eyes of my student?"

Biographical sketch of my student:

Background:

The student I chose is a fifteen year old male. He lives in Newnan, Georgia and attends Newnan High School. He is the youngest child of a middle-class, White (Non-Hispanic) family. His siblings are both older females. The oldest sister is a doctor of pharmacy and the middle sister is a pre-service teacher. The parents of my student have modest paying jobs that allow for moderate discretionary spending and allow them to live in a 2-bedroom home on the outskirts of town. His mother is a paralegal at a local attorney's office, and his father works as a supervisor in a German company in town.

To protect the specific identity of my student, I will henceforth refer to him as CJ. CJ is in the 9th Grade, despite his age, because he was held back in the 6th Grade. His 6th Grade teachers and his parents agreed to keep him back because he failed to pass the classes; however, he passed his 6th Grade Criterion-Referenced Competency Test (CRCT) at the end of the semester, showing that he had mastery of the curriculum. His parents and teachers agreed that CJ was too immature to pass on to the next grade. His mother believes his immaturity stems from the fact that he started school early; his birthday is in July and he started school in August, as soon as he was eligible for entrance.

CJ is a young gentleman with average intelligence. Based on his test scores, he seems to have an aptitude in Science and struggles mildly with Math. CJ struggles at times academically, in part

due to his Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder. As a child, he was medicated. He went through periods of changing medication; this, in turn, interrupted his ability to focus in school and, as a result, directly affected his grades. Currently, CJ no longer takes medication. He is able to focus in school, but still has trouble remembering tasks and turning work in on time.

The Middle School Years:

Middle school was the most difficult time of CJ's life. Academically, changes in medication made focusing hard. Teachers were satisfied by the fact that they believed he could complete the assignments well, but were easily frustrated at CJ's lack of effort given to turning in his completed work. At home, CJ was dealing with many changes. His eldest sister was in an abusive relationship and their parents were trying to get her out of it. This relationship began when the eldest sister was 14; this was a 15 year relationship. The man that his sister was dating was the only person he had ever seen her with. He was like an uncle to CJ. The middle sister was starting a new job, changing living arrangements, and getting married. In the Spring of CJ's 8th Grade year, his middle sister found out that she was pregnant. CJ was so excited to be an uncle. Unfortunately, she lost the baby 7 weeks into the pregnancy. This was a tough thing for CJ to take and to understand.

The housing situation for CJ was changing as well. His parents lost their home, began renting a home, lost that house, began renting another home, and then, eventually purchased a new house. Moving living situations so often in a 3-year period affected CJ in many ways. Emotionally, CJ had to be strong for his family members; but these changes were also affecting his academic performance. He was shy at this point in his life and it was hard for him to make friends. As 8th Grade approached, he began to open up socially. By the end of 8th Grade he had multiple friends and a growing interest in music, skateboarding, and spending time with his peers.

High School Begins:

As high school began, CJ's life, and that of his family members, finally started settling down. CJ was in a stable home and attending church on a regular basis with his friends. His eldest sister severed her relationship from the abusive gentleman. Following this event, however, she declared to the family that she was a lesbian. She began a new relationship with a woman, lost her job, and moved to North Carolina for employment and to be with her new girlfriend. Despite her distance, she still comes to visit the family on a regular basis. The middle sister is almost finished with her college experience and lives close enough to visit when her schedule permits. CJ's parents are home every night and on the weekend, just as before, but CJ sees them when he is not visiting or spending time with his friends or going to church functions.

Data collection—Interviews:

CJ and I spoke several times during the semester. I learned about his education and how school was going, his future plans, the importance of church and Christ, the influence and closeness of his family, and the importance and roles that his friends play in his life. At first, he spoke with some hesitancy. It was hard for me to get answers from CJ that weren't what similar to what he

would like me to hear. As the sessions progressed, however, CJ began to open up to me and speak more freely.

In speaking with CJ, I learned that his report card had just been issued for the first half of the first semester. CJ was proud to announce to me that he earned all A's. This is the first time since Elementary school that CJ had earned all A's on a report card. I was very proud of him and let him know this fact. I asked, "Why do you think you are getting all A's now?" He said that he believed that high school grades are more important than middle school ones, and that he was working harder to earn better grades now than he did in middle school. When asked what the importance of high school grades were, CJ responded that high school grades are more important because employers look at them when deciding whether or not to hire you. I agreed. I tried not to influence him in any way during these sessions, therefore, I did not comment any further.

I asked CJ what he wanted to be/do when he got out of school, and he said that he wanted to be a Marine. I have to admit this was very disturbing for me to hear. Having family members who were in the military, I know what the families of the military members go through. I also have heard stories of what military personnel go through during war times. Let's face it; we are still in war times in this country. CJ stated that he wanted to join the Marines because they are the first ones sent in to fight. I did not respond to this out of fear of how I should respond and fear of inserting my opinion into this session that is supposed to be me understanding him and his life.

When I asked CJ about his future in education, i.e. if he was going to college, he stated that he would like to go to college like his older sisters did. I asked what he would be going for. He said he didn't know what he wanted to do for a living, but he knew that he needed to get an education more than a high school diploma. His parents made the point to him that a college education was very important. Regardless of what he wants to be for a living, I agree that a college diploma is extremely important and will further his career and life.

During his years in middle school, CJ began going to church. He goes with friends every Wednesday night to youth worship and every Sunday morning to Sunday service. His parents do not join him and neither of his sisters attends church. I suspected that CJ went to church solely because his friends attend. However, when I asked him about church, CJ said that he that he attends church because, "It is where I find peace." I was struck by this answer. I didn't know that CJ was, or had become, such a deep and spiritual individual. He said that he wished that his parents and family attended church, but it is fine with him that they don't. As I listened to CJ describe his dedication to worship he seemed very happy, however, when I asked about his family's lack of dedication, he seems bothered and began to look away from me as we spoke. I believe that, from reading his body language, this is something that does bother him, but he wouldn't like to discuss. I didn't push him further.

