

Chapter 4 – Results

Student Teacher #4 – “James”

Background

James had originally planned to go to medical school, but after seven years in college, he decided his grades were not good enough. Although he admitted that teaching was a “fallback” career for him, he insisted that after a little experience in the classroom that teaching was the “right choice” for him. He enjoyed the stimulating challenge of the variety of the teaching experience. He also found the prospect of long “vacations” appealing, although he acknowledged that the days that teachers do work are very full and intense. He was not dissuaded by the low pay of the teaching profession, claiming to get his “compensation” from seeing students succeed:

Well, you know, of course, the pay’s not that great, so that’s... financial reward’s not one thing. That’s not why I’m in this. I enjoy helping... I enjoy working with kids, and y’know, seeing them succeed at something. That’s pretty much enough of a reward for me.

James had always enjoyed science, and had wanted to work in the sciences in some capacity. He confessed that he did not have the “hands-on” science experience that many of his fellow student teachers had, but he did have experience working with young people in day camps. He was seeking composite science certification.

School Environment

James’ host school had mostly lower socio-economic, mostly Hispanic students. The school had a bad reputation in the community, and James had received a very bad impression of the school from friends and acquaintances: a bad neighborhood, hardened

and violent students, etc. At first, this negative impression made James certain that he would not want to teach at this school. He found the teachers at the school, especially his host teacher, to be very willing to share advice, lessons, and activities. While he noted that the students were very unmotivated, he grew to like them, and regarded them as “just normal kids.” One particular incident at the school drove this home to James:

We had a day where they had, um... They faked a crash scene with a car, and then they had “Death” roaming the halls picking people out of classes, and then they were dead, and they had read their obituaries. And they were... that was a really strange day. And the kids reacted like any other kid would react: they were just kind of scared by... you know, what was going on. Like that could really happen. And they weren’t, you know, “Aw man, that’s crap,” you know. Like I think maybe somebody would expect them to... you know, act...

James ultimately came to the conclusion that the bad reputation of his host school was, in his words, a “load of crap.” He tried to apply for a teaching position at his host school, but the school was not hiring science teachers at the time.

To James, the worst aspect of his host school was the lack of laboratory facilities. He was a great believer in the ability of good laboratory materials to enhance science education, by making the class more active, interesting, and fun. He characterized access to materials and equipment for experiments and demonstrations as a “paramount” concern for teaching science. While he realized that teachers could bring equipment and supplies from home, he also realized that this could be an expensive proposition. The science department at James’ host school had only one outdated computer at its disposal, which James viewed as completely inadequate, given the potential value of computers as tools for learning. Even students noted the lack of good equipment at the school, when they would talk to friends at other schools. James got the impression that his school was among the last in the district to receive science equipment and materials.

James had very little contact with the administration of his host school during his student teaching. What he did see, however, did not impress him. For example, he noted a few instances where it seemed to him that many of the assistant principals showed favoritism toward certain students. Also, it seemed to him that administrative punishments for violations such as low attendance were doled out in an inconsistent and unfair manner.

Organized, Yet Flexible

When asked about the best piece of advice he had gotten about teaching, James answered that he was advised early in his student teaching experience to “get organized.” James believed that a high level of organization could make everything in the classroom run more smoothly, because the teacher can find everything and get things done more efficiently. When asked about valuable skills for teachers, he ranked organization as being equal in importance to being able to relate to students. Because organization was so important, James was concerned about his own skills at organization as he went into student teaching.

