

Cole Donovan

Dr. Smagorinsky

LLED 3461S

30 April 2018

Central High School Case Study

Note: The names of the student and the high school in which this study was conducted have both been changed for the sake of privacy.

The Learner

Trey is a seventeen-year-old white male student at Central High School. This is the description he gave himself; he was certainly onto the fact that I was “studying” him. He is very relaxed and laid-back in the classroom. When I first meet him, he is sitting at the computer at the back of the classroom, one ear-bud in, slowly scrolling through pages of his own work. He tells me that he is not very interested in the assignment his teacher has given him. He thinks it’s too easy. This will become his mantra in my time with him. “This is too easy.”

He is an obviously bright young man; he likes to talk about science and the environment. He is very concerned with the future of the planet, though when I asked him what makes him so concerned, he laughed it off and said it was just something to think about. He does this a lot, deflect questions that try to get him to open up about his own interests. He likes to keep most of his personal thoughts to himself. In truth, he likes to keep most things to himself. He does not tend to socialize much, and the only person in the classroom that he talks to consistently is the teacher. He does not seem shy but rather just uninterested in talking to other people.

He is easily frustrated by the work but always does what the teacher asks of him. He tends to grumble under his breath when the teacher asks him to re-do an assignment that he did not complete correctly or to find an assignment that he did not turn in. He very often does not turn in his assignments; I find this odd because when the teacher asks for them, he can always produce them, completed, from his book bag. I cannot tell if this is some form of resistance to what he sees as useless work or simply a product of his laid-back demeanor. I am being careful not to assume one way or the other, but I do wonder.

Based on his clothing and the stories he tells of what he does on the weekends, I assume that Trey is from a middle-class family. He often takes trips to nearby towns and stays with his family overnight on what he calls “mini-vacations”. I am, of course, extrapolating the information about his family’s wealth based on what he tells me, I have no definite proof of the SES of his family, however I do feel not un-justified in making that assumption. He seems to have a close relationship to his family, he has mentioned them multiple times, however this too is an assumption based on what he said. There is apparently enough support in the home for one of his parents to attend an awards day; the teacher asked if a parent would be attending, and he said yes.

He is the only white student in the class. This may be why he is somewhat reticent to join in the conversation. In a class as small as his (averaging around seven students), the social conversation is very much geared towards African-American culture, with the most frequent topic of discussion being hip-hop/rap music. Trey has expressed to me that he does not enjoy this kind of music, therefore he likely feels left out of these conversations. I do not believe that

Trey is in any way prejudiced against his classmates, I just feel that he believes he has little in common with them. He tends to shut down when the class engages in socializing.

In terms of his educational history, Trey is a recent transfer to Central High School. He arrived this semester. He said that he chose to come to this school because of a bullying problem at his previous high school. He said that he did not feel safe in the last environment, so his parents moved him to Central. He says that he is very thankful for this move. He feels that the teachers at his old school did not care about his safety or his success. He says that even though the new school is easier, he feels the teachers care and that he is in a safe place to learn and grow. It is this type of situation that makes me appreciate school choice within a district level. In reference to Ravitch, it makes perfect sense to have choice within a district for alternative high schools, but you can see some of the issues with funding that that can cause. The curriculum at Central is very limited, as are the resources. I have to imagine that this is a funding issue.

Comparison/Contrast to the Researcher

What may have been the most surprising thing to me about my time spent with Trey were the similarities between him and myself. Though we did not share the same outlook on school or the same motivation towards scholastic success, our personalities were remarkably similar. Looking back, it was probably this perceived similarity that drew me to study him. He provided for me a picture of the kind of student that I very easily could have been had I been in a situation like he was. It honestly made me very appreciative towards my own high school experience and the teachers I had who pushed me to succeed.

Like Trey, I am relatively laid-back and do not tend to stress out very heavily about school work. This is not to say that I don't do my work, but rather that it is not a cause of chronic stress in my life. I attribute this not to a particular adeptness at schoolwork, but rather to a genuine interest in learning. I tend to not stress because what I am doing is generally interesting to me so I am not trying to fit in its completion with my other interests.

In middle school (and somewhat in high school), I experienced the same frustration with the work. I felt that it was too easy. Had I not had the opportunities to take more challenging classes, I certainly would have adopted the same disinterested outlook that Trey has. His lack of interest in the education system is not a product of his own preferences, but, I believe, it is a result of the system failing him early on.

From my basic assumption about his SES, I believe that our home lives are relatively similar. I do not want to say too much about this; it would be too much conjecture on my part that may, in truth, be unfair to the reality of his situation. I will just say that I think the support that he likely receives at home is similar to what I experienced: Parents who are at least moderately, if not heavily, involved.

Because my high school was primarily white I have a hard time relating to what he may be feeling about the makeup of his classroom. Again, I want to stress that I do not believe him to be prejudiced, however it would be interesting to know how he feels about being in the minority. I think his apparent mild discomfort and self-ostracizing behavior is a function of this position. Coming from a place of privilege where I have never had to experience this discomfort, I find it hard to relate and notice myself being quick to judge him (wrongly, of course) for some behaviors that seem to actively separate him from his classmates.

Considering the Learner and the School's Expectations

The largest way that the school's expectations are not in sync with what Trey needs is the rigor and presentation of the material. Trey is successful in his classes; he is also very bored in them. This boredom leads to disinterest. I am of the opinion that success in the gradebook does not necessarily equate with the success of the school. In this case, I believe that it may even be an indicator of the school's failure. Trey does the work expected of him and promptly forgets it. He does not care about it because it is boring to him and it is not presented in a way that engages him.

Much of his time in class is spent staring out the window while the teacher delivers her lessons. The lessons are things he already knows. I know this, not because he says he already knows it, but because he can ace each test without having paid any attention to the lesson. I will agree that he needs to pay closer attention, simply for the possibility of a more thorough understanding of the material, but I think the key to the problem lies with the method of delivery.

I realize that Willingham's book attempted to debunk learning styles, but I believe that Trey would benefit from different modes of engagement and delivery. The teachers seem to believe that lecturing to the students will reach each one. This may be true, but it leads to no engagement. The school expects attention and interest but does not provide a model in the classroom that achieves that.

I fear that teachers feel that Trey is lazy simply because he is disengaged. This is a very unfair appraisal of this student and comes down to what the school provides versus what the

school expects. If the school wants active engagement and interest in the material being taught, it must try harder to reach students like Trey.

Conclusion – How Would I Teach Him

As noted, I believe that the key to teaching Trey is engaging lessons with various methods of delivery. I think he would benefit greatly from a discussion based setting as well; I think discussion of group topics could begin to remove his feelings of disconnect with his classmates. In thinking back to our weekly seminars, I think that discussions like the one we led for *The Line Becomes a River* would be an excellent tool for getting him to participate and engage with the lesson. It would give him a space to form and express his opinions (something I think he is keen to do) as well as interacting with his classmates. Of course, being a high school class, I would likely approach a less contentious topic, but the theory still holds.

As developed throughout this observation, Trey's major issue with the school is that it does not interest him. As a future teacher, I believe that it is important to reach students on more than just an academic level; I believe you should meet them at their interests. That is not just what Trey needs, but what each student deserves.