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**RURAL STEREOTYPES IN THE CLASSROOM
A TEACHER'S PERSPECTIVE**

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ABSTRACT

As part of a yearlong English teaching internship, I had the opportunity to observe the daily interactions of twenty-six eighth grade students enrolled a regular track English class co-taught by Philip Anderson and myself. As the year progressed, I observed behaviors indicating that one of my students from a rural background was being excluded from his peer group based on this background. With the goal of facilitating a cohesive classroom community, I began to investigate this apparent division among my students. This case study focuses on my encounters with rural stereotypes that threatened to hinder the harmony of one eighth-grade English class. Through direct observation I collected my data, and then triangulated it through written records from school educators and counselors, as well as the students' own academic work. On this foundation, I began to examine how various students' perceptions of rural life affect the classroom environment.

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INTRODUCTION

As part of my studies to become a secondary English teacher, I have taken dozens of education classes. Out of those dozens of classes, I cannot recall a single one that failed to emphasize the importance of viewing each student not only as an individual learner, but also as an individual human being with a unique background. My professors never instructed me to make instructional decisions based on generalizations about the kids in my classroom. Not once did I hear, “And now, future educators, remember that the most efficient classroom management strategy is to make assumptions about the student population without wasting time on understanding them as individuals.” Rather, I have heard the exact opposite assertion in countless lectures, seen it in innumerable different PowerPoint presentations, and even written about it in my own academic papers. However, I did not understand the implications of this educational philosophy until I began a yearlong Professional Development School (PDS) internship in a middle school English classroom in central Pennsylvania. When I began my

student teaching practicum with mentor teacher Philip Anderson (all names are pseudonyms) in September 2009, I met a young man who prompted me to reevaluate the meaning of this concept: that a teacher must first know a student as another human being with a unique background and individual interests in order to then fully understand and attend to that child's learning needs in the classroom.

Nate Palmer, a student in my regular track 8th grade English class, looks much like any other student in the class. His academic performance is average; he does not express great enthusiasm about English or school in general, but does not behave in a way that indicates marked aversion to them either; he tends to socialize consistently with one group of friends; his clothes feature the same styles and name brands that are commonly seen in this middle school; and he is generally respectful towards myself, co-teacher Philip Anderson, and other students in our classroom. Even though I purposefully took time to observe all my classes over the course of several weeks at the beginning of the school year, nothing regarding Nate's appearance and behavior compelled me to separate him from his peers. Other students caught my attention as individuals whose backgrounds may require further investigation – one who was exceptionally outspoken in class, but not particularly high-achieving; one who repeatedly commented on his religious affiliations; one who alienated himself through unprovoked criticism of his classmates; one who was the only child of his race in the class; one with a purple, green, and/or blue streak in her hair that changed color from day to day– but nothing about Nate indicated that he was currently, and had been since sixth grade, experiencing tension at school due to his unique background.

Finally, in late September/early October, Nate's guidance counselor explained to me and Nate's other teachers that, unlike the vast majority of his peers at this middle school, Nate lives

on a farm and aspires to become a farmer. Additionally, his rural background has been and continues to be a source of tension at school. The counselor disclosed this information in our team room, where the teachers on our designated middle school team regularly meet with one another, and periodically – on days such as this one – with our students’ counselors. One of the principal purposes of these team meetings is to improve communication between our team’s subject teachers, teachers of English, Math, Social Studies, Science, Art, and Music. In this manner, we gain a well-rounded and thorough understanding of our shared group of students in the contexts of their various classes. This time, we were receiving a more well-rounded and thorough understanding of Nate and his rural background. According to his counselor, Nate had received discrimination from his peers when they identified him as a farm kid, a negative identity in their estimation. Moreover, Nate had expressed a certain amount of apathy towards school, because he did not understand why it was relevant to his life. With this information in mind, I began to suspect that Nate’s situation may require further investigation. I wondered, *What is the nature of this peer discrimination? Does it negatively affect Nate’s attitude toward his learning environment? Does his apathy towards school result from social tension and/or a perceived disconnect between academics and farming?*

