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Ethnographic Narrative Project

Ry Finerty

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Teacher Education Program

Abstract

This ethnography seeks to describe my evolution as a teacher. It begins with my background, past experiences (both in the classroom and outside of it), and initial personal motivation for becoming a teacher. As I began teaching in my classroom this year, I detail my experiences with three Focus Students (all names in this ethnography have been changed to protect their identities) with whom I forged relationships. I include portions of interviews I have conducted with them and their families, as well as demographic analyses of the communities in which they live. I describe my school community, incorporating information gleaned from staff interviews and personal research. I conclude with an audio podcast describing the ways in which I have changed as an educator, and the areas in which I will continue to seek personal development.

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Part A***My Positionality***

G.K. Chesterton, one of the most prolific writers of the 20th century, said "Fairy tales are more than true: not because they tell us that dragons exist, but because they tell us that dragons can be beaten."

I've loved this quote for years, but I misunderstood its meaning for most of that time. I used to think it was a sobering reflection on how our institutions can dilute, stifle, and invalidate children's imaginations. Now I see it more as a metaphor for the challenges we face in this world, and the firm conviction that those can be overcome.

The challenge I have faced in my journey as an educator has been to equip my students with the skills they need to defeat their dragons. I can't give them all the skills, because I don't have all the skills. What I do have is 33 years of life experience, which has shown me a very simple, very powerful truth: we are all the same. We all have fears and ambitions. We all want what's best for those we love. We all want to belong.

And yet, magically, we are all unique. Each of us is a one-of-a-kind medley of emotions, experiences, relationships, and wisdom. I have spent more than half of my life trying to understand these differences, but more importantly, I have come to see that the common denominators we share are what will unite us. But that path is often unclear, and only by understanding what makes us different, can we appreciate what makes us the same.

Selfishly, I have pondered this question for years. For most of my life, I was always different, but I yearned to be the same, to have a tribe, to belong.

Had I not experienced such a turbulent lifestyle change as a teenager, I might never have had reason to lament this. I grew up as a typical American kid. Born and raised in Chicago, in a

loving family, in a safe home. My father was a successful television director, my mother was a senior vice president at Merrill Lynch. We had a big house in a relatively safe neighborhood. I had a big yard, and an even bigger dog, Roy. My younger sister and I could play all day, on the lawn, in the sandbox, on the front sidewalk, even in the back alley. I went to an expensive private elementary school, which gave me ample opportunity to explore and learn and create.

I did not want for much growing up. The only thing I wanted more of was my dad. His work frequently took him all over the country, even to other continents. He was gone constantly, and I missed him - we all did.

When I was 9, a conversation began about moving somewhere else. He was always flying to warmer, sunnier places to shoot commercials and TV shows, like Los Angeles or Florida. We reasoned: *Why not just move somewhere that's warm? Then he can work and not be gone as much.*

So, at the age of 10, we moved to southern California. We lived in an uber-affluent, entirely white, suburb of Santa Barbara, called Montecito. Our next door neighbor had founded Kinko's. Across the street was the former owner of the Indiana Pacers. The *service entrance* of Oprah Winfrey's \$52 million weekend home was half a mile down the street (no one knew where the main entrance was). A cookie at the local bistro cost \$6.

Anyone who has been to Montecito knows why it is considered paradise. The Santa Ynez mountain range serves as a beautiful green backdrop for the quiet, tree-lined streets and red terracotta tiles and cream stucco walls of Spanish-style houses. It is heavenly.

Once again, I had a big yard, that I shared with my big dog and little sister. It was two acres, but it felt like an entire continent. There was enough space for me to ride my bike, for my sister to climb trees, for my dad to have a work studio, and for my mom to have an impossibly huge

garden. I had my own room, with an attached office and an outdoor patio. Both my parents and sister had wings of the house to themselves. It was a wonderful place to spend an adolescence.

Yet it was also the first place in my life where I experienced a deep sense of unbelonging. In Chicago, I had many friends living in our neighborhood, and it had been natural to jump on our bikes and go explore the world. My best friend, Jesse and I would save quarters to play the local corner store's one, ancient arcade game. We would have annual block parties, where we would shut the street down to traffic, and everyone and their kids would spend time with each other, eat barbecue, and listen to the live music.

In Montecito, I struggled to make friends. I couldn't ride my bike outside my house, as there were no sidewalks and cars whizzed by at 50 mph. We didn't know most of our neighbors. At school, I couldn't understand why no one liked me. They made fun of my rattail and my skateboard with plastic trucks. Everyone had liked me in Chicago! What was wrong with them? Or was something wrong with me?

In 5th grade, Roy died, and I was devastated. My best friend was dead, and I cried myself to sleep for weeks. I remember the night he died. Sobbing into my pillow, I felt my sadness give way to anger. I blamed God. We had never been a religious family, but that night I killed the idea of God in my mind. I could never believe in something that had robbed me in such a manner. I have been an atheist ever since.

My parents became worried about me. My grades slipped shortly after Roy's death, and I started getting into fights. Once, a boy named Cameron who constantly tormented me about my rattail, jumped on my back and tried to cut it off with box cutters. A few months later, he and another boy pushed me to the ground in front of everyone. As they laughed, I stabbed a freshly sharpened pencil into the meat of his knee. I received a day of in-school suspension as punishment. In 6th grade, I was jealous of all the kids who had expensive TI-83 calculators, while I had an old hand-me-down from my mom. *They don't need those to do 6th grade math!* I

reasoned. I went into each of their cubbies during recess and stole as many as I could. I got caught, and received another suspension.

Ironically, we had moved to California for my dad to spend more time with us, but soon after we moved, he signed a contract with a company in Toronto, and was gone nearly as much. I remember that evening, after I had been caught, my mom had to call my dad long-distance and put him on speaker to yell at me.

My parents sent me to see a shrink, then moved me to another private school. To borrow a term, it was the definition of “Crunchy Granola,” and I loved it. We went on several bike trips every year, had crazy and awesome electives (like Filipino stick dancing), and shared our thoughts around the school’s Kiva. I had friends, and I was happy!

My parents were having difficulties, however. My mom hadn’t worked in years, having quit her job to take care of my sister and I, my dad wasn’t getting as much work, and the mortgage payments put them under enormous stress. So another conversation began about moving, but this time it would be much further away.

My mother had always wanted to live in Italy, where her parents were from, so we decided to move to Rome. I had only ever been to Canada and Mexico, and a brief vacation in South America when I was 7. Europe seemed like a different planet compared to what I knew.

My experience in Rome was downright magical. The city was unlike anything I’d ever seen, and afforded considerable freedom to a 16-year-old. I could go out with my friends and drink (no one cared if we were underage), and never felt in danger once.

My school was amazing. The American Overseas School of Rome was small, with only a student population of 200, but was represented by more than 40 nationalities. Most kids’ parents were army or diplomats of some kind; I was one of the few civilians.

In that place, everyone was different, *really* different. My best friends were Italian, Dutch, Chinese, Canadian, and Nigerian. Our differences weren't celebrated, though. Since everyone was different, our cultural differences were somewhat of a banality. It was at AOSR that I began to eschew my American identity for something more multicultural (more on that later), and I welcomed it.

After I graduated high school, I went to university in England, feeling like an international citizen and eager to continue my worldly travels. But England proved to be a less welcoming place than Italy had. I struggled to make friends (again), and couldn't adjust to the food or the awful weather. I had become accustomed to embracing people's differences, but many I met didn't feel the same way. The Iraq War was on everyone's minds, and anti-American sentiment was strong, even towards someone who had anti-war views (which I did). I skipped class frequently, and my health, both physical and mental, suffered. I began seeing a psychiatrist due to suicidal thoughts. I slogged it out for four years, and when I received my diploma, it felt anticlimactic. I had enjoyed many of my classes, but they hadn't prepared or qualified me to do anything even remotely marketable. I left England with an uncertain future ahead of me.

At this point, the reader may have been asking themselves: "Ok, why are you giving me literally your entire life story?"

Positionality was not a term I had heard until a month ago, and, I confess, when it first arose in class I thought it was a veiled jab at white people, and I bristled defensively. I have come to realize that this is not the case. Instead, all this self-evaluation, while uncomfortable at times, is to give the educator a clearer sense of how their students see *them*. In turn, that educator will empathetically be able to understand their *students'* perspectives of the world. I believe the best teachers are those most sensitive to their students' needs, and do their utmost to address them. "It's as if [sensitive people] have thinner boundaries separating them from other people's emotions and from the tragedies and cruelties of the world" (Cain, 2013).

How have my experiences influenced my approach to teaching? I believe, down to my absolute core, that students can succeed. Too often they lack the skills or resources, both mental and otherwise, to do so. I have benefited from many advantages in my life, and I am grateful for each of them. I have also experienced hardships that have seemed insurmountable, which I overcame.

I know how that sounds. The white boy who never wanted for anything had problems, so his parents moved him to another private school, or moved to Europe. The contradiction is not lost on me.

I can't help the advantages I was fortunate enough to receive. But that does not diminish the experiences they have afforded me, or the lessons they have taught me. I know happiness as well as I know misery. I know abundance as well as I know the allure of self-destruction. The one constant has been the people in my life who have supported me, loved me, and helped me to beat my dragons.

If my positionality is anything, it's this: I *must* connect with everyone. I *must* support those who need it. I *must* show, in whatever way I can, that I am *here for you!*

My Decision to Be a Teacher

I admit, my initial decision to become a teacher was less to do with pursuing a career in education, and more to do with early 20's existential angst. I had been transplanted at a young age to a very different environment, which had given me wonderful experiences, yet also an unclear sense of personal identity. I met many "natives" in Europe, people who had lived in one country their whole lives and never questioned their identity in the same way as me. I envied their seeming ability to just exist, without constant soulsearching, introspection, or self-overanalysis. Hindsight is 20/20, of course, and I now realize each of them no doubt had

their own issues with which they wrestled. What can I say? Early 20's existential angst can make one feel inadequate. It sucks.

I chose to address said angst by returning home. I just needed a national sponsor, like all the other perfectly normal and put-together people I so envied. Surely *that* was the missing piece holding me back from truly thriving, I thought.

Armed with the conviction of a young man, I decided the best way to reconnect with America would be through service. I found City Year, and was immediately intrigued by the merits of their program. Their corps members serve in classrooms all across the country, building positive relationships with students and helping to stem the nationwide dropout crisis in areas of concentrated poverty. Receiving my acceptance letter from City Year Chicago was an incredibly joyful feeling, and I looked forward to repatriating myself through hard work and civic duty.

Looking back now, the experience did help me to become more American, but not in the way I intended. I will cherish for my entire life the relationships I built with my students and their growth that I had the privilege to witness. I am a better man for it, but it came at a cost.

I remember the first time my team and I went to visit the high school where we would be stationed, and the surrounding area of Humboldt Park. To give some context, I had grown up in a small, multicultural nook of downtown Chicago called Bucktown. There was crime, of course, but less and less as I grew up. I rode my bike around the neighborhood with friends, played in the graveyard and empty lots, without much consideration for safety.

Academically, I knew Humboldt Park would be a different environment, but I felt confident that I would be able to adjust and excel, given my experience overcoming culture shock in Europe. That did little to prepare me for what I saw when I toured the neighborhood for the first time. Only 4 miles separated my childhood home from Orr Academy High School, but it may as well have been 4,000. It was truly a different country. Condemned houses and boarded up storefronts,

tire-less cars propped up on cinder blocks, cracked pavement, empty lots filled with trash, used needles and condoms littering the sidewalks. I had never seen anything like it.

I had also never felt so white in my entire life. My team comprised two black members, and 8 white members. We strolled down the streets in our crisp, white City Year T-shirts and jeans, cheerfully saying hello to everyone we saw. I remember some of the looks I received from the locals. Like I was an alien, like I didn't belong there. It made me feel uncomfortable, in a way I had never experienced.

Over that year, I would struggle to reconcile my initial enthusiasm with the grim reality to which it had brought me. And, if I am honest, I believe I failed. I served as honorably as I could, but I lost sight of my motivation. I was unprepared for the fights, drug usage in the bathrooms, students cursing at me, 9th graders unable to read, security forcefully removing students from classrooms, blood in the hallways, seeing my students sell drugs on the corner, and the shell shocked looks of those who had witnessed things I couldn't imagine.

Halfway through the year, during the coldest month of Chicago's winter, I received an email from my dad back in Italy. They'd found a lump on my mom's chest, revealing she had advanced-stage lung cancer.

I don't remember the remaining months very well. I think I just put my head down and tried to get through it. The only redeeming goal I could cling to was to ensure that none of my students would drop out that year. None of them did, so in that sense the year was a success, but I finished the program feeling even more confused about my path forward than before I had started.

I returned to Italy that summer to be with my family. After my mother died, my dad and sister were in mourning, but I was not. For reasons I won't elaborate on here, I wanted to get as far away as possible from anymore distress. So I fled, back to Chicago first, and then to South Korea.

South Korea offered what I thought I wanted at the time: distance from painful memories, adventure abroad, and a chance to reinvent myself. My repatriation experiment had floundered, and I was convinced that America wasn't the place for me.

It had been easy to find a job; schools in Asia don't require much more than native English and a BA in any field. Schools typically pay for your rent, and you have a comfortable salary. You work hard for that money, though. 10+ hour days, 6 days a week (Saturday was "optional" mandatory overtime), zero sick days, and 10 days of vacation a year.

Hard as it was, I truly enjoyed most of my teaching experiences there. I was a teacher in a society that valued education over almost everything else. My students were engaged, polite, smart as heck, and had been raised to view teachers as figures that commanded enormous respect. I may not have felt I deserved that at the beginning, but it was an easy shoe to slip into. I began to see myself the way my students saw me, and I liked it immensely.

I first thought of myself as a teacher my second year in South Korea. After searching for years for some clear sense of identity, distilling my essence into a single word was a welcome reprieve.

