Learning from Teachers through Interviews:

The Differences and Similarities in Responses and Their Importance

When I went about conducting my interviews, I chose to focus on the full spectrum of high school (including junior high schools). I also wanted to have the viewpoints of teachers that taught in different types of schools, such as public, private, and inner-city schools. I quickly discovered how the different environments of the schools influenced the teachers in relation to their responses. One teacher’s experience may be completely different from another teacher’s experience. Both experienced and inexperienced teachers can agree on some of their responses, but can also differ in their views on other topics. Teaching is as individualized as the teachers; there is no one archetype of a teacher or a class.

My first interview was with Mrs. Mary Ann Romans, a teacher for twenty-three years who has taught English and reading for both college and inner-city high school classes. My next interview was with Mr. Dan Reese, a new seventh and eighth grade science teacher at a junior high school. My final interview was with my former teacher Br. Philip Smith, a teacher for forty-six years who currently teaches Advanced Placement British Literature and band at Catholic high school. Knowing all these teachers personally, I was not surprised by most of their responses, but I was surprised by some of their stories and how their responses differed from the other teachers’ responses.

Many of the teachers’ responses to questions were similar with some slight variation for certain questions. When asked about students with disabilities, all the teachers said they have had students with learning disabilities and have worked on Individualized Education Plans for them. Both Mr. Reese and Br. Smith noted that students are different now than when they first began because the current students are much more technologically savvy and constantly need to instantaneously receive information. The idea of retention brought some different responses, with Mrs. Romans and Mr. Reese focusing on the social stigma of a student being a “failure” for repeating a grade. Br. Smith thought that retention should be for the lower grades, as those are the grades where children receive their most essential education; by high school, if the student is not on track, then “the damage has been done” (Smith 2).

Assessment questions were the questions of which the teachers seemed to have to have the most differing opinions. Mrs. Romans adored having assessments and found them incredibly useful for helping her to understand her students’ strengths and weaknesses. Mr. Reese also thought assessments could have some benefits and already teaches with curriculum-based assessments. Br. Smith did not agree with traditional standardized assessments as they are “[not] tailored to meet the needs…of ‘special learners’” (Smith 1). He felt outcome-based assessments were more important than curriculum assessments. All three teachers had a similar view on teacher-based assessment: the teachers of the students are the best people to write the assessments for the students. Their responses to assessment were the responses by which I was most surprised; I had been under the impression that most teachers abhorred assessment and did not use the tests for any classroom improvement. I am glad that I was indeed wrong because I believe assessing students to see the progress they have made and their academic weaknesses can be incredibly beneficial to helping every student succeed in school.

Student-First instruction was a noticeable theme in the teachers’ responses. Above anything, teaching is about being “the guide on the side” (Romans 2) and assisting students with new knowledge and the applications of that knowledge. By keeping the focus on the students, a teacher can better educate the students and reach them on a more personal level. Br. Smith preferred having private conferences with his students to better reach them and help them with their work. Mr. Reese referred to his management style as “students centered approach with a teacher as the facilitator” (Reese 2). “It’s not about me- it’s about you” was Mrs. Romans’ personal philosophy in her classroom (4). With students as the focus of education, schooling should be less about passing/ failing and more about connecting with the students and enriching their lives with the knowledge the teachers provide.

The teachers’ responses mostly aligned with different educational text and theories. Mrs. Romans’ answers connected heavily with Lev Vygotsky’s Social Development Theory as she used the Zone of Proximal Development to help her students learn more about writing. All three teachers understood that the students’ outside environments still affect them in school, which relates to Urie Bronfenbrenner’ Bioecological Systems Theory. Anytime the teachers had to deal with students acting out or behaving inappropriately, they all stated that they remained calm and diffused the situation without instigating any more drama or power struggles. By remaining calm and logical while interacting with an upset student, the teachers acted as good models for appropriate behavior, which connects with the way students learn according to Albert Bandura’s Social Learning Theory. As education moves more towards research-based assessments and teaching methods, I believe that the relationships between students and teachers will improve, and teachers will see more improvement in their students’ work.

These interviews were an excellent way for me to talk to teachers and learn more about my future profession. I was surprised to realize how much that goes into every day of teaching. Teachers have stresses around them constantly and must be flexible to changes and to their interactions with students and their parents. I was afraid that after conducting the interviews I would start doubting myself as a future teacher, but I actually feel more confident about becoming a teacher. I know that I have good role models for teaching in the teachers that I interviewed and trust that I can always come to them with more questions about education and students. Though I know that my teaching experience will differ from their experiences, I feel that I can handle the difficult situations that come with teaching. These interviews have been both insightful and helpful; I feel better prepared to step into a class and start teaching.