

Running Head: Washington Middle School

Observing Pre-Adolescent Behavior in the Environment of Washington Middle School

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Driving away from Croixside Monday morning I was a bit apprehensive on what might lay ahead. As I began to exit off on Interstate 35E on to Maryland Avenue heading towards the residential section of St. Paul, I was debating maybe teaching wasn't the right choice, I had very little experience working with members of diverse communities, even though my undergraduate degree was in psychology and international studies nothing had prepared me for what I might ultimately face. Looking briefly at my map, I knew that I had to travel down Maryland for a while past Rice Street but I had to turn before Dale Street, on Marion. I noticed that I was only a few miles from my aunt and uncle's place on Dale and Wheelock Parkway, so I quickly assumed that these neighborhoods would be similar. I was in for a shock when I pulled off of Maryland to head down Marion Street. As the houses seemed to cave into the road and parking was on both sides of the street, I wondered what would happen if someone came down the street in the opposite direction. The houses were so close that many lack windows on neighboring but the yards caught my attention just around the corner my aunt and uncle have a yard that can hold a large party for all our family and friends. But parties were not my concern. As a child I would be able to run freely through our huge yard my spirit soaring and I would have not a care in the world. These yards were small about the size of my driveway it made me think how these kids play or even create an imagination.

As I drive closer to the school I see a beautiful church and a school to my left and in front of me a building built during the early 20th century, with fireplace chimney's on the roof. Its architectural splendor reminds me of the Summer Palace in Superior, Wisconsin, I can only imagine how many painstaking hours we spent to build this place. I park my car on one of the side streets and walk towards the door. I am now nervous when I see *Washington Junior High* in

big bold white letters of the main entrance; I began wondering if I am in the right area. As I walk in I am greeted with a large smile and welcomed to Washington Middle Technology Magnet School. I sign in and ask the lady where I can find VR, as I will be doing my observing with her. Still nervous a bright and bubbly individual greets me and escorts me to the ESL wing of the school. I drop my stuff off in her office and my day begins.

The school looks like 1960s throughout the hallways, white walls accentuated with a purple stripe and there is someone painting murals this week. today he is working on the word Washington, I'm guessing so that students feel welcome. There are the gym style vinyl floors that look well traveled. During passing time they are crowded and you afraid of bumping into someone for fear that you would get hurt.

The classrooms are where the school shines. As you walk in you can tell the windows are the most integral feature, large with a lot of natural light makes the maple wood floors look even more rich and inviting. I view two different classrooms before starting the first class; the first classroom looks almost to be a classroom in a wealthy suburban district. The desks are new with typical middle school doodles on their tops, the windows are large but the distraction is the humming of the fluorescent lights keeps me from pretending that I am in a new school. You can tell the school is old and the walls have been built on top of. There are network ports for the Internet throughout the room, it would be safe to say that they out number the electrical plugs (which I have only found two, one in front and back); there is a surplus of extension cords and surge protectors to accommodate the technology portion of the school. The bookcases are well organized and are actually built-ins, giving the classroom a clean and sleek look.

As I enter in the second classroom, this is how I pictured how it would look. The desks are old and mismatched, not in perfect rows because they do not fit together. The bookracks

below the desks are broken or removed. The windows are used as wall space and covered with students work because of the lack of wall space. It is unwelcoming room; even with the fluorescent lights it is still dark and ominous. There are metal bookcases lining the room, like wagons around the campfire, trying to hold the massive number of materials need in a classroom. With no built-ins the back of the classroom looks to be used as makeshift storage. There are no built-ins, which gives this room an unwelcoming feel because of little continuity. The wood floors are cold and uninviting. This room is half the size of the other room and next to is a room that looks almost to be a mirror image; it is like these two rooms were split in half. This is the room I will be doing my first observation.

As I watch students in the hall go through passing time, it looks crowded, later in the day I will get to embark on my own passing time later in the day when I observe a social studies class on the other side of the school. As I look at the demographic make-up of the school I notice that the majority of the population (70%) is Hmong or African American the students are almost all of minority descent, with less than 10% of the entire student body white, actually VR referred to it as the other. 86% of these students live below the poverty line. VR is out in the hall welcoming her students in the classroom, she moves very quickly from one room to another because passing time are only 5 minutes long and has little time to interact or engage in discipline for hall behavior.

