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PRACTITIONER'S ESSAY

The Journey of a Teacher

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I stumbled upon the teaching profession as a senior at Barnard College, unsure what I would do with a social science degree. A New York City subway ad read, "You remember your first grade teacher's name. Who will remember yours?" It advertised the New York City Teaching Fellows program, which offered a Master's Degree to those willing to teach in one of New York City's under-served schools for two years. Although I had never taken an education course in my life, I applied and was accepted to the program. After an emergency credential program[1] over the summer of 2001, I found myself in charge of a class full of twenty-five children in Jamaica, Queens, one of the low-performing districts of New York City.[2]

I began this program full of doubts. Money from the state was invested to train the "newbies" in the teaching field instead of giving the already experienced teachers the raises that they were fighting for. Why had the United Federation of Teachers ("UFT") been working so long without a contract, yet so much time and money was invested in developing this new program? I did not know if the strategy of bringing brand-new teachers into the classroom was going to help the city's neediest children.

In my Teaching Fellows cohort, there were a number of recent college graduates like myself, but the vast majority of new teachers were adults who had changed their profession. The idea was that these people could bring a unique set of skills into the classroom as well as a new energy that perhaps the more

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1. This gave me what New York State termed a "transitional B license" qualifying Teaching Fellows to enter the classroom. The temporary license was valid as long as we completed our Master's Degree within three years of issue, passed certain certification exams such as the Liberal Arts and Sciences Test ("LAST"), and completed required fieldwork. NYC Teaching Fellows, Certification, http://www.nyctf.org/the_fellowship/certification_b.html (last visited Mar. 12, 2007).

2. In that school, 78.6% of the children were eligible for free or reduced lunch, enrollment was more than 1200 students, and the overcrowding index was up to 110%, meaning there were 10% more students in the building than it was originally designed to accommodate. InsideSchools.org, School Profile P.S. 135 Bellaire School, http://www.insideschools.org/fs/school_profile.php?id=852&page=2 (last visited Mar. 12, 2007); Bellaire Sch., Overview, http://schools.nyc.gov/OurSchools/Region3/Q135/AboutUs/Overview/default.htm (last visited Mar. 12, 2007).

experienced teachers had lost. Despite imperfect conditions, my first year of teaching was wonderful. I enjoyed my interactions with the diverse kindergarten class, a mix of mostly Hispanic and Caribbean students. I liked the explicit curriculum given to me by the school, for example, outlining the specific letter sounds that I was supposed to teach these emerging readers each day and giving the material for reinforcing this information. I felt I was able to teach these youngsters basic skills of reading, writing, and math successfully. Parents were involved in their children's education, and the principal was active in writing grants to acquire new materials for his students. I felt that the success of the school was due in part to the dedication of the administration, which in turn attracted committed and talented teachers.

Unfortunately, both the Principal and Vice Principal were turned off by the ways that the education system had changed since they entered the profession as teachers many years earlier. The district office imposed innumerable rules upon the teachers and administration, such as state standards being displayed on sentence strips in the classroom, intended to justify each lesson that was executed. This killed all elements of spontaneity, which happens to be my teaching forte. As a result of these frustrations, they were planning to retire the year that I got there.

Administrators were also inculcated with a fear of being sued, draining all elements of community and trust from the school. Although some of my five-year-old students were unable to unbutton their pants to use the bathroom, the Vice Principal instructed the Kindergarten teachers that it was better that we let a child urinate on themselves rather than help them unfasten their pants, since the school would not support us if we were sued. Though I thought these comments were unfeeling, I connected with my Vice Principal on a personal level, and know that these policies had to be a result of pressure to do so from the "higher ups." I was disappointed that parents, teachers, and administrators could not unite around the common goals of educating and nurturing children, which should be the primary goals in schools. So, at the end of the year when these two administrators sent their retirement letters, I sent my own notice of leave.

My decision to leave was also partly based on the desire to seek a less restrictive teaching environment where I would not feel I was constantly being watched. The Teaching Fellows Program implemented an elaborate mentor system, and asserted that this would give new teachers the support that they needed. However, in practice, this mentoring program interfered with my teaching and the relationship with my students. In my mind, more of a balance was necessary between being observed and being left to develop my own teaching style. It was the moments when I was alone with my students during a read aloud and follow up discussion that I felt the greatest connection to my students. They could express their intellectual curiosity, and any question could be explored, even if that was not part of the lesson plan or curriculum.

