

School Study: Abbott Middle School

For my practicum this semester, I have been placed in a seventh grade social studies classroom in Abbott Middle School. Abbott is located off of Orchard Lake Road in West Bloomfield, Michigan. West Bloomfield is a large suburb located on the fringe of Detroit. The population at the time of the 2000 census was 64,860. The population breaks down to approximately 84% Caucasian, 8% Asian, 5% African American, and about 2% Hispanic. The median household income is \$91,661, which is more than double that of the national statistic. The number of violent crimes recorded by the FBI in 2003 was seventeen, and the number of homicides was zero.¹ West Bloomfield is similar to the suburb I grew up in just north of Chicago in Illinois, which makes for a relatively comfortable setting for me to complete my observations.

Abbott Middle School is comprised of sixth, seventh, and eighth grade and currently 779 students are enrolled: 268 sixth graders, 253 seventh graders, and 258 eighth graders. There are 41 teachers at Abbott Middle School, making the student to teacher ration 19. Teachers are generally paid well, averaging \$61,319 per year. 388 of the enrolled students are female and 369 of the enrolled students are male. In terms of racial diversity, Abbott's student population consists of 557 white students, 123 African American students, 48 Asian students, 24 Hispanic students, and 5 American Indian students. In terms of the socioeconomic status of the students, 79 students are eligible for a free lunch and 28 students are eligible for a reduced lunch despite the relatively high average household income of West Bloomfield.²

In terms of test scores, Asian students at Abbott have the highest combined

¹ *EPODUNK: The Power of Place*. 2000 Census, U.S. Census Bureau. <http://www.epodunk.com/cgi-bin/genInfo.php?locIndex=22198>

² *IES National Center for Educational Statistics*. CCD public school data. <http://nces.ed.gov/index.asp>

reading and math proficiency of any ethnicity at 97%. Whites have an 86.5% proficiency rating, multi-racial at 67.4%, and blacks at 63.6%. Female proficiency in reading and math is slightly above male proficiency. Economically disadvantaged students are 65% proficient, while students with disabilities have a 39% proficiency rating.³

Social studies curriculum in Abbott Middle School follows a general geographic pattern. In sixth grade social studies classes, students study the Western Hemisphere. Students cover the Eastern Hemisphere in seventh grade, and eighth grade classes focus on the United States. Students are required to take three full years of language arts, science, and mathematics in addition to social studies and then fill in the rest of their schedule with electives. They are urged to take at least one semester of foreign language (the school offers Spanish, French, and Japanese) and a technology elective.⁴ The school's fine arts program is thoroughly developed both inside and outside of classes. There are band, orchestra, choir, and theater classes offered as electives and the school puts on a memorable performance each year. It is a fine arts program that the school is proud of, evidenced by the plentiful bulletin boards and photo galleries around the building. This year the chosen play is *AIDA*. The show is so popular that it takes place in the High School nearby so that more people are able to come and see the production.

The physical environment of the Abbott building contributes to the general atmosphere of the school. The four main hallways form a large square, which makes navigation easy for students (as well as for observing teacher candidates). All of the sixth graders have their lockers in the same hallway, which eliminates some of the intimidation they might have felt having their locker next to an eighth grader. The facilities are

³ *School Matters*. McGraw Hill Companies, 2008. <http://www.schoolmatters.com/schools.aspx/q/page=sl/sid=16965/midx=StudentGroups>

⁴ *Abbott Middle School*. West Bloomfield Public Schools, 2008. <http://web.westbloomfield.k12.mi.us/abbott/documents/coursedescrip0607.pdf>

modern and well maintained. Hallways are kept clean and free of clutter, and bulletin boards are common around the school. The boards are colorful and often adorned with students' latest work. For example, the social studies class I observe currently has their African masks on display in one of the hallways. While the school's technology is not the most modern, there are computers for students and faculty to use. Additionally, several teachers have recently applied for technology grants. My cooperating teacher has recently been granted the money for a "smartboard," which will allow her to incorporate more technology into the classroom.

Abbott Middle School has a developed social and cultural environment that is fascinating to observe. The social environment differs depending on the location within the school. For example, teachers and students interact professionally and students are well behaved in general within the classroom setting. However, the few steps it takes to get to the hallway lead to a whole new environment. Students are rowdy, cliquish, and use profane language. In addition, the sentence structure changes completely. Students who use proper English when interacting in a classroom with their teachers and peers routinely revert to a sort of student-only dialect that can sometimes be difficult to understand for the outside observer. Furthermore, students tend to congregate in groups around their lockers. Their body language is telling of how they feel about their friends and also of some of their insecurities. For example, some of the girls physically latch on to each other, which I think is a visual example of their need for acceptance in their peer group.