Following the aforementioned team meeting, my curiosity was piqued regarding Nate and the correlation between his rural background and his learning experience at school, but I was not convinced that the situation required follow-up. Then, a second incident in November confirmed the prejudice that Nate’s guidance counselor had mentioned. Several of my students, including Nate, had arrived slightly early to class. I was sitting at my workstation at the back of the room, when one of the girls approached me. After we exchanged greetings, she noticed my cell phone lying on the desk next to me, and asked if she could look at it. When I agreed, she opened it up

and viewed the background photo on the main screen, a picture of my fiancé sitting on a tractor. When she asked who was in the picture, I explained that I had taken the photo at the Grange Fair, the annual county fair, while my fiancé was trying out one of the exhibit tractors. She then asked me what kind of tractor it was, to which I replied that I did not know. Smirking, she retorted, “Why don’t you ask Nate?” He was standing fewer than five feet away. She continued with great sarcasm, “He knows *all* about tractors.” All of this was spoken in the third person, as though Nate was not standing right there. If I had not seen the condescending expression on her face or detected the disdain in her voice, I might have dismissed her comment as a matter-of-fact assertion or even a compliment regarding his knowledge of tractors. I wish this were the case; however, this girl’s body language and tone of voice left little room for ambiguity. After this exchange, I knew that I must pursue a course of action in order to better understand the tension around Nate’s rural ties.

One of my greatest aspirations as a classroom teacher is to have unity among the students in my classroom. They need not share one single perspective, but they must behave with respect towards their classmates, regardless of different backgrounds and values. The prejudice demonstrated by one student in the minutes preceding that November class gave me the final bit of initiative I needed to decide to research this phenomenon in my classroom. Before I could help my students to get along cohesively in the classroom and effectively function as a community of learners, I needed a deeper understanding of the tensions and attitudes surrounding this boy and his rural background. I needed to understand why some of his peers treated him as an outsider and needed to make certain that he would not be excluded from the group. My desire to foster a sense of school as a positive learning environment for Nate lead me to ask, **How does being the recipient of repeated prejudice based on a rural background affect the**

development of this student, and how can educators effectively combat this prejudice/profiling in a way that simultaneously improves the student's perception of school and promotes a cohesive, prejudice-free classroom community?

Assertion 1:

Nate is a “normal” kid.

One of the most important things to realize about Nate is that he is a normal and nice kid. Since “normal” is often a loaded term, I will clarify that for the purposes of this research, normal simply means that on the surface level, this boy does not stand out from his peers as dissimilar or different. He makes passing grades, his appearance reflects the style standards of his age group, and his teachers know him to be a polite young man who shows respect for teachers and classmates alike. As evidenced through my own observations, school records, and the observations of other teachers, this section will provide a picture of the boy who is Nate. My research shows that his academic performance, physical appearance, and character traits look much like those of any other eighth grade boy.

Academic Performance

First, it should be noted that Nate's standardized test scores are very normal. According to Nate's fifth through seventh grade records, his scores on the Pennsylvania System of School Assessment (PSSA) Test, the TerraNova Test, and the Otis-Lennon School Ability Test (OLSAT) range from average to slightly above average. The PSSA is scored on a scale of four levels of achievement: the Advanced Level for "superior academic performance," the Proficient Level for "satisfactory academic performance," the Basic Level for "marginal academic performance," and the Below Basic Level for "inadequate academic performance" (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2010). Apart from two outliers, one Advanced and one Basic, Nate consistently scores Proficient on PSSA Tests. His sixth grade TerraNova Test scores confirm this pattern, placing his performance between the 60th and 75th percentiles in both reading/language arts and math. Similarly, on the OLSAT, Nate scores just above 110. Nate's guidance counselor Mrs. Elizabeth Briggs clarifies that while his score is below the average for State College, it does surpass the national average of 100. Overall, Nate demonstrates through his performance on these three standardized tests that his academic ability is normal.

Nate's middle school report cards provide further evidence of adequate academic aptitude. While reviewing his academic records in April 2010, Mrs. Briggs affirmed that teachers appreciate Nate's positive contributions to the classroom environment. Moreover, teacher comments reveal that Nate is a focused and thorough worker when he completes his assignments. However, Mrs. Briggs also noted that as Nate's report cards move up through middle school, his grades move down. Where he has all As and Bs for the duration of the sixth grade year, some seventh and eighth grade report cards exhibit Cs and a even a couple of Ds. Comments like "good to have in class" are now interspersed with reminders for him to pay

attention to detail and turn in homework. This year in particular his grades reflect that he experiences difficulty in Math. Even so, Nate's grades are high enough to substantiate the previous claim evidenced by his standardized test scores: Nate's academic performance and ability are at least average, if not hovering above average.

Physical Appearance

Perhaps more pertinent than the normalcy of Nate's academic performance is the normalcy of his appearance and behavior in school; Nate looks and acts much like any other eighth grade boy. In a March 17, 2010 observation of the English class that Philip Anderson and I co-teach, I surmise that Nate's clothing choices are typical of a boy his age: "Nate is dressed in a t-shirt with the initials of popular name brand emblazoned boldly across the front and a pair of straight cut jeans whose hem hangs just over the tops of his sneakers." The name brand of Nate's T-shirt is popular at the school, a brand that I see advertised daily on the clothing of countless students, girls and boys alike. His jeans, plain and slightly short for height, attest to nothing more than the fact that he is a growing teen. Altogether, his clothes, along with the rest of his appearance, are such that Nate blends in seamlessly with the majority of his classmates.

