

Thinking About Learners

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Students are the reason why teachers exist, it may be cliché, but it's true, and as a future educator I will be responsible for guiding students through their educational journey. As a prospective teacher, I believe it is important to have discussions with students of past and present in order to gain perspective on what it means to be an effective educator. In this report, I will summarize the major points that emerged as a result of three interviews I conducted, and further analyze their perspectives utilizing Bill Ayer's novel *about Becoming A Teacher*.

My first interview was with N, he is a secondary one student aged 13, currently attending a private French school in Montreal. His transition to secondary school was smooth because he didn't change schools, but he noticed a shift in difficulty, and his grades have lowered significantly. He said the teachers put a lot of stress on him as there is a large emphasis placed on preparing for Grade 9. He is very artistic, and his favorite class is visual arts. He says he often distracts himself during the day by sketching, as it helps him focus. He mentions that he likes most of his teachers and that they care, except one that overreacts and often lectures them if a single student acts up. He says he dislikes the transition to Zoom, his schedule is still five days a week since COVID started. He prefers going to school physically, he emphasizes that his friends make him enjoy going to school.

My next interview was with M, a University student aged 23, currently studying towards a Bachelor of Software Engineering. He attended a public English high-school in the West Island of Montreal, and his opinion is that the majority of his teachers did not care about his success and focused more on talking at the students rather than engaging with the topics. He said that teachers emphasized finding answers as opposed to understanding how to get them. He said that

he spent a lot of his high school days staying up extremely late playing video games and would be often caught sleeping in class. He noted that he rarely ever did homework, and passed with very little effort, overall felt unchallenged but still got into his first pick of CEGEP program. He felt as if students who were in the IB program got way more enthusiastic teachers and students in immersion got left behind.

My final interview was with S, he is 59 years old and went to a public Catholic-English school on the island of Montreal in the 1970s, post-separation of church and state, and post-single-gender schools. He said the school still had leftover clergymen and women within the teaching staff. He said that he had a few teachers that left an impression on him, but he really didn't care about school and he believes he got what he gave into the schooling system. He said that when he went to school the teachers could use physical punishment -- the strap was rumored but he never saw it or heard of anyone getting it. His experience in high school changed when he was put into the vocational program, as he was put in a situation where he learned numerous trades and had the opportunity to get certified as a carpenter while simultaneously obtaining his high school leaving certificate.

In the course required text by Ayers (2019), he says that teachers must see their “students as whole, three-dimensional human beings, dynamic and in motion” and that as an educator it “is a challenge you’ll face every day” (p. 47). I feel as if this quote does a good job of critiquing the lack of respect that M felt in school. Although M admitted to his shortcomings as a student, he felt as if he was neglected because he was not in the gifted program. I think that M experiences show that not all teachers see their students as three-dimensional beings and sometimes neglect to address the unique ways in which students learn. The quote connects well to my interviewee S

and his transition into the vocational program. S's success was based on a teacher seeing him as more of a technical student and putting him in a position where he could thrive. My interviewee N explained his struggle with the pressure and grades but praised the majority of his teachers. I think N's experience could be reflective of the private system, where teachers have more freedom, funding, and smaller class sizes. I feel that in the private system teachers have more opportunities, or pressure to analyze each individual student and help them succeed.

The interviews that I conducted strengthened my feelings about being a teacher. In the Ayers (2019) novel, he says "think of your student (or of any learner, really) as an unruly spark of meaning-making energy on a voyage of discovery and surprise" (p. 59). As a teacher, I do not want to be a "passive" (Ayers, 2019, p. 38) individual reinforcing the status quo, but rather guiding the voyage of discovery for all types of learners. Students are diverse in the ways in which they interact with course material, and I think it is central to address that consistently. Students must feel as if they can be successful, regardless of the subject.

As my interviews projected, some students feel as if their teachers barely went through the motions. As a future educator, I don't want to desperately be a "cool teacher" (Ayers, 2019, p. 53), but I want to be a fair and well-rounded teacher and recognize that not all students learn the same way. I believe educators must both evaluate and elevate students based on their strengths rather than penalize them for their shortcomings.

References

Ayers, W., 2019. About Becoming A Teacher. Teachers College Press.