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**Teacher Interview | Fall 2017**

**Educational Control & Change | Honors**

**Professor Sarah Stitzlein**

**Teacher Background - Aaron Edge**

**Teaching History:** Relatively New Teacher

* This year: Dater High School, 9th Grade World History, baseline non honors class.
* Last Year: Delhi High School, 7th grade world history.

**School Information:**

* Gilbert A. Dater High School is connected to Western Hills University High School in Westwood, Cincinnati, Ohio. It includes grades 7-12.
* A test required for enrollment.
* Geared toward college readiness, more challenging curriculum.
* Population: ⅔ minority (majority black, some Hispanic, very small asian), ⅓ white; mostly middle to low class, working class; broken families common, drug use and other bad environments are present; Decent number of foster kids, there are caseworkers from St. Joe’s in the school.
* Located in an Urban Area, Near Price Hill.

**Interview Questions**

1. **How do you feel about the rise of standardized assessments that seem to be having an increasing presence in schools today?**

According to Aaron, many studies are against tests; they don't improve student performance, they hinder them. Kids spend so much time worrying and feeling pressure and it affects their grades in a negative way. During the Spring, little learning occurs because  students are preparing for testing. Students are so focused on passing their tests. A majority of this pressure is due to concept of funding being depending on test scores in many school districts, not just Cincinnati. Some schools have said ‘screw it’ and stopped pressing test scores, putting their funding at risk.

1. **What do you think is the cause of declining reading and writing skills in high school students?**

He believes that the rise and influence of standardized tests has actually decreased students reading and writing skills. When he was working at the Writing Center at Ball State University, he experienced an influx in upperclassmen trying to improve their writing skills, something that should have been stressed *years* ago. Aaron believes that the solution is disciplinary literacy. Disciplinary literacy is the idea that all teachers need to teach literacy, no matter what subject they teach. A rise in these programs should lead to improvement in reading and writing. Currently in many school districts literacy is hit hard during K-5 education, then drops off as you move on to middle school and beyond. There need to be more enforcement of literacy in all levels of education.

1. **Do you think that more involvement of corporations in schools has had a positive, negative, or mixed effect and why?**When it comes to companies such as Cengage and Pearson, that's their job. They have a strong presence in Early Childhood Education and it appears again in college. They make large sums of money in both arenas. Aaron believes that anyone looking to make a profit off of education is committing a major sin. He is not a fan of Charter schools as he believes they create a bias. When it comes to textbooks the more populous states have all the power, similar to the electoral college. Textbooks coming from California tend to be more liberal, while textbooks from Texas tend to be more conservative. Aaron believes this is a problem. While he doesn’t like the financial dependency aspect of textbooks, he acknowledges that improved diversity is important.
2. **Has inequality between funding in schools affected your school or classroom?**Funding is a problem. Urban schools tend to be funded less because people distributing the money don't live there. Dater tends to receive less many than suburban schools, but they receive enough to operate at a normal level, without excess. They function with learning center system so they are a “one stop shop” for anything that the students or their families may need. Many donations are made by partners who are not in it for the money. He says that some CPS schools are limited on things such as printing, but he has not experienced this at Dater.
3. **What are your thoughts on the current administration in our government and the influence on educators?**

Simply, there are more of us than there are of them and we are united. Changes will take some time, which will allow a solid defense to form. Too many decisions are made by people that have never taught in a classroom or been exposed to lesson planning. When we learned that Betsy DeVos was Secretary of Education, though we were frustrated, we still functioned the same in school, composed lesson plans, and did not try to change our style of teaching to fit their demands. All things considered, he has not met a teacher that is happy about the new administration’s stance on education.