Character Traits

Unlike physical appearance, character traits cannot be seen with the naked eye, no matter how intent the observer. Therefore, Nate's behavior will have to serve as evidence of his character. My observations of Nate's behavior in class lead me to believe that he is a focused student, exhibits exemplary work ethic, and is a leader among his peers in certain ways.

Nate is a focused learner who is not easily distracted:

During one of Mr. Anderson's and my own English classes, Nate's behavior completely affirmed that he is a focused student (March 19, 2010). He was partnered with Eric Goetz, an exceedingly outgoing boy, for an online reading comprehension quiz. When Mr. Anderson gave the class the opportunity to take their laptops and spread out into the nearby hallways, Eric and Nate opted to sit just outside of the classroom door, where I easily observed them. About four minutes into the work period, a boy student from a different class approached them in the hallway. While Eric set his computer aside to talk to the boy, Nate barely acknowledged the newcomer. Seeing that Eric was becoming distracted, I decided to utilize some proximity control. I walked over to the area of the hall where the three boys were crowded. In my notes I observe, "As I approach, the boy walks briskly away from the other two. And Eric looks at me." In suddenly stopping his conversation as I approached, Eric's behavior indicated that he was aware that I would not support his choice to socialize during class time. Yet, he did it. In contrast, Nate remained perfectly on task. I noted, "Nate does not talk, nor remove his focus from the paper he is holding in front of him." His behavior reveals that he is a focused student who does not allow himself to become easily distracted.

His behavioral habits in school demonstrate good work ethic:

In addition to being focused, Nate utilizes excellent work ethic. His math teacher Mrs. Allison Randall affirms, "Nate is more willing to help out in the classroom than most of his peers. He is quick to volunteer. I don't know if this comes because he is used to hard work on the farm, or if it is just his personality" (April 9, 2010). Mr. Anderson agrees with Mrs. Randall, calling Nate a "hard working, focused kid who wants to please" (March 26, 2010). While

observing an art class of teacher Mrs. Ellen Leigh, I saw evidence of this character trait in Nate (March 25, 2010). Based on Nate's sparse, indifferent comments about the sculpture he was creating, I conclude in my notes that he "does not seem to be personally invested in this project." Yet, I also note that Nate was one of the few students who worked without pausing to rest for the duration of the period. His work ethic in art class speaks volumes about his character: Here is a young man who is committed to completing his work, even when that work may not be something that he himself values.

One of Nate's most notable characteristics is an advanced level of maturity:

Nate's mature work ethic does not come as a surprise, because his general demeanor and behavior demonstrate a high level of maturity. Mr. Anderson observes that Nate "carries himself in a much more grownup way than many of his male peers" (March 26, 2010). Throughout my own research notes, Nate's respectful attitude stands out as a remarkably mature aspect of his character. As Mr. Anderson detects, Nate is "respectful of his teachers, and he is respectful of the work, much more respectful than other students in some ways." Two ways in which other teachers and I have observed Nate's maturity are through his ability to work independently and his leadership initiative in the classroom.

His art teacher Mrs. Leigh and music teacher Mrs. Vivienne Miller both stress that Nate is an independent worker in the classroom. Mrs. Leigh notes that Nate "seems to do his own thing and doesn't appear bothered that he doesn't move with a group" (April 5, 2010). I myself noticed this independence during the aforementioned observation of Mrs. Leigh's class on March 25th, 2010. While other students chatted with one another and walked around to visit their friends' work groups, Nate was content to keep to himself as he sculpted. Without knowledge of

Mrs. Leigh's conclusion about Nate, Mrs. Miller also perceived independence in the young man during her music classes. She asserts, "He is not influenced by peers to dislike country music or believe that his future career choice is anything but a good choice for him" (March 25, 2010). This key observation attests that Nate is not only independent, but also confident, even in the aspects of his identity that differentiate him from his peers.

Nate's leadership is undoubtedly linked to his independent and confident nature. If he is self-assured enough to confidently uphold an unpopular music preference, why should it be surprising that he is self-assured enough to step up and lead his peers in the classroom? During a March 25th, 2010 science class with teacher Adam Watson, Nate and his classmates conducted an experiment to test the effectiveness of different brands of antacids. For the duration of the experiment, Nate provided stable yet unobtrusive leadership in his group. When his group members become distracted, he redirects their attention to the task at hand; he keeps track of supplies and materials, volunteers to handle the eyedropper, and takes initiative to rinse the beakers as the period is ending. Based on Nate's focused and confident leadership in this science class, along with the aforementioned evidence of a respectful attitude and independence, I can conclude that his level of maturity is more than equal to that of his peers.