CJ's family life is stable. He has two loving parents that he respects. When asked to describe his family, CJ spoke lovingly about his eldest sister whom he likes to make angry. He says that she is funny when she is upset. He is ok with her being a lesbian and being in a relationship with another woman. He really seemed happy with the decision. He described his father as keeping to himself. CJ said that his father always stays in his office, but he comes out to talk with CJ sometimes. He said his mom is funny and that she is the "coolest mom ever." I believe that he

has a close relationship with his mother because she is always talking to him about his life and friends, and she allows him to come and go as he pleases. When I asked about his middle sister, CJ said that he didn't feel like he knew her all that well. He doesn't get to spend a lot of time with her, and he seemed saddened at this fact.

CJ is like most typical teenagers; his friends are the most important people in his life. CJ has a group of two really close friends, and a looser network of 4-5 close friends. The two individuals who are the closest to CJ are Cameron and David. Cameron, CJ, and David met in the 6th Grade. Since they met, each gentleman has gone to different schools, but they continue to remain close friends. Cameron is now home schooled and David attends the rival high school East Coweta. Despite their new schools, they have remained friends, see each other every weekend, skateboard with each other in the town square a lot, and they all attend services at the same church. As an interesting twist to our conversations, I asked CJ once what/whom he would take with him if he could choose any two things/people that he would have with him on a desert island. He replied that he would take Cameron and David, because they make him laugh. I too believe laughter is important. We bonded over this conversation, and I could see his point-of-view on the topic.

The culture behind the group that CJ has is one of typical teenagers, but it has a different twist than I am familiar with. CJ and his friends skateboard, do not wear name-brand clothes, and they avoid anything they deem to be "mainstream." To succeed in this group dynamic, CJ must conform to what his friends believe or try to change the beliefs of the group as a whole. I do not believe that CJ struggles with this culture, however. He is more of the setter of the beliefs, rather than the follower of the group's beliefs and ideals. CJ enjoys what I would describe as a leadership role within the group of friends. This is an interesting feature, however, because CJ was shy before he met the members of this group. The group formed around him.

Analysis and interpretation:

To the best of my ability, here is what I think the world is like for the student I chose. Based on the interviews that I had with CJ, he seems like a teenager that has many things on his mind. He has loyal friends, a stable and loving family, and a healthy outlook on education and his future. He sees his family as supporters and entertainment, and his friends are a large support system for him.

Over the course of our discussions, however, I have come to believe that CJ does not have any "I-Thou" relationships. "I-Thou" relationships, according to Buber (1923) are deep, meaningful relationships that do not have labels and "I-It" relationships are relationships that have labels and are contain superficial bonds at times. Both types of relationships have meaning, but "I-Thou" relationships are more meaningful than "I-It" relationships.

CJ's relationship with God would be the closest thing to an "I-Thou" relationship that he has, despite is awareness or lack-thereof of this fact. Most relationships have meaning for CJ, but nothing is deep enough to be considered as "I-Thou." Most of CJ's relationships are "I-It." He sees what is in the relationship for himself and continues with the relationship to benefit him only. To develop his existing relationships into "I-Thou" relationships instead of "I-It"

relationships, CJ will have to care about the person more and care less about what is in the relationship for him only.

I have learned a lot about my student and a lot about relationships from this case study and the Culture and Society in Education Course. Students' decisions in and out of the classroom depend on the relationships they have with their family, friends, teachers, and education in general. The more we develop and strengthen the teacher-student relationship, the more teachers will understand of the lives that students lead and the students will be more willing to gain knowledge and learn in the classroom. The bonds of a trusting relationship can make or break the learning experience, especially for students who struggle in life and in school. As teachers, we need to do our part to create and strengthen these relationships with our students. Communication is the first step in this process.

Creating a relationship with a student, as in this case, can be difficult at first. Building that initial trust is the hardest part, though. After a relationship and trust has been established, both teacher and student learn more about each other and the world around them. Relationships between teacher and student affect both parties, sometimes equally as much. I know that I grew closer to CJ during this case study. He and I both agree that we understand each other a little more and we talk more easily with each other now that this case study has been the focal point of our relationship. CJ and I agreed to have weekly or monthly conversations with each other after this study finishes. We both agreed that this case study has been good for the both of us. I understand him in a way that I hope to continue.

Speaking with CJ has helped me understand that there is more to a student's life than education and the classroom. With the classroom experience comes a past, present, and a future of each and every student, as well as my own. We don't just leave the things in our lives at the school house door on our way in. Our lives affect our decisions daily. To understand that about myself and CJ is to understand and apply that to all students. As a teacher, I hope that I can be an understanding person for all of my students, as I have been for CJ.

Final thoughts:

My final thoughts for this case are complicated. As this case ends, I feel that I have so many more questions. I understand more about CJ, and his life and I can apply that to my students. However, what I learned about CJ was more than I wrote in this essay. CJ isn't just any student to me; he is my brother. As a sister to CJ, I have learned so much more about the young man in this essay and in my life. He is kind, caring, smart, funny, and deeper than I ever gave him credit for. Getting to know CJ in this light made he and I have a stronger relationship. I really want to keep talking with him and understanding what makes him, him. I want to see the world through his eyes to understand his decisions and his relationships. Even more than anything else, I want a better relationship with my brother. I want an "I-Thou" relationship with him. This, is my new goal.

Reference:

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