The cultural environment at Abbott Middle School is multi-faceted. For example, the school observes Jewish holidays such as Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. In spite of this, on a recent quiz about the Middle East and its culture, many students in my

cooperating teacher's classroom did not know the significance of those holidays even though it has a significant impact on their lives. However, the school does have a religious diversity program, in which participating students spend several days throughout the semester at various places of worship, engulfing themselves in a new culture and even eating the foods associated with that religion and culture. In general, Abbott Middle School has a culturally diverse student population, various races, religions, and socioeconomic cultures present in significant amounts.

Abbott Middle School follows the general pattern of the curriculum follows state standards. Sixth graders study the Western Hemisphere, seventh graders study the Eastern Hemisphere, and eighth graders focus on the United States. This is the model for education laid out in the state standards, and Abbott social studies classes follow this precedent. In middle school, students do not have a choice in their social studies classes, and must take classes all three years. The social studies classes have historical, geographical, political, and somewhat economical focuses. This generally ensures that the students are able to meet a good amount of the state standards for social studies in middle schools.

In chapter six of Lisa Delpit's book, she discusses the "culture of power"⁵ that dictates the structure of schools. This chapter specifically relates to Abbott Middle School and West Bloomfield in that the culture in power dominates the academic sphere. This is evident in the cultural and social environment at Abbott. Students communicate more professionally with their teachers than they do with their peers. African American students in particular have a specific vernacular in which they communicate with their peers, and sometimes have trouble converting their speech when talking to teachers. I am

⁵ Delpit, Lisa. *Other People's Children*. New York: The New Press, 1995. Page 122.

able to observe this specifically when I am in the AVID classroom, spending time tutoring students of various racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic backgrounds.

The third point that Delpit makes in her argument, “the rules of the culture of power are a reflection of the rules of the culture of those who have power,”⁶ is especially potent in the Abbott environment. It is clear in the classrooms I tutor in and observe that the students who are most apt to succeed are the ones who have mastered the communication styles that involve the use of proper English. Another point Delpit makes is that those with power, in this case the teachers and staff, are frequently the least aware of its existence. Delpit urges teachers and educators to pass on the tools that students need to succeed in a society that values white, middle-class culture. It is unclear to me based on my observations whether or not the teachers in Abbott are specifically educating their students about how to succeed in today’s society and giving them the tools they will need to accomplish ambitious goals.

Abbott Middle School is more racially, religiously, and socioeconomically diverse than its surrounding community of West Bloomfield. The percentage of students who are economically disadvantaged is higher in the school. Additionally, there is much more racial diversity present in the school as compared to West Bloomfield. This has to do with the busing program which allows parents to send their students to Abbott from various other cities and towns. The school seems to be acknowledging this presence by including programs such as the religious diversity club that ventures out into the community. However, Abbott continues to reflect mainstream culture by acknowledging Jewish holidays despite the fact that many of its students do not necessarily observe those

⁶ Delpit, 122.

holidays. In addition, the curriculum, linguistic forms, and communication strategies that are valued in Abbott are all reflective of mainstream, white, middle-class culture.

Jean Anyon also discusses the reflection and perpetuation of conflicts and tensions from society within educational spheres. She argues that schools tend to reflect the broader class conflicts and social inequalities that exist in society.⁷ Specifically, she breaks down students into four main categories: working class, middle class, professional-affluent, and executive elite. Abbott Middle School is unique in that its enrolled students span the categories and do not all fall neatly into one. The majority of the students tend to fall into the middle class and professional-affluent categories. Most of the students I interact with in the AVID classroom work hard to understand facts, however there are a few students who ask deeper questions in an attempt to understand “how” and “why” instead of just “what.”

An understanding of the demographic and ethnographic characteristics of Abbott Middle School allow one to see that the broader cultural trends of the surrounding community are reflected within the educational environment. Abbott attempts to provide students with programs that allow a cultural understanding across different social classes, however it seems inevitable that societal inequalities will continue to be reflected in the public school system.

⁷ Anyon, Jean. “Social Class and School Knowledge.” *Curriculum Inquiry*, Vol. 11, No. 1. Spring 1981. page 38.