James’ host teacher had only been teaching for four years, but she possessed organizational skills that James greatly admired. He opined that his host teacher “has the system down pretty good,” in that she understood how to work with both the school district and the students. He was very grateful to have such a good role model to help him develop his organizational skills. At first, James tried to organize his teaching in his own manner, but soon found himself seeking his host teacher’s advice:

The things that she – her suggestions. I... eventually took them to heart. You know, I was kinda like, “Okay, well, I’ll do this, and see if it works my way.” And I was like, “Okay, that didn’t work so well. Maybe I should do it her way.” And her way was usually better. I think that’s

experience talkin'. So, I uh... When she spoke towards the end, I listened.
(laughs)

One particular area of his teaching where James eventually took his host teacher's advice to heart was his lesson plans. At the start of his student teaching he made up his lesson plans day by day. This practice caused him a great deal of stress, left a poor impression on his students, and greatly displeased his host teacher. She advised him of the importance of getting lesson plans done at least a week in advance, so that she could have time to review them and offer advice. He put in his best effort, sacrificing free time on the weekends to get the task done. His efforts at advance planning paid off: he reported experiencing less stress, and was more able to deal with problem situations, such as a long line at the school's copier or equipment breakdowns. He developed a sense of pride at being able to develop lesson plans in advance. He found that being organized and prepared enabled him to be more flexible in his responses to the many surprises that a teacher can encounter in the school year:

Um, you could have an assembly, and there goes your whole lesson plan for that day. You've just gotta... roll with it. (laughs) You've just got to understand that there are certain things that you can control and certain things you can't. And... it's just one of those things. You just have to be prepared to be flexible.

As he benefited from his host teacher's experiences as well as his own, James felt that he gradually improved his organizational skills, and became a better teacher in the process. He was very pleased at how smoothly things went once he "got into a rhythm" with his preparations for teaching.

Although the advance preparations consumed a great deal of time, James felt that in the long run, being organized helped him to deal with the intense time demands of being a teacher. He still felt that there was never enough time to get done all the things

he would have liked to do to improve his teaching, and had to sacrifice sleep and leisure time to get things done. He was grateful to have a host teacher who was not so far removed from student teaching herself, and could sympathize with the time crunch he was experiencing. Once again, his host teacher's level of experience allowed her to provide him with practical suggestions and guidance, because she had "been there, and done that:"

I thought I had a reasonable teacher, our host teacher, who... She knew, because I think she just did it, and knew all the time that it took up, so she was... she helped out a lot, as far as that goes, with my preparation. She didn't do my work, but she pointed me in the right direction, didn't just say, "Here, have at it."

James considered himself very fortunate to have had such a good experience in the classroom as a student teacher, and felt that the experience taught him a lot about teaching.

Motivation Problems

While James felt that overall student teaching was a good experience for him, he spoke with great regret of his students' lack of motivation. His greatest reward for teaching was in being able to help a student understand a concept, but such rewards were few and far between for him, because students were so poorly motivated. If students did not put forth an effort, all of his efforts would be for nothing. He saw trying to get students motivated as his greatest challenge, and he felt that many times he did not meet that challenge. It seemed to James that students genuinely did not care about their grades and performance, an attitude that James did not anticipate, and could not understand at all:

Well, I have kids that just... they don't want to be there. They put their heads down. "You guys are going to fail, if you don't do something." And they just kind of look at me, y'know. And it's just trying to get them motivated is pretty rough.

I dunno. (laughs) I didn't – I expected people to want to learn, I thought everybody wanted to learn, and it's just not the case.

James saw a great many student behaviors that frustrated him, and he attributed a great many of them to a lack of motivation. He tried many times to get students to do work outside of class, but nothing really worked. In fact, many of the teachers at his host school had stopped assigning homework, because most students would not do it. He gave struggling students several opportunities to improve their grades through extra credit, but few of them took advantage. The biggest problem, however, was in low attendance. Many students did not want to be in school, and thus did not come to class on a regular basis. Students compelled to come to school after being caught for truancy may have been present in the classroom, but they did their work half-heartedly.

