

## **Chapter 4 – Results**

### **Student Teacher #3 – “Joy”**

#### **Background**

Joy has taken a somewhat untraditional route to becoming a science teacher. After studying a variety of subjects as an undergraduate, she received a degree in anthropology. While pursuing teacher certification in biology, she was also finishing work for a Bachelor of Science in Biology. Her father is a doctor, and she described her family as being of a very analytical bent. She felt that she had an aptitude for science and mathematics while growing up, being inquisitive about nature from an early age

#### **School Environment**

Joy’s host school was in a state of transition. The school was getting ready to move into a new facility, and the administration was preparing to make changes. One of the biggest changes was reducing the number of faculty. Administration felt that class sizes were too small, and was reducing the teaching force preparatory to moving into the new facility. This created a lot of tension between administration and faculty, as Joy was under the impression that the administration was looking for reasons to fire teachers. Many veteran teachers were choosing to quit rather than wait to be fired. As a result of this tension, there was a low level of cooperation, and even a degree of antagonism, between administration and faculty. Joy’s host teacher was one of the teachers with the most antagonism towards administration, and Joy was afraid that she would suffer because of the association. Her host teacher did not encourage Joy to work with administration on matters of discipline, so she wound up taking care of discipline problems on her own. She tried very hard to remain neutral in these conflicts, and was discouraged by the cynicism and low morale that the conflicts engendered.

While she noted that many of the science faculty warmed up to her over time, she did not feel that the science department at her host school had a great deal of cohesion. She got the impression that the members of the science department had separate, incompatible agendas. There was no effort to share ideas and teaching techniques. There was no departmental office for science faculty to meet in, and the school's teachers' lounge had such a negative atmosphere that she only went there to make photocopies. She felt that some of the teachers at her school were too busy to talk with her, and others were probably not interested in talking to a student teacher. Whenever teachers did get together, it was typically to gossip, or conspire against the administration, and Joy did not want to be in such an environment:

... there's not a lot of talk about curriculum and teaching and things like that between the teachers; it's more like gossip, talking about the administration, talking about, you know, "So-and-so said this and that," trying to get letters together to write the school board, or trying to get this school board person elected. That's really all I see the teachers doing.

Joy's class was held in a portable building, and Joy did not like the classroom environment at all. Students were jammed together at small tables; the only positive Joy could see was that students found it difficult to cheat because they were so easy to monitor. The room was very disorganized and unattractive, a "total wreck" in her words. Joy tried to rectify this, but her host teacher struck her as very unconcerned with organization and classroom aesthetics. After seeing how well another teacher utilized student projects to liven up a classroom, Joy tried to do the same by working with students to construct a large model of the geologic time scale. Joy believed that an attractive room creates a more positive and comfortable atmosphere for students, and that student projects on display give students a sense of ownership in the classroom.

Both in terms of the professional atmosphere and the physical environment, Joy found her host school unpleasant. She proclaimed that one valuable thing she got from the experience was finding out what to *avoid* in a school!

## **A Lively Atmosphere**

The thing that Joy enjoyed the most about teaching was the incredible variety of experiences that go along with teaching. She found that it always kept her thinking and “on her toes.” She hated monotony, and enjoyed teaching because it was not repetitive. Her students brought a lot of energy into the classroom, which energized her as well:

... with teaching... I guess just the kind of lively atmosphere of working with kids, and just kind of the pep I think younger people have. Working with younger people, they have a popular outlook on life and it kind of gears you towards that, I think, and keeps you active and thinking, and it’s not – nothing repetitive about your job, and nothing monotonous...

Student teaching opened up Joy’s mind to endless new possibilities. She found this exhilarating, if occasionally overwhelming:

And since I’ve been student teaching I’m really busy and it opens up the doors to this, this, this, and this as far as... the possibilities are endless for trying to, like, improve the way you teach kids, and how you get them to learn best, and resources for your lesson plans, or experimental things that you can try... And so I’m kind of overwhelmed, but in a way it makes me feel alive, so...