I was getting better at it, too. The nuts and bolts of teaching were becoming clearer, and my comfort in the classroom had grown considerably. My students were engaged with my lessons, and my first experiments in curriculum development proved to be both fun and rewarding. Working with the same students every day allowed me to build relationships with them, which became the highlight of that year, and my biggest motivator.

While I was developing professionally, personally I was a mess. My second contract took me out of the playground that is Seoul, into a smaller town in central South Korea. There were few other foreigners there, and my Korean was terrible. I lived on the outskirts of town, and had no car or friends. My time was spent between school and my apartment. The thing I looked forward to

most was jumping on my computer after work to play games, when I could put my headphones in and speak to my best friend in Singapore.

Isolated and lonely, I became extremely depressed. I seriously considered secretly flying out on a Friday night to escape back home, despite knowing I would be blacklisted from ever returning to the country. Only my dad convinced me to stay and tough it out. I affixed a small whiteboard to my wall, where each morning I would erase and write the next number down in my countdown until the final day of my contract.

I left Korea convinced that my teaching days were done. Burnt out, I moved to California to enjoy a sabbatical. That's what I called it, anyway, until my savings ran out. Unqualified to do much else, I bounced around between various restaurant jobs until landing an online job as a quality controller for a graphic design company. Really good money, but I was just sat in front of my computer for 8 hours a day, my only human interaction coming in the form of text exchanges between me and designers annoyed that I pointed out errors in their work. Absolutely. Soul. Crushing.

But something very unexpected happened. I actually started to miss being in the classroom. I missed the chaos, the energy, the hilarity, the spontaneity that working with students brings. I realized that I really liked the person I was when I was teaching. I may not have appreciated it until then, but being in the classroom had made me extremely happy.

Not without a small sense of irony, I began scouring the job boards once again. Determined to learn from my mistakes, I was ruthlessly discriminatory in my pursuit of the perfect teaching job. I wanted a job that wouldn't burn me out, was in a big city, and paid a decent salary. Over a two month period, I interviewed more than 40 schools all over the world. As my search progressed, I became more intrigued in China, and focused all my efforts on schools in Beijing, Shanghai, and Hong Kong. Finally, after many disappointing and fruitless interviews, I connected with Alex, who was the head teacher for a small, upstart academy in Shanghai.

I knew in the first five minutes I had found my school, Athena Academy. They had just opened their doors the previous month, and were in the process of recruiting students and teachers. I was most impressed by their qualitative approach to curriculum. In a sea of schools overseeing the completion of endless worksheets, this was a huge breath of fresh air. Smaller classes, in-depth and engaging curriculum, and a strong focus on Project-Based Learning. I didn't know much about that at the time, but I liked what I was hearing. The prospect of building a school from the ground up appealed to me greatly, and I couldn't have been more thrilled when I got the senior teacher position. Gleefully, I gave my company notice, and packed my bags.

I worked with Alex and Nicki at Athena, and I could instantly tell my colleagues were of a different caliber than those with whom I had previously worked. They were passionate teachers, creative and proactive. We had huge latitude to design our curriculum the way we wanted, which quickly gave us a sense of ownership and pride. Alex was our captain, Nicki was our curriculum lead, and I was in charge of all demonstration classes, outreach events, and parent sales meetings. We worked our tails off that first year to build our student base, and while it was difficult and tense at times, we vibed off each other and became a cohesive, effective team.

Shortly after I re-signed for a second year, both Alex and Nicki left Athena, in the span of a week. They were quickly replaced by new faces, who were eager but inexperienced. I was sad to see my friends go, and unsure as to how I fit into the new team dynamic.

As it happened, this may have been exactly what I needed to reach the next level in my career. The new teachers, unsure how to navigate the complexities of the curriculum our initial team had created, frequently came to me for help, advice, and training. This, too, was an easy shoe to slip into, and I enjoyed my new role immensely. I hadn't really had a team of people depend on me in that way before. Being seen as an authority figure based on my experience was unexpectedly rewarding, and it helped me to see how much *I* had learned and how far as an educator I had come.

Once I accepted that, I began to take my job much more seriously. In the absence of Nicki and Alex, I took a more active role in many areas. One in particular was Project-Based Learning. We had experimented our first year with several ideas, and though they worked and engaged the students, we hadn't quite nailed our formula. Once on my own, I embraced my inner nerd and dove head first into designing my own courses. It appealed to me because I enjoy and excel at connecting concepts to real-world examples. Once I understood that the ultimate purpose of PBL is to give students opportunities to develop 21st century core competencies (communication, creativity, collaboration, and critical thinking), it was actually pretty easy (and insanely fun) to find tangible exercises that would achieve that. I started seeing potential projects everywhere. I designed eight full courses, many of which were shared with our other branches across China. We made podcasts, wrote blogs, made Lego stop-motion films, conducted radio interviews, and wrote plays. We even designed and built an automatic robotic cat trap (only testing it on stuffed animals, of course).

My *pièce de résistance* was a six-month filmmaking project. This was my most ambitious to date, and it was simply epic. Students researched how to build character arcs and story mountains (we preferred "story volcanoes," because it sounded cooler), studied script-writing conventions, storyboarding, how to make a shooting schedule, camera angles and techniques, and editing. My kids couldn't have been more enthusiastic, and just to give some context: our project class came immediately after a 90-minute writing class. Normally I would expect someone to be burnt out by then, but my students were so excited for project time, they were laser-focused, didn't mess around, and *regularly* completed their work early, so as not to waste a minute of our precious hour of moviemaking.

I remember one class in particular. The students had been filming for about a month by that point, and were basically pros. They knew how to film their scenes, how to use the necessary language (ex: "rolling," "action," "cut"), and were largely self-sufficient. I had always been close at hand to offer suggestions on the process, but on that day, they were using the skills and

techniques they had taught themselves to great effect. I remember leaning against the wall, observing them from the other side of the class, not ever having felt more proud in my entire life. Seeing them working together diligently, fully in control of their efforts, having an absolute blast, filled me with gratitude to have been a part of something so beautiful.

My second year in Shanghai was the best year of my life, hands down. I had an immensely gratifying job that didn't burn me out (more than that, I *looked forward* to going to work), I was making good money, and I had dozens of friends in the city. Life was good.

However, as the second year went on, I couldn't shake the feeling that something was missing. I agonized over it for months, unable to find the language to describe what I was feeling. I was truly happy for the first time in my adult life, both professionally and personally, what more could I possibly want?

While listening to a podcast, I heard something that bore deep into my brain and wouldn't let go. "Everyone needs to sacrifice their youth for something." I couldn't stop thinking about it. Somehow I knew that this had revealed my path forward, but I wasn't sure in what way. Like all great, inescapable truths, it was something I had known for years.

I was scared, and had been so since I was 16. Scared of growing up, scared of choosing a future, scared of giving up the potential of my youth. I realized that I had resisted the idea of embracing adulthood because of that fear. Yet my successes and personal growth in the previous two years had demonstrated that growing up is something to be celebrated, not feared.

Once I accepted that, I saw teaching very differently. Where before it had been a vehicle to other things, now it stood apart as something inextricably linked to who I was as a person. I could be a teacher, I realized. No. I *am* a teacher, and have been for a long time. If I have to sacrifice my youth for something, I could do a heck of a lot worse than to do it for something that I'm really good at, and that I love.

Armed with that knowledge, I made the decision to pursue an MA in Education, and leave my life in Shanghai behind. I do not exaggerate when I say it was the hardest decision I've ever made. My school organized a farewell party for me, and dozens of current and former students (and their parents) came to wish me well. Many brought gifts, or read letters to me, telling me I had been the best teacher they had ever had. I cry very rarely, but I broke down and sobbed in front of everyone. A few weeks later, I invited my friends to my farewell dinner, and 30 people turned up to say goodbye. I was equally happy and sad, but I took solace in my newfound resolve, my decision to commit to myself and my future.

I decided to become a teacher because I am motivated by what I love, not what I fear.

The Role of Critical Social Justice

“Critical social justice recognizes inequality as deeply embedded in the fabric of society (i.e. structural), and actively seeks to change this” (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017). Every student has the right to a comprehensive education, but not every student receives this. As an educator, my responsibility is to my students, first and foremost. Therefore, it is incumbent upon me to deliver said education as effectively as I can. Education can be a path out of poverty, or to better opportunities, and is the greatest and most sacred investment we as a society can make. I will endeavor to give my students the best possible chance to succeed academically, and to equip them with the skills they will need to be apt, intelligent citizens later in life. I do not believe my role as an educator is to actively change our institutions. I will not advocate or champion any explicit ideology in the classroom. If I seek to change anything, it will be to improve the lives of my students, so that they may have equal opportunities to live fruitful, full lives.

What and Whom Do I Want to Teach?

I have had the privilege to teach students of nearly all ages, from pre-K to working adults. The vast majority of my time in the classroom has been spent with K-6, however, and most of that was with 1st and 2nd graders. I always liked the energy they brought to class. They're still cute little kids, and hang on your every word. But they're getting old enough to start forming their own opinions about the world, and it really excites me to see them begin developing the intellectual "language" to voice them.

In Shanghai, I had many more opportunities to work with older students as well. The aforementioned project courses were done by students ranging from 4th to 6th grade. As I was falling in love with PBL, I realized that it would be difficult to develop curriculum this complex and engaging for a younger crowd. Where the little ones were just starting to develop their language, these older students already had those mental resources in place, and would eagerly hit the ground running. I liked the challenge of engaging students who already knew how to communicate their thoughts. For this reason, I have chosen to specialize in 5th to 6th grade.

What I want to teach is partly an extension of my age preference. I like the idea of teaching a variety of subjects, as I would do as a Multiple Subject candidate. I have taught repetitive curriculum before (as in, the same subject in each lesson), and while you can achieve mastery this way, I found that it didn't suit me. I need to keep things fresh, for two reasons. First, I need to genuinely find a topic interesting before I can teach it to students and expect them to learn. Only by engaging myself in the material can I then convey my enthusiasm about it. If I chose a Single Subject specialization, I am unsure if I could do this, as I may struggle to make the material relevant to myself. Secondly, I am excited for opportunities to "cross-pollinate." As in, if I am teaching a math lesson, I can rephrase a problem into a question that uses established concepts from other subjects. For example, if there is a tricky pre-algebra problem, I could rephrase it by referencing a book we've read in our reading class:

Me: "Ok, so Bill and Barry both have some apples. But Bill wants to show Barry that he always has more, so whenever Barry brings an apple to school, Bill, brings two more. If Barry brings 3 apples, how many does Bill bring?"

Students: Five!

Me: Right! What if Barry brings 10 apples?

Students: Twelve!

Me: Booya! So check it out, we can write it like this:

Barry's apples + 2 = Bill's apples

OR

Ba + 2 = Bi

That sounds like a heck of a lot of fun to me.

Assets and Needs

My decision to leave China to pursue a Masters was partially based on the understanding that I enjoy teaching, and want to become more effective at it. I recognized that if I was truly committed to that goal, I could not only rely on myself for guidance. Rather, I needed to seek the expertise of others who could guide me. It is my aim to combine my experience and passion with a thorough framework for success in the classroom.

I have a large body of experience from which to draw. I am comfortable in the classroom, and I have a general - not comprehensive - knowledge of lesson planning. I have been an eager student in curriculum development, and have used that as a springboard to discover the areas of education in which I am most passionate. I am a proactive learner, and enjoy educating myself

for its own enjoyment. I seek to demonstrate that attitude to my students. I want them to know that it's desirable, and fun, to teach themselves.

I have much to learn. I want to further my understanding of the logistical elements of education. I have operated for most of my teaching career without access to a greater body of professional knowledge, and logistics and planning is the area in which I am most keen to improve. To address this, I will rely on my community to aid me. Living abroad, I saw the importance of establishing a strong support network, and learned firsthand how to create my own. This helped me avoid feelings of isolation, and revealed ways to find common ground with others. I found that many other foreigners experienced the same isolation, frustration, and confusion that I did. By sharing them, we were able to reject cynical thoughts that soured our opinion of the local culture, and instead celebrate it. It is precisely this skill I will leverage to aid me during this year. As Gonzalez (2013) says, "By finding the positive, supportive, energetic teachers in your school and sticking close to them, you can improve your job satisfaction more than with any other strategy. And your chances of excelling in this field will skyrocket."

I am equally keen to develop my understanding of social justice, as it relates to education. I may already be familiar with many strategies and concepts through experience, but I want to equip myself with the intellectual language to describe them accurately and utilize them effectively.

What Implicit and Explicit Biases Might Hinder Your Ability to Be an Effective Teacher for all Students?

I admit, this one is difficult. It's hard to know one's implicit biases, let alone be comfortable sharing explicit ones.

I have benefited from teaching in predominantly ethnically homogeneous environments. Many concepts introduced in Critical Social Justice Theory seem foreign to me, since I never had to

factor in different ethnicities in my classroom. I will need to readjust when working in the heavily multi-cultural environments of Los Angeles's schools.

My students were also very studious. They came to class everyday prepared and eager to learn. They came from wealthy, nuclear families, and had a strong support system in place. They were supported (oftentimes pressured) by their parents to excel, so I came to expect this mentality as a given. As a result of their studiousness, my students were exceptionally smart. I had the great privilege of working with some of the smartest students in Shanghai, and I began accustomed to pushing them hard to achieve difficult objectives.

I will need to temper my expectations this year, as it will be unfair to hold students - who may not operate at that same aptitude level - to the same standard as my past students. I will need to readjust my expectations throughout this year, as I cannot and should not expect the same thing. Drawing on my experiences from City Year will aid me in this. During my year of service, I witnessed the disadvantages my students experienced. Many came from broken homes, and lacked the strong familial support system many of my later students enjoyed. Additionally, they lived in a toxic, and at times, dangerous environment. The stresses outside school they endured were often weighted more heavily than those inside, and for good reason. While my high-achieving students in Shanghai stressed about the next test, or displeasing their parents, my students in Chicago feared the ubiquitous gang warfare that continues to plague the city. It is neither fair nor helpful to hold such disadvantaged students to the same standard as my later students, nor should I over-rely on my own education experiences (and the biases they instilled) to guide my expectations.