I left the Teaching Fellow's program after the first year, in order to join the

Peace Corps. I was sent to Central America, specifically Nicaragua, where I began to teach kindergarten through fifth grade in rural neighborhoods. I got to enter the Nicaraguan classroom with forty to sixty children per class,[3] teaching lessons to students in all academic subjects while also training teachers in constructivist teaching techniques.[4] I helped the teachers turn math drills into trivia games. I encouraged students to analyze books by comparing them to their own lives, and thought of other ways to get the children to actively participate in lessons. This contrasted sharply with the dictation and copy style so prevalent in the country. Although I was a relatively new teacher speaking a language that was not native to me,[5] there was still willingness among the Nicaraguan teachers to adapt different teaching tactics that I suggested. They used more "*dinamicas*" or games and began to take questions during lessons. Just as the local teachers were open to questioning the techniques they used, so were my own ideas about education changing as a result of my time in Nicaragua.

For instance, I used to think the public schools of New York City were under-funded; seeing schools that had little to no supplies gave me a new perspective. In the rural mountains of Nicaragua, there were hardly any materials to assist in student learning. What well-funded American schools considered necessary hands-on constructivist learning techniques weren't present in public Nicaraguan schools. For instance, classroom libraries were non-existent, and a community-wide library where students could borrow books had just opened the year I arrived. Nicaraguan schools lacked the money to buy plastic math

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3. The school in the municipal head, San Jose de los Remates, where I lived, had each grade from kindergarten until sixth grade in a separate classroom within the elementary school grounds. There were two sessions of school to make room for more children; one from 7 AM until 12:00 PM, and the other from 12:30 PM until 5:30 PM. The enrollment of each grade varied. For example, there were about fifty students in each of the two fourth grade classes, but about twenty students enrolled in the only sixth grade class, because so many children dropped out of school by that age. I got to enter each classroom and work with the individual teachers and students as a sort of teaching assistant, modeling interactive lessons, as well as supporting and elaborating upon the lessons the Nicaraguan teachers planned. I also taught in some rural schools, located in the mountains, which were "multi-grade." In this setting, one teacher was in charge of instructing grades kindergarten through sixth grade in the same large room. In one small community or "*comarca*" called *El Cerro*, a dedicated and talented teacher taught about forty children of various age groups in the same room, giving one age group independent work while instructing the others, switching off between the two. This teacher was especially receptive to my help in the classroom since she often felt overwhelmed at the task of instructing such a diverse and large group on her own.

4. Constructivism builds upon students' prior knowledge, maintaining that teachers must get children to show what they already know in order to learn new concepts. The theory of constructivism rejects the notion that children come to school with a blank slate—a *tabula rasa*—waiting to be filled by the teacher; rather, it asserts that the children come to class with prior knowledge that can be built upon and connected with new material.

5. I studied Spanish extensively before my arrival to Nicaragua, and so was placed in the highest language level during our three months of training when we lived with a Nicaraguan family and received Spanish language classes daily. During this time I improved on colloquialisms and vocabulary that I would need on a daily basis. By the time I entered my site, three months after my arrival to the country, I was able to teach in the Spanish language, as well as look for housing and take care of my needs as a volunteer placed in a community where hardly anyone speaks English fluently.

manipulatives[6] when learning the multiplication tables—but they were a lot better at reciting the multiplication tables from memory than were most American students. In the United States, teachers emphasized separating plastic cubes into groups rather than memorizing multiplication and division by rote memory. Did the poverty of the children who grew up in a third-world country without plastic math manipulatives mean that these children were at a disadvantage, or did their experience merely indicate another educational style?

Influenced by my American educational ideals, I tended to think that the children were at a disadvantage from not having tactile aides when learning abstract math concepts. I believe in multiple intelligences: children learn in different ways and need to be stimulated by participating in a number of different activities, not learning just by listening and copying dictation, which were the primary activities in Nicaraguan public schools. During my time in the schools, the students and I went outdoors to plant tree nurseries and make organic compost to enrich the soil. We collected seeds from trees to count and group, in conjunction with the students' addition and multiplication lessons. In this way, I was able to appeal to visual and tactile learners who were not able to grasp the concepts by merely listening to their teacher or filling out a workbook page.

The role of Peace Corps education volunteers like myself was to demonstrate to Nicaraguan teachers how constructivist teaching techniques could be incorporated into their daily lessons so that they might use the ideas after my departure from the community. We were also supposed to help promote the preservation of the Nicaraguan environment, teaching about the importance of plants and animals in the eco-system, and incorporating natural resources like seeds into our lessons.

Through hikes and nature walks that I took with students and community members, I felt that I helped bring about a greater appreciation of some Nicaraguans' natural surroundings. However it became clear to me that the underlying problem was not necessarily a lack of appreciation for the environment, rather dire economic situations that lead many Nicaraguans to chop down trees to construct houses and furniture, or to export wood to more prosperous countries to earn a profit.