Summary

In many respects Nate Palmer is an average eighth grade boy. His performance on report cards and standardized tests ranges from average to slightly above average, his appearance fits the style standards of the school, and his character traits mark him as a good student and mature child. From my own interactions with Nate in class, I deduce that he is a somewhat reserved, well-behaved student who follows directions and completes his assignments. Science, math,

music, English, and art teacher descriptions of Nate validate my understanding of him; they convey his characteristics and behavior with words and phrases like, “hard worker,” “more respectful than other students,” and “not influenced by peers.” This picture of Nate leaves me wondering, *If Nate is such a nice, “normal” kid, why is there conflict around him?*

Assertion 2:

Nate perceives school as irrelevant to his agrarian career aspirations.

“Why do we have to do this?”

“What’s the point?”

“What does this have to do with *anything*?”

A teacher enters her profession knowing, indeed expecting, that she will hear questions regarding the relevance of schoolwork. Some of my middle school English students want to know when in life they will be asked to distinguish between an independent and dependent clause, how Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* is going help them to be a better person, and why they need to know how to write a persuasive essay when they have already determined a future career as an NFL quarterback. These inquiries commonly result from a student’s disinterest in the assignment at hand. I notice that when I say, “Now, we must all go

outside to the field across the street for a team game,” my students do not question the relevancy of that activity, because they desire to participate in it. Moreover, they are usually aware that their personal preferences are the true reason for their reluctance to engage in a certain activity. If I ask them directly “What’s the real reason you do not want to do it,” they will recognize that it is their dislike of the activity, not its perceived irrelevancy. This is usually the case. However, with Nate it is different.

First, Nate’s teachers note that even though he regards schoolwork in general as irrelevant to his life, he respectfully completes it. This comes as a pleasant surprise since other students who view schoolwork as irrelevant sometimes fail to complete it in any capacity. Second, Nate has a unique reason for his attitude towards school. Based on their observations of Nate in class, his teachers suspected that school is irrelevant to him, because it is irrelevant to his future career as a farmer. He himself confirmed this hypothesis in a class in March 2010, asserting that he views working on the farm as a better pursuit for him than attending school.

Committed Without Cause?

Multiple subject teachers have noticed Nate’s perception of school as irrelevant. From my data, teachers of English, history, math, music, and art have all specifically commented on his indifference and lack of enthusiasm towards his schoolwork. According to these teachers, he does not merely regard certain activities as irrelevant, but rather regards school in general as irrelevant. Mr. Anderson sums up Nate’s attitude toward school, carefully specifying that he “does not seem to have an overly negative attitude toward school,” but rather, “it’s almost as if he is indifferent.” The distinction that Mr. Anderson makes between a negative attitude and Nate’s indifferent attitude could be one reason why Nate, unlike other children who think school

is unimportant, completes his work. While a few students will tell us in no uncertain terms that they “hate school,” Nate seems to come to school and leave school because he knows it something he must do, regardless of how irrelevant he may think it is. According to a comment made in April by guidance counselor Mrs. Briggs, his maintained commitment to school may be due in part to the influence of his mother. Mrs. Briggs asserted that Nate’s mom “certainly would want her kids to do well academically, and behave – you know, kind of be good citizens.” Through Mrs. Briggs’ helpful insight, there emerges one factor that may contribute to Nate’s commitment to an education that he does not particularly value.

To shed further light on the seeming paradox of Nate’s situation, several of his other teachers provided comments. These teachers also are quick to note that Nate is usually a hard-working student, in spite of his indifference. On April 9, 2010, Mrs. Randall described Nate’s attitude in Math class as “apathetic.” She clarified that he is focused, but only to the extent that he “just wants to get his work done.” History teacher Susan Greenland, agreed with Mrs. Randall that Nate simply “isn’t overly interested in learning.” Finally, Mrs. Briggs noted that he “hasn’t expressed excitement about any school classes, even Tech Ed. There’s some kind of sense of him not being satisfied.” She added that it is not a new sentiment. Records from the previous year indicated that at the time, “He just want[ed] to quit school.” These additional pieces of teacher and counselor-provided information help to shape a more complete understanding of Nate’s perception of school and his subsequent work ethic. Although he does not feel that school is important, it is reasonable to conclude, based on aforementioned evidences of his mature character and these more recent evidences of an attitude of apathy rather than hatred, that one reason he continues to do his work is because he is a respectful and well-behaved student who knows it is the appropriate thing to do.

School is school. Farming is farming.

