

“The mission of the Pittsburgh Public Schools is to have all students attain a performance level that will enable them to be independent and self-sufficient and contribute responsibly to our society and ever-changing world.” [From <http://www.pps.k12.pa.us>]

Mutual Respect and its Influence on the Classroom Culture

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As I neared the front door of [the] High School, one of the Pittsburgh Public High Schools, I was overwhelmed by its sheer size. The metal detector in the entrance shocked me, but as I was informed by a passing student, “This isn’t the airport.” Nonetheless, as someone who hadn’t been in a high school in nearly ten years – and as someone who had never been to an urban school, I have to admit I was somewhat frightened.

My fear was, thankfully, short-lived as I began to investigate and understand an array of different classes: Mr. Y taught a spectrum science class, an honors physics class, and an AP Physics class, along with a math standards course. Mr. N taught a number of classes, although I only had a chance to visit with two of them, both physics classes. Each class was different; to attempt to compare them directly would be a disservice to them all. However, I can (and shall) speak to the cultures in terms of the mutual respect that the teacher and students shared and the evidence from my observations and interactions with the students.

One observation that struck me was the racial and gender compositions of the classes. In most of the classes, there was a fairly even racial and gender distribution; however, the honors physics class was predominantly female (and entirely white), the AP class was predominantly male (and entirely white), and the math standards class was predominantly black (though gender balanced). These cultural imbalances in the classroom are the result of tracking: separating students into heterogeneous groupings based, supposedly, on ability. However, socio-economic class seems to be the driving force in this tracking, and I’m not convinced that it is a good idea. However, the relationship that each class had with its teacher did not seem to be explicitly dependent

on its racial composition or gender. Rather, each class negotiated for the respect it commanded and offered.

Each of the classrooms had a different set of implied rules. These rules were negotiated and continually tested in different ways. Sometimes this manifested itself as a tug-of-war, as in certain dialogues within Mr. N's classroom between teacher and student (or even between two students). In one situation, a student was speaking on a cell phone (for example); Mr. N would tell her to hang up. She would respond with "I'm talking to my mom about picking me up later." Mr. N would sigh and say, "Just a minute, then." In another, the only way in which Mr. N was able to settle a classroom was to threaten detention and that he would "speak to their coaches." In fact, on at least one occasion, detention was actually given. That action resulted in a few sulking students and no more than a few minutes of relative calm.

The effect that this had on the learning environment was transparent. Mr. N spoke, with a wealth of knowledge, while sitting on the edge of his table with the book beside him. He would talk at the students, telling them to "write this down" in their notebooks (which they were allowed to use on their exams – it was his way of rewarding those who paid attention and did their work). Because of the commotion in the classroom, it was hard to discern when a student was making a physics-related comment and when they were merely speaking out of turn. Physics-related comments were sometimes encouraged, sometimes ignored, and sometimes acknowledged with a quip.

I observed one of Mr. N's labs, which was largely descriptive in nature. Only a small portion of the class performed required duties while the majority of the class ruined the toys, goofed around, or talked. When we returned from the lab, Mr. N told

me, “It’s useless to try to do anything after a lab” and proceeded to give the students a free period.

At one point, I decided to discuss with a student a physics question that Mr. N asked the class (which required only to plug numbers into a formula that was written on the board). We engaged in a dialogue that ran roughly thus:

Me: “What is this number [that Mr. N told you to write down] – this 3×10^8 ?”

Her: [after thinking for a moment] “I don’t know.”

Me: “Yes, you do. [Mr. N] has mentioned it in class many times.”

Her: [blank look] “I don’t know. Tell me.”

Me: “I want *you* to tell *me*.”

After our discussion, she directed all further inquiries to Mr. N. This is because Mr. N responds to those questions by giving her a straight answer that she can write down, or by pointing at the equation without letting her think. The unwritten classroom rule says that all answers come from the teacher; the way to get those answers and pass the exams is by listening to him and writing down what he says. There is no other way. This is, perhaps, a way to have a tenuous hold over the class.

In Mr. Y’s classes, the respect between the students and teachers was negotiated in a much different manner. Rather than a tug-of-war, the respect was something that was built by both sides. The boundaries were not immediately visible, but they were largely non-negotiable. While the boundaries were tested by the students frequently (such as by wearing headphones, having a cell phone out, or making commotion), a sharp word or, more often, a calm command to “put that away” from Mr. Y would be sufficient to reinforce those boundaries. The result of this was that everyone understood what was permitted and what wasn’t; because this was well-defined, the students didn’t spend time negotiating, but instead took advantage of the

benefits of the contract. Namely, students were allowed to engage in good-natured ribbing with the teacher, they were allowed to speak, sit, and move around informally and openly, and (most importantly) they were free to question and construct their own knowledge.

While my timing was poor in that I never got to see one of Mr. Y's presentations, I was impressed as to how little he relied on them. He likes to introduce his material in some sort of lecture-type format; then he creates an activity or has a discussion to help explain it. The discussions, while steered by Mr. Y, often addressed student difficulties. Students often bought into them and engaged in them to the point of reprimanding their peers who preferred to socialize. The activities were certainly not ideal; the equipment was often poor and crude, and the students in each class dragged their feet as much as possible before actually engaging in the work. However, once engaged, the students found themselves asking questions and actually learning.

Notably, I observed the spectrum science class as they drew thermometers to learn about converting Fahrenheit to Celsius. When the class attempted to undertake the task (after a moment of groaning), they naturally migrated into groups (although it was not even suggested) and began drawing, each in different ways. I spoke with a girl in one of the groups about her attempt, and with my help she succeeded. None of the students was able to draw an accurate pair of thermometers on his own, but neither was this really expected of anyone. Mr. Y was constantly speaking to the students individually, showing them where their model failed and indicating how they might improve it. After I helped a few students by asking them questions (and respecting their ability to answer them), they responded with respect, "Thanks for helping."

It is worth noting that the class that Mr. Y taught that felt most precarious was the AP class. The students, who were brilliant, were much more difficult to engage for long periods of time. They much preferred to play cards and Starcraft in whatever free time they were given (which was usually substantial). However, they understood that this free time only came after the “one thing” that Mr. Y wanted to do with them that day, which ranged anywhere from solving a sheet of problems individually, to solving a complicated problem as a class, to paying attention for a short “lecture” (which was always a dialogue with the students, not a monologue). Thus, the relationship between the class and students was also one of mutual respect: the teacher acknowledged their senioritis and they acknowledged his desire to teach them.

While I am unable to compare different classes, I wish to reiterate the importance of mutual respect in a classroom culture. In those instances where that respect was present, the boundaries were well-drawn (although invisible), and the class allowed for learning to take place. Where that respect was lacking, the boundaries were negotiable (although visible), and the class focused on expanding those boundaries rather than learning.

“You’re not stupid,” Mr. Y said to his math standards class, “you’re *lazy*. If you pay attention and *work* a little bit, you’ll get out of here. If K isn’t finished with his work, don’t mess with him. Just let him get his work done so we can get rid of him. Come on; let’s do what we need to do for you to graduate.” He may as well have stated his implicit classroom rules: respect yourself, your peers, and me, and we’ll all leave this class better people, maybe even having achieved the school’s mission.