1. **Has there been a problem with teacher retention in your district/school? Why do you think this is a problem?**Aaron says that much of turnover has been due to lack of support from administration. Within Cincinnati Public Schools there are some issues, Western Hills has problems between administration and teachers, but Aaron hasn’t experienced problems at Dater High School. Blame tends to be placed on teachers and they tend to be underappreciated. There is a common myth that teachers are coming to collect a paycheck and that’s simply not true (what paycheck?!). An overwhelming majority of teachers come to work and put in maximum effort. “Critics have blamed the performance of teachers for myriad social ills: the erosion of American economic competitiveness and productivity, the decline student academic achievement, teenage pregnancy, juvenile delinquency and crime, the coarsening of our everyday discourse and culture, a decline in morals, gender and racial stereotyping and discrimination, and on and on.” (Ingersoll, 2011).
2. **What is your average class size? Do you think this is too big, too small, or a good size? Why?**Aaron has about 25 to 30 students in his class at once. He believes there is a line that shouldn't be crossed which is at about 40 students. After this point teaching cannot be individualistic anymore. He also made a point to say that less than 10 students creates a lack of variation in ideas coming from the students.
3. **Do you think that schools should be invested in the socioeconomic status of the population they serve?**Definitely!Trying to create good citizens is a must in schools as we are teaching the students about their civic duties and their part in giving back to the community. It should be a goal to give them perspective. When asked about why people chose the career they did, we often hear “because that’s my way of giving back to society”, so we should be starting early to instill such values in our students.
4. **Do you think that the parent, the child, or neither are your "customer"? Why or why not?**Ultimately he (Aaron) is there for the student, but wants parent collaboration and cooperation. He has found that collaboration has improved the students’ education experience. He believes that this method shouldn't change in private education. But it is important to keep in mind that the teacher is the one with all the training and the parents should trust them while still being advocates for their children.
5. **Diversity in the classroom is important, how does your school support that? What is the racial/religious/cultural breakdown and how has that influenced your Lesson Plans?**

The demographics and socioeconomic status of students and teachers tends to match loosely with the demographics and socioeconomic status of the community. Aaron says his goal in all his classrooms is to talk about the things that make people uncomfortable such as the Black Lives Matter Movement. His lesson plans are not going to change based on the people in his class because everyone deserves to voice their opinion about things they are passionate about. The diversity does aide and created a variety of voices during discussion, but he also realizes that the opinions of 14-15 year olds are largely formed from their parents.

**Analysis & Connections**

Before beginning our search for a teacher, we set certain criteria that fit our insights on specific topics and areas of interest. We knew we wanted a teacher that would challenge our thoughts, had strong opinions concerning education, critical thinking strategies, and hopes for our future classrooms. We found our perfect match: Aaron Edge, a 9th grade World History teacher at Dater High School. Aaron is outspoken and has strong opinions towards education, especially the inadequacies, the “nerve” to ask the hard questions, and it all comes back to his passion for teaching and raising a new generation. As we spoke to Aaron, we noticed many comments concerning the “good” school district in which he teaches at. But what defines a “good” school district? According to Brown, when many are asked how they define such a label, “most believe, with evidence, that their teachers provided them with strategies and skills needed to succeed in college and in life” (Brown, 2012). It is not surprising hearing that the teacher has such an impactful role in the classroom, but it is surprising seeing an individual non-education related trying to mandate set criteria’s for teacher’s lesson plans.

In the past few weeks of class we have been talking about the town, state, national, and international actors that influence our schools and most importantly, our children. We asked Aaron his views on the inclusion of companies in education and how that controls the topics taught in our schools. We started at the involvement of big corporations such as Pearson and Cengage, which led to us discussing who specifically controls these companies. We back tracked to California and Texas, where many textbooks are created, which naturally adds to the liberal and populist bias in schools via textbooks. Out of the 50 states, the power of our education that is preached to our children everyday, lies in the hands of a few members that tell us the facts of our history. We, as parents and teachers, have been instructed to abide to such textbooks and continue to teach it. Aaron brought up a wonderful point, “You have to learn how to embrace your personal style of teaching, without going against the administration because at the end of the day you need them on your side!” It is also because of state funding that schools abide to state standardized testing and put away planned intellectual and self-management activities, in order to assist students in studying for tests. We can recall the many times we were told by our teachers, “Just know this for the test, that’s all that matters, but I won’t ask you about it.”

“It is inaccurate and faulty thinking to believe that a school is either “bad” or “good” based on its location or the socioeconomic community that surrounds the school” (Brown, 2012). Though this quote might be the most appropriate or “politically correct” way of thinking when determining a school’s value, it is absolutely unrealistic. Aaron stated that when parents are looking to place their child in a school, they are either looking for something convenient with their schedule or a place that is known to nurture the child’s well-being. The socioeconomic status (SES) of the community surrounding the school does indeed determine if the school is viewed as good or bad. The reason this is a reality is because schools known to be in an urban setting often are stigmatized with the idea that it’s surrounded by violence, either by students or third-parties. This, in turn, leads to community outreach initiated by the school not only to teach the children their civil obligation, but more importantly, to make their own school look like a better and safer place to be.