## **A Time-Consuming Profession**

The dark side of the dynamic nature of teaching is the intense time demands on the teacher, especially the new teacher. Joy intensely felt this time crunch, especially when it came to creating lessons. She believed that a great deal of preparation is required to create lessons that will engage students, but frequently found herself preparing lessons the night before. She feared that her lessons suffered in their quality as a result. Her host

teacher exacerbated an already bad situation by frequently giving her last-minute assignments. She found it very difficult to get accustomed to the pace of teaching and “get into the flow.” It was also hard for her to balance the need to create a lesson for the entire class while simultaneously seeing to the needs of individual students.

Because of these time demands, Joy felt that organizational skills are important to her as a beginning teacher. She imagined that more experienced teachers may have more experience with various teaching styles, and with “thinking on their feet,” and do not need to be as organized. Others might be able to compensate for a low level of organization with humor, or with sheer talent at getting students to think and learn. In any event, more experienced teachers will certainly have more established lessons to go from, and thus may require less preparation time. Joy hoped this would be the case as she gained more experience.

The time-consuming grind of teaching took its toll on Joy and on her teaching. She found it difficult to come up with creative ideas because the school days took so much of her energy. Because it was so draining, Joy frequently questioned her chosen profession:

Interviewer: What questions come to your mind almost every day you are teaching?

Joy: Do I really want to be a teacher? (laughs)

Initially, Joy felt that being a teacher would provide her with an opportunity to expand her science content knowledge. However, given the time demands of teaching, she was later not so sure:

But sometimes I think it limits, like, your personal growth, as far as you getting to get out and learn new information, um, you know, that like

enhances your own knowledge. I mean, it's like I'm learning ways to teach things I already know, but as far as me seeking out things and enhancing my knowledge in, like, tons of other areas I want to explore, I don't know if I'm gonna be able to do that if I'm a teacher.

Joy got the impression that many of the veteran teachers at her host school dealt with the educator's workload by simply not putting in the large amount of time needed to be a good teacher. Joy often found herself so caught up with the mechanics of completing all the tasks that were demanded of her that she risked neglecting the process of teaching. However, she realized that students could sense when a teacher was hurried and not genuinely interested in teaching. Many of her students noted that some teachers at her school seemed more concerned with going through the motions to get through the day than they were with teaching and interacting with students:

I think a lot of the teachers – and even my students said this today – a lot of teachers just try to get through it, and they're not really interacting with the students, and, um, they're not concerned so much with the process as they are with just getting, like, the grades written down and recorded and handed in. And so, the teachers... you know, the students can sense when the teachers are maybe like hurried and not genuinely interested.

Other teachers helped her with her lack of time by letting her borrow lesson ideas, and she developed her own techniques to help herself with time management. She was forced to focus more on the scientific process than on a large amount of science content in her lessons; in the end, she found this to have a positive impact on student understanding. She realized that she would eventually reach a point of diminishing returns if she put too much time into lesson planning, and so she learned to limit herself as far as the work she put into each lesson. She felt that her time student teaching provided her with lots of good experience in making up lessons, and she had a better

grasp of the process by the end. In the final analysis, she believed that the stress and anxiety of student teaching helped her grow as a teacher.

### **Helping students to think**

Joy felt that the most valuable thing that she could do as an instructor was to teach students how to develop their thinking abilities. She saw this as an overwhelming task; it was to her the most important thing that an instructor could do, and also the easiest to neglect. She believed that the ability to reason effectively would be more valuable to students in the long run than any science content.

Because when I started out, I thought it would be a real content-oriented thing... as far as the science. But I found out that that's kind of like a means to like teach them... kind of like, responsibility and, you know, certain skills, and how to think, and things like that.

Regrettably, she felt that more traditional tools of science teaching, such as worksheets and other bookwork, are too impersonal to work toward this goal. Therefore, during her time as a student teacher, Joy was constantly thinking about how to incorporate a variety of activities and resources into her class. She saw it as an immense challenge to develop the best ways to encourage students to think and be involved in the class. She tried to focus more on reasoning skills than on science content, reasoning that if students have the skills, they will get the content. She always sought to show students how the things she was teaching could apply to the world outside the classroom. She also allowed the students to occasionally choose which topics would be covered in class, to give them more of a stake in the class. She believed that high expectations were key, and that a teacher has to let students know that she cares and expects great things from them.

