

## **Chapter 4 – Results**

### **Student Teacher #1 – “Lisa”**

#### **Background**

“Lisa” was a “traditional” student teacher, pursuing teacher certification at the end of four years of undergraduate education. She was seeking certification in biology and a composite certification. She had extensive experience with science classes in high school, and eventually chose to focus on biology as an undergraduate. She has also worked at a Museum of Science and History in a large metropolitan area.

#### **Classroom and School Environment**

Lisa’s host school was mostly Hispanic, with a few African-American students and a few white students. She found the school to be a little bigger than she thought it would be, both in terms of class size and total students. The school was on an accelerated block schedule, which Lisa was unaccustomed to, but she quickly warmed to the idea. She approved of the smaller number of periods, and of the opportunity to spend a large continuous block on laboratory activities rather than dividing time between two or more shorter laboratory periods. She also felt that she could spend larger chunks of time working with students and not feeling rushed.

One particular challenge that Lisa faced in her biology laboratory was a lack of laboratory tables. She had to move desks to provide large enough surfaces for student work. Lisa did not like this situation for a number of reasons. Moving the desks into position was an ordeal for Lisa that consumed precious class time. She felt that student interaction was hindered by not being able to gather around a laboratory table. Because laboratory equipment could not be set up before class, Lisa felt that there was more potential for equipment to be damaged by student mishandling.

Another challenge that Lisa faced in her classroom was in the inclusion of special-needs students in her class. Lisa professed dislike for inclusion programs, based on her limited experience. She felt that students in inclusion programs can get advantages that other students do not, and she observed some instances where students in inclusion programs took what she saw as unfair advantage of their situations. She related a story where a student requested extra time to do an assignment because of classroom distractions. Lisa was unsympathetic to this student because the student was actively participating in the classroom disruptions, and refused to be moved into an environment with fewer distractions. After this experience, Lisa felt that some students use inclusion programs as an excuse to avoid doing work:

And, it's also... it seems to me a little unfair that if a child comes to class and he's not attempting to do anything, that you still have to let him – give him extra time, although he's not even trying. And to me that's what makes me a little angry.

At the same time, she believed that special-needs students would be included with their fellow students whenever possible. She suggested that inclusion programs could be greatly improved by more strict diagnosis of problems before a student is identified as having special needs, to make sure that only the students that really need help are part of the inclusion programs.

Many of Lisa's difficulties with inclusion programs may have stemmed from her experiences with one particular student. The student was very disruptive and disrespectful in class, frequently using foul language and even physical threats to attempt to intimidate Lisa. Lisa wrote numerous referrals, had a conference with the student's mother, and even filed a police report against the student. The situation improved briefly, but soon problems began again. When Lisa discussed this student with other teachers,

she was told that the student was essentially “untouchable,” because he was a special needs student with a very aggressive lawyer.

Lisa was struck by what she termed lack of professionalism on the part of the more experienced teachers at her host school. She feared that many of the teachers and administrators have surrendered to apathy after years of frustration. Many of the teachers dressed in a manner that Lisa felt was overly casual. Lisa believed that students cannot take a teacher very seriously if he or she is improperly dressed. She also felt that many of the teachers do not even try to exert authority over students, in or out of class. She related one incident during a fire drill, when the more experienced teachers seemed content to delegate the job of watching over the students to the student teachers, while the senior teachers conversed among themselves separately. To Lisa, it seemed that the veteran teachers did not care that students were misbehaving during a fire drill.

This teacher apathy was distressing to Lisa, because she felt that her host school could be much better if more teachers would try harder, and push students harder. She is quick to be diplomatic, however, and note that she had not seen very many teachers in action. She hoped that her opinion would change as she observes a larger number of teachers in her career.

### **Helping students achieve**

Lisa believed that her most important task is to help students excel. She got a great feeling of accomplishment from encouraging students who have not achieved at the start of school to improve their learning, performance and attitudes. Lisa hoped that she could change the attitudes of students who do not want to be in school, to make school more positive for them. She felt that communication was key: when students are underachieving, teachers should talk to the students privately and try to understand why, and what can be done.