I will not, however, write off a single student. This would be the ultimate insult, disguised as sympathy. Every student deserves the opportunity to succeed, regardless of where they've come from, or what disadvantages they must endure. I believe that, as an educator, I have neither the purview nor the right to determine a student's trajectory for them. Furthermore, I cannot afford to meet students with anything less than optimistic expectations. As Bower says (2015)

“Run-of-the-mill expectations, when they are being fed by the demands of the school systems, by the press or social media, or *by our own private prejudices and preferences* (emphasis mine), can have destructive, if more subtle or invisible, effects.” Rather, it is my job to empower them to determine their own.

Goals

My central goal for this year is to “fill in the gaps” of my knowledge. My passion and creativity has brought me far as an educator, but now I need to supplement that with expertise. I want to observe experienced teachers in their element, and benefit from those who are trained and qualified.

At times, I have relied on my improvisational abilities to carry a lesson, and I often create loose lesson plans to accommodate for this. I want to become more diligent in planning my lessons, to use every minute as effectively as possible. This is not to say that I will not utilize my improvisational strength; I simply do not want to use it as a crutch.

One particular area that I want to pursue is Classroom Ecology. Many foreigners are hired in Asia simply for being good at entertaining children, and this no doubt played a role in some of the schools in which I worked. I was encouraged to be engaging, get the kids laughing, and the parents will be happy. In many ways, it became a small platform for me to perform. I developed a “stage persona” that seemed to bring me success, so I never questioned it. While teaching in Shanghai, I began to reevaluate that attitude, and attempted to place more emphasis on encouraging students’ expression and camaraderie. During this program, I want to continue that effort, to create a safer, more inclusive, egalitarian classroom environment.

When on shaky ground educationally, I tend to fall back on what makes me comfortable. Typically that is directing more attention towards me, rather than towards the students. I want to

instead fall back on the skills and resources I have acquired that create a more conducive learning environment. Additionally, I have relatively little experience creating a productive Classroom Ecology plan. I am a visual learner, and it will benefit me greatly to see effective Classroom Ecology plans in practice. To ensure I improve in these areas, I will lean heavily on my Mentor Teacher, professors, and fellow educators and administrators to help guide me.

I plan to be very communicative with mentors and colleagues. I will welcome criticism and suggestions, and seek to implement their recommendations. Feedback will be especially important this year, as I am determined to learn what I can from those who are more knowledgeable and experienced than me.

Part B**CalTPA: Focus Student 1**

FS1 (Bob) is reading and writing at the 3rd-grade level and is an EL. After speaking with his 2nd-grade teacher, I have learned that he was on track the previous year, and was able to demonstrate mastery of 2nd-grade reading and writing skills. Bob is extroverted, and actively seeks recognition and praise from his teacher and peers. This can often lead to him become distracted during lessons when he wants to talk with his teammates instead of working.

Bob has a strong family support system. He was born in America, but his parents are from Afghanistan. They lived in England before moving to the States, and as such their English level is proficient. Bob speaks English well, but only speaks it at school; at home, his family speaks only Farsi. Bob has a great interest in open-world sandbox-type construction video games like Minecraft and Roblox.

He enjoys creation without parameters, and this is reflected in his written responses to texts in class. For example, he will relate his response to the text, but will often stray away from the prompt in order to write a story using elements from the in-class reading. Bob is developmentally typical, though he is more challenged by cognitive exercises that require him to dive deeper into texts and understanding the meaning below the surface. When I speak to him and address off-task behavior, he can become defensive and shut down emotionally, which requires reassurance that he's not in trouble, just that I need him to fix his behavior so he can participate in the lesson.

Bob (pseudonym) is an 8-year-old boy of Afghan descent. He will serve as FS1, the English Learner. I chose him for several reasons: first, because of his EL classification, second, he was one of the first students in my class with whom I had created a positive teacher-student relationship, and finally because I had never met an Afghan before, and my experiences living abroad made me interested to learn about people from other cultures.

Inside the classroom, Bob is very consistent with homework expectations. He (almost) always completes his homework, and it is (almost) always completed correctly. However, it does not always translate to increased proficiency in the classroom. For example, we have a weekly spelling test, and, to give students a chance to practice throughout the week, they must write their spelling words out and turn them in every day. Bob consistently turns his spelling homework in, but his quiz results are inconsistent.

Inside the classroom, Bob struggles with summative assessments. Our school administers weekly reading comprehension quizzes that require short written responses to prompts. Bob can produce a significant amount of writing, but it is often not in response to the prompt. For example, when asked to identify the central message of a story, or what one character's solution says about life, he will instead summarize the story. During our recent NWEA assessment, Bob placed in the 39th percentile of 3rd graders for literature and vocabulary usage.

Additionally, Bob struggles with staying focused during independent activities. He can become distracted by his peers, and will often choose to interact with them instead of completing his tasks. I am taking steps to limit these unproductive moments by incorporating more group and small-group activities into my lessons. For the first three months of the year, I struggled to

understand my school's curriculum and culture and did not feel comfortable straying far from direct instruction, so as to maintain control over the content's delivery. This has proven ineffective because I was delivering the content mostly in one format, and, unsurprisingly, that grows quickly tedious to 8-year-olds forced to sit and listen to it for 8 hours. When I differentiate delivery methods to include more group work, Bob is able to remain more focused and productive.

One area in which I am working with Bob is how to ask for help. When Bob struggles with a new concept, he is uncomfortable raising his hand to ask for assistance, nor does he ask his teammates. I sometimes notice after a few minutes of work time, Bob has done little to no work, and when I ask him how I can help him, he'll ashamedly admit he doesn't understand. Once we have a conversation, I can help him get going, but he seems embarrassed to ask for help.

Bob's language classification is EL. He was born in America, speaks English at school, and Farsi at home.

Bob is able to complete work with which he is already familiar. For example, every week the students must complete their vocabulary activities, finding the definitions and writing sentences using these words. We have done this every week since the start of the year, and he is comfortable with this format. As such, he is able to complete this independently without a problem. When he is unsure about a new format or concept, he requires additional assistance.

Tasks that require case-by-case analyses (the aforementioned weekly written tests, for example), he lacks systems and routines to help him succeed.

Bob struggles to explain his ideas using more complex language. I suspect this is one reason he rarely raises his hand to share with the class. When speaking one-on-one, Bob is more comfortable but seems to lack the language, literal or mental, to explain himself as well as he would like. This is something I noticed throughout our oral interview.

Bob's main struggle so far this year has been CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.3.1 (Write opinion pieces on topics or texts, supporting a point of view with reasons.). Our weekly writing quizzes have borne this out, as have our numerous in-class writing assignments. His struggle does not seem to center on his ability (or lack thereof) to physically write; as mentioned, he can produce large amounts of writing at times. Instead, the issue seems to stem from his uncertainty when formulating new ideas, orally or in written form.

Bob has failed all of the 4 main quizzes I have administered so far this year. Using an 8-point grading rubric for each, he received 0/8, 0/8, 1/8, and 4/8, respectively. This suggests that he is slowly improving, but still needs to build confidence and competence with the testing format, but more importantly, with some of the more complex analyses the questions require of him.

Bob's biggest strength in terms of standards is CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.2 (Determine central ideas or themes of a text and analyze their development; summarize the key

supporting details and ideas). Bob is capable of summarizing most literary texts. He can internalize the elements of a story and is able to talk about them confidently.

Bob is a social boy and enjoys talking with his classmates. He is well-liked and generally well-behaved. One of Bob's needs is to find a more positive way to interact with his peers. At times, Bob will disconnect from the lesson (usually due to discomfort or uncertainty with the content), and engage with his teammates instead. This not only disrupts those around him but prevents him from grappling with and improving in the concepts discussed.

To help Bob improve his self-awareness, self-management, growth mindset, social awareness, and relationship skills, I have started carving out a few minutes during each lesson to check in with him. Usually, we use this time to work on the assignment at hand, but I also use this time to check in with him, to ask how he is finding the assignment, or how he's doing with his teammates. I am always careful to phrase my words (and, at times, rephrase *his* words) to demonstrate more growth mindset (ie, offering useful sentence stems that imply he is progressing towards his goal, rather than stating his ignorance/inadequacies).

Bob is a boy living in two cultures. In his own words, "My parents told me 'You can speak Persian or American in your home,'" and outside I speak American." When at school, he wants (and is encouraged) to be an American, but has a strong connection to his linguistic heritage. He is generally happy in class, though can be embarrassed to ask for help when he doesn't understand something. He seeks validation from his peers and wants to be popular.

I have taken steps to make Bob feel included in the classroom. He sits close to his friends with whom he works well, which helps to make him feel connected to the group (one of these friends is also able to help him when he needs to ask a question). I have made him our class greeter, and he enjoys the responsibility of welcoming visitors into the class.

Bob's motivation for being in school is "just to have fun." He completes his work because he wants to have his Fun Friday reward. Bob wants to become a firefighter. When pressed, he said it was because he didn't "want anyone to die." When not at school, Bob likes to open-world sandbox creation games like Minecraft and Roblox.

Bob has a younger brother with severe special needs. They both attended the same school last year (where I currently teach), but the school did not have the resources to adequately help his brother, so he has moved to a specialist school. Bob has expressed some sadness about this but was unable to articulate exactly how it made him feel.

Bob has a small but tight-knit family here in California, which consists of his mother, father, and younger brother. His family moved first from the UK, then to America, so he does not have much family remaining in Afghanistan with whom he has close ties.

Bob's development is atypical in that he struggles with articulation. Many times during our interview, Bob struggled to express himself using more than a few words and often asked for questions to be repeated. This is reflected in his in-class engagement, as he often needs one-on-one assistance to gain a solid understanding of a concept. Here is a portion of our interview that demonstrates this:

R: If you could do anything, if you could have any job, what would you want to do?

B: To be a firefighter.

R: Interesting, why do you say that?

B: To just save people.

R: So you like the idea of saving people?

B: Yes.

R: Where do you think that comes from?

B: (Silent for 8 seconds)

R: 'cause I think it's awesome, not everyone can do that, not everyone wants to do that. Why is saving people important to you?

B: Because...(10-second pause)...it's because I don't want anyone to die from fire.

R: Did you have an experience with someone dying before? Did you ever know anyone that died?

B: There was one who died.

R: Do you want to talk about it?

B: It's a she. And, she was old.

R: Do you know who she was?

B: (5-second pause) I forgot what the name was.

R: But not related to you, maybe just like a neighbor or something?

B: There's no...not a neighbor...(10-second pause)...I don't know.

R: That's alright! I just think it's interesting when someone says that they want to save people, I want to understand why they think that way.

B: Because...(15-second pause)...it's a little...it's a little hard.

R: Could it be that, you said you don't want anyone to die, and I think that's really noble. Firefighters often go into dangerous situations, are you not afraid about that?

B: I'm a little bit afraid.

R: Yeah?

B: But not really.

R: What's the most scared you've ever been in your life?

B: A little bit.

R: You've only ever been a little bit scared? When were you that scared?

B: (5-second pause) I think I was a...(4-second pause)...I forgot.

Bob shows that he possibly has difficulty recalling memories, as well as organizing his thoughts before speaking. This manifests in the classroom when he does not understand a concept or set of instructions. During independent work time, when I work with him one-on-one, I will try to talk through the activity with him. We will verbally discuss the answer to a writing question, for example, and I will ask him probing questions to help him arrive at a suitable answer. Often times, he is unable to respond, as he perhaps feels too much pressure rests on his answer. Many times during these conversations, he has put his head down on his desk and becomes visibly upset.

To write this analysis, I have used data from personal observations, weekly spelling tests, reading comprehension tests, fluency tests, and conversations with his mother and other teachers.

Home Visit #1: Bob

My first home visit was with Bob, my EL student. The interview was conducted with his mother Liza at their home. Though it was just she and I in the interview, Bob, his younger twin brothers (Huey and Dewey), and his aunt were there as well. His father, Abdul, was at work and unable to attend.

Before the formal interview began, I spoke with everyone there (except the aunt, whose English was not good). I had been told about Bob's younger brothers by my partner teacher (they had attended my school the prior year), but this was my first time interacting with them. We discussed weighty issues like the merits of Halo over Minecraft, the biological mechanism of

brain freeze, why knocking on wood protects oneself from jinxes, and whether one could taste colors in food.

His mother asked if I was hungry; I had recently eaten a good meal, but I knew from past experience she was a fantastic cook, and to refuse her hospitality might be seen as impolite. She dished me a huge serving of basmati rice with lamb, and served me a delicious dish she called *Torshi*, which translates to “sour” or “pickle.” I ate what I could, and continued to pick at it throughout our interview.

Note: English is Liza’s second language, after Farsi. She is very good at expressing herself, and I never struggled to understand her. In the interest of transparency, I have quoted her verbatim, not adding [sic] throughout the quotations. This is not a reflection of her language proficiency.

Home Visit Part II: Reflection to Inform Asset-Based Instruction:

Bob has been raised in an environment that wants him to do better than his parents’ generation. He was born in California, but his parents are from Afghanistan and left to escape the war 11-12 years ago. This decision manifests in what Liza wishes for Bob’s future. My first question for Liza was “What are your hopes and dreams for Bob?” Her main focus was on him getting a good education because she wanted him to have a better life than her. “Because I’m educate, I come here, I don’t have any good job, something like that, because I not get my master' degree or this kind of stuff, so I’m so low I feel without education is no good life. Good life not means to have everything, but good life support, just support yourself and someone else.” (Liza, Bob’s mom, personal communication, Nov. 19, 2019) Liza would later share with me that

both Bob and the twins were unexpected pregnancies, and she had to adapt quickly to providing and supporting three children while emigrating to two different countries (she and Abdul lived briefly in Pakistan before moving to California).