James attributed this lack of student motivation to a variety of factors. A great many students did not want to be in school at all, and this attitude was compounded by the fact that students may think that science is boring. One reason for this seemed to be that students had a hard time relating science to their everyday experiences. Many science concepts, even elementary ones, can be quite abstract, and James was able to sympathize with students who cannot easily grasp them. He got the impression from talking with his students that many of them did not seem to think that science had anything to do with their lives; he felt that this led to them being more easily distracted from their studies by other influences. They became disengaged from learning science, because they saw little to no value in it. James proposed that this attitude is pervasive, extending to all kinds of student backgrounds:

(Sighs) Yeah. I don't know if it's just this particular school, but I think a lot of kids have a problem, no matter what socio-economic level they're at. I think they have a hard time with science just not being very fun. That's one of the things I would like to do: I would like to make my classroom interesting and fun.

James also believed that a large factor in these low motivation levels was a disregard for the value of education. He noted that high school students have a great deal to do to prepare for the future. However, he felt that students did not realize (or would not admit) how much they had to do, and this ignorance (or denial) generated boredom and lack of motivation. Despite his efforts to convince them that a high school education was becoming increasingly inadequate to get good jobs, many of his students persisted in the belief that high school graduation would mark the end of their schooling:

I don't think they really understand. I think they just think, you know, they're gonna get out and poof it's gonna be handed to them, get a good job. And that's just not the case. You've gotta go out there and educate yourself. And I try to tell them, you know, "You should not plan for high school to be your last stop in the classroom. You have to go on and educate yourself, whither it's through, um, a trade school or something, you've gotta keep going. Or college. Or [community college], something like that. You've just have to keep going to school."

James tried a great many things to try and get students motivated. Some of his problems with attendance corrected themselves, when the end of the semester approached and some students realized that they had to improve their grades. He tried to employ a "success breeds success" strategy, but had difficulty getting the initial successes to begin the cycle. He made it clear to students that they would not fail so long as they tried, and this managed to motivate some students:

They continued to keep trying, you know, and, uh, I think that's important. As long as they're trying, you can't really fail them for that. And, um...you just kind of... You build on it, y'know? "I'm not gonna fail you for this," and they like realize, "Well, if I keep doing this, if I keep working hard, then I'm not gonna fail."

James noticed that the biggest discipline problems seemed to come from the students who were most disengaged from learning. The most bored and unmotivated students seemed to James to also be the ones most likely to make classroom management very difficult. He expressed regret that he spent what he considered wasted time disciplining unmotivated and unruly students, time that would have been better spent actually teaching. He feared that he had to neglect students that genuinely wanted to learn in order to attend to students who clearly did not:

It's like I said, it's a problem getting those kids motivated. I could see how it would wear a teacher down, in that situation, just because there are so many kids that don't want to be there, that are there. And it's just – Y'know, when you spend most of your time dealing with classroom management issues, the kids that want to be there suffer.

Although he believed that he had achieved a handful of "breakthroughs" with some students, James reported that his most negative memories about his student teaching experience involved situations where he could not reach students and help them achieve. He felt as if he had failed those students by not being able to motivate them. He considered such instances to be very personal defeats, where he did not do his job. He expressed disappointment that he had "lost quite a few battles" to keep some students motivated, and to show them a measure of success. When James started teaching, he expected students to have as much of a desire to learn as he did. As his teaching assignment went on, he began to fear that was simply not the case. He frequently questioned his ambition to become a teacher, but upon reflection he realized that he

should not base his decision on a single teaching assignment. He also wondered if student motivation is generational or cyclical, and he just happened to be teaching at a time of low ebb.

James felt that his host teacher was very good at motivating students and managing classroom discipline, and he often sought her advice. His fellow student teachers were also a valuable source of ideas. He confessed, however, that issues of classroom management and student motivation still left him stumped. He hoped that he would become more adept at motivating students as he garnered more experience and found out what worked for different students. He also planned to read some books on classroom management over the summer.

Getting Too Close?