Schools also receive their reputation, good or bad, based on test scores, but is this the real definition of success or failure? Should it not be the improvement that is measured? This concept is evaluated by Park (2002) when she discusses whether it should still be counted a failure when immense improvement has been made, even though it is technically below grade level. Still, how can students learn if they lack the literacy for basic reading and writing? If Aaron experienced college students have a lack of literacy how can students in high school be expected to work at that level? Park (2002) experienced this situation in a high school classroom when, “[She] realized that [she] was trying to teach academic literacy to some students who did not yet have basic literacy”. This problem needs to be addressed to ensure improvement in the test scores that keep schools alive, so why does this not seem to be on the forefront of change?

Instead of focusing on improving test scores, and more importantly learning, the new federal administration wants to expand schools that make a profit off of the education of children, directly against Aaron’s view against making money from education (Spring, 2017). The changes that are going to be coming with the new administration are something that many Americans are worried about, but Aaron’s perspective sheds new light. The fact that change may not happen easily with teachers bound together is a concept we never considered. Another change that the US can expect is the institution of free enterprise in education and the shift of educational power to the states. This will lead to exacerbation of the problem of differentiation in education. Park (2002) stated, “I can see how I may have planned curriculum for a class that I assumed was homogeneously literate rather than heterogeneously learning.” She struggled with a different level of education between her students. If the states obtain power over education and there isn’t a universal mandate, there will be an even more substantial rift between levels of education especially as students move on to college. Coincidentally, Aaron expressed his view that educational decisions shouldn’t be made by people who aren’t involved in education. He seems to have the right idea based on the ideas and their consequences held by our current Secretary of Education.

**Learning Assessment**

We think the most important part of this interview was the fact that Aaron had informed opinions on every question that we asked that were already created. We concreted the fact that he has the best interest of the children at heart and wasn’t in it for his own purposes. He opened our eyes to problems that we never would have experienced in our K-12 education being from Kettering and Centerville, both suburbs of Dayton, Ohio. Even though we were aware that there is a rift between different schools, he helped us realize how lucky we were. We often do not realize how fortunate we were growing up, and though we fight for the rights of our students, we will never truly understand what their daily struggles are outside of school borders. Furthermore, it is our duty to ensure that every child receives the best quality education no matter where the school lies and how society labels it; “ghetto”, “for rich kids”.

For example, he explained what it is like to attend and teach at an urban, underfunded school. Our history involves some of the most well off schools in the Dayton area, both known for their academic prestige. Dater is similar to our schools in one obvious way, preparation for college. Dater is filled with students who want to be there, and their entrance test scores reflect that. The goal is to graduate, similar to most suburban schools, like ours. The considerable difference is in the funding of our schools compared to Dater. In Kettering and Centerville, the levies almost always pass, the students are given tablets/laptops to use throughout the year, there are always renovations happening, etc. At Dater, they are currently replacing deteriorated equipment as money allows. Dater has to worry about obtaining enough funding to keep the school running smoothly. Even though Aaron expressed that updated schools with high end materials and equipment isn’t the most important thing to promote exceptional learning, it has an impact.

Not only is the school different, but the socioeconomic status of the surrounding area is completely different. The area around Dater is composed of mostly lower to middle class families, while the area around our high schools are mostly middle to high class families. Community outreach with a focus of remedying poverty is an important part of life at Dater, while at our schools it was something that we went to *other* cities to do, if we experienced community outreach at all.

The last major eye opener we experienced was the difference in student population. At our high schools that vast majority of students were and are white. Maybe ¼ of the student population at each school were minorities. However, at Dater about ⅔ of the students are a minority. This leads to a completely different school dynamic when it comes to class discussion and even the daily groove of the school. We think this is something that you can’t completely get a feel for unless you have been in the middle of it.

It was interesting how an extensive amount of opinions Aaron shared about current problem in schools matched up with our opinions, especially because of Aaron being middle aged and us being new adults. Even when thoughts differed, everyone recognized that change needed to be made to increase school success. The contradiction was what and how change should be made. Some people do the big “talking”, while others do the hard “walking”, but at the end of the day we need bright minds and critical thinkers to achieve success in our schools. This was definitely an experience we will cherish as Aaron allowed us to challenge his own thoughts, dig deeper into the politics surrounding his school, and gave us hope as future educators, nurses, engineers, that our schools will still be a place of love and nurture for our children.

**References**

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