She always tried to maintain an energetic and positive atmosphere in the classroom, to keep the students motivated. At every opportunity she got students up and

moving around, interacting with each other. Her host teacher showed her that humor was very useful in getting and holding students' attention, and she tried to employ humor whenever she felt it was appropriate. She also avoided any negative talk in her classroom, and tried to nip in the bud any negative comments from students.

Joy was afraid that she was not very good at helping students to learn how to think, but she also admitted that it was hard to tell, because assessing students' progress is "the most difficult part of teaching." Just as students have individual needs, they have individual ways of expressing their understanding. She felt it was important to constantly assess both students' needs and progress, in order to constructively modify her approach to teaching. Joy believed that a teacher should be able to gauge students' feelings and reactions, and be able to judge how much students are thinking about their learning. Communication and interaction is therefore very important to a successful classroom relationship. Joy was very interested in finding out about her students' experiences and getting "in touch" with them. She wished that she could have videotaped herself in class, to get a better feel for how she was interacting with students. In Joy's opinion, the more connections she can make with students, the better.

While Joy strongly realized that she had a great responsibility to make class material interesting to students and keep them on-task, she also noted that students have a responsibility as well. She felt that students should strive to be inquisitive and "hungry for knowledge." Students should listen to and respect what the teacher is saying. Although she did all she could, Joy feared that many of her students were immature and uninterested in learning. It was hard for Joy to inspire a love for and hunger for knowledge in these students. They seemed to just not care about science, and were determined to think in a way that was incompatible with a scientific approach. It seemed to her that many students tried to get through the class period without thinking, frustrating her efforts. She felt that she could "click" better with some students than with others for this reason. The times when things did "click," however, were very satisfying to her.



## **Maintaining Distance**

Although Joy felt that it was very important to care for students, she was very conflicted over exactly what it meant to care. Her attempts at definition show a clash between wanting to get close to students and wanting to keep a proper distance:

Caring... I would define as... um, (laughs) I don't know why that's so hard to define. It's not; I know what it is, but I can't... let's see. Just having compassion and understanding and just acceptance for your students. And for people around you, who you work with, or anyone in your life. And (ponders) also, um, being able to remain objective, I guess, in a certain way, because if you get too involved...

I mean, you wanna, you know, have... you know, your students obviously think that you care about them, and have, like, expectations for them, I think. You know, it definitely helps out their motivations, but at the same time, you know, you're their teacher, so you can't get real involved in their personal lives or anything.

Joy found it very difficult to maintain this distance, as she saw that many students seemed to want teachers to reach out to them and give them support they might not have been getting at home. She often felt that she was placing herself too close to the students' level, to try and make her teaching more effective. But this would risk making her more lax on classroom discipline, and risk getting too personally involved with her students:

I guess to be a teacher, you pretty much have to... y'know you kind of have to stand your ground and be... separate yourself in a certain aspect from the students. And you can't really get involved with them on a certain level, like as you would with people on the outside, like from school, like in an environment that wasn't regular.

Objectivity was very important to Joy. She was very concerned about not showing favoritism, positive or negative, toward certain students. Ideally she felt that teachers should be in touch with students' feelings and attitudes, but she acknowledged that that was difficult to maintain on an individual basis, because of the need to keep an emotional distance.

I mean from a teacher's standpoint, I think caring for someone, you still have to have that boundary, where like you care for them, but, y'know, you still have to let them... Y'know, kind of separate yourself in a certain way from your students. And that's doing them a favor.

### **Dealing with Discipline**

Joy did not feel that her school was a very serious learning environment. Although the school did give her the freedom to be independent and "do her thing," she described the discipline management at her school as "shaky." She did not think that administration backed teachers up on discipline problems, perhaps because of the tension between faculty and administration noted above. In some cases administration seemed to ignore her discipline referrals and requests for assistance. In fact, some teachers were reprimanded by the administration for giving too many referrals:

And, um, basically, um, I've had some... discipline problems, and administration really doesn't back me up on anything. And I kind of get the feeling I'm discouraged from writing referrals or detention, so basically I think that, um, the discipline is just... there's not a lot of discipline in our school right now. (laughs)

As a result of this neglect, she has become discouraged about following discipline protocol, such as referrals and detention. It seemed to her that each teacher at her school

had his or her own method of discipline, with little or no guidance or backup from administration.