In one of my initial observations of Nate in Mr. Anderson's and my own English class on March 17th, 2010, I wrote that Nate's behavior leads me to believe that he "perceives school as inadequate for his pursuits." The pursuits to which I was referring are those related to farming and agriculture. More than simply perceiving school as inadequate, Nate perceives a disconnect between school and farming; the two are not related, nor useful to one another. On March 25th, 2010, music teacher Mrs. Miller identified Nate's estimation of school in relation to farming as such: "He doesn't value school very much; I doubt he sees the merit it will have on his future career in farming." About a week later, Mrs. Randall elaborated on Mrs. Miller's remark, saying:

Nate clearly does not feel that school is important. He is a student that frequently asks, "Why do we have to be here?" He has mentioned that he can't wait until he doesn't have to go to school anymore, and I believe he has even specifically said that he won't need to learn most of this stuff, because he already knows what he is going to do, and he already works on the farm during weekends.

In this comment, Mrs. Randall recognizes one of Nate's perceptions that greatly concerns me. It is the perception that because he is going to be a farmer, "this stuff" is completely unnecessary for him to learn. In his estimation, there is virtually no possibility that the material presented in school could be of use to a future farmer in his agricultural activities. School is school, farming is farming, and they don't mix.

Nate's Own Words on the Issue

The final piece of evidence for consideration comes from an occasion in Mr. Anderson's and my English class on March 17th 2010. As the class embarked on a new unit in persuasive writing, Nate and his project partner Mark Edison struggled to establish a persuasive topic. After the boys had completed about 20 minutes worth of research on their laptop computers and still had not chosen a topic, I intervened with the hope that I would be able to spur their thinking. The following observation notes resulted, providing crucial evidence regarding Nate's perception of school:

Nate and Mark expressed that they wanted to organize a debate as the medium for their persuasive writing project. As they could not find anything about which they disagreed, they were brainstorming various ideas, in the hopes that something controversial would emerge. A very important conversation ensued:

Me: "You seem like you both get along really well – you might have to pretend to disagree on a topic for a debate."

[They smile a little, nod their heads, and make quick eye contact with each other]

Nate: "Yeah – we keep agreeing on everything."

Mark: "Well I'm okay with debating something I don't believe"

Me "Alright. You may have to end up doing that, but let's give another try finding something that you already have different views on."

Nate: [the corners of his mouth slightly raised and eyebrows lifting upwards]: "I don't think we should have to take classes at school."

I am surprised at this statement, since it generally reflects a disrespectful attitude towards education. The thought crosses my mind that he is advocating for kids to not have to go to school simply to avoid the work. However, instead of following up on that initial thought, I give him a chance to prove himself:

Me: “Do you mean not go to school at all?”

Nate: “Yeah – kids shouldn’t have to take all those classes.”

Me: “What would you do instead, Nate?”

Nate: “Work”

Me: “What kind of work. Obviously not school work”

Nate [shrugs, looks at the carpet]: “Work on the farm”

I am thankful that I gave Nate the opportunity to further explain his initial statement. Fewer than five minutes later, he and Mark had determined that this issue was one on which they actually disagreed, and they could therefore create a debate around it. Nate’s words in this interaction show his attitudes to an extent, but his body language conveys more. Not only does Nate hold a view about school that may not be generally accepted, but also he knows it. I mistook his expression for mildly mischievous; in reality it may have been a reflection of his accurate anticipation that I would not take him seriously. Next, take note of Nate’s downward gaze when he admitted that he would rather work on his farm than sit in school. His avoidance of eye contact suggests that he was uncertain as to the nature of my reaction to his idea. Altogether, Nate’s words and behavior in this observation provide valuable confirmation of a conflict between school and farming in Nate’s life.

Summary

Nate sees school as irrelevant to his life and his agricultural career goals. One of the perplexing aspects of Nate’s case is that in spite of an apparent lack of motivation, Nate completes his work. He stands out from other students in that he respectfully completes the work that he perceives as irrelevant. History teacher Mrs. Susan Greenland states, “Even though he doesn’t see a lot of value in a formal education for a farmer, I have seen Nate make good progress in his work habits and with the curriculum this year.”

Assertion 3:

Some students perceive an agrarian society to be irrelevant and inferior to their social status.

Just as Nate has his own perception of the relevancy of school in relation to his life and agrarian career goals, Nate's peers have their own perceptions of the value of agrarian society. Unfortunately, in both cases, their perceptions spawn conflict. As seen in the previous section, Assertion 2, Nate's obligation to attend school conflicts with his perception that school has nothing to offer a future farmer such as himself. As will be presented here, some students' negative perceptions of agrarian society result in conflict between themselves and Nate.