When asked about the ideal student-teacher relationship, Lisa proposed that students are responsible for paying attention and being active, and that teachers are responsible for creating lesson plans and activities that will hold student interest. Students should be ready and willing to learn, and teachers should organize a positive and engaging learning experience. In her view, an outside observer should be able to see students actively participating, and the instructor working hard to hold student interest.

Lisa felt that the greater responsibility for making the student-teacher relationship positive lay with the teacher. The teacher must put forth the initial effort to grab students' attention. In Lisa's view, students can hardly be blamed for not wanting to participate if a teacher who is not putting forth a good faith effort presents material in a boring manner. Accordingly, Lisa saw high-quality lesson plans as essential to successful teaching: lesson plans full of active, hands-on activities are more likely to command students' attention than more traditional laboratory activities from a book. She believed that if a teacher can craft an interesting lesson plan that students find interesting, then students will pay attention and participate. In her classroom observations, Lisa enjoyed seeing other teachers employ active, fun methods of teaching that engage students, such as test review games. Lisa herself found that her students really enjoyed classes that she had prepared on genetics and genetic defects. The students seemed to be very interested and engaged.

Because of this tremendous responsibility, Lisa proposed that it is vital for a teacher to be prepared for class, perhaps even over-prepared. Just about everyone that Lisa talked to – her professors, her cooperating teacher, her mother who is a teacher – advised her to always have too much to do in any day's lesson plan. She felt this is the most important piece of advice that she has gotten. If there is too little to do, the classroom environment can become less focused, and students can quickly become unruly. If a teacher is prepared, any mistakes she makes will be minor and easily fixed. Therefore, she always had something for students to do, even if it was something improvised at the last minute.

Lisa felt that her pre-service training helped her develop lesson plans and other important materials for her class. It was very time-consuming, partially because of the need to change her mind-set to operate at the students' level when putting together lesson plans. She believed that the time required to put together good lesson plans is a major challenge for teachers. She tried hard to avoid over planning, and has had many veteran teachers advise her that she does not have to work as hard as her pre-service classes have led her to believe:

And other teachers, when they look at your lessons plans, they're like, "I can't believe you're gonna do all this." So like when you start teaching, you don't even use this. You know, so it's like if you listen to another teacher, you wouldn't even be prepared enough...

I guess because they've been there a while, and they understand, you need all this. They're like, "Oh, once you're out of college, you don't even do that anymore."

Part of this attitude may be due to the teacher apathy noted above, but Lisa realized it was probably also due to the years of experience possessed by these teachers. She hoped that after a few years of teaching, she will have developed a large quantity of good materials, and time considerations will not be such a concern.

While she believed that the teacher has the bigger responsibility in learning process, she noted that students must play a role as well. There were many instances where she believed that she had created interesting lesson plans that were not well received by students. She realized that it is difficult to get students' attention, and she did not feel that it was always necessarily her fault when students were not engaged in learning. Nor is it even necessarily the students' fault: she suggested that many students have not been trained properly to work hard, that they have become accustomed to being lazy.

Lisa saw teaching as a chance to make a difference in student's lives. However, after some teaching experience, she realized that there is little that an individual teacher can do:

I think when I first started, I thought, y'know, "You'll change the world."  
Y'know, like, "All these students are gonna be awesome after I leave."  
And I think after a while, some kids, I just feel like – maybe if we all worked together we could change them, but just one teacher trying isn't gonna help.

She realized that without a united effort by everyone concerned – teachers, administration, students, parents – many of these students' attitudes are not going to change. Given the ubiquitous apathy that she had seen from all these parties, she was disheartened, but determined to try.