In thinking more about the impoverished conditions of the country, it became clear that many children did not come to school, not because it wasn't enjoyable, but because many Nicaraguans did not share the American assumption that education is a stepping stone to a better place. Unfortunately, in the poorest country in Central America and the second poorest in all of Latin America,[7] there

6. Math manipulatives are plastic tools that illustrate mathematical concepts in concrete forms. For example, when learning 5*5=25, the tools provide an illustration of five groups of five blocks each that the child can visually see add up to twenty-five.

7. U.S. Agency for Int'l Dev., Central American and Mexico Gang Assessment Annex 5: Nicaragua Profile 4 (2006), *available at* http://www.usaid.gov/locations/latin_america_caribbean/democracy/nicaragua_profile.pdf.

were not enough jobs for college graduates, let alone for the majority of children who did not advance to high school. What is the incentive to send children to school, investing in notebooks and uniforms, when there is little hope that the child will be able to advance in life as a result of this learning?

Once I came to this realization, I began to dedicate a lot more time to helping the community build its local economy, believing that this would indirectly benefit the education system. Unlike my previous teaching experience, I had a great deal of autonomy as a Peace Corps Volunteer to determine how I spent my time within the community. I began to assist the Nicaraguan teachers less in their classrooms, and instead frequented the mayor's office, getting to know the social programs they were implementing for the benefit of the community. I got to know the needs and resources of the town a little better, and I had an idea of how to push for sustainable change to promote the creation of jobs.

The picturesque landscape of the town where I lived gave me the idea of implementing an eco-tourism project. Nicaragua has much of the same natural attractions as the popular vacation destination of Costa Rica, but natural disasters as well as political turmoil in Nicaragua have discouraged foreign investment and the development of tourist infrastructure. The community of my Peace Corps site, San Jose de los Remates, located about two hours from the capital of Managua, had beautiful cascading waterfalls and a wooded area that was purchased with government funds by the mayor, Fabricio Cajina, because it was being rapidly deforested by individuals in need of wood. In this way, he was able to effectively declare this forest a protected area. The consciousness about environmental preservation among the leaders of this community was greater than in the majority of rural Nicaraguan towns due to their slightly higher standard of living. This made it easier to implement an eco-tourism initiative.

Although some officials of the community had eco-tourism as a long-term goal for the community, it was a slow effort to convince most residents of this small town that the land where their cows grazed could be developed into a tourist attraction and that it was worth the investment of their time and money. George Isaac, the Programs Coordinator of the Mayor's office at the time I was there, was determined to make the project one that would benefit the common people of the community. He did not want a foreign company to come and buy the land to build a zip-line or adventure course, as they had in other parts of the country, and keep all the money away from the local residents.

With those ideas in mind, we developed a vision that common residents and artisans would see a monetary gain from the project. Many local people had goods and services to offer tourists. For example, some families had nice houses with a spare room to offer tourists lodging. Another woman, who lived in the middle of the mountains, knew how to weave beautiful baskets out of tree bark. When she first showed me how to make these baskets, she offered to give me many for free. I cringed as I told her not to offer the baskets to foreigners for free anymore, since many tourists would be willing to pay money for the hand-made

craft. Although her generosity touched me deeply, she clearly needed the money, with what seemed like an army of children and grandchildren living without running water or plumbing in a dilapidated house in the mountains.

My work on both the eco-tourism and teaching project was extremely meaningful. I got to know a way of living vastly different to the one I was accustomed to in the United States. I had found the sense of community that I yearned for while teaching in New York. I enjoyed going on hikes with my students on the weekend and getting invited to their families' homes for dinner. The parents' trust was certainly a contrast to the New York City Board of Education's hyper-paranoia about its own liability. It is difficult to gauge the long-term impact of my time in the Nicaraguan education system, since I was not able to track lesson plans after my departure from the community. I did, however, get the sense that I helped make school more enjoyable for some Nicaraguan students, which might have encouraged them to continue their education instead of dropping out at the 5th grade, as many others did in order to help their families in the house or in harvesting the land.

Teaching in Nicaragua stood in contrast to everything I had experienced to date. Nicaragua allowed me to engage in a holistic approach to education. I was able to engage with students and other teachers directly in the classroom, and enhance the power of education through job creation. Most importantly, I was able to engage students outside of the classroom in a creative environment, and when I returned to the United States two years and three months later, I searched for a school that would provide a similar experience. Although I could not hope that another school could emulate the small-town feel I had encountered in Nicaragua, I found that the charter school movement came close to creating the educational atmosphere I was looking for.

In the 2005-2006 school year, I started teaching at the charter school *Beginning with Children* in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, where there were only two classes per grade and a high sibling enrollment. Teachers, students, and parents knew each other quite well. I began teaching third grade in a maternity leave position and was asked to stay the rest of the year, filling in for a Kindergarten maternity leave vacancy until June. In this family-friendly school, there was a babysitting service for the teachers' newborns and toddlers in the basement, next to the nursery school. The school extended up to the eighth grade, the idea being that a child could grow up in this nurturing school community and receive the best education possible.

