

Classroom Study, Part 1

Background Information about the Classroom

The class I will describe is a Latin One class which takes place during fourth hour—right before lunch. There are thirty two students in the class representing all four grade levels. On any given day, as is expected, there are two people missing for one reason or another. The teacher is the one who is solely responsible for the materials and preparation for the class, so the students view him as the ultimate authority over the material and the physical space. The classroom has desks in rows facing forwards towards the white board. The teacher's desk is in the center of the front of the room, and in the wall opposite the door has several windows. Around the middle and back of the room are various posters and descriptions of Roman buildings. Towards the front, the pictures are more of a literature-based theme. There is a small alcove with amusing comic strips pertinent to Latin or literature. There are also large, movable white boards which are in different places every day depending on their use. The colors are fairly muted, so the room has a calm feeling which seems to me to be pretty conducive to learning.

The class has five Asian students of whom three are Korean and two Chinese; four are English language learners. One of the Korean girls has such trouble that she often uses an electronic dictionary. One student came from Ukraine three years ago but already has excellent English skills. Another boy has some sort of accent, but it is unclear where he is from. There is an Armenian girl whose English skills are perfect, but she references her heritage and is visibly proud of it. Two students in the class are African-American, and one is of some kind of mixed race. One boy is Indian and he has a slight accent, but I am unsure as to when he started learning

English since he speaks quite perfectly. One student has a mild learning disability which involves having trouble getting words out sometimes; he receives extra time for tests.

The students all feel pretty much at ease with each other, and if there is free time of some kind, almost everyone has someone to talk to and they slide easily in and out of conversations. Usually, while an assignment is being handed back or checked at the beginning of class, it is acceptable to chat quietly, but then everyone goes silent when the lesson starts. It is expected that everyone is quiet and paying full attention, and the teacher always reminds students to raise their hands if they want to say anything. The lessons are entire-class efforts—they revolve around people participating one-by-one and helping each other out, so the sense of community is well-developed and there is a feeling of good intentions.

Culturally Responsive Pedagogy

My teacher is very passionate about teaching Latin to students and strongly believes that they are all capable of understanding and enjoying it. Part of what contributes to this feeling for him is that, since the subject has a reputation for being difficult, the students are “all volunteers” and are motivated to learn. He believes that the students have a great deal of intelligence and skills in other areas, which he often draws upon in class. He frequently relates class to running somehow to appeal to the many girls on the track team, and tries to engage one of the quieter boys with references to bass-guitar, which they both play. In this way he legitimizes the student’s real-life experiences and makes them seem like part of the official curriculum.¹ His statements are usually humorous, along the lines of “you don’t run well without practice, so you can’t do Latin without doing your homework,” but the simple mention of their interests makes the students feel like their personal culture applies to the class.

¹ Ladson-Billings, Gloria. The Dreamkeepers: Successful Teachers of African-American Children. 117.

But much as he tries to use whatever the students like to make them feel included, there are many times when he simply has to lecture and the overly-derogatory term of “banking” system must be applied. I think when one is learning a foreign language, it is hard not to follow a somewhat heirarchical system since there are so many things that students just do not know. However, when learning vocabulary or some such thing, it is easy to get the students to apply what they already know it terms of derivatives. For example, when discussing the word “onus” which means “burden,” the teacher showed students how they knew words in English like “exonorate” and “onerous” and how that related to the Latin root. He treats the students like they “already know something,” the importance of which is emphasized by Ladson-Billings.²

The way the teacher pushes all the students to participate helps foster a great classroom community. Students can pass if they are called on, and whoever answers instead does it in a helpful way. The teacher encourages questions and encourages other students to help answer them. This makes the students feel like they help each other and that the teacher is open to what troubles them. However, sometimes students who do not quite understand something are too embarrassed to ask their question in front of the whole class, as it inevitable sometimes, so the teacher will call on students when he thinks they may be having a hard time. In this way he involves all the students so they can all improve. Latin is tricky, but the teacher does his best to make all the students feel like they can understand it.

No Child Left Behind

Huron High School failed to meet AYP requirements due to some sort of achievement gap between different kinds of students, my teacher was unsure as to the details. However, as far as foreign language classes go, there was no affect on any of the teachers or curriculum due to the failure. Since the quality requirements established by the legislation, the teachers have had

² Ladson-Billings, Gloria. The Dreamkeepers: Successful Teachers of African-American Children. 117.

to prove that they are “highly qualified,” but they have not had to change positions or any such thing—I cannot speak to the other departments.

My teacher thinks that NCLB is a great idea. He says that “The senate was right to pass NCLB...they knew that the lack of standardization was causing chaos among national high school graduates.” He believes that it is very important to expect accountability from students and especially teachers. However, he believes that the legislation is being poorly carried out in terms of AYP standards not taking into account progress which does not meet specific grade-level requirements even if some amazing teacher raises a student’s reading level by four grades—it only matters if it meets the set requirements. He believes “It winds up being a mess because have legislators trying to make educational decisions that they didn’t have the experience to make.” A theme of education, according to this teacher, is good ideas badly applied.

The biggest problem he has with NCLB is that, with all the talk of accountability, nothing happens with regard to him or his classes. He says, “I could be doing the worst job in the world and no one would know it or I could be doing the best job in the world and no one would know it.” He wishes that there would be people coming into his classroom and asking he he were doing the right stuff. “If I feel like not reading the Odyssey next year [in English class] I can do it. No one is checking on me, and they oughta be checking on me.” While he views accountability as crucial, he does not believe that the way it is measured is right, in fact he thinks it is detrimental. “Attracting and retaining qualified educators”³ is important, certainly, but they need to be checked on beyond their hiring. Part of the problem, in the eyes of my teacher, is that his principal is far from being “a true instructional leader”⁴ and is focused on the wrong things.