Getting to know Liza and her family was an interesting experience for me, as I'm used to interacting with people of different cultural backgrounds. However, these interactions have almost always seen me as the "foreigner" learning from the "native." This time was the reverse, as I was the "native" (despite the fact that Liza and her family had lived in America more recently than I had). It's valuable for me to be exposed to immigrant culture in America, as its breadth and diversity is not matched by most other countries.

I asked Liza for advice on what she could tell me about him that would help me be a better teacher to him. She described his eagerness to learn and gain knowledge that he can share with others. "Because, he wants to talk, he wants to get information, he wants to know about, not about English, about the everything. But anytime, any day, every day he go to the school, he get the things he want, and when he come home, he feel better, I am so happy he gets something the right way." (Liza, Bob's mom, personal communication, Nov. 19, 2019) I shared that this is reflected in Bob's attitude in the classroom, that he is an eager student, and is an active learner. This attitude is one of the reasons I considered when placing him in the seating chart, as I know I can rely on him to set a good example for those around him.

One major area of personal growth I am focusing on as I head into Trimester 2 is incorporating more diverse ways for students to interact with the content, and with each other, during lessons. Too often, I have over-relied on direct instruction, and not given my students the opportunities to speak with each other, even in the interest of furthering a lesson. Knowing that

Bob is an eager learner, and best communicates (and learns) verbally, I am even more encouraged to diversify my teaching style to include more student interaction.

The first major surprise of our discussion was when I asked about Bob's early development as a baby. His mother told me that he began walking at a normal age, but didn't say his first word until he was three years old when he went to kindergarten. I asked her what she thought the reason was. "I don't know, we tried talking with him, because maybe me and my husband were here, we're both alone and nobody talking too much. When he go, even third years, he was three, he doesn't talk, when he goes to school, and his teacher name was Anita, so he doesn't want, because he can't talk, and he call her, in place of Ms. Anita, Ms. *Mina* [emphasis added]. For us, it was so funny, and because Ms. Mina, 'Mina' means 'love.'" (Liza, Bob's mom, personal communication, Nov. 19, 2019)

Bob's status as an EL made more sense after this since children who are late talkers at 24 or more months are at a significantly higher risk of having low vocabulary at 48 months and low school readiness at 60 months. (Hammer, Morgan, Farkas, Hillemeier, Bitetti, Maczuga, 2017, p. 607) This is borne out by Bob's fluency data; his CWRPM (correct words read per minute) is 60, while the median score of his classmates is 85. I will encourage him to read more, both in class and at home; I will also supply his mother with a list of books within Bob's Zone of Proximal Development.

One area I wanted to explore in more detail was Bob's relationship with his younger brothers. My partner teacher first told me about his brothers, and how one of the twins had attended my current school last year but had been moved to another school due to behavior

issues. According to her, the behavior had stemmed from moderate learning disabilities that my school lacked the resources with which to adequately deal.

Ry: This is my first time meeting Huey and Dewey. Mrs. Jenkins [my partner teacher] had told me that he has younger brothers, but I had never met them. I don't know that I ever saw them at [my school] this year.

Liza: They were at the [school] last year.

Ry: But they're not anymore?

Liza: No, because one of them was over here, and for me to drop off, and pick him up, is just...

Ry: ...too complicated.

Liza: Yeah.

Ry: And how is his [Bob's] relationship with his younger brothers?

Liza: Good. His relationship like big, big brother, sometimes like a dad [laughs]. Do this one, do this, not that. Explain, like a teacher, dat dat dat [laughs].

Ry: Do they every fight?

Liza: Fight, sometimes. Yeah, like a pillow fun, for the fun.

(Liza, Bob's mom, personal communication, Nov. 19, 2019)

I will follow up with my partner teacher to reconcile this discrepancy. If necessary, I will seek out the younger brother's previous teacher to understand what prompted the decision to place him in a different school.

His brotherly instincts are something I will leverage in the classroom, by putting him in a greater leadership role that encourages him to assist others. Due to his lower reading level, however, I will ensure that this role is not predicated strictly on academic proficiency; rather, for situations in which I know, he can succeed, and help others to succeed as well.

My school emphasizes Lawrence Kohlberg's Six Stages of Moral Development, with the ultimate goal to help guide our scholars to the final stage: I do what's right *because it's who I am as a person*. My final question gauged Liza's perspective on Bob's development in this regard.

Ry: Does he have chores? Do you give him responsibilities at home?

Liza: Yeah, I give him responsibility. You have to do this one in five minutes, he just so happy. First he wanna finish that one, and like I telling this things must be clean right now, just do it. He don't wanna let it for after a few minutes.

Ry: Does he get an allowance?

Liza: I don't wanna do that. Our family doesn't do that. But I wanna teach that, this is life. Especially in the family, money is no matter, not important. But I encourage him thank you, I appreciate that stuff, I always talk about him.

Ry: And it shows, it really shows in the classroom, because one of the things we talk about is why we do the right thing. There are six answers to that [I briefly outline five of the six levels]...and then the last one, the one that we're trying to get to is "I do the right thing because it's who I am as a person." He is really there, he really does the right thing, because that is who he is.

Liza: Even we go to the store, something fall down on the floor, something like that, I saw other kids, they kick it. Other kids, not my kids, they kick it. But he no, just pick it and put on the side, and go. I never taught him. Even the assistant saw and hug him and say thank you, something like that, and he was so proud!

(Liza, Bob's mom, personal communication, Nov. 19, 2019)

I was heartened by this statement. I have been more focused on macro elements of first-year teaching, like lesson planning and classroom management, to devote time to “luxury items” like the Six Stages of Moral Development. It is reassuring to know that some of my students are already holding themselves to that high standard on their own. This further encourages me to provide him with ways to demonstrate his leadership qualities in the classroom. As we move into Trimester 2, I will reconsider what responsibilities he can handle that are more closely aligned with his natural inclinations.

CalTPA: Focus Student #2

FS2's (Jayden's) main learning challenge is emotional regulation. He can have verbal outbursts and is learning to address problems with other students more diplomatically (instead of physically). After speaking with his 2nd-grade teacher, I have learned that he was on track the previous year, and was able to demonstrate mastery of 2nd-grade reading and writing skills. Jayden is introverted and does not seem to seek out social acceptance in the classroom.

At times, he can task himself with regulating others' behavior (for example, when another student is talking, he may become annoyed and disrupt class to verbally address it). Jayden's primary caregiver is his grandmother, who is a fire marshall. She provides him with the stability he needs to be successful at school and at home. He speaks English, and this is his primary linguistic resource. Jayden loves to read, and I frequently catch him doing so during class. He also loves drawing (I also catch him doing this in class).

When writing, Jayden has no trouble with producing content, but it often strays away from the prompt and towards personal connections. Jayden has ADHD, for which he is taking medication. Before his grandmother had dialed in his dosage, he experienced frequent mood swings and had difficulty regulating his emotions. Jayden often is pulled out of class by our SpEd teacher so he can complete work in a quieter environment (he can become distracted if there is too much noise around him).

Home Visit #2: Jayden

My second home visit was with Jayden, my SpEd student. The interview was conducted with his mother Anne and grandmother Lady O. Also present were Jayden and his younger siblings Kerby (age 3) and Ariana (age 1). His stepfather was working and was unable to attend.

While waiting for Lady O to return home from work, Anne and I chatted. She told me about her nursing job, and how she would like to return to school to pursue a specialization as a hygienist. She shared her desire to travel, especially to France, and how a close friend of hers joined the army, and now works just outside of Paris.

I also introduced myself to Kerby and Ariana, who were both constantly in motion. More than a dozen times during the visit, either Anne or Lady O would continue the conversation while herding the children away from stairs, shelves or drawers. As I remarked during our talk, I thought their “multitasking skills were godlike.” (Ry Finerty, personal communication, Nov. 20, 2019)

Jayden comes from a loving home, where he has the support of his mother, stepfather, and grandmother (they all live together). With three young children in the house, the volume level was high, but the energy was positive (several times during the interview, I repositioned my phone to better capture voices, as there was much ambient noise). When Kerby began “fake” crying for the second time in ten minutes, Anne assured me “This is all day, every day.” (Anne, Jayden’s mother, personal communication, Nov. 20, 2019)

Once Lady O had arrived home from work, we started our conversation. My first question was “What are your hopes and dreams for Jayden?” Anne’s hope was that Jayden would become successful in a way that empowered him to make a positive change in the world. “I want him to make a difference in something. I want him to be like ‘Let’s help build San Bernardino back up.’ That’s what I want him to do; something I wish I could do.” (Anne, Jayden’s mother, personal communication, Nov. 20, 2019) Lady O expressed her desire to see him remain religiously faithful, and also highlighted the importance of graduating from college, especially for Jayden’s generation. “For this next generation coming up, it’s hard on them. I’m not trying to be racial, but especially on our black men. So I want him to be somewhat of a positive role model, where he can teach and help others because he has a caring spirit. Even if he

goes down the wrong path, I want him to be able to find his way back.” (Lady O, Jayden’s grandmother, personal communication, Nov. 20, 2019)

They would both later expand on this sentiment as the interview progressed, but I was immediately struck by the urgency with which Lady O spoke. To achieve success and elevate one’s position in life was the goal, but the urgency came from a sober analysis of the obstacles black males must overcome to achieve those goals. I have been critical in the past of America’s seeming over-fixation on college degrees (at the expense of vocational training). I admit my view has been colored by my college experience, which I found unrewarding and unhelpful. Additionally, neither my family nor I ever doubted that I would attend college. My conversation with Anne and Lady O helped me realize that in black communities, a college degree is not just a piece of paper that says “you’re qualified,” but rather a pathway to being a better citizen.

My next question was aimed at understanding Jayden’s condition. I was told he was diagnosed with ADHD in second grade, though signs first appeared in kindergarten. Until they got an official diagnosis and Jayden began receiving treatment, he was having difficulty in the classroom. Regarding Jayden’s kindergarten teacher, “She was overwhelmed, and had over 30 students. I didn’t think she was a strong enough teacher for him. She couldn’t handle his personality.” (Lady O, Jayden’s grandmother, personal communication, Nov. 20, 2019) Lady O immediately contrasted her with Jayden’s first-grade teacher. “First grade, loved her to death. She had him right next to her, she’d say ‘you’re my helper.’ But she wouldn’t play. He was on honor roll.” (Lady O, Jayden’s grandmother, personal communication, Nov. 20, 2019)

I silently empathized with this kindergarten teacher, as I am currently experiencing what she must have, but having such a clear juxtaposition of effective and ineffective teaching practices is helpful to me. Jayden needs to be engaged and needs a teacher who can give him the attention he needs, while also being firm when necessary. As I move into Trimester 2, my main focus is on maintaining a warm, positive tone, while also being firm and providing structure to those who benefit from it.

Lady O surprised me when she discussed what the same second-grade teacher had recommended:

Lady O: She was the one that said she wanted to retain him.

Ry: Really? On what grounds?

Lady O: So she could get him next year and work on him a little bit longer.

Ry: Oh, so it was more behavioral than academic?

Anne: Right, but she wasn't able to because his grades were good.

Lady O: She really wanted to work with him again, she knew she could get him where he was.

I had never heard of a student being retained for behavioral reasons, but I understand that Jayden's family recognizes his ADHD as something that requires guidance and discipline to positively channel. I will use this knowledge in several ways. First, I will sit him centrally in the class, so he will be closer to me. Second, I will check in with him throughout each day, to gauge

his emotions and understanding of the content. Lastly, I will make him a team captain, to give him agency and the responsibility of helping others.

My next question aimed at getting advice on how to be a better teacher to Jayden. Both were very complimentary with me, and told me they thought I was already a great teacher, and that Jayden liked me a lot. “What he needs is that teacher that’s really gonna take that time him. Continue to follow through, making sure he’s on task and holding him accountable.” (Lady O, Jayden’s grandmother, personal communication, Nov. 20, 2019)

This was enormously helpful, as I struggled during the first trimester to be consistent. Too many times was I underprepared for lessons, so I would revert to mostly direct instruction. Unsurprisingly, the students found this boring, and would often be off-task, which would stress me out further. This strategy used most of my mental “bandwidth,” making it more difficult to take extra time with students. Going forward, I will structure my lessons to involve more varied elements, especially independent and small-group work. I will find a more effective balance between direct instruction and student-centered learning, which will give me opportunities to engage individually with students.

I wanted to know more about how Jayden’s ADHD manifests in his daily life. Anne shared what she’s observed when he plays video games. “He has a Playstation. When he’s not winning, he will get really, really frustrated. He’ll start crying, he’ll start hitting the TV, he’ll start yelling. I’m like ‘Just calm down, it’s just a game, calm down.’” (Anne, Jayden’s mother, personal communication, Nov. 20, 2019) Having been a gamer myself (and experiencing “gamer rage” more than a few times), I can sympathize with Jayden’s frustrations. Video games can be

empowering in their own way (in that they allow one to do incredible things), but they can also make one feel frustrated, even impotent.

It was interesting to hear Anne describe Jayden's reaction, because I have seen similar behavior from him at times this school year. At the beginning of the trimester, Jayden was taking medication to treat his ADHD, but the dosage (in hindsight, we found) was too low. During this period, Jayden would frequently become emotional over the slightest problem. He would ball his fists, tense every muscle in his body, and silently cry. Additionally, this would affect how he interacted with his classmates. He would frequently overreact to perceived slights and would justify his behavior by blaming it on someone else's actions. I brought this up with Lady O and Anne, and they agreed that he needed to change this narrative. "He'll come home, if he had a bad day, he'll be like 'Well, such-and-such pushed me, so I took it upon myself...' I'm like 'I'm not worried about such-and-such, I'm worried about *you* [emphasis added].'" (Anne, Jayden's mother, personal communication, Nov. 20, 2019) Both women discussed the importance of taking responsibility for one's actions. Once the dosage was corrected, his peer interactions, as well as his ability to self-regulate became much stronger.