I am a bit nervous when I hear a tapping a desk nearby, it becomes almost as distracting as the humming of the fluorescent lights and I find my pre-adolescent to observe. Oscar is from a Latin county, I didn't have a chance to ask which one, but he is a character to watch and I am thoroughly going to enjoy the experience. Two minutes into the class Oscar receives his first warning the evil eye, as VR likes to call it, he is the third student to receive the warning, he got it

for talking and making noise while someone else was talking. Once caught on that infraction, he begins getting into other students business. When VR asks for the assignments to be turned in, Oscar pipes up that he does not have his assignment completed which then receives him his second warning of two minutes after class. His misbehavior does not cease and continues, but VR ignores the behavior, I learn later why she ignores. He shows a lot of respect to VR when she helps him acting like an ‘angel child’, but when the E.A. Mr. Packor comes to assist he begins a role of defiance. Then students are asked to pull out their words, as they will be taking a quiz on the material, this student engages in socialization practices that do not assist in his learning of vocabulary words. Oscar who is very impulsive and lacks self-control seems to be more in the role of the ringleader of troublemakers when his group gets nailed again on misbehavior, but Oscar doesn’t receive the third and final warning of detention. I think Oscar actually took a lot away from the lesson; they were beginning a lesson on nouns that I think he was able to translate back into Spanish, as he was able to fully participate in the naming of noun game that was played. The class is fairly small and the student on student interaction is done surprisingly not in English, but rather their native language. After the bell rang Oscar has to serve his two-minute silent time with his buddies. VR who has to move quickly from one room to the next has to leave the room to begin setting up her next class; Oscar and his buddies began having a two-minute social time. The student leaves the room like he owns the place. I then move onto the next room for the next class.

Reflecting on the overall class atmosphere and the ideas of the authentic qualities of a middle school, the only one I see is block scheduling I do not observe student centered instruction. I think this is because this is an ELL classroom and students must learn the basics before moving on. Looking around to additional aspects of the classroom atmosphere time spent

on tasks is a bit perplexing, I wonder that only in two minutes, three students have received verbal warnings about their behavior. How many students will get the second warning of 2 minutes quietly after class or ultimately go to detention? The class is seventy-five minutes long and students only spend fifteen minutes on various academic segments before transitioning to another activity, after the first 40 minutes students are allowed to stretch and move around quietly for about 2 minutes to grab materials for their next activity. This break seems to allow students to focus more intently on the material at hand. One of the other rooms I observed on the second day, the teacher did not allow movement between activities and these students became restless and disrespectful. Discipline is short and quick as these students are well aware that argument and insubordination will give you detention immediately. Since noise can guarantee you a warning, the noise level in the classroom is muffled sounds of papers being shifted or pencils being set down. The only noise occurs when students get to move around during activities playing games like popcorn or fishbowl to assist in learning about activities. Throughout the class VR and Mr. Packor respond with positive or constructive comments when observing student work, students tend to respond very well to these comments.

Following my second observation I ask VR about what things she would like to change. She characterized them into three major topics, the physical environment, emotional environment, and the mental environment. In the physical sense, she would like for teachers to be able to teach in one room rather than float from room to room. Part of this would be sanity for the teacher who must cart all of their materials around to different places. It also inhibits teachers ability ensure safety during passing time. Students have a difficulty being able to connect with the teacher outside of classroom time because the teacher is not located in one place. It makes it hard for the teacher to provide extra help during homeroom or prep time. With regards to the

emotional environment she would like our building to have a more consistent for of discipline. Also a building that was safer for both students and teachers. We have had a number of assaults of students on students and student on teacher. I would like to see more effective/positive conflict resolution. And finally the metal environment, she would like to improver her teacher strategies and understanding so that I am improving my students high thinking skills and challenging them while still meeting their ELL and special ed needs in addition to their lower proficient reading levels.

In regards to what I would like to change, I think I would change the discipline policy with regards to respect towards adults. As I was sitting in the classroom, a student began lying and cheating, when he was caught. He began telling the teacher how terrible she was and he was going to the bathroom and not coming back. I grew up learning that adults demanded respect, whether they were your elder relatives or members of the community. When I was sitting taking notes VR came over and said to me, "I like to keep them in my class. So I refrain from sending them to detention unless they swear or get into a physical fight. In detention they don't learn anything and when they are this far behind. Why should I then make them fall back further?" I would also agree with VR that each teacher needs their own classroom, fighting through the crowded halls to move a crate weighing about 30 pounds has to become tiresome and frustrating every day. The final change I would make would be that all students should have to talk in English; the best way to engage into learning English is to not speak your native language around your peers, but rather talk in English. I noticed that when students were in the library they would talk in their native language but if a teacher was in earshot the student(s) quickly changed to English.

As I walked out of Washington on my first day, I felt more confident in my abilities and how to deal with minorities. Maybe they can find their spirit in small environments, maybe and that spirit is found, when they laugh when they make mistakes and say, "I get it now."