³ Kimmelman, Paul L. *Implementing NCLB*. 21.

⁴ Kimmelman, Paul L. *Implementing NCLB*. 20.

In addition, due to the structuring of focus of the legislation on English and math, no other teachers are really helped or hindered. The teacher wishes to be checked upon or perhaps corrected; as it is he is solely responsible for his students and could be teaching them no Latin at all, and no one would know.

Social Class

It is hard to place Huron High into Anyon's classification system because I (and my teacher alluded to this as well) think this should in some way have its own category: University Town School. In terms of Anyon's system I think this would fall somewhere between Middle-Class School and Affluent Professional School. There are students from all levels of the socio-economic scale—from poorer families to the children of University professors who, even if they are not rich, live in Ann Arbor and attend lectures at UofM and associate with academia on a regular basis. In the classroom I do not notice the differences between students as much, but in the cafeteria groups or cliques are much easier to locate and do not seem unrelated to SES differences.

My teacher says that there are certainly social class differences between his students and that "some are for good, and some for bad." He says that sometimes the families with a lower SES do not consider reading as important and do not have as many books around the house as those of a higher SES. "It's not that they like [reading] less, but they are taken aback by kids around them know more words or have read more books." However, he says that the students who choose to take Latin, even if they are from a home which did not value reading and classics as much, they still chose to take the language and will work as hard (if not harder) than the students who may have been more advantaged. Students who are not as used to reading enjoy Latin, he says, because it is orderly.

Because of all these differences, my teacher does not have expectations for parental involvement beyond “giving [their children] a quiet space to work.” When parents have asked him what they can do he urges that they encourage kids to “use their dictionaries and guide their kids into doing homework.” He says it would just not be fair to expect more from parents since most of them would not be able to help much. He does not think it is their job.

Whatever the parents have exposed their kids to, however, has built up their social/cultural capital and the teacher makes great use of this in his class. For example, “when kids have been all around the world and I can relate it to my class, you bet I’m going to bring it in.” Especially for international students, he tries to make great use of their experience to get them involved and to show the greater relevancy of Latin and Rome. I have often noticed how the teacher references interests of the students, he says it is “about meeting kids on their own level—whether it be interest in track, chess, or swimming.” As I described before, he often relates the subject to the students’ interests and thereby, their culture.

Tracking

Latin classes are viewed as so hard to begin with that there are few students who take the language. Because of this, there can be no tracks. I once heard two students complaining that they could not be in a higher track, but they consoled themselves with the opinion that colleges would see their transcripts and be amazed at the presence of Latin at all. For them, the desire to be tracked was not related to “learn[ing] better when they are grouped with other students who are considered to be like them academically.”⁵ They simply want the prestige associated with being in a higher-tracked class. I did not ask my teacher about tracking issues since he does not deal with them.

Race/Ethnicity and Schooling

⁵ Oakes, Jeannie. *Keeping Track: How Schools Structure Inequality*. 6.

There have been no subtractive elements that I noticed. The Latin class definitely has a majority of white students, since they traditionally view it as more relevant. However, the number of Asian students is definitely representative of their population in the school as a whole. My teacher says, “I’m going to have an Asian constituency year after year after year. Asian parents have heard somewhere along the line that Latin is going to give their kids the fast track to learning vocabulary and getting a higher SAT verbal score so the kids come in motivated. I don’t think the black parents say this.” The number of black students is very small, but they are as successful as the majority of the class. He says, “If I could find a way to get more black kids into my class I would do it.” My teacher wishes more of them would be in his classes so he could get their perspectives mixing in; same with Hispanic students, but they usually end up taking Spanish. This speaks directly to Lareau’s findings, in the sense that these Asian parents are the ones who “see the education as a shared enterprise” and “scrutinize, monitor...the school experience for their children”⁶ whereas the black parents do not intervene as much. The parents who urge their students to study Latin have the cultural capital to know that it leads to success and are therefore able to pass that along to their children. The reputation which Latin inherently possesses generally determines what kinds of students sign up to take it.

As far as representation in the curriculum is concerned, elementary Latin is not as conducive to discussing various social/cultural issues as much as more advanced classes are. My teacher says that he would have more of an opportunity to get into the cultural issues of Rome in advanced classes. In those classes one could discuss that, though the Romans were slave-owners, it was not race-based. The streets of Rome were full of Ethiopian traders, Jews, and a plethora of cultures. He says when something lends itself to discussion, he seizes the opportunity; “You better jump up and down and talk about the importance of Boudicca or Livia.”

⁶ Lareau, Annette. *Social-class Differences in Family-School Relationships*. 81.

These issues involve all kinds of students and are important to talk about as much as the material allows, though the elementary curriculum does not address them as much. I think that short of language difficulties, none of the students have any racial or cultural issues to overcome, and if they do, the teacher makes sure to address them as much as he can.

Overall Reflection

I was very glad to learn that not all teachers are against the fundamental idea of NCLB and would be eager to have someone make sure they are doing their job right. After all, if no one checks on a teacher, he could start teaching something wrong and the students would not necessarily know. However, I realize that in subjects like Latin it would be hard to find an expert able to evaluate a teacher's performance.

My teacher's thoughts on cultural issues were very interesting, and I think that when I am a teacher I will try harder to incorporate cultural discussions into elementary Latin since they are both interesting and important. However, I agree with my teacher's general trend of relating class more to a student's interests than any other part about them. Whatever students feel is important, whether it be the instrument they play or the color of their skin, that is what the teacher should make relevant.

The interview can be found at: <http://www-personal.umich.edu/~innad/ed392.html>