Charter school funds come from a mix of private and public sources; this school was funded by the Pfizer pharmaceutical company, whose factory was located across the street from *Beginning with Children*'s building. Pfizer would give employees permission to tutor students during the work day; they distributed holiday gifts of lotions and soaps to the teachers. Class size was capped at twenty-five students and the entire elementary school population stayed at 250 students, a far cry from other overcrowded public schools around the city that I

previously experienced.

I took a very positive impression from this charter school. It seemed that the community was very appreciative of the education that the children received. I heard parents telling students in the school that they should "appreciate this small private school education that was offered to them for free." Although charter schools are not the panacea to problems in public schools, they seem a viable alternative that helps students thrive with more individual attention. Furthermore, the respect afforded to the teacher and his or her family was exceptional. Babies came to eat lunch with their mothers; teachers introduced their babies to students, teachers were respected by students and faculty as real people with lives outside of school.

Eager to experience another model of charter school, I began teaching first grade for the 2006-2007 academic year at another charter school, *Explore*, located in Flatbush, Brooklyn. Unlike the Williamsburg school, with its mixed population of students, the charter school at which I am presently teaching has a predominantly African American population.[8] The charter school prides itself in the education it provides to its inner city students, who end up scoring higher on their math and reading state exams than students at neighborhood public schools.[9]

Explore does things differently than many neighborhood public schools. The head of *Explore*, Morton Ballen, chose to extend the school year until the end of July because many of his students' families cannot afford to send them to summer camp. He also chose to extend the school day from 7:50 AM to 4:00 PM to help his students learn the math, reading, and writing skills needed to score higher on state exams, and also to help them stay out of trouble. Ballen says that the goal of his school is to prepare his students for a college preparatory high school. Although kindergarten and first grade seem a bit early to begin to introduce such ambitions to children, he believes that it is never too early to inculcate his students with bright hopes of a successful future. Students learn the "Explore Chant," which they periodically repeat, with phrases such as "we always work hard," "we will try our best," "we respect ourselves," and "we respect each other."

Frequent professional development helps the teachers learn how to better promote students' growth, especially in the areas of reading, writing, and math. For instance, we have new-teacher meetings that bring up complex issues, such the experiences of a white, middle-class teacher serving a poor African American community. We read excerpts of the controversial text, "Other People's Children,"[10] which sparked a debate among the staff at a particular meeting as to

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8. InsideSchools.org, School Profile Explore Charter School, http://www.insideschools.org/fs/school_profile.php?id=1232&page=2 (last visited Mar. 12, 2007).

9. Explore Charter School, About Explore, http://www.explorecharterschool.org/about/achievement.html (last visited Mar. 12, 2007).

10. LISA DELPIT, OTHER PEOPLE'S CHILDREN: CULTURAL CONFLICT IN THE CLASSROOM (1996).

whether there are any inherent differences between teaching African American and Caucasian students. Many teachers in the diverse staff were middle-class African Americans who thought it was silly to generalize that people need a specific type of education because of the color of their skin. Others were Caucasian teachers who grew up in urban neighborhoods and felt that clear and direct communication came naturally.

Many of us eventually concluded that the differences spoken about in the book had more to do with class than race, and that there are many middle-class African Americans and poor whites who defy stereotypes described in the article. One instructive point that came from the meetings was that for many of us from middle-class backgrounds, who had relatively more choices in life than our poorer counterparts, were used to phrasing instructions in the classroom as if the student had a choice whether to participate. For example, asking a child, "Would you like to join us on the rug for our read aloud?" might confuse a student who is not used to being addressed in this manner, suggesting that he or she could say no. Are inner-city poor children used to being spoken to in a rougher manner? Do middle-class teachers really use less directive language, and, if so, does this pose a barrier to effective instruction for middle-class teachers who want to help students from a lower socio-economic level?

Despite some staff feeling offended by these controversial topics, I feel good about teaching at a school where unresolved questions of racial inequality and unequal education for poorer students are being addressed. Although the long hours typically expected of charter school teachers sometimes prove taxing, my experience at this school, as in every other one where I have taught, has been very rewarding. I learn new things about myself while serving different communities and becoming a better teacher.

As the reader might infer from my meandering career through schools in different neighborhoods, boroughs, and countries, I am more interested in exploring different educational models than spending the rest of my life in a single school. Change helps keep my energy fresh to teach the children in new ways. As a result of my different educational experiences, I have acquired new skills, like learning to speak Spanish fluently in Nicaragua, which I hope to incorporate into my profession one day. I am writing freelance about different social issues like education, and am considering going back to school to get a second master's degree in public policy or international studies. I hope to someday be a part of the national debate surrounding education reform to give the perspective of a teacher who has served in a variety of classrooms.