### **Being Close to Students**

Lisa felt that, in addition to being organized and prepared, a teacher must genuinely care about his or her students to be effective. In fact, Lisa saw the two characteristics as resonating with each other: a teacher who does not care about students will not take the time and energy to be prepared. Lisa felt that a teacher should not treat teaching as just a job, but should genuinely care about students and display that caring at all times. Lisa claimed that students can tell whether or not a teacher cares, and that awareness influences the classroom atmosphere for good or ill:

That's pretty much near the top, because I think that you know when you care, and they know when you don't care, and if you do care, I think that changes the feeling in the class 100%. Because they know when a teacher doesn't want to be there. Y'know, you'll hear then talking about this

teacher and that teacher. They know when you don't care, it's just a job to you, so I think that's important.

When asked to define "caring," Lisa said that caring involves trying to understand students and being willing to help them. Communication is therefore an important part of caring for and about students, according to Lisa. It is vital to a good student-teacher relationship, and Lisa believed that one of a teacher's most important skills is being able to relate to the students, to talk to them, and to help them with their problems. To Lisa, caring for and about students involved trying to understand why students did the things they did and felt the ways they felt. As often as possible, Lisa would try to talk to a student who was not engaged in learning, and find out why the student wasn't working.

She discovered that one student really wanted to be in a more structured alternative learning environment, and she helped the student get into this situation. She probably would not have discovered this desire if she had not talked to the student. Also, she would try to talk to students who came into class tired or tardy and figure out why this was happening.

Lisa saw the teacher's role as carefully juggling the need to be an authority figure with the need to relate to her students and get to their level. She viewed this juggling act as one of her greatest challenges. At one point, she made a conscious decision to interject "another side of herself" into her class:

Previously, when students stopped at my desk, with personal stories I am ashamed to say I almost ignored them. As I spoke to more students I felt myself relaxing. I noticed that I began to smile and laugh more... This week I learned that a teacher can be an authority figure without being an authoritarian.

On the one hand, Lisa felt that teachers should avoid relating to students as an authority figure would, but rather more as a peer. However, she realized that the teacher is an authority figure, like it or not, and she notes that “If you lose that authority level with them, then you’ve lost everything.”

Although she connected caring for students with closeness, Lisa was warned in her pre-service classes to keep her distance from students. She found these warnings very discouraging and restrictive, and even a little frightening:

And it almost made it discouraging, some of the things that he was telling us that you just can’t do with students, even though to you it may seem harmless.... I mean they give us all these hypothetical situations... Well, things actually happened: situations where coaches and teachers caring too much I guess, and allowing students to know where they live and things like that, and just horrible things that ended up. Teachers losing their jobs, lawyers and lawsuits, and all sorts of things. So I mean basically they just scared everybody half to death, you know.

She often felt like she could not have a conversation with students, or tell them anything about herself. She wished that she were more free to talk to students, especially a pregnant student who was obviously depressed. However, she felt the school environment prevented her from doing that. Lisa saw all these restrictions as a definite impediment to her making a connection with students:

I mean, basically, it seems like that puts up a wall between you and your students. It was almost like, don’t tell them what you enjoy, don’t tell them... So I think that’s tough, because if you’re asking them to share things with you, it’s almost unfair...

At her host school she saw many instances of what could be interpreted as improper contact between experienced teachers and their students, such as hugging, in apparent defiance of the warnings she heard in her preservice classes. She remained unconcerned about her own actions with students getting her into legal trouble; her biggest concern in that field was in dealing with students in inclusion programs.

Lisa did not believe that preservice training had prepared her to relate to and care for students. She feels that a lot of it is learned during actual teaching, through classroom experiences and conversations with veteran teachers:

So, I mean...this past two and a half weeks has been the best education about how to deal with students than any of this, like, year or so worth of classes I've been taking, I think.