James firmly believed that a teacher needed to put in the effort to get to know his or her students. He reasoned from his own experiences as a learner that if a teacher can find out what students know and are interested in, the teacher can teach at the students' level, and work to make science relevant to students' everyday lives. A teacher that knows his or her students can more readily craft strategies to motivate the students, individually or as a group. James thought that his host teacher was very good at getting to know students and relating to them. He tried to emulate her as much as possible. He believed that as he got to know his students better (and vice versa) barriers came down between them:

I think that was kind of just getting to know them. I think after awhile they broke down their preconceptions about me, and I broke down mine, and we just, you know, found that, "Hey, you know, we got something in common," and went from there.

James had a motivation for wanting to get to know students beyond classroom mechanics. He believed that getting to know students was an important component of caring about students. One major reason that he wanted to be a teacher was the opportunity to make a difference in students' lives. He felt that getting to know students communicated this desire to them, by showing interest in them as people:

I think you have to convince the kids that, uh, you're there to help them, you're not just there to get a paycheck. You're there to help them succeed in school.

Convincing students of his desire to make a difference was very important to James, because he believed that without that desire, a teacher is just doing a job. He was convinced that students could tell when a teacher was not interested in helping them, and that in turn they would not be interested in learning. But even something as minor as promising to look up the answer to a question in class, or an offer to help a student one-on-one, could show students that a teacher was willing to work for them, and not just "throwing out facts." When he was in high school, James felt that many of his teachers were just there to give grades and get paid. He was determined not to be that kind of teacher, and to show his students that he was not.

Getting to know students was a concern for James, for three reasons. First, he was daunted by the large amount of time required to become acquainted with all (or even most) of his students. He could understand that with all their duties, some teachers might not be able to make time to get to know their students, but he was determined to try. Once again, his host teacher was a valuable role model and resource for him.

Another concern that James had about getting acquainted with his students was inherent in his position as a student teacher. He came into the class late in the school year, and so was already behind in forming relationships. Students were already "used to" the host teacher, and may have found James a bit of a shock:

The whole switching from the host teacher to the student teacher, I think that was kind of... not traumatic, but it was just... you know, they were used to a certain way, and then all of a sudden you're there. And you have to get to know them, and they already got to know the teacher, the host teacher, and I dunno how much... how willing they would be to share, necessarily.

James felt his task of getting to know students – and their task of getting to know him – would have been easier if he had been with students from the beginning of the semester. If he had had more time and opportunity to get to know his students better, he believed he could have done a better job of motivating them. He looked forward to the opportunity he would have as a full-time teacher to get to know students from Day One.

James' most pressing concern in getting to know students, however, was his perceived need to walk the fine line between being too much of a friend to students and too much of a disciplinarian. He believed a teacher must play many roles – motivator, friend, psychologist – all while maintaining status as an authority figure. But he was also convinced that teachers have to emphasize that they are there to help students, not to fail or punish them. He knew that it would be a constant struggle against his basic nature to avoid getting too friendly with students. He felt that soon it would surpass his quest to become more organized:

So that's gonna be probably my biggest problem, because the organization, I know you have to do it; it's just something... now it's totally ingrained in my head. But I think after that my next biggest problem is gonna be the too buddy-buddy with the kids, and I've just... I've got to find that.

In one incident, he was compelled to report a student who came along on a class trip without permission. It was a difficult choice for him to make, but he knew that he

had to be responsible and objective, whatever his feelings about students. Other teachers that he has discussed the matter with agree that walking the fine line between getting to know students and getting too close is a difficult task.

Content Knowledge

Another issue that James was wrestling with was the prospect of having to teach subject matter that he was unfamiliar with. This was a major concern, as he was seeking composite science certification. He firmly believed that it was vital for a science teacher to know his or her subject matter well:

I think you also have to have a good grasp of your subject that you'll be teaching. Because if you don't have that, then basically you're acting.
(laughs)

For a while during his student teaching, James had to teach subjects that he had only a slight familiarity with, such as aquatic biology and certain topics in physical science. He was so occupied with trying to stay one step ahead of the students in learning the material himself, that he had no time to work on how best to teach it. He felt that his lack of knowledge showed in the poor quality of his teaching in those classes. Once he got back into subject matter that he knew more broadly and deeply, he could focus more on pedagogical issues and work on being a better teacher.