I was glad to hear that Anne's solution was the same as mine had been. I began to frequently check in with Jayden, and would sometimes call him back to my desk to quietly calm him down when I saw him becoming emotional. I will continue to do this as needed going forward, as well as helping him rewrite his mental narrative for handling negative behavior.

Near the end of our conversation, Anne became emotional when sharing her concerns for Jayden's future. "When you asked me what do I see for my son, I want my son to make it to see

an adult. Just because a lot of kids around here are losing their life [sic] over bullying. My fear is, I know how my son is, my son is very sensitive, just like me. My fear is, for when he gets older, and kids start to get rough in school, then my son will take his life. But also, my fear is I don't want him to take his anger out on another student. I want my son, my kids, to be able to grow up and enjoy life. I don't want them to be...I don't want to bury kids before I leave this earth. Just because it's getting so *bad* [emphasis hers] out here." (Anne, Jayden's mother, personal communication, Nov. 20, 2019)

I experienced bullying in elementary school, and while it was challenging and left a lasting impact on me, my thoughts never drifted to suicide. It was also not the main concern for my parents, who did not have to make decisions regarding my education to address that risk. It is clear that Anne operates as though it is a real possibility for Jayden, and is taking steps now to better prepare him for when he faces greater challenges later in life.

During our recent parent-teacher conferences, my partner teacher and I were informed by some parents that their children had experienced bullying at school. One mother told us during our meeting that she was pulling her child out that same day because she was concerned for his mental wellbeing. I felt simultaneously saddened that I would no longer see these students, and ashamed that I was unaware it was happening around me. Students who are bullied have a higher risk of internalizing problems, which can lead to depression and self-harm. (Wolke, Lareya, 2015, p. 880) My partner teacher and I have discussed what steps we will take to ensure we address bullying. This includes candid observations, one-on-one talks with students we suspect

are being bullied, and outreach to other teachers (especially PE, where most bullying has taken place) to help prevent this behavior.

CalTPA: Focus Student #3

FS3's (Billy's) father is in prison; this is his 7th sentence. As of yet, I am unaware of the crime for which he was sentenced, but Billy speaks about it as if he has accepted it and it is normalized. He has expressed sadness and that he misses his father; he seems to have a clear sense of how he feels and understands the situation well.

After speaking with his 2nd-grade teacher, I have learned that he was on track the previous year, and was able to demonstrate mastery of 2nd-grade reading and writing skills. Billy is introverted and does not seem to seek out social acceptance in the classroom. At the beginning of the year, I made him the captain of his table group, but he was uncomfortable addressing the off-task behavior of his teammates. He has, however, shown that he loves to help others, but in a one-on-one setting. Whenever he finishes work early, he asks if he can walk around and help others who are still struggling.

Billy's primary caregiver is his mother, who is a nurse. He has a large family in the immediate area, as well as family in Mexico, Guatemala, and France. He speaks English and Spanish fluently. Billy loves reading and writing stories and loves to find ways to connect those interests to what we are learning in class. He frequently makes connections between in-class and recreational readings, and this is reflected when he writes stories.

Billy's development has been atypical due to his father's repeated imprisonment. His mother has stabilized most other areas of his life, but it is clear that he is troubled by it. He often lacks confidence when talking with peers, unless he is helping them.

Interview #2: Billy

Billy is my third Focus Student, and will be satisfying the "significant life experience" requirement for my ethnography. He is 8 years old and lives in San Bernardino. He is half Guatemalan, half black. His father is currently in prison, and will be released sometime around Christmas; this is his 7th sentence. Billy's family is somewhat spread out. He has family in Guatemala, Mexico, and a cousin that lives in Paris, but "I have 22 members of my family [living in San Bernardino]" (R. Finerty, personal communication, October 11, 2019). He lives with his mother, who is a nurse/caregiver.

Inside the classroom, Billy excels at reading. His fluency is near the top of the class, and his comprehension is similarly high. Outside the classroom, he has a strong family network, the most important of which is his mother, who is committed to his success. Billy struggles with writing. It is clear that his thoughts are organized, but he struggles with grammatical conventions and sentence structure. Outside the classroom, he is learning how to better express his emotions.

Billy's language classification is EO. I believe he is bilingual, but always communicates with his mother in English (at least from what I've seen). I will update this document when I have more information from her.

Billy's weekly spelling tests are quite good. The more challenging reading and Unit tests are a bit more difficult for him, but he is still able to complete them accurately. Billy is very good at working independently. When working in groups, I have noticed that he will complete his work, will sometimes work with others, but is uncomfortable asking others in his group for help. Additionally, if his group is distracted or off-task, he is uncomfortable asking them to stop. Billy completes the tasks given to him. I do not have any issues with him not completing work, or turning in incomplete assignments or homework.

Billy is a good communicator. He organizes his thoughts well, and is able to express himself clearly. Regarding critical thinking, he is able to understand the deeper meanings of texts and is able to extract the central idea from our readings. I will implement more opportunities for the students to demonstrate their creativity in the classroom (we have a narrative writing assignment coming soon); as of yet, I do not have enough information.

Billy struggles with the W.3.2 standard (*Write informative/explanatory texts to examine a topic and convey ideas and information clearly. a) Introduce a topic and group related information together; include illustrations when useful to aiding comprehension. b) Develop the topic with facts, definitions, and details. c) Use linking words and phrases (e.g., also, another, and, more, but) to connect ideas within categories of information. d) Provide a concluding statement or section.*). If you ask him what he thinks, he is able to clearly tell you but struggles

with writing his ideas in a cohesive way. A large part of this, I believe, has to do with the fact that he, like all his classmates, has just moved from 2nd to 3rd grade, and this kind of work is very new to him.

Billy excels with the RL.3.2 standard (*Recount stories, including fables, folktales, and myths from diverse cultures; determine the central message, lesson, or moral and explain how it is conveyed through key details in the text.*).

Behaviorally, Billy is usually on-task and focused. He serves as a good role model for others but is very uncomfortable actively encouraging others to behave more appropriately. Socially, he seems to be well-liked. He plays on the flag football team, and has friends in the class. I would like to see him use some of that capital to discourage others from bad behavior.

Billy is an optimistic boy. He looks forward to the future, and has a clear motivation for why he is in school. He is able to see how he has changed throughout his life, especially regarding how he regulates his emotions. I want to encourage him to take more of a leadership role in class. To do this, I will give him a job that allows him to help others (he has specified he really likes helping people).

Billy sees himself as a helper. He wants to do well in school so he can help his family later in life. I want to give him more opportunities to help in an official capacity in the classroom, to encourage him to take ownership of and inject agency into his area of strength. He likes to play sports and spend time with his family. I will update this document when I have more information.

His father's frequent prison sentences have clearly had an effect on him. He didn't seem too sad to talk about it, but it was clear that he was affected emotionally by it. Without a doubt, Billy's mother is the most influential figure in his life. She is very invested in his success, and is communicative with me about his struggles. Billy likes school because he can meet new people that are not in his family, and he can learn many things he can use to help his family members. It is a very selfless attitude.

Billy's main motivation for school is to help his family. He has alluded that his family is spread out in several countries, some of whom live in poorer conditions than him. He wants to be a good student so that he can help those close to him.

Billy is a typical 8-year-old boy. He has a strong family, despite his father being in prison. His mother ensures he stays on pace with his work. To write this analysis, I have used data from personal observations, weekly spelling tests, reading comprehension tests, fluency tests, and conversations with his mother and other teachers.

Billy has been a well-behaved student in my class. He is usually focused, and able to work independently. He is kind to others, and tries to help where he can. Academically, he is near the top of the class. He turns in all his assignments and does well on his assessments. Additionally, his mother routinely checks his homework and signs his planner to show it. Clearly, she is very involved in his schooling, and it shows in his grade.

I first considered Billy to be a Focus Student when his mother told me about his father. I didn't know much about him before that (as I don't know too much about most of my students), and this information led me to choosing him.

My first question was, “What do you like to do when you’re not at school?” I chose this as my first for several reasons. First, it is not intrusive. It is very open-ended, and allowed Billy to respond in whichever way he desired. Billy talked about how he likes to go outside and play football when it’s not too hot. That shows me that he’s active, and prefers to be outside when possible (though he does also enjoy playing WWE2K14 - a wrestling video game).

Second, it allowed me to get a glimpse of him outside of school. When asking about his favorite wrestler, Billy said, “Dean Ambrose...because he’s cool, and he’s crazy like me” (R. Finerty, personal communication, October 11, 2019). I asked him to expand on that, he said, “I jump around and try to do flips that I can’t do, and I end up hurting my head. But my head is indestructible because, when I was little, I used to bump my head on the wall because I didn’t know how to express my feelings” (R. Finerty, personal communication, October 11, 2019).

We talked a bit longer on that topic, and he said he was better at expressing himself now because he knew how to describe what he was feeling. The only times he gets mad these days is when he doesn’t get enough “me” time. This was the first time I was struck by how similar Billy and I are. As I told him during our interview, I also need my “me” time at the end of the day.

From these questions, I had gathered that Billy is a typical kid in many ways. He likes to play, he has passions, interests, and his own opinions. More significantly, he also has impressive historical and emotional intelligence. As in, he understands how he has changed from when he was younger, and why. I was also struck by how eloquently he spoke at time. Admittedly, when transcribing lines from the interview to this document, I misremembered how he phrased certain words, and misquoted him. Only after re-listening did I realize that he spoke very well and organized his thoughts clearly in his mind.

I was most interested in his relationship with his father, but I wanted it to come up organically. I already knew he was in prison, but Billy didn't know that, so I asked, "Can you talk to me about what your neighborhood looks like, and describe your family?" Billy elaborated on how his family is very spread out, but most of his family is in San Bernardino. "Some of them died, but they still count as my family" (R. Finerty, personal communication, October 11, 2019). I found this really touching and insightful. He had talked about his grandfather dying, and how it made him sad. Clearly family is very important to him.

RF: So do you have big family dinners? Do you celebrate Thanksgiving?

Billy assured me he celebrates all the holidays.

RF: So do you have your whole family there?"

B: No, because some has [sic] to work on holidays like my mom.

RF: Really? She has to work on your holidays? What about your dad?

B: My dad is in jail.

RF: Oh he is? I'm sorry to hear that. (pause) What's your dad's name?

B: Alfred.

RF: That's a good name. When will he come home?

B: I dunno, he said like Christmas.

RF: Oh that's great, so that means you'll have him for Christmas.

B: Mmm-hmm.

RF: How long has he been in jail?

B: Well he been [sic] back in jail, like, like, he been, so he got out and came back in, got out came back in, like probably seven times.

RF: That must be really hard. How does that feel, when your dad's in jail?

B: Well sometimes at night, so my grandpa died, so we're from a Spanish place, you know Guatemala? So they have songs, and my sometimes plays songs in the car and sometimes she cries and I cry.

Billy was very open and honest with his response and tone. It is clear that his mother has given him a healthy mechanism for dealing with his emotions in a positive, constructive way. I believe this is one of the main reasons he has become better at expressing his emotions, as mentioned earlier. I wasn't sure if I should press the topic of his father any further, though there was more I wanted to ask.

The last big question I asked was, "What do you like about school, and what do you dislike about school?" He replied, "I like about school is [sic] you get to know other people that's not [sic] your family, and I get to learn more stuff so that when I get older, if one of my cousins doesn't know something I could easily just tell them" (R. Finerty, personal communication, October 11, 2019). Billy's main motivation for doing well in school is to help his family. That is something I would expect to hear from a single parent going to night classes, not a 3rd grader. I took from this that Billy's connection with his family is very deep, and is a central pillar in his life.

When I asked him what he would change in our classroom, he said that I had given him a class job to be a helper, but wasn't letting him do it. I think he was referring to when I changed

many class jobs and responsibilities, so I gave him a job on the spot (he is now the “Memo Boss,” whenever I need something jotted down during instruction, he takes the memo in a special notebook I bought for this purpose).

After our interview, I now see Billy as a very aware, very caring young boy. He recognizes his own emotions and those of others around him. He wants to help - it is his prime motivation for being in school. He has a loving mother and a large network of family and friends that support him. He misses his father, but understands that Alfred is a repeat offender, and seemed to somewhat to accept that fact.

Home Visit #3: Billy

My final home visit was with Billy, my student with significant life experience, and his mother Benedetta. The interview was conducted over the phone, as Benedetta was expecting to give birth in the next week, and a home visit would not have been practical. I spoke with Benedetta while she and Billy drove to her mother’s house.

On a personal note, I found Benedetta to be a truly awe-inspiring person. She has overcome great challenges in her past, and is doing her best to be a supportive mother, working full-time, preparing for childbirth, all while Billy’s father is in prison.

Before our formal conversation began, we discussed Benedetta’s challenges during such a long break (students at my school not invited to take additional “catch-up” classes had 3 weeks off, including Thanksgiving week), the challenges of getting Billy to school on time, and how she was looking forward to having a few months of maternity leave once the baby is born.

She mentioned one morning in particular, where Billy was feeling sick. Billy still wanted to go to school because he didn't want to miss a test, but they arrived late - the only tardy he received for the trimester. Benedetta told me how Billy was really upset about this because he wanted to get a prize for being on-time every day. We would go on to discuss this more, but I was pleasantly surprised to hear about Billy's desire to be in school. I remarked to Benedetta "I think if a lot of kids were given an option from their mother to not go to school, most of them would say 'Yeah, I'm sick!'" (Ry Finerty, personal communication, Nov. 30, 2019) This speaks volumes about who Billy is as a person. He is clearly motivated by his pride and sense of personal accomplishment. His integrity prevents him from seeking out easier paths (even when they are offered).