### **Student (and Parent) Apathy**

Although Lisa felt that she needed to relate to her students to be an effective teacher, she often found it hard to do, because it seemed to her that her students did not care about their futures. In fact, the students did not seem to care much about anything. This tremendous apathy was mysterious and confusing to Lisa:

I just... I'm not able to understand why they just feel like there's no future. I don't know if it's the future, or they think they just will carry on regardless of what they do. That's... I'm finding it really hard to relate to them right now. Really hard

Lisa saw student apathy as a tremendous barrier to teaching. Midway through her student teaching "total teach," she even began to doubt her personal maxim that students will react positively when a teacher cares about what goes on in the classroom and works hard at teaching:

So, if they know that you really do care, somewhat, then I think they might try. But I don't know if that's true anymore, because I do care and they're not trying. So... I don't know.

Lisa experienced many of the negative side effects of student apathy. Many of the students in her first period class often did not show up, choosing to come to school later, if at all. Students who did not want to be in class often came into class with a bad attitude and were disruptive. Dealing with these situations filled Lisa with feelings of hopelessness and frustration, because the students who most needed to be involved with their learning were frequently the most disinterested and disengaged. Even students whom Lisa was able to coax into working harder for brief periods of time would invariably revert to old behaviors.

Lisa's experiences did not leave her hopeful about the prospect of receiving help from parents, as parents were often subject to apathy as well:

I know parents of those kids that might not help them change the way they are, you know, if you call them in for a parent-teacher conference; those that don't show up, don't care, that kind of thing.

In the case of one student who was very disengaged and disruptive, Lisa wrote multiple referrals for the student, and even called the student's parents, but she received no response from the administration or the parents. Lisa felt that referrals were not effective because administration often does not follow up. Parents were not helpful either, as Lisa noted they often make excuses for their children and will not exert authority over them.

Students frequently failed to turn in assignments, even when given many opportunities to do so and extensive help in-class. Lisa was very frustrated and

disappointed that students did not seem to understand or accept that just doing the work would allow them to do well in class. She felt as if she had tried everything, and nothing was working. Her host teacher sympathized with her over this dilemma, but offered no possible solution. In fact, many teachers at Lisa's host school told her that they did not assign homework, because students would not do it.

A lot of Lisa's big questions about teaching revolve around student behavior: "Why can't I get you quiet?" "Why don't they listen?" "Why don't they follow instructions?"

Lisa feared that the defiant attitudes of students who do not want to learn or enjoy being in school can also be an obstacle to a teacher developing good relationships with individual students, and with the class as a whole. Sadly, she realized that sometimes a teacher cannot help a student, simply because that student does not want to be helped. Lisa contended that students need to be willing to help themselves, and while there will always be students who will try, and will learn, there will also be many students that will refuse to try.

Lisa was mystified that students did not seem to understand, or care to understand, why education was important. She attempted to have an in-class discussion about why education was important, but student could come up with few reasons on their own. One student went so far as to state that the only reason many students were in school was to avoid trouble with the law!

Over the course of her student teaching, student apathy gradually wore Lisa down. Initially she was excited about the prospect of teaching in a low-performing inner-city school, saying that they did not seem as bad as their reputations. But by the mid-point of her student teaching, her attitude had completely turned around. Lisa was not afraid of violence in her teaching environment, but the student apathy sapped her energy and her love for teaching:

I just can't be in a school like that. I hate to say it, but I can't... I mean, I've experienced all sorts of school, but I've just never been in that environment, where kids just do not care like that. I've just never been around it before, so...

Lisa felt that she was simply not yet the type of teacher that could endure the frustration engendered by such grinding apathy. Her host school struck her as only a good working environment for the type of person who would not let the frustration get to him or her. In her mind, she was not yet that person. In many cases she had to fight to keep herself from crying under the stress. Lisa hoped that at the start of her teaching career she could get into an environment where she could build up her skills and confidence. Then she would consider teaching at a school like her host school again after she had had time to "toughen up."

### **Relationship with Cooperating Host Teacher**

Lisa was conflicted when discussing her relationship with her cooperating host teacher. The host teacher was also a track coach, and split her duties and time between academics and athletics. This split of time and attention had both positive and negative implications for Lisa's student teaching.