To begin to understand the conflict between Nate and his peers, refer back to the March 17th observation of Mr. Anderson's and my English class. During this class Nate and his project partner Mark chose a debate topic for the upcoming Persuasive Writing unit. Until that point the two friends had interacted with such harmony that they could not identify even one subject on

which they disagreed for the purposes of conducting a debate. However, when Nate asserted his belief that farm work is a more useful pursuit than schoolwork, his friend Mark took the opposite stance. According to my records, Mark contended Nate's point of view, saying with a "surprised and amused" expression on his face, "I think that kids should go to school. Kind of. I mean, the classes are good to have." In this instance, Nate was in the safe environment of his friendship with Mark. Hence, the two boys did not appear to be "even the least bit annoyed with one another," but rather excited to have found a debate topic. A difference in opinions might not cause conflict between two friends, but imagine if Nate had been randomly paired with a peer who was not a friend. Nate has historically experienced prejudice from peers who harbor negative stereotypes of him based on his rural background. What may have seemed like an excellent instructional strategy for building classroom community – partnering students with random other kids in the class – could have resulted in open conflict. The primary concern here is two fold: 1) to establish that stereotypes are the source of students' negative views of agrarian society and not Nate, who does nothing to provoke conflict; yet, 2) some students do initiate conflict between themselves and Nate.

Stereotypes as a Source of Prejudice

Before delving into specific incidents of conflict between Nate and his peers, it is necessary to understand that his peers' negative views of Nate's rural background are founded in stereotypes. Mrs. Greenland provides evidence of three of Nate's specific interests that his peers latched onto as stereotypical of a country kid. On April 9th, 2010, she states that "other students tease him about what they see as negative aspects of the perceived lifestyle – pick up trucks, country music, hunting, etc." These interests in and of themselves need not be a source of

conflict. Problems arise when students correlate Nate's interests with certain stereotypes, such as "redneck" and "hillbilly." These terms become offensive because of the negative meaning assigned to them by the context in which they are used. I have yet to hear a middle school student use one of them in a positive way.

A second truth to acknowledge is that Nate does not incite this prejudice by aggressive action or by any other means. I teach another student who incessantly criticizes his peers until they no longer desire to be near him; this student is partially responsible for the conflict that he encounters, as he has provoked it with his abrasive behavior. Nate is not at all like this other boy. Described by his teachers as "laid back," "personable," "sweet and very polite," and "a very likable young man," Nate seems unlikely to deliberately rouse conflict. Referring back to the first Assertion of this research, Nate is commonly identified as a nice kid. Mr. Anderson confirms that Nate is generally content and relaxed among his peers: "Unless a student has poked fun at Nate in the past, he seems to be fairly comfortable with his classmates." Even if Nate did find himself alone with one of his more belligerent peers, he would need to decidedly defy the personal characteristics that he generally exhibits in order to initiate conflict with that peer. Therefore, it is reasonable to conclude that stereotypes, and not any action of Nate's, are a probable reason for some students' prejudiced attitudes and behavior.

Nate the Farm Kid Vs. Peers

Mrs. Randall notes that she has heard Nate "mention on more than one occasion how several students have picked on him and made fun of him simply because he lives on a farm" (April 9, 2010). He has indicated to her that he dislikes school in part because "so many people are mean." Mrs. Briggs assesses the situation as "conflict between him and peers who are

putting him down. I would guess that he just doesn't feel like he fits with some of the kids" (April 7, 2010). She recalls a specific incident that occurred in the lunchroom when Nate was in the sixth grade:

There was a group of kids that sort of table-to-table were taunting him. He was being taunted because he was a farmer. I honestly don't know how that started. I do know that somebody brought that up again a few months ago at his table. It happened in sixth grade, it's happening now, so it probably has been happening the whole way around, sixth, seventh, and eighth.

This data reveals that not only is there a verifiable conflict recurring between Nate and some of his peers, but also this conflict has been ongoing for all three years of middle school. One implication of this data is that Nate is fully aware of the conflict surrounding his agrarian identity. Also, he probably expects that the conflict will continue just as it has for the last several years, since there has been no relief to indicate otherwise.

Summary

It appears as though Nate's peers' conflict with him is caused by his career aspiration to become a farmer. He experiences tension due to the perception that his peers have of him being a "hick." Finally, stereotypes, and not any provoking behavior on Nate's part, is responsible for the ignorant perceptions and prejudices of his peers.

Assertion 4:

The source of both conflicts is a detachment between perception and reality.