When I asked Benedetta what she wished for Billy's future, without hesitation she replied, "I really would hope for him to be a college graduate. I didn't really like school after middle school, and just the way I see how education is nowadays, I don't want him struggling the way I struggled. I want him to have more than what I had. I want him to travel the world, and see and do things that maybe I couldn't give him as a kid that maybe he can do for himself *then* [emphasis hers]. I want him to have more than I had." (Benedetta, personal communication, Nov. 30, 2019)

This idea of wanting a better life for Billy was thematic of our conversation, as she frequently connected her responses back to this sentiment. I already knew Billy was incredibly fortunate to have such a dedicated mother, but after our conversation, I could see how centrally important a good education is to her (and, by extension, to Billy as well).

I asked Benedetta for advice on how I could be more effective when teaching Billy. Again, without hesitation, she replied “Eye contact. He focuses really good when you do eye contact. I noticed a lot of people, when we communicate, we tend to look lower or to the side, and with him that’s his issue. He gets distracted sometimes, so eye contact tends to say ‘He’s not playing’. I say that because he got that from me; if I don’t get eye contact then I don’t really take it in like that, and then I slack off. I notice he has the same issue. If I don’t give him eye contact, he doesn’t take me serious.”

I thanked her for making her advice so succinct. I always try to maintain eye contact when talking, especially in the classroom. Going forward, I will redouble my efforts to ensure that I am deliberately making eye contact with my students. For Billy specifically, I will position his desk so he and I are facing each other.

I was curious about what Benedetta saw as Billy’s strengths. “For one, math. Numbers in general, numbers are a strength to him. He was in preschool since he was three, and I noticed that numbers was his biggest thing. For some reason, anytime he saw numbers when he was little, he would just put them together and read it. That was his first thing, you know they learn words and stuff, his was numbers. Which is weird, a lot of people were like ‘Hey, what was his first word?’ Well, his first words were obviously ‘mom’ and ‘dad,’ but what always got his attention was always numbers.” (Benedetta, personal communication, Nov. 30, 2019)

As I don’t teach math, it will be harder for me to leverage his aptitude for it in my class. However, I am planning on doing a crossover lesson with my partner teacher (who teaches math and science), wherein we combine what we’re learning in our writing class to write our own math problems. Referring back to our one-on-one interview, Billy said he always wants to help

people; I think this would be an excellent opportunity for him to speak with authority as he helps his classmates work on this assignment.

The second strength, she said, was his communication skills. “His vocabulary is not like a lot of other kids I see, because he’s very, very straightforward. I never babied him. I’ve always told him to talk straight out and say how you feel. I never wanted to be that mom, to where if something was to happen to me, he doesn’t know. He’s very independent; he doesn’t depend on me for a lot of things.” (Benedetta, personal communication, Nov. 30, 2019)

This echoes much of my in-class experience with Billy, as he has always spoken very directly. After listening back to my interviews, home visits, and virtual POD, I have noticed my language is uneconomical. This has undoubtedly made my lessons less engaging since more time is spent listening to me instead of engaging with the content. I will actively seek to “say more with less,” not just to be more concise, or to leave more room for student-centered activities, but also because many students communicate this way as well. The fewer words you use, the clearer the message. (Lenov, 2011)

I chose Billy to be my focus student because his father has been in and out of prison his whole life. “His dad got incarcerated about three months after Billy was born. I had to take full responsibility for him as a baby. He was 3 months when his dad went in and did about 3 years.” (Benedetta, personal communication, Nov. 20, 2019) I wanted to understand what effect this had on their family. Benedetta answered by explaining her attitude towards raising Billy: “He might think ‘Oh, she’s always tough on me,’ but I’m showing tough love in a different way. I’m preparing him for when he gets older, so that way no else has to tell him anything. Obviously there’s his dad, but I don’t know the situation, if he’s gonna stay out. And I can’t depend on him

saying ‘Oh, I’m gonna be out, and stay out this time.’ So I tell Billy we just have to keep going. We cannot just stay here and wait for Dad to be like ‘Oh I’m here to help.’ So I really don’t count on his dad for help. I begged and I begged and I begged so many times for him to help me with his son, because he’s a boy, and I *know* [emphasis hers] he needs his dad. I’m 32 years old, and I don’t have my dad. So that’s why I think I’m double harder with him, because I don’t have my dad in my life, and he doesn’t have that either.” (Benedetta, personal communication, Nov. 20, 2019)

I thanked Benedetta for her openness and honesty. I cannot empathize with her or Billy’s experiences, but I can use it to help me become a more understanding and compassionate educator. Before these home visits, I was not actively reflecting on my students’ home lives when teaching. The first trimester has been the most stressful period of my life, and it has been hard to reserve some energy for my students. This comment helped me understand that each student in my class has their own life as well; that we are all faced with challenges. It also reinforces the fact that I, as a male teacher, maybe the only positive male role model some of my students have. As mentioned previously, one of my main focuses in the next trimester is to have a warmer, more patient tone when teaching. There are several reasons for this, but one reason that relates especially to Benedetta’s comment is to demonstrate how an adult (in my case, a male adult) conducts themselves.

Part C**Section 1 - Community Context****What are the demographics of the community?**

San Bernardino is a city in the Inland Empire that is the county seat of San Bernardino County, and it has a population of over 215,000 people. Of its population, the majority is Hispanic (65%), followed by White (15%) and Black (14%). The population has grown 15% in the last 20 years. Less than 30% of its citizens graduate high school, and a quarter of households are “non-family.” The median household income for San Bernardino residents is \$38k/year; the California state average household income is \$61k/year. Over 15% of San Bernardino residents are unemployed, and 40+% receive some form of government assistance. According to the US Census, San Bernardino is the poorest city in California, and the second poorest in the nation, after Detroit.

What does the community look and feel like? (i.e.; landscape, architecture, urban/suburban setting, use of space, how people interact, etc.)

San Bernardino city has many hallmarks of Southern California architecture. Most municipal buildings, and many private homes have stucco walls, red-tile roofs, and rounded arches. In my school’s community, most homes are significantly more run-down, and many homes have been foreclosed upon. There is little foot traffic in my school’s community; the only exceptions are the many homeless people residing in the area. As we have an exterior gated exercise area for our students, we can sometimes smell marijuana and crack cocaine that is consumed close to the school premises.

What languages are spoken? Has this shifted over time?

The majority (61%) of the population is Hispanic, so Spanish is presumably the most commonly spoken language, followed by English. Since WWII, the Hispanic population has risen roughly 1% every year. Conversely, the White population has decreased roughly 1% every year since WWII. The Black population has remained relatively stable since the 1970s.

What population, industry, and/or labor history has influenced the community and specifically your students and their families?

In 2012, San Bernardino filed for bankruptcy, the largest city to have ever done so (until Detroit did the same in 2013). The city had more than \$1B in debt, and remained in bankruptcy for 5 years. During that time, it had suspended pension payments to the California Public Employees Retirement System. Additionally, it privatized its fire department, and rewrote its city charter. Most storefronts are open these days, though many areas, like San Bernardino's Old Town, are quiet and commercially quiet. Many of my families find work outside of the city (they are always mentioning the traffic in and out of the city), as there are not enough jobs within.

What kind of housing is available and where do your students live? (i.e.: apartments, mobile homes, etc.)

The majority of San Bernardino's housing is low-density housing, though there are a significant number of apartment complexes (two of my Focus Students live in these). Roughly half of all

homes here are owned and lived in by the owners; the other half are occupied by renters. Nearly 23% of households had a female householder without no husband present.

What are the resources and services available in the community?

There are some robust social services available to San Bernardino residents. For example, California Children's Services (CCS) supports parents by assisting them in accessing medical services to help their children. This and thirteen other social services are accessible for San Bernardino residents.

There are many services aimed at addressing poverty. Community Action Partnership, for example, sets up food pantries, provides residents with financial training to achieve economic stability and self-reliance, and seeks to maintain an accurate count of homeless residents at any one time. Two services are focused on helping homeless veterans, like VA.com/homeless and the Veteran Crisis Line. There is also a HS CBO program that arranges for surplus county goods to be given to non-profits working in the area.

What resources and services are needed?

There is a clear need for more homeless support. Many are forced to sleep in makeshift camps near my school. I have spoken with many of them, and have heard that drug use and mental illness are rife in that community. Crime is rampant in the community as well; there is frequent theft as well as rape. Homeless citizens have told me they don't contact the police because of slow response times, as well as a general distrust of authority.

While there are meal programs for the homeless, there is not enough for everyone to have a meal. Our school has free meals, but we have to throw them out if they are not even opened. I try to save whatever I can and give it out to the homeless people usually camping in the parking lot outside of my school, even though I have been told explicitly not to (the food company's name is on the packages, and they don't want to be sued).

What are the community's assets? Give examples.

San Bernardino residents have access to a fairly robust public transportation system. There are dozens of bus lines travelling around the city, as well as Metrolink train services connecting them to Los Angeles and other major hubs. These are cheap options for travelling around the city and state.

There are several notable theaters used for local performances. Sturges Theater, for example, is often rented by my school to host school performances multiple times a year. There are two main hospitals, and other small specialist hospitals. There are only two emergency rooms, however.

The community at my school is widely religious; this is reflected in the 100+ churches in San Bernardino. They offer worship services in a variety of faiths.

San Bernardino is close (less than 10 miles) to the San Gabriel Mountains.

California State University San Bernardino is located in the north of the city, and offers an inexpensive path to higher education. They specialize in Business, Management, and Marketing

degrees, and are known for their educational services for active duty military personnel and veterans.

San Bernardino County Museum has exhibits and collections in cultural and natural history of the region. They have live animal shows, research sections, and public programs for adults and children.

Section 2 – Community Events & Community Members

Events

I researched three events in my school's community. Two were family events designed to give families opportunities to create positive memories. One of them was a showcase of African American culture and history.

The Mother-Daughter dance was held at a local community center, and was organized by the PTA. At first, it appeared to be simply a dance, but the theme had much more to do with African American female empowerment. There was food and drinks, and a DJ playing music for those wanting to dance, but there were also many prominent female community members. I spoke with a few business owners, PTA members, and other community organizers, who had all brought their daughters. While some danced, others sat and spoke in groups about issues they faced in their community.

The next month saw its counterpart event, the Father-Son picnic. The theme centered on positive male role models raising strong boys. Instead of a dancefloor, there were numerous games and activities fathers and sons could play together. Pool, basketball, beanbags, and ping-pong were available to be used, and there was a barbecue grilling hot dogs and burgers.

There were fewer community leaders at this event, which felt less formal than the Mother-Daughter dance. When speaking to the attendees, I found most of them were fathers of young boys, and wanted to use this event as an opportunity to spend time with them.

The African American Program is a recurring, yearly performance of K-8 students in the community. It is meant to be a showcase of African American culture through song and dance. Groups of students choose a performance, and practice for weeks. I saw most performances, and was greatly impressed by the passion, artistry, humor, skill, and coordination of these young performers. One middle school group made a tribute to Kobe Bryant, another 2nd grade group performed a skit of the Oprah show, in which she interviewed famous African American historical figures. It was as funny as it was adorable. I was most impressed by a 3rd grade performance of the Black Panthers' 10-Point Program. Wearing black berets and black gloves, they stood in rows and powerfully delivered their lines. They were the only group that had a call-and-response element; after each point, a student shouted "Power to the People?" and the audience (roughly 400 people strong) would raucously echo "Power to the People!" They received a standing ovation.

I spoke with several community members during these events. First was Mrs. A, who attended the Mother-Daughter dance with her two daughters, 11-year-old Emily and 7-year-old Amy. In addition to being a parent, Mrs. A served on the local PTA board as well. She was born in San Bernardino, and has lived there her whole life. When Emily was six, she told me, she became more involved in PTA matters. According to her, Emily's kindergarten teacher had not satisfactorily prepared her for 1st grade, and she had been unable to make any progress communicating that to her school's administration. She joined the PTA to have a stronger voice

in the community, and while she was unable to address the situation with the kindergarten teacher, she found she enjoyed the connection that the organization provided.

Mr. B attended the Father-Son Picnic with his son, 8-year-old Eric. Mr. B is a forklift operator, and was grateful for the event, as it allowed him to spend more time with his son. He works long hours, and is usually never able to drop off or pick up Eric from school. He had taken the afternoon off so he could take Eric to the event.

Ms. M attended the African American Program, and is a teacher at a neighboring elementary school. Her middle school class performed the Kobe tribute, as her students were very upset by his death. She told me she has been participating in this event for the last three years, and the performances continue to improve each year. She makes the effort to encourage her students to perform, as there are “not enough opportunities for young Black children to positively explore and express their race.” (Ms. M., personal communication, February 7, 2020)

The community members with whom I spoke had much to say about their community; while their views differed, they were all committed to San Bernardino’s success and eventual resurgence. When I asked about the positive elements of the community, their views were surprisingly consistent. “People who are here want to be here” (Ms. R., personal communication, April 3, 2020) was a sentiment shared by all three community members. That is, those that live in San Bernardino choose to live there, and are proud residents. They thought San Bernardino had much to offer, including natural resources, a proud history, and a robust grassroots community. Land can be bought cheaply, and it is situated less than an hour from both the Pacific Ocean and the San Gabriel Mountains. It has a sufficient, if diminished public

transportation system, and 3 notable colleges within 20 minutes of each other (University of Riverside, Cal State University San Bernardino, and University of Redlands).

All had plenty to say about what the city lacks. They described how the city began its downturn in the 1970s, when several large institutions closed, including the Kaiser steel mill and Norton Air Force base. This caused thousands of lost jobs, as well as capital and investments to seek more attractive municipalities. San Bernardino petitioned for and was given federal aid in the 2000s, but city officials (it was later revealed) embezzled millions of these dollars. The effects of this were not immediately felt, but after the 2008 recession, city services were increasingly cut.