Reflections on Preservice Education

When he began taking his education classes, James expected them to be as challenging as his science content classes, but in the end he found them to be “mind-numbingly boring” and “tedious busywork.” He received good grades in his education classes, but came away with no real feeling of accomplishment, because they were so

easy. While he believed that his education classes had some good professors, he viewed much that was being taught as trivial, or so obvious as to be “common sense.”

His preservice education classes primarily frustrated James because he saw them as being very disconnected, both from each other and from actual classroom teaching. The education courses seemed to James to have no little or no structure to guide the student to overarching ideas or themes: they just seemed like a jumble of topics. This was in contrast to his science content classes, which presented material in a more interconnected and building fashion. Furthermore, he felt strongly that his education courses had little to no connection to the actual realities of teaching, and doing assignments for these classes took away from previous time that he could have spent thinking about and working on teaching:

I had a problem with that, a lot of times. I was like, why am I doing this. This is making me so much... I have this due, when I could be concentrating on the actual teaching. Or, you know, gathering information and, you know, my own thoughts, my own reflection on what my teacher's doing, whether during observation or the student teaching, getting all those thoughts together, writing some things down – notes, my own ideas. But instead I had to do... There were quite a few assignments that are just, like, I can't... They were ridiculous.

One example that James gave of a “ridiculous” assignment was a “design your own classroom” project. He viewed the assignment as unrealistic, because he knew that teachers rarely get even a small portion of what they ask for. Furthermore, he felt that that assignment encouraged “padding” with its page minimum requirements. He definitely classified the project as one of many examples of “busywork” in his education classes.

He did find some aspects of his education classes to be useful. For example, a course about special-needs students proved to be one of his more worthwhile classes, for

the information and strategies that it provided. He encountered many of the situations described in the class during his student teaching. His teaching methods class provided him with concrete examples of what to do in the classroom, such as activities and experiments. He wished that his other education classes had presented him with more “hands-on experience with hands-on learning,” as opposed to the theoretical material he got in most of his classes:

I really wish we could have had more with the teaching... how to actually teach science. You know, what different things... That was, um, some of the best ideas that we had was the actual... the methods class. I think if we had more classwork like that, you know, actually... “You should try this experiment for this,” you know. I... That really would have been helpful.

One facet of his preservice education that James found both helpful and pleasant was the opportunity to interact with his fellow student teachers. He felt he could identify with many of the situations his classmates found themselves in, and he found it very useful to hear the solutions that they came up with for common problems. At the start of the student teaching experience, he met with a group of his student teachers at a local tavern on Friday nights to discuss events of the past week, commiserate, and relax. Although these get-togethers faded away as workloads got too heavy for all concerned, James felt that they helped him maintain his focus on student teaching. Thanks to his classmates, he knew that he was not alone. This was important to him, since he did not have as extensive a support network of family and friends outside of his student teacher cohort. Were it not for his fellow student teachers, James said that he would have gotten very little from his preservice classes:

Actually, I learned more from my other... the other future teachers than I did from any of the classes, so that was kind of valuable. But other

sources... the classes themselves weren't that real helpful, but the interaction with other students were... was helpful.

James ranked his preservice classes very low as a source of preparation for teaching, far below his experiences with his fellow student teachers and his host teacher. He firmly believed that the place to learn about teaching is not in an education class as a student, but outside the university setting as a classroom teacher. He felt that prospective teachers should be placed in as wide a variety of classroom environments as possible. According to James, education classes cannot hope to provide the opportunities that actual classroom experience can:

I think you just have to get out and experience, and then... just have the information – or have the stuff available to you that you can draw from, and then incorporate that into your actual hands-on experience, and build on certain things that work, discard things that don't work. Um, just having the resources available I think is important, but experience... that's what you really need. And I just didn't get that from my classes. They can't provide you with experience.