The rural stereotypes in my classroom manifest themselves in the form of two different kinds of conflict. As discussed in Assertion 2, Nate has his own stereotype or perception of what a farmer needs to know, and for him that does not include the academic knowledge that is shared in school. As discussed in Assertion 3, some of Nate's peers also have a perception of what a farmer is and evaluate Nate accordingly. At the root of both of these kinds of conflict lies a detachment between perception and reality. Both groups misperceive the reality of what farming is and the way that education is essential for successful farming.

The elitist culture of the school district is partially responsible for this detachment. High school English teacher Claudia Crouse emphasizes that this elitism fosters a negative perception of "ag" kids (March 26, 2010). She cites the relatively small number of sports, music, academic,

and social opportunities at the school, compared to the significantly larger number of students; there are only enough student spaces for the “best of the best” to participate. Mrs. Crouse questions, “If we as a school community continue to place our emphasis on those at the top, then what does that mean for the rest who hold different cultural values?” Her inquiry raises a valid point that mirrors my own research questions in regard to Nate.

According to guidance counselor Mrs. Briggs, the district and this particular middle school have not always been this way. In fact, at the middle school level there once was a significantly different makeup of rural versus small town students. In the early 1990s, there was a much larger group of students who were “united by their farming identities” and tended to “seek each other out for companionship” (April 7, 2010). Mrs. Briggs avers:

Those kids formed themselves into kind of a click to protect themselves against other people...Now, we still do have other kids who are interested in agriculture, but they few and far between. They receive less reinforcement of the validity of their interests. For example, whereas before dozens of kids would be out of school because they were going to Grange Fair [the county fair], now maybe only a handful of kids would go to Grange Fair rather than school.

It would seem that the school district’s elitism has increased over the years, increasing many students’ misperceptions of agrarian society along with it. This leaves today’s rural students in a remarkably less welcoming learning environment than twenty years ago.

Ignorance breeds false/damaging perceptions.

Again, there exists a conspicuous disconnection between my students’ prejudiced perceptions and the reality of agrarian life. For Nate, his personal perception of farming has

managed to obscure the reality that schooling is applicable in the life of a farmer. Mr. Anderson clearly and effectively describes this phenomenon as it occurs in middle school aged students:

Obviously kids who choose to tease him are ignorant to the reality of the situation. This ignorance is not uncommon in middle school students. I find that young adolescents don't always care about issues or even the truth, they are simply striving to improve their social rank – sometimes at the expense of others. Even when the truth is pointed out to them they may not take it seriously (March 23, 2010).

Mr. Anderson wrote this paragraph in reference to the students in our class who have very narrow perceptions of farming, but in some ways the relevancy of his assertion extends to people of all ages as they struggle to separate perceptions from reality. How difficult it is to distinguish between perception, a thing that ironically cannot be seen, and reality, a thing that is so often obscured by the thing that cannot be seen. Yet this is the task of the person who hunts after an educated mindset, and it is the task of the teacher who wishes aid her students in this same quest.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendations for Nate

From my research about the demographics of Nate's middle school, and the needs he has expressed to teachers, I would highly recommend that any future instructors invest time in cultivating a personal relationship with him. Nate's behavior shows that he hungers for positive role models, especially ones who have interests that mirror his. Mr. Anderson realizes that in his relationship with Nate, "it makes a difference that I am an enthusiastic hunter. We talk especially about deer hunting, and I've learned some things about him through our discussions as I am sure he's learned things about me" (March 26, 2010). This year Mr. Anderson has been the only teacher who has been able to fill that role for Nate, because the middle school faculty and staff is quite limited compared to that of high school, where there are teachers of agriculture. Other teachers have noticed Nate's need for someone who is in an agriculture-related profession to validate his own interests and identity.

History teacher Mrs. Greenland discerns that Nate "seeks support and reassurance from me as his teacher that farming is an important and honorable profession" (April 9, 2010).

Guidance counselor Mrs. Briggs confirms that thought, noting that one of the areas in which

Nate struggles is “not really knowing how to advocate for himself” (April 7, 2010). Therefore, as he enters high school next year, I would highly recommend that his ninth grade teachers take the initiative to make sure that this young man is connected with a mentor who has shared areas of interest and expertise.

High school English teacher Mrs. Crouse suggests that this will be an easier task than in middle school. When he enters high school, he will find a more structured support system for aspirations and identity related to farming and agriculture. She recalls several of her own Advanced Honors English students who were leaders in both Future Farmers of America (FFA) and in the high school in general. Based on this data, I would specifically suggest that Nate seek out a connection with students in FFA. For the first time he will have the opportunity to accept the support of a network of other students who share his agrarian culture. Moreover, FFA may even afford Nate a mature mentor to validate his farming identity and help him to continue developing healthily as a young man.