This included public outreach programs, family assistance, school funding, and police presence. Ms. M. told me that San Bernardino City had maintained a public works program for decades, in which residents could receive work to repair and improve streets and sidewalks. She saw it as a point of pride, something that no other city in the Inland Empire had done, but lamented that, due to the aforementioned budget cuts, the city was unable to continue funding the program, so it was discontinued.

When I asked what the city needed, their answers were largely consistent. The city needs to provide jobs and ease entry requirements for residents to start their own businesses. The city's Old Town is sadly quiet, with very little foot traffic. Many of the storefronts are closed, and are unlikely to open soon. Mrs. A told me that, in an effort to mask lost revenues and keep the local economy from plummeting, the city began purchasing buildings from businesses that chose to leave the city. The majority of unused real estate in San Bernardino City is owned by the city, which it will presumably resell it for a fraction of what was paid. This has created a toxic

environment for businesses and aspiring business owners. There are so many empty buildings that it has driven most other businesses away.

Services

I researched several local businesses with which Hardy Brown has partnerships. Revolution Foods supplies all of our reduced price/free meals, of which students receive up to four per day (breakfast, morning snack, lunch, supper). As many of our families depend on these meals, Revolution has continued distributing them during quarantine. Families drive up to the school, and meals are placed in their cars to reduce the chance of contamination.

As our students are expected to wear uniforms, Carrusel Uniforms provides the clothes needed to comply with school expectations. They set up their table outside the school several times throughout the year to offer families the opportunity to purchase additional/replacement clothing articles.

Hardy Brown partners with prominent African American professionals and business owners for Career Day twice a year. These are community leaders that answer students' questions about their profession and the process of attaining that job. Hardy Brown also offers an after-school program, where students can complete homework in a quiet environment. As it costs extra to participate, it has fairly low attendance, and mostly serves as a form of daycare for parents who are unable to pick up their students at the regular dismissal time.

Problematize the Issue

After speaking with parents and faculty, it is clear we need a better food distribution system. Many of our students' meals are eaten at school, and some go hungry when at home. They are given free meals at school, but there is no mechanism affiliated with Hardy Brown that extends this service to the home. The reason, obviously, is due to cost. The state can defend its decision to supplement companies like Revolution Foods to provide free meals to students at school, but to extend it to the home may appear as another form of welfare.

Another service sorely lacking at our site is tutoring. Many of our students would benefit greatly from individual support at their own pace. I have been unable to provide that, at least to my satisfaction. That is disheartening, as I can see that many of my students would be able to generate significant momentum in their development if they had additional guided practice. Our after-school program provides a quiet place for students to complete their work, but does not offer tutoring services (and only a few families take advantage of this anyway).

Response to the COVID-19 crisis

On March 13, our school temporarily closed in-class instruction. Initially, we were told that San Bernardino Unified School District had voted to close schools for one month until April 13, then to May 1, and now Governor Newsom has taken executive action to extend that through to the end of the school year. Teachers were told to await further instructions, while the curriculum team at Fortune School of Education's headquarters in Sacramento devised a distance learning program, which we began two weeks later.

Teachers at my school received notice of San Bernardino Unified School District's decision to close all of its schools thirty minutes before dismissal on March 13. We were told to

not share the information with parents, though during dismissal (parents line up outside of classrooms to sign their children out directly from the teachers), the majority of them had received the same news from other sources. As the crisis has developed, our school organization has forwarded news and messages from state authorities, including the governor, about changes to the policy.

We had no chance to discuss it before we dismissed class on March 13, but I have been able to speak virtually with students and families regarding how they are coping with being quarantined. During my teacher hours, when I am available for students to call in via video chat to discuss their assignments, I offer strategies to counter lethargy and remain productive, as well as providing meaningful or interesting distractions from the banality of quarantine.

Governor Newsom has held frequent press conferences to keep the public informed of developments relating to the virus. California was one of the states that chose to implement social distancing earlier than most; as a result, the infection rate has slowed dramatically, though the governor's executive order will remain in force for the foreseeable future. San Bernardino county officials have opened drive-through COVID-19 testing areas, and have moved all municipal services online, where possible. San Bernardino has markedly fewer cases of Coronavirus than most other commensurate cities in Southern California, as "we don't have an international community that would be frequently travelling to and from China." (Ms. R., personal communication, February 7, 2020)

Hardy Brown has taken steps to help families directly. During regular school operation, my school offers free and reduced-price lunch to its students, provided by Revolution Foods. During the quarantine, instead of students receiving their food in our cafeteria, families drive by

the entrance of the school, and staff place packs of ready-made meals into their open car windows, to reduce the chance of virus transmission.

In addition, Hardy Brown has loaned out all of its Chromebooks to our students. When it became clear that Fortune School of Education would pursue a distance learning program, we notified all families that they would be able to borrow a Chromebook for the duration of the school's closure. These were also given in the same manner as the ready-made meals.

This event has affected me in unexpected ways. I am an introvert, so when we were told to shelter in place until notified otherwise, I was content. I was very stressed in my classroom, and having a break from that, imposed or not, was a welcome reprieve. At the time of writing this, though, more than five weeks have passed since schools closed. I find it difficult to stay motivated and to keep my teaching grounded in reality. I interacted with 50 spirited 3rd graders on a daily basis; being isolated so suddenly afterwards is a difficult adjustment to make. Time seems to have less meaning, and it is challenging to use my time productively. As stressful as my classroom was, I realize now how much it helped to structure my life. Without it, life feels vague and poorly demarcated.

Additionally, I find it harder to hold my students to a higher standard. Grading has become lenient, the majority of students are not participating in our distance learning program at all, and the few interactions I have with students on video calls limits how much teaching I can actually accomplish; usually, I am answering technology or procedural questions. "Although [warm demanders] recognize the difficult circumstances of their students, they demand that they can and will rise above them." (Delpit, L. (2014) p. 78) I want to be a warm demander, but this virtual format makes that challenging, and while the few students with whom I speak on a daily

basis are doing excellent work, I am disheartened by the dozens that are not engaging with the curriculum at all.

Section 3 – School Site Research

The School Site

Hardy Brown College Prep is located in central San Bernardino, a few blocks off of the 215 freeway. A few years ago, it was physically located across the street from its current location, in an abandoned mall. Fortune School of Education, the parent organization of Hardy Brown, has made repurposing old spaces part of their commitment to helping local communities. They remade several empty shops to serve as classrooms. After the terrorist attack in 2015, they took security concerns more seriously, and moved into their current location. Our building used to be a department store, which is why we have such a large parking lot. They did a great job turning the open space into classrooms, but it is a small space for 300+ students to share.

HBCP has a good reputation in the community. Many parents want their kids to go there, as the public schools have gang and drug-related problems, and very low academic achievement. HBCP has the highest test scores in the county for its grade level, and the waiting list for new students is significant. Those students who are admitted tend to stay until they graduate in 8th grade. The vast majority of my students have attended HBCP since kindergarten. Additionally, HBCP offers a more rigorous academic setting, with a longer instruction day than nearby public schools (8.5 hours compared to 6.5 hours). This is also attractive to parents who, due to work commitments, are unable to pick up their student at an earlier time.

Personnel

To help deepen my understanding of the school community, I spoke with several members of staff. First, I spoke with Mrs. J, who is my partner teacher in third grade. We both teach the same two groups of students; I focus on ELA and Social Studies, she teaches Math and Science. This is her fourth year teaching at Hardy Brown. Her feelings towards the school were largely positive. While she does have some issues with administration, she thinks “the school does a lot of good things for the kids. It gives them more than an education; it gives them a safe space, too, a place where they can feel emotionally secure, and physically fed.” (Mrs. J., personal communication, April 6, 2020) Her professional mandate at Hardy Brown also aligns with her personal motivation. “The students at Hardy Brown are surrounded by adults that truly care about them. During this quarantine, I miss them even more, and I think about them all the time.” Regarding her personal motivation for teaching, she sees Hardy Brown as “the place that allows her to do what [she’s] passionate about.” Mrs. J feels that while the school provides many benefits to its students, it can improve in other areas, specifically its strict culture. She feels that this is partly why its academic success is so great, but it comes at a cost to student freedom and expression. This is exemplified by a lack of unstructured breaktime (instead of free recess, students have a teacher-led yoga class in the mornings).

Next, I spoke with Mrs. L, who is a lead teacher and member of the administration. She is responsible for training and monitoring progress of other elementary ELA teachers, including myself. When asked her thoughts about Hardy Brown, she said she “really loves the connections made with the staff.” (Mrs. L., personal communication, March 26, 2020) She has taught there for seven years, and the support she receives from other staff is what has distinguished Hardy

Brown from other schools, and ultimately what has kept her teaching there. “There is a real sense of camaraderie with the staff; everyone is going through the same thing and understands each other’s struggles.” To get a complete picture of her view of Hardy Brown, I asked in which areas she thought the school could improve. Without hesitation, she replied “Parent involvement. [Our principal]’s heart is in the right place, in that she wants to maintain control over who is in the building during school hours, but she needs to allow them back into the school.” She cited how our principal spends some of her time planning dances instead of focusing on discipline, and that these are excellent projects that could easily be delegated to parents. It would lighten our principal’s load, and allow her to focus on areas that benefit the teachers and students. Mrs. L made it clear, however, that she fully supported our principal, whom she said had a great ability to empower her employees. She recounted a story of her first year of teaching, in which she taught at an expensive private school, and received little support from her principal (who consistently took the parents’ side). When she came to Hardy Brown, she found that our principal was able to “bring my confidence back.”

Finally I spoke with Ms. R, who is Hardy Brown’s RTI specialist. She is a lifelong local resident, and is proud to be working at Hardy Brown. She said that, despite making less money than her previous job (in which she was an elementary teacher) and receiving offers from other schools, she continues to work with us. She stays because Hardy Brown offers her the opportunity to work with students from her community. She thinks that Hardy Brown is unique because it offers a highly rigorous and demanding school environment that is unmatched by the nearby public schools. When asked about what the school needs, without hesitation, she talked about the acute lack of counseling services available to students. We have one school counselor

who works part-time, and only works with two of my students. Ms. R. would increase the number of counselors so any student, regardless of IEP or previous behavioral intervention, could speak with someone about issues they face because “Adolescents act and engage differently depending upon whether they feel known or anonymous.” (Mehle, D., & Frazier, N. (2013) p. 41)

Problematize the Issue

Hardy Brown has a strict culture. Students are expected to be well-behaved and under control at all times. While walking in the hallway, students are expected to walk silently with their hands behind their back and their eyes looking forward. While in the classroom, students are expected to silently sit upright, their eyes tracking the speaker, and ears actively listening. There is a zero-tolerance no-bullying policy, though (in my opinion) this is not as strictly enforced as it should be. The dress code is strictly enforced, however, and our administration will come into the classroom and write up infractions to be sent home to parents (this can affect a student’s honor roll eligibility). There are expectations for how students should address adults and each other. For example, teachers are always addressed by their title (Mr., Mrs., etc.), even by other teachers. Additionally, students are expected to use sentence stems during class discussions (I would like to build on what _____ said; I respectfully disagree with what _____ said). Parents are expected to personally pick up their student from the classroom at dismissal, and receive a fine if they are late multiple times.

Unfortunately, I have found Hardy Brown lacking in accommodations for different types of learners. Hardy Brown does not have separate EL teachers. Therefore, ELs are not pulled out

of class for small-group instruction. Officially, I am expected to provide EL instruction in class, but unofficially I am under no pressure to do so. The implication from our administration is that we are already incorporating this instruction in the classroom, mostly in the form of Word Walls. Speaking honestly, I have not made a concerted effort to provide the daily 20 minutes of EL instruction, as I continue to struggle with time and classroom management.

There is also no formal policy addressing the needs of gifted learners. It is implied that teachers differentiate their instruction to address different students' needs. However, the administration at Hardy Brown has divided the 3rd grade students into two classes based entirely on their NWEA test scores. As a result, my partner teacher and I teach the "Benchmark" class (those with an NWEA score of 60% or higher) and the "Rising" class (those scoring less than 60%). Unsurprisingly, this results in a significant disparity between the two groups, as the students in the "Rising" class don't have the benefit of learning from their "Benchmark" peers, and are less able to build the confidence needed to progress at grade level.

As previously mentioned, Hardy Brown has a behavior counselor available to speak with students who have significant life experiences. Unfortunately, our counselor does not have a full-time position, and only comes for limited hours twice a week. As a result, many of my students that could benefit from talking out their feelings are unable to do so.

Section 4 – School Mission/Vision & Demographics

Demographics

Hardy Brown's student population is majority African American (90%+), with a small percentage of Hispanic students, and very few White students. Linguistically, all students speak

English, though a considerable percentage of our Hispanic students are English Learners. Some students are of African descent, though English is still their first language. Our school provides instruction from Transitional Kindergarten to eight grade, and besides a small number of students who were retained a year, all students are between the ages of 4-14.

Faculty-wise, one third of teachers are White, one third are African American, and the remaining third are a mix of Hispanic and Asian. The administration, specifically the principal and assistant principal, are both African American.

There is a significant mismatch between the teaching staff and the demographics of the community. The majority of San Bernardino's population is Hispanic (65%), followed by White (15%) and Black (14%). Less than a third of our teaching staff is Hispanic, and White and Black staff are also overrepresented.

Mission/Vision

According to the Fortune School of Education's website, their mission is "To graduate high achieving students of good character prepared for college and citizenship in a democratic society." (Mission. (n.d.). Retrieved March 20, 2020, from <https://bit.ly/3cLztQI>) It was developed by Dr. Rex Fortune in 1989 when he founded Fortune School. These schools are focused on closing the African American achievement gap.

Fortune School of Education (FSE) has partnerships within the African American journalism industry. Publications like *The Black Voice News* and *The Sacramento Observer Newspaper* offer FSE the ability to convey their message and mission to the African American community in California.