On the positive side, Lisa was happy that the host teacher did not place as many restrictions on her as she had anticipated. Lisa had heard from her fellow student teachers that some host teachers could be very controlling, and she was relieved that her host teacher was giving her opportunities to find her own way:

Um, I think it's great that she's allowed me to do what I want, basically. I think that's good that she hasn't, y'know, put any specific guidelines or

restrictions on me. I guess allow me to explore different things, what's good, what's bad, which I think is really helpful.

She felt that her host teacher was a very good resource in helping her deal with issues of organization and classroom management, and provided her with some good feedback. However, she sometimes felt that her host teacher held things back from her, or gave her advice that the host teacher herself would not follow:

I was having a problem with the class, and she was like, "Well if they act like that again, you have your red button over here to push, to call somebody to come in." But then I'm thinking, she wouldn't do that. I know she wouldn't do that, you know push the red button to have, like hall monitor rush into the classroom. So I wish she would tell me things that she would really do, you know?

Lisa's host teacher was very tolerant of students when they would laugh, joke and talk when there was extra time at the end of class. Lisa felt that this leniency was very inappropriate, and that her host teacher could have filled the time more productively. She also felt that her host teacher's acceptance of student misbehavior was bad for her, as students would object to her attempts at discipline when the host teacher let students get away with so much. There were even a few incidents where the host teacher directly countermanded Lisa's attempts at discipline. She did not feel it was proper to voice her objections to her host teacher, however, and just tried to work things out with the students on her own.

Despite her expressions of appreciation that her host teacher gives her so much freedom, Lisa also felt that at many times her host teacher did not spend an adequate amount of time with her. Many days after her "total teach" was over, and she was supposed to share time with the host teacher, her host teacher would not come to school and leave the class to her. In many of those cases, the host teacher left inadequate

instructions, causing her to have to improvise. While she liked the fact that this situation forced her to develop improvisation skills, she wished she did not have to use those skills so often. Lisa's experience working with her host teacher has left her with seriously mixed feelings:

She's a great woman, but I don't think she's very supportive. I don't feel like she's even listening to me half the time when I say things. I feel like she's kind of reading something, and she'll look up and go, "Oh, what did you say?" Or something like that, and it's kind of like, okay...

It's just hard, that I don't feel like she's really there, or she's really...paying attention... I mean, she has a right to leave, but I feel like she kind of leaves, and I can tell other teachers, kinda like, "She wasn't there today?" or y'know that kind of thing. You know you can kind of tell that something's not right, a little like that, so... But I think she's great... I guess the fact that I've gotten to do what I want to do is maybe a good thing. So that's benefited me a lot.

The situation was very frustrating for Lisa; at one point she expressed a feeling of "being used" by her host teacher. Lisa proposed that some of her host teacher's behavior could be attributed to the same end of the semester drop-off that many students experience:

I'm kind of pulling for things right now, but I guess... I don't know what's happened to her. At least... it's almost like she's fallen down – you know the kids towards the end start to go downhill a little bit? I feel like she's like rolling right behind them.

Lisa proposed that host teachers should be required to attend some of the discussions sections that the student teachers have as part of their preservice classes. She

suggested this would give host teachers more chances to share their experiences, and make them less likely to take student teachers for granted:

These teachers need to know that having a student teacher does not give them permission to take a two-month vacation.

### **Reflecting on Preservice Classes**

Lisa projected a very positive attitude about her preservice classes. While she realized that many of her cohort members were very critical of their education courses, she felt that her preservice education was worth everything she paid for it. Further, she could not understand how a teacher could be adequately prepared without the preservice classes she took:

I don't know how I would be able to do what I'm doing now without the classes... I don't understand how some people go into teaching and get emergency certification, or something of the nature, without student teaching and without having any of these classes. I don't see how they're prepared whatsoever.

Despite the fact that she saw her preservice classes as indispensable, she did acknowledge that they fell short in some areas. She felt that while she learned about many of the issues surrounding inclusion, she received little guidance about how inclusion could be implemented in actual classroom situations. She also wished that she could have gotten more advice about various aspects of classroom discipline:

Lisa: But I don't think I learned enough about classroom management or what to expect.