Recommendations for the Class

The class as a whole needs greater awareness of the reality of farming. This includes Nate, who still does not quite perceive the full relevance of a formal education for a farmer. What I have done with this class is to teach a lesson based on the story “Antaeus” in *Echoes from Mt. Olympus* (Deal, 2006).

The story, based on the concept of the greek Antaeus who draws all of his strength and power from Mother Earth, emphasizes the value of earth and of the skill to grow plants and food in it. Moreover, it tells of a boy named T.J. who moves from the farm to the city, and helps a gang of city boys to truly perceive the value of farming. My intent in teaching this lesson was to

begin wash away at ignorant stereotypes and empower all of the students with truth. We read the story aloud together, and discussed our perceptions of T.J. the farm boy at the beginning and end of the story.

When we first began to read “Antaeus” among my students’ predictions about the character of T.J. were “redneck,” “hillbilly,” “racist,” “not really that smart,” “talks kind of strange,” and “likes hunting.” By the end of the story their insights had deepened to include the following verbatim excerpts from their writing:

- “If you meet a new person, you can’t judge them by the way they look, because they could actually be a nice, and cool person. If you assume that they are weird the moment you meet them, you could be missing out on a good friend.”
- “you can’t judge someone without knowing them you have to dig deep”
- “If you keep your assumptions you could miss out on being friends with a great person or activity. Forgetting assumptions provides you with a path to happiness.”
- “if you meet someone new & they’re different, then you can get to know them for who they are and not what you think of them if you don’t make assumptions, you can open up your mind to different ways that people do things”

To continue to build upon this growth I would recommend that these students be exposed to further literature with agricultural themes. Also, a future instructor would do well to invite a guest speaker to the classroom from Penn State University’s College of Agricultural Sciences. This speaker would not only increase general knowledge and awareness of agricultural fields, but also validate any students in the class who plan to explore these fields of study.

Recommendations for Further Research

My research has revealed much regarding my particular eighth grade English class' learning needs. However, I have only begun to explore an idea that is currently quite limited in its research resources. Therefore I have compiled the following research questions and recommendations that I would recommend for further study:

1. What are the effects/influences of negative student attitudes towards agriculture? For the classroom? For the students? For the teacher?
2. How can a teacher facilitate a positive learning environment that nurtures children from rural backgrounds and validates their learning experiences?
3. Are there similar stereotyping and misperceptions regarding all vocational trades? What are the implications of the level of widespread misperceptions of this nature?
4. How can we better educate students in general to appreciate the value of agriculture in their own lives?

CONCLUSION

Though my transcripts are soaked in education classes, and my mind is still marinating in the advice of countless wise professors of education, I did not truly comprehend the meaning of differentiated instruction until Nate Palmer challenged me to apply it. I have realized that differentiating my teaching to meet the specific needs of my students is a task that requires dedication and research if I am to do it well. I have also discovered that, as with Nate, sometimes a student's background and unique identity is only subtly manifested in the classroom, and therefore difficult to detect. With Nate, I did not have physically distinct clues in his appearance to indicate his background. Nate dressed like the other kids, seemed average among his classmates, and certainly never hinted to me that there may be tension around his agrarian identity. Only with careful research and patient observation of my classes did Nate's and his peers' behaviors indicate conflicts that might impede the unity of our classroom community and the efficiency of their learning.

Faced with two conflicts that threatened the cohesion of my students, I knew that I must analyze the situations. Although the primary goal of my research was to afford a better understand of Nate's and my other students learning needs, I also started the next step: taking measures to enlighten the perceptions that were causing conflict among the students. In this case, what was best for Nate was best for the whole class. By looking out for his interests – trying to create a more welcoming, less ignorant classroom community – I facilitated an activity that informed the rest of the class as well. Whereas students previously admitted that they viewed a person from a rural place as an unintelligent, racist “hick,” by the end of my research their insights included statements such as, “If I judged a person right away I wouldn't have the friends I do” (April 13, 2010) While I know that I have probably not changed my students' entire mindsets, their written responses to the “Antaeus” activity are an unmistakable improvement. As future teachers take this group of students, they will hopefully be able to notice a slightly different attitude about them – that they are a group of young men and women who are at least willing to analyze their perceptions and reshape them according to a more accurate picture of reality.

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- English Teaching Intern, Park Forest Middle School, State College Area School District in collaboration with The Pennsylvania State University's Secondary English Professional Development School Program Fall 2009—Spring 2010
- Ballet and Acrobatics Instructor, Kennedy Dance Centre Fall 2003—Spring 2010
- Literacy Corps Tutor, Central Intermediate Unit #10 in partnership with The Pennsylvania State University Spring 2009
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Honors/Awards

- Schreyer Honors Academic Excellence Scholarship Fall 2007—Spring 2010
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Professional Presentations & Affiliations

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