In addition to these partnerships, FSE also partners with local prominent African American business owners and professionals. Part of preparing their students for college also means introducing them to various professions, and demonstrating that African American citizens can and should be successful and independent.

I try to contextualize FSE's mission in the classroom in terms of how it will benefit the students later in life, specifically related to what their expectations will be in future grades, as well as college. This is illustrated in *Highly Effective Teachers of Vulnerable Students*, when Ms. D's contextualization strategy is described: "When the discussion is finished, Ms. D states, 'now could I write a summary with this information? Yes (models a quick verbal summary), but not today. Place these in your folders.'" (Poplin, M., & Bermudez, C. (2019) p. 16) Students are aware that being prepared for college is the main focus of Hardy Brown, and many of the school's practices are designed to illustrate college's importance.

While I understand FSE's mission in this regard, I am not completely supportive of it. College is one path to success, but it is not the *only* path. I feel that vocational training programs are sadly viewed as inferior to college, which is reflected in how few American students are enrolled in these programs (as compared to college attendance). Vocational programs offer training in a variety of industries that offer well-paying jobs that are largely immune from risk of automation. The overfixation on college as *the* means for elevating one's status in society can have two negative effects: first, it can saddle the student with large amounts of debt, precisely when they should be able to take risks in starting businesses or relocating for work. Second, while pursuing a college degree can yield higher-paying jobs, it can also lead one to view jobs not requiring a college degree as lower-quality, or indicative of lower social standing. My

personal feelings aside, I “toe the company line” with regards to college preparation, but I am not Hardy Brown’s most vociferous college advocate.

Problematize the Issue

Despite my misgivings, Hardy Brown College Prep is one of the highest performing schools in San Bernardino City Unified School District. Their scholars outperform their peers in math and English Language Arts, regardless of race. According to the annual assessment scores released on October 11, 2019 by the California Department of Education, 46.2% of African American scholars at HBCP met state standards in math compared to 15.1% of this same demographic in San Bernardino City Unified School District. HBCP scholars also excel in ELA; 59% of their African American scholars met state standards in comparison to San Bernardino City Unified School District's 29.9% of the same demographic.

I believe there is room for improvement at HBCP, and it begins by addressing the limited parental involvement at our school. The administration does not encourage it, and this is lamented by other teachers with whom I have spoken. This culture has been attributed to our administration’s attitude towards maintaining tight control over who is in the school building. School security is taken very seriously, as we have buzzer-controlled entrances watched by an armed guard during school hours.

While I understand the concern, especially considering the proximity of Hardy Brown’s previous location to the 2015 San Bernardino terrorist attack¹, there could be more effort made to reintegrate parents into the school environment. One way in which this could be done is by

¹ The two perpetrators, Syed Rizwan Farook and Tashfeen Malik, fled authorities by driving directly by the school site.

giving parent volunteers the authority to organize social events, instead of the administration doing so. Several years ago, Hardy Brown used to have a parent liaison, who sat at the front desk next to the secretary, and was available to inform parents of events or activities. Several parents and teachers have communicated to me that they would like Hardy Brown to bring back that position.

Hardy Brown has proudly and clearly stated their mission, though I fear that the lack of key resources leaves certain students less likely to succeed there. The students that do thrive on campus are those who do not need additional support to succeed academically. Students with significant behavioral issues often do not have access to the counselors and accommodations they would require to calm down and be less disruptive in class. This was exemplified by two male students in my class this year that exhibited extremely disruptive behavior. One boy clearly had an undiagnosed learning disability, causing him to frequently scream out obscenities and run around the room during class. The other boy exhibited bullying behavior by punching and kicking, as well as cursing at students across the room. Hardy Brown does not have the resources to compassionately and patiently help students like these. We were unable to offer any counseling, and our sporadically-enforced no-bullying policy limited what measures I could take in the classroom. As a result, both boys were expelled, but only after months of this disruptive behavior.

Students that are able to self-motivate and complete work on their own show the most success. This is often reflective of how much support they receive from their family. Students whose families are heavily involved in their learning (ie. very communicative on ClassDojo, frequently ask questions about assignments, and want to understand how their child acts/behaves

in class) tend to be more engaged and receptive. Many of my students who struggle with the content have parents with whom it is very difficult to communicate. Certain students have turned in very little work this year, and were at risk of retention by the end of the second trimester. These students' parents do not return ClassDojo messages, do not come in-person to pick their child up from school, and do not answer their phones. I have done what I can in the classroom to help these students, but it is clear that there is no accountability at home to either complete homework or come to school in a productive mindset. It saddens and frustrates me because these students' futures are suffering, and I am limited in terms of what I can do without parental support.

Section 5 – Classroom Reflection

Ecology

My classroom functions like a community, where students feel that they are supported in their learning journey, not just by the teacher, but their fellow students as well. In order for them to feel supported, they interact with honesty and civility. Students are empowered by their classmates, and come to view them as resources to assist them on their learning journey.

The main effort I have made to ensure my classroom feels welcoming and safe is to be consistent. I try to make my interactions with students consistent in line with classroom norms and practices that we have put into place. That means having a roughly consistent routine during the day, so students find the space more predictable. I try to be consistently fair when dealing with discipline, not being overly strict or lenient with specific students (though this has been very difficult).

I have also encouraged students to enfranchise themselves to the classroom by including them in creating behavioral expectations, reward systems, and routines. Students feel they are more invested in the space when they help create the “rules” of the space. Additionally, I take a lot of student feedback when teaching lessons. For example, when I began experimenting with Gallery Walks, I asked my students about what they enjoyed, what was difficult, and what should change, then incorporated that into future lessons.

I also try to observe my students as much as possible. During a meeting with a parent, my partner teacher and I were told she would be taking her son out of the school due to bullying. We were both shocked, as neither of us had seen or heard anything all year. Since then, I’ve tried to notice when students are clearly feeling distressed, and have taken them aside to have a quiet chat. Taking this time to understand what problems my students are facing has helped our classroom ecology enormously.

When I first arrived in my classroom it was very jarring visually, as there were large elements of bold, clashing colors (hot pink and green, for example). I am very sensitive to colors, so I decided to change the color scheme to something much more muted, opting for blue, grey, and yellow. The result was much more soothing, with the wall elements simply displaying posted work, instead of being too distracting.

I arranged my desks into pods instead of traditional rows, as I often have collaborative exercises requiring structured group work. In the back, I have a row of 4-6 isolated desks. Some students have asked to sit by themselves, some parents have asked that I isolate their student to limit distractions, and some students lost their privilege of sitting with their team due to behavior, and sat at an “island” desk until they earned it back.

The classroom culture I have tried to create first focuses on having a growth mindset. Students may become overwhelmed when they make a mistake, especially if that mistake is witnessed by their classmates. They can feel like failures, and may withdraw from further engagement. Having a growth mindset flips this on its head. Instead of a “*Mistakes are bad so I’m just not going to raise my hand at all*” mentality, I have tried to encourage my students to adopt a “*Mistakes are awesome because they show me where I can get better*” mentality. Whether the student succeeds or makes a mistake, there is value in either outcome.

My second focus has been encouraging students to be critical, but supportive. In order to foster a strong community, its members must maintain a level of honesty and civility with one another. That means that when they disagree, they are encouraged to specify why, using certain conventions that will convey their honest opinion, while not attacking or demeaning those with whom they disagree. For example, if a student shares their perspective on a text we are reading in class, and another student has a different perspective on it, I have modeled how to address the other student directly using supportive language *first*, critical language *second*.

My third focus has been to encourage students to actively listen to their peers. If a student is sharing a perspective, and another student interrupts them, that sends a subtle message that communicates “My thoughts are more important/valid/correct than yours.” Instead, if one is actively listening to another, they are less focused on simply waiting for their turn to talk. This allows each of us to feel as though our words are being carefully considered, and valued in the community. This, in turn, will encourage future contributions, since each student will know that their thoughts are welcomed.

I find that students’ lack of enthusiasm for a lesson has less to do with their inability to

grapple with the content than it does with a lack of relatability. When I am able to relate content to something they are already familiar with, it greatly speeds up the process. For example, many of my students enjoy the video game Fortnite, so I insert references to it whenever I can.

We have a few Spanish speakers in our classroom, and I try to tap into that knowledge whenever possible. Aside from practicing my Spanish with them (which they find hilarious and awesome, since they become the teacher), I will often ask my Spanish speakers to translate a word we are discussing, and as a class we look for similarities between the English and Spanish versions.

To break up the monotony of lessons I “try to find a way to break up the script” (Heath, D., & Heath, C. (2019) p. 92), and I have found that dancing to music works perfectly to achieve this. I will usually find a song online with accompanying dance moves, and the students can move around for a few minutes. Before quarantine, I was allowing students who had completed their work the chance to add songs to our list (I would listen and ensure there was no profanity first, of course). This allowed students to share what they loved with their classmates.

Positive intervention has been the first step in helping students with their socio-emotional growth. From making observations of my students, and those in my school, the majority of students need help with socio-emotional learning. As I try to become a more culturally responsive teacher, I want to “ensure an environment that values students as whole beings, encouraging success within and beyond the scope of the classrooms.” (Cuauhtin, R. T., Zavala, M., Sleeter, C. E., & Au, W. (2019) p. 23) Many of these students are at the lower end of academic achievement, and are coming from difficult home situations. Many of my students who have shown negative behavioral issues are usually trying to express their emotions, but lack the

tools or language to do so. A small number of my students this year have shown this to be true, as they act out in class to get attention, but without their audience, they are much calmer and easy to talk to. With these students, I have asked them to eat lunch in my classroom once or twice a week. I make it clear that this is not a serious teacher meeting; rather we are just having a friendly chat. I try to get to know them, but mostly I let them talk. I try to steer the conversation towards the areas I think they want to understand (their behavior, for instance), so the discussion is organic, and we can share ideas about how we can improve.

3rd grade is a unique time, when students have to adjust to new obligations, as 2nd grade is still largely teacher-centered. I want my students to understand that their job in school is not to endear themselves to their teacher (or their friends, for that matter). More importantly, I have tried to show them that I do not expect them to always be “better” or “smarter” than they are. Rather, I have tried to demonstrate that learning is a lifelong process; understanding that learning is a journey - not a destination - is a lesson in itself, and the tools that we need on that journey take time to improve.

For example, one student this year has struggled on his weekly spelling tests. I could see he was becoming discouraged, as he routinely failed. I had a conversation with him during lunch and we discussed what was challenging for him. He admitted to not studying enough, so we agreed that he should start doing so. I told him that the goal was not to get a perfect score each time, but to do better than the last test. We made an agreement that if he got the same number of words correct as the prior week’s test, he would get a point on ClassDojo. If he did better than the previous score, I would call home and tell his mom how amazing he was. His test scores improved after that!

Creating a welcoming environment in the classroom means I am held to the same expectations as my students, and I visibly demonstrate that whenever possible. For example, we have a strict no-phones policy at our school, and I make a point to say that this applies to me as well, so I do not have my phone while teaching. Aside from the value of following certain expectations, I believe that there is much greater value in young students seeing how someone (like a teacher) embodies individual responsibility. By holding myself to the same standards as I hold my students, they are able to see what that looks like in practice.

Additionally, I have tried to give my students as much responsibility and choice as possible. We create our class expectations as a group, and everyone's feedback is taken into account. When experimenting with different lesson formats, I ardently seek feedback from my students, and make it obvious when I use it (my Gallery Walks, for example). When a student brings up an issue they have with the class environment (the physical space, lesson pacing, content confusion, etc.), I do my best to explain, then ask that student "What do you think we should do?" I want my students to believe they have a stake in the classroom, and it is their responsibility to maintain it as a safe space. That way, the group feels like a team!

Demographics

Nearly four out of five students in my two classes are African American; the rest are mostly Hispanic, with one White student. All are able to speak English fluently, with the exception of one Hispanic student whose speaking skills are improving, yet she produces some of the best written work in her class. This particular student does not need significant additional support with her language, as she is self-motivated and works diligently to complete her work.

Hardy Brown does not have a GATE program, though my two classes are split based on NWEA performance. We have three students with IEPs; I accommodate them by offering them extra time on assessments, selective seating arrangements, frequent breaks, and lunchtime privileges (once a week they eat with me in my classroom).

The two groups are split based on their NWEA scores. The higher-testing students are in the “Benchmark” class; the lower-testing students are in the “Rising” class. The two groups are similar in that they both follow the same curriculum and have the same testing schedule (reading assessments, weekly spelling tests, standardized tests). Both groups follow the same class expectations that both classes have helped to create. The groups differ in that the Benchmark class is able to complete more of the content in the same period of time; I frequently differentiated content for the Rising group to focus on the initial tasks in a lesson sequence. Two out of my three IEP students are in the Rising class, as well as most of ELs. The level of work completed is visibly lower than that of Benchmark, and many classwork assignments are not completed or submitted. The Rising class is much smaller than Benchmark (21 versus 30), which helps when I am pulling small groups, as there is less activity in the classroom to monitor.

Problematize the Issue

Fortune School of Education provides its teachers with curriculum developed at their headquarters in Sacramento. We are given a pacing/testing guide and follow it as closely as possible. This includes lesson content, Do Nows, spelling lists, activity ideas, teaching scripts, and relevant media. My class has a set of Chromebooks that I use throughout each week for

various purposes. I also have a teacher Chromebook, which is connected to a projector showing at the front of the class. We have relatively few para-educators; one RTI specialist comes in several times a week to help students settle after transitioning classes. Our school also has very few parent volunteers that help teachers, and when they are available they are typically not allowed inside classrooms, often offering to make photocopies in the teachers' lounge.

From my conversations with other members of staff, the two resources that would help our school are more counselors and more parental involvement. Students should be able to speak to someone if they are troubled, regardless if they have an IEP (currently, our one part-time counselor only works with IEP students). Increasing parental involvement would help parents be more invested in the school, and it would allow our administration to focus on administrative and discipline issues, rather than planning social events (as was done by parents in the past).

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