Interviewer: What did they try to tell you?

Lisa: Um you know, like little things that you can do to help out. You know, what rules to set up. Like proximity, that's how you can get a child to stop talking, or, you know just little hints like call out their names if they're talking. But I don't think they prepare you for children that just...are outright defiant. I don't think you're ready for that. Or to have maybe a class of 35, that 20 are being defiant that day. It's like, what do you do?

Lisa saw two major differences between her science content courses and her education courses. First, she felt that her education courses were less rigorous, involving less memorization, but she hesitated to call them "easier." Second, she had many more opportunities for discussion, with both the professor and fellow students, in her education classes. Her science classes afforded very little opportunity for two-way interaction, aside from simple requests for information or clarification. Lisa found it very useful to be able to ask questions of her professors in her education classes, and to share experiences with her fellow students. Since her fellow students had been in situations similar to hers, they were able to provide her with many helpful hints. She felt that although her fellow student teachers might not be familiar with her particular situation their own situations were similar enough that they could "be strong for her" and provide her with an indispensable support system. She claimed that this support system has kept her from contemplating walking away from teaching.

As useful as the class discussions were, however, Lisa felt that many of her fellow students diminished that utility by injecting too many of their personal stories into discussions. She found the stories irritating after a hard day's work, and not terribly worthwhile:

That's not very useful at all, I don't think it's very useful... unless you're sharing. Like, we had one instance where we all shared

discipline techniques; I found that useful. But personal stories, I don't find that useful at all.

The personal stories were really the only thing Lisa found to be negative about her preservice training. While she realized that many people have a need to “vent,” Lisa did not feel that way, and longed to hear more about solutions than about problems:

Yes, vent. (laughs) or tell us that – You know, I really don't want to hear about every situation that's happened, because we've all had it. You know, something – maybe something that you found effective, that'd be great... and I want to hear that. But not everything, not every single little thing. You know, that's what your husband or your wife or (laughs) you know, family members, even if they don't wanna hear it – which I'm learning, they don't want to hear too much of that after awhile, but...

She felt that the discussions in her preservice classes could have been greatly improved if her professors had taken more responsibility for keeping discussions focused, either by direct interventions or subtle steering back on topic. She feared that many students might be shy, and that their voices might not be heard without efforts by the professor to bring everyone in. She would even go so far as to impose rough time limits on discussions, to decrease personal stories, increase the number of students that get to speak, and make discussions more useful.

Overall, Lisa thought that her preservice classes balanced each other very nicely to prepare her to be a teacher. Lisa felt that most of the helpful advice that she had gotten about planning and teaching came from her preservice classes, while the best advice on classroom management and discipline came from her teaching experience. Based on help preparing lesson plans alone, she deemed her preservice classes more than worthwhile. She also found the microteaching sessions, where student teachers would role-play classroom situations, very useful. She liked the opportunity that microteaching afforded

to see herself as a teacher and get feedback from her peers. However, she felt that even the best microteaching exercise could not equal the experience of an actual classroom. She suggested that instruction on classroom management could be greatly improved by showing student teachers more real examples of classroom situations, either directly or through films.

### **Good Memories and Bad**

Lisa said that the happy memories that she would take away from her student teaching experience involved times when students have worked hard and succeeded. She would also happily remember conversations with students who truly enjoyed her class and liked her. She would also happily remember uplifting and useful discussions with her fellow student teachers, and the important support that her mother, herself a teacher, had provided to her. She was proud of the fact that she was able to stand up to the challenges of teaching.

Her negative memories revolved around student apathy, and the fact that so many seem unconcerned about what is going to happen in their lives in the years to come. Especially stuck in her mind were students who were pregnant, especially those who seemed to be proud of their situation. She wondered what would happen to such students and could just hope for the best for them. She felt that she just could not be in a school environment where the students just did not care.