Context for Learning: [Redacted] High School

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1.) The School

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\textit{The School}, the school’s northernmost school, is a true slice of America. The school’s grounds abut Highway 99 with its strip malls of dollar stores, cheap supermarkets and fast food chains where many of the students work and frequent. Just over half of the school’s 1,182 students are white and only 28% of the school qualifies for free/reduced lunch—a 6% decrease from the previous year (OSPI, 2015). Diversity appears to be decreasing as well. The breakdown for the 2014-15 academic year was as follows: 11.5% Latino (a 2.2% decrease from 13-14), 16.7% Asian (a 2% decrease), and 9.1% African American (a 1.6% decrease). Despite this slight tilt towards homogeneity, the school is diverse in other ways. The school has a large Special Education program. In 2014-15, 11.3% of students were in Special Education, plus 6.7% on 504 plans. It also has a small but robust ELL program with 6.2% of students as members (1.3% are considered migrant) (OSPI, 2015). The schools’ international emphasis is also felt. Not only are there welcome banners in ten different languages, but classrooms read and study authors from around the world. Japanese, along with French and Spanish, is also offered and the school has an oft advertised clean water project with a partner school in Kenya.

2.) The Classroom (s)

In the 2014-15 academic year, over-crowding was observed in all classrooms at all levels and subjects. This is the result of 2014-15’s large freshman class (n= 500, 2015); but the 2015-16’s class is reportedly even larger. Despite overcrowding, the classrooms are equipped with document cameras, projectors and five to seven computers each. There are several computer
labs on campus and X Public School’s web portal—*the Source*—allows teachers to post assignment documents and grades instantly for students and parents.

In terms of classroom curriculum, teachers appear to adopt a decisively international emphasis in at least their choice of texts and historical perspectives, whether it’s in 9th grade Language Arts (*Born Chinese*), 11th grade American Literature (*The Circuit*), 10th grade World Literature (*Like Water for Chocolate*) or 11th grade U.S. History (*The People’s History of the United States*).

Other curricular considerations, of course, include preparation for the SBAC. I saw two language arts teachers preparing students for this test. The prep consisted of having students read two to three sources and writing a paper on how they were related.

Lastly, teachers get evaluated yearly based on the Danielson framework, which, among other things, prompts teachers to choose either the whole class or a group to target. Achievement data must be gathered on this targeted group and instruction must be adapted to increase their learning.

3.) *Exceptional students*

As already reported, X is home to many exceptional students. One particularly memorable student is described below:

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timorous towards his brash and often off topic commentary. He has five mainstream classes, despite his SM3 classification. He does no homework, as a personal policy. He occasionally can be seen after school doing make up work with his Instructional Assistant (this author) usually at the end of the quarter to get his grades up.

Jayshawn's housing is unstable. He often couch surfs at his girlfriend's house, other friend's houses and occasionally at his father's house in South X. Needless to say, he often shows up in the middle of second period, not having slept much. He was raised largely by his father, but also by his older brothers—all of whom are currently in jail or recently released because of drug or gang related offenses. His mother was addicted to drugs and was not available to care for much of Jayshawn's childhood needs. He has aspirations to go to a four year university to play college league football and then join the NFL. He is convinced academic requirements will be waved.

4.) Implications for Instruction

Because of potential fragmenting between X’s diverse ethnic groups, a new teacher at X might employ more cooperative learning activities like jigsaw or ‘learning together’ activities that get learners achieving a common academic goal (Lewis & Doorlag, 2011). Teachers interested in utilizing motion or movement in their lessons (as recommended by Medina, 2014) may want to take students outside, as the rooms generally do not allow for large scale movements of any kind. In addition, because of the working class background of many of the learners, real world connections and applications to academic learning should be found as often as possible.
In addition, the past neglect of students like Jayshawn may be ongoing, but may currently be taking forms that appear as independence. Jayshawn, for instance, would never admit that he is, for all intensive purposes, homeless. He claims he is on his own and already a man. While this claim has validity, teachers must remember the age of their students (Jayshawn is still a minor) and their duty to report and/or investigate neglect. In response to hearing that a student is sleeping at multiple locations a week, a call to a parent would be in order at the very least. If a parent cannot be contacted, administration should be informed.

References