Joy felt that she got along with her students well in general. In most of her classes, students were mostly cooperative, although class time was never as productive as she would have liked. In even her best classes, she noted that students “goof around a lot” and seemed uninterested in learning. She tried to keep her classes physically active, positive, and upbeat, and allowed socializing at appropriate times.

One class in particular, however, stuck in her mind as having particular discipline problems. She found one student with an attention deficit to be bright, but noted that he required almost constant attention. A handful of girls in this class were a particular problem, showing disrespect and frequently talking during class. They would even encourage other students to be disruptive. Respect was very important to Joy, and she was taken aback by these students’ mockery and defiance, even embarrassed. She realized that the students were immature, and unable to see the “big picture” of their education. She was still very frustrated about the situation, because the students either could not or would not see that she was trying to help them.

Joy realized that the class with poor discipline created even deeper problems for her as the semester unfolded. She had to focus a great deal of her time and energy on controlling the class, and thus had to spend less time actually teaching science. As a result, this “problem class” fell behind relative to other classes. She hoped that as she become more experienced in matters of discipline, she would have to sacrifice less instruction time to classroom management. Also, she was afraid that this constant struggle with defiant students brought out a side of her personality that she did not like:

I dunno, in a way it makes a certain side of my personality come out that I don’t really have to, but I don’t really show that often. Or I don’t like to, y’know, like be mean – not mean but kind of -- I’m sure they think it’s

mean, like when I... kind of snappy or just a little bit angry or maybe just not... I never really get that, like, y'know I don't really have that in my personality to be that mean or angry or snappy, but... I get towards that tendency, and so they kind of bring that out in me, and so I think they see that side of my personality a lot more than like the other classes. They kind of just put me on the defensive.

Being on the defensive would often lead to a vicious circle, which Joy struggled almost daily to break. She theorized that the larger-than-normal size of the class, and its later time period, may have contributed to difficulties.

She realized that some of the problems with students were partly her fault, and that it was part of her job to work through them. She knew that she had to “stand her ground” with students, and not allow students to take advantage of her desire to be easygoing about discipline:

I try to kind of, just be a little relaxed, but sometimes that doesn't work. So, they just like, take... you know, they just take advantage of the fact that you're not, like, keeping on top of them constantly. So it's like a fine line in-between.

Detention was the preferred method of punishment at her host school, and Joy employed it in the case of the problem students, albeit begrudgingly. She did not feel that it was a very effective tool for classroom management, so she sought alternatives for prevention rather than punishment. She often found that just the threat of punishment, either by detention or being sent to a study hall, was often enough, if the threat was made quickly and firmly. She believed that high expectations were just as important for classroom behavior as for academic performance, and she made her expectations known from the beginning of her time teaching. She was compelled to redo the seating chart to separate disruptive students, and even moved some of the students into other classes.

However, she found her most effective tool for classroom discipline was simply getting to know students better, and having them get to know her in turn. As she and her students became more comfortable with each other, mutual respect grew and problems diminished:

But then, once they got to know me and plus... it was a little tough there for a while, and they kind of understood, like, what I... what my, you know, boundaries were and things like that, then they pretty much just... leveled off, y'know?

As noted above, Joy felt that it was very important for her to be objective as a teacher, and nowhere was this need more apparent than in matters of discipline. One of the best pieces of advice she had gotten was to not take anything personally that students say or do. This was difficult for her to do in the cases where students treated her with disrespect, although she admitted she often found it hard to gauge the amount of respect that her students had for her, and for each other. She took pains to make it clear to her defiant students that she bore no grudge against them, and that she was not going to treat them differently from other students. She knew that she had to constantly struggle to show objectivity and respect for all students, even those she did not get along with.

