

September 2015

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Recommended Citation

Brill, Matthew (2015) "Summer in the City: Respect and Autonomy in the Urban Classroom," *SPACE: Student Perspectives About Civic Engagement*: Vol. 1 : Iss. 1 , Article 5.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.nl.edu/space/vol1/iss1/5>

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Summer in the City: Respect and Autonomy in the Urban Classroom

Matthew Brill, Illinois State University

Introduction

The Summer Teacher Education Partnership for Urban Preparation (STEP-UP) is an intensive, four week, immersive fellowship offered by Illinois State University and the Chicago Teacher Education Pipeline (CTEP). In this program, Illinois State students studying education are offered the opportunity to live with a host family in one of CTEP's partner communities. While living with a host family, the fellows co-teach summer school programs, volunteer with a local non-profit, and take professional development classes. The goal of this program is to prepare pre-service teachers to teach in Chicago Public Schools (CPS).

Reflection

The phrase “life-changing experience” is thrown around so frequently in college that it often has become a meaningless expression. But in the case of my STEP-UP experience I can honestly say that it was a life-changing experience. Since I entered Illinois State University I had always toyed with the idea of teaching in CPS. After doing a four-week fellowship in the summer of 2014 I knew that CPS was the place for me to realize my dream of being a high school English teacher.

I grew up in affluent, suburban Downers Grove, Illinois. I was raised to think that the city of Chicago was just a giant cesspool of poverty and violence. My conception of what an urban classroom looked like came solely from the movie *Freedom Writers*. Needless to say, I was nervous before STEP-UP started. Somewhere in the back of my mind I was convinced this would be a month-long experience that would teach me not to teach in CPS.

On my first day in the program, I arrived at the brick two flat in the Auburn-Gresham neighborhood of the Southside of Chicago that would be my home for the next few weeks. I was amazed by how wrong my expectations had been. I was promptly welcomed into the very nice home of my host mom, Ms. Johnny. She was absolutely thrilled to have me with her for a month. She could not have been friendlier and more welcoming. She was excited that the other fellows and myself were there and had an interest in learning how to teach in Chicago. Ms. Johnny has a wealth of knowledge about the history of the neighborhood. More

importantly, she gave great insights into the concerns, hopes, disappointments, and points of pride in the neighborhood.

Ms. Johnny explained and showed me by example that Auburn-Gresham was not the place that the news media portrays. While crime is a factor in the neighborhood, there are far more good, hard-working people than criminals. The whole neighborhood is judged on the actions of a handful of residents. This community is filled with retired public employees and working class families trying to raise their children and be productive members of both society and the community. I was so pleased to learn I had been so wrong about this area. As valuable as living with a host family was, I think that for me the most important component of the STEP-UP experience was actually getting to be in a summer school classroom.

My first day co-teaching summer school was the first time I had ever been in front of a class. I was absolutely terrified. My biggest fear was that the students would not respect me. I thought that as a white, suburbanite this class that was 100% African American would never think it worth their time to listen to me. I had stereotype-fueled fears of being shouted down by the class. The exact opposite took place. At first the class was absolutely lethargic. They made it quite clear they could not care less about being in summer school. I remembered to not take this personally. I could not really blame them for now wanting to be there. What kid wants to go to summer school?

I knew that my success in the classroom would hinge on whether or not I could get the students to like me, or at least not dislike me. I was not quite sure how to go about this. I decided the best course of action was to be polite to my students, be myself, and take an interest in their lives. This may seem strikingly simple. I suppose that is because it is simple, but pre-service teachers and teachers early on in their careers often make the mistake of thinking that they have to adopt some sort of “teacher persona.” By “teacher persona” I mean some pre-service students think that they must present themselves as serious-minded, keepers of knowledge. There is often a thought that one has to be “tough with the kids.” Some teachers fear that making a joke or revealing a fun side of their personal life will undermine their authority. Perhaps some teachers do need to change their persona to be effective. In my experience simply being respectful to the students was all I needed.

A strange change came over the class. Once they knew that I actually cared about their opinions and their lives they went from being lethargic to rowdy. Now that they had gotten comfortable with me, and I with them, they now felt inspired to make fun of my ties and call out the mistakes I made and mock my poor handwriting. I suppose this kind of behavior might bother a lot of people in the field of education. Some teachers might take it as a disrespectful challenge to their authority. It never really bothered me. Half the time the students made me laugh. They also knew how far they could take things before I would get angry. They knew that I did not mind a little rambunctiousness as long as they were getting their work done.

Being in that classroom for summer school was really an enlightening experience. These were the students everyone was supposed to be afraid of. They were inner city kids who needed to recover an English credit. They were the “bad kids” teachers are always told to avoid having in class if at all possible. To me, they were just “my kids.” I knew that I had done my job when one student complained to me that, “summer school was supposed to be

easy. Not an AP class! “

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People always ask me what makes STEP-UP so good at preparing students for CPS. There is no single, simple answer to that question. Over 90% of participants end up getting jobs teaching in CPS. Clearly CTEP is very good at getting Illinois State students interested in teaching in CPS. CTEP also does a great job of giving students the skills they will need to be successful in Chicago.

So what does this valuable experience tell us about public education? I think it confirms what a lot of current theory about the field of education tells us: adolescents learn best in supportive classrooms that are student centered. It also confirms my personal suspicion that students do not respond well to being patronized. Unfortunately, in many urban classrooms teachers view their students as having some sort of deficit. As a result of this, teachers tend to talk down to their students. They teach their class as if the students are far too dumb to be challenged. They do not bother doing the serious work of teaching students the critical thinking skills required to be successful in our 21st century world. Teenagers pick up on this cynical approach to high school education. This is why I think it is so critical that teachers treat their students with respect. I always addressed my students as the young adults they were. I stressed the fact that they all know lots of things I do not know. Learning should be a collaborative experience. A teacher should learn from their students, just as students should learn from their teacher.

I think this experience shows us that another key to teaching students in an urban setting is to have some awareness of where they come from. We know that school is an institution mainly geared towards protecting a middle class lifestyle. There is nothing wrong with this model. However, the model falls apart when we expect impoverished youths to have the middle class schemas necessary to function in a school setting before they come to school. It is critical that teachers meet their students where they are. It is our job to not only teach content but also teach the skills necessary to navigate the demands of the society we live in. For example, if students are too loud or use language that is not deemed appropriate for a school setting, it is important that we do not simply chastise the students for their failure to conform to middle class norms. We have to explain to our students how being able to adapt their behavior to the setting they are in will set them up for successful futures both inside and out of the classroom.

STEP-UP taught me these valuable lessons about teaching. There is no magic bullet that will solve all the problems of urban education. However, there is a method through which we can prepare teachers to be successful in an urban classroom. America's future is far too valuable to not be given the best-prepared, most qualified teachers available.