Joy found grading in general to be unpleasant, but it was especially difficult to grade the papers of students that she was having problems with. Her host teacher warned her that she could not let her feelings affect her grading, either to exact revenge on difficult students or to give such students extra points so as to not appear negatively biased. On a couple of occasions, difficult students turned in excellent projects that nonetheless had to have points deducted because of lateness. Joy regretted having to mark the papers down for a variety of reasons, but she knew that she had to hold everyone to an equal standard.

As her student teaching unfolded, Joy found that discipline concerns began to give way to pedagogical ones. Still, she wondered if certain aspects of her personality made it difficult for her to find a happy medium between maintaining discipline and being friendly with students. She wants to be accommodating, and does not want to get students in trouble. On a few occasions, she did not report students for infractions such as swearing and fighting, and she worried if she did the right thing. Her ultimate goals for classroom management were simple, but admittedly difficult to attain:

Be strict, be one of those types of people that the kids can, y’know, joke around with and kind of be themselves with, but know where the boundaries are exactly.

### **An “Upbeat,” but Disorganized, Host Teacher**

Joy described her host teacher as “upbeat,” and she noted that he fostered a classroom atmosphere that was very positive and energetic. He frequently tried to keep students involved in the class through lively discussions. The host teacher was very flamboyant and jovial, freely joking with students. In fact, Joy feared that the joking was at times too free, with inappropriate remarks being made by the host teacher and the students. She worried that the host teacher might get into trouble over such remarks.

Overall she noted the host teacher had a good relationship with most of his students. Sometimes, however, Joy notice that the host teacher had problems with students that she easily got along with and vice versa. She wondered if some of it was due to the gender difference, but she acknowledged that a teacher cannot get along equally well with everyone:

I guess you know it just depends; certain teachers are going to relate to... I guess you can’t have a great relationship with every single student. Just too many different personalities. I mean you should try to, but...

Joy saw a number of aspects of her host teacher's in-class performance that she did not want to emulate. She felt that many times her host teacher was too easygoing, and even encouraged students in bad behavior. The environment made it easy for students to get away with things, and has made it difficult for her to impose her own limits on the class. To be fair, however, her host teacher has backed her up when she has imposed disciplinary measures on students.

Her host teacher did not employ many laboratories and demonstrations in the class, a situation Joy found puzzling. She realized that this situation was partially due to the poor facilities at the school, but she also sensed a lack of motivation on the part of her host teacher to try and creatively overcome these obstacles. It was also difficult for Joy to develop her own laboratory activities, because her host teacher gave her so little support. The host teacher also put very little effort into class preparation, preferring an extemporaneous style to detailed lesson planning. Joy feels that this attitude has led to a great deal of disorganization, both in the lessons and in the physical classroom. She has tried to bring more organization to her lessons, and to the classroom itself, but has gotten little help from her host teacher. In fact, she has found herself following the host teacher's lead, and putting less preparation time into class.

She has found things to admire about her host teacher, however, calling him a "nice guy." Through him, Joy has learned the value of being positive and friendly toward students. She observed another teacher who was very organized, but was not very effective because she could not relate to students. Joy would like to find a middle ground between this teacher and her host teacher. The host teacher has also shown her ways to go beyond the textbook, using demonstrations (such as an actual human skeleton) and newspaper articles to capture student interest.

Joy described her host teacher as "wild" and rebellious. He seemed more concerned with school politics and opposing the administration than with teaching. He

also had a disturbing tendency to give Joy teaching assignments at the last minute, and to leave Joy alone with the class while he attended to personal business. Needless to say, Joy found this unpleasant:

Uhhh, he's given me a lot of anxiety over, like, leaving me alone a lot. Even after I was supposed to be done, like with my teaching, and my total teach, and things, he still, like, wouldn't come to class, or say, "oh, I have to go do this." Run errands, and not come back... Kind of deserting me a lot.

### **Reflections on Preservice Education**

Joy ranked her preservice classwork third in importance in helping her prepare to be a teacher, behind her fellow student teachers and her cooperating teacher. She did not think that most of her preservice classwork was particularly challenging, characterizing it as mostly "busywork." She found some of the assignments helpful, especially those centering on lesson planning and classroom management. She also appreciated hearing about principles of active learning and how they can be incorporated in the classroom. However, she saw the majority of assignments as more of an exercise in simply "getting things done" than an intellectual exercise. As a result, Joy found it difficult to care about, and put much effort into, many of the assignments in her preservice classes. She reported that many of her classmates held similar sentiments.

Much of what was presented in the education classes seemed like mere "common sense" to Joy, and she felt the course content did not have to be "drawn out" so much. She believed that many of her courses could have been shortened or consolidated to eliminate redundant and irrelevant material. She would have preferred to spend more time on her student teaching and on her much more challenging science content courses:



Joy: And you just feel like you're wasting a lot of time, especially, like during your observation semester. It's ridiculous, like, all the things we had to do, and turn in.

Interviewer: For example?

J: For example... it's just like different... (laughs) I dunno, let's see... I just remember having soooo many things to do that the whole semester was a total nightmare for me. Because I was taking lots of heavy – I was taking Microbiology and Zoology and Botany and a Botany lab on the side of doing all my observation stuff.

I: Goodness

J: And it was just like... it was a nightmare.

Joy largely believed her preservice education classes were not as worthwhile as they could have been because they seemed divorced from the actual classroom environment. Even the microteaching exercises seemed very artificial to her, since she was presenting to her fellow student teachers instead of to a “real” class. The classes struck Joy as far too theoretical:

I mean, I'm sure the courses helped me prepare in some ways, but... you know, not that much because it wasn't, like, that experience-oriented. It was more like a lot of talking and just... you know, doing these little assignments here and there that, you know, you really have no connection with, in your mind, to any, like, experiences that you're having, you know?

So since you're not making any of those connections – it's just in one ear and out the other – you have nothing to, like, you know, apply it to. So it's just... that's why, like, people think it's a waste of time.

She acknowledged that much of the lack of context in her preservice classes was due to her own inexperience as a teacher. Many of the early assignments – such as an exercise where she was asked to articulate her prospective classroom rules – were of little benefit to Joy, because she had no experience in the classroom in which to root her decisions. She felt that anything she wrote would be equally invalid, because she had no experience to draw from. She claimed that most such exercises would be useless at that point because the future teacher has no direct experience with what a classroom is like. Once she got some experience in a real classroom, even if they were just observations, Joy felt that she could make some connections and respond very differently to the assignments that were of little use to her at the start.

To Joy, the best part of her preservice education was the opportunity to discuss teaching with her fellow student teachers. Her classmates were very supportive of her; in fact, she considered them her greatest source of help, and proclaimed that she probably would not have gotten through student teaching without them. She enjoyed the confirmation that everyone was having problems similar to the ones she was having, and the opportunity to share solutions, lessons, and teaching strategies. Since her cohort members were having similar experiences, they could empathize with each other. She felt that she could talk to her fellow student teachers as equals, in a way that she just could not with her professors and cooperating teacher. She found the face-to-face interaction with her fellow students more useful than any material presented in her classes, and wished that her methods classes had focused almost exclusively on sharing of experiences between student teachers:

I think that [Professor's] class would have been just as useful if we would have just gotten together for about an hour, and talked about our

experiences, and what was going on. You know, just as much as... you know, doing like all these assignments and things that, like, you just don't really care about, and want to put much effort. You just want to get them done, because what you're really focusing on is your teaching.

Joy felt strongly that prospective teachers need to get into the classroom as soon as possible, even if it is just as an observer. She thought that the more classroom experience teachers have early in the training process, the better a picture of teaching they get, and the more able they are to judge if teaching is for them. She even went so far as to say that student teachers should even observe classes at grade levels they do not plan to teach. She proposed that learning how to teach really cannot begin until the student teacher is in the classroom environment:

It's kind of hard to be really well prepared before you start doing your student teaching, because it's kind of a thing where you've just got to be thrown into it, and you just learn on the spot.

That's the whole thing: it's hard to teach someone how to teach. It's just an individualistic thing, and it's just the kind of thing that you'll learn once you start teaching, you know?