

The Unit in Context  
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From the first day that I walked into my second-grade classroom at Penn Alexander I was struck by how well the students seemed to get along with one another. There was a steady buzz of chatter and laughter in the room as students unpacked, settled into their seats, and started on their morning work. I heard one boy excitedly to tell a friend every single detail of his cool new game. On the other side of the room two girls discussed their play date that afternoon and all of the things they were going to do. Another girl, seemingly more quiet and perhaps even timid, walked around the room placing each student's notebook on his/her desk, gracefully avoiding the jackets, book bags, and lunchboxes that littered the floor and desktops without a single complaint. It seemed like a very comfortable class—a group of students that cared for and respected one another. They seemed to truly understand what it means to be a community and what it means to work as a team.

Now, a month into my student teaching at Penn Alexander, I am still impressed by the kindness and cooperation displayed by many of my second graders. Just today I saw two students at two separate times offer to help a classmate of theirs who often struggles with basic directions/tasks because of a learning disability. These students did not know that I was watching them—their desire to help was completely unmotivated by the need for approval and attention from their teacher.

I have also noticed, however, that there are times when this sense of community, camaraderie, and teamwork breaks down. Some of this is just a product

of the reality that 8 years old are, naturally, relatively developmentally immature. Brief fights about who gets to be first in line, for example, are not surprising.

What does disturb me is some of the competitive and even mean-spirited behaviors I have seen in the past few weeks. When my classroom mentor handed back a bunch of graded work one Friday afternoon the dynamic in the classroom changed. Many of the students who had only ever come across as kind and caring up until that point walked around the room showboating their high test scores, celebrating with friends who had also done well, and remarking quietly but pointedly on those students who hadn't. Comments such as "Yay, I got a 100%!" "That test was so easy!" and "You got a 60%?! How did you do that—I got a 90%!" filled the room. The students that had not done well looked devastated. One, I remember, even cried.

I have noticed similarly pernicious behavior exhibited by some students toward two of their classmates in particular who are considered 'weird' and who are known for not following directions. Over the past month I have noticed many of the students ostracizing these two individuals. They tattle on them at the drop of a hat, yelling to me or to my classroom mentor from across the room that one of them is being 'annoying' or 'not following directions'. They intentionally get up and move if they happen to be sitting next to them on the carpet. These two students, I worry, are starting to get the message that they are not welcome--that they are not part of the classroom community.

I cannot say with any certainty what the root of this hurtful behavior is. From what I have observed, however, it seems that the students feel an intense desire to

be 'right,' do the 'right' thing, or please their teachers and parents. This would account for both the competition around grades and the desire to tattle on or avoid those students who are not following the rules.

Penn Alexander is a fantastic school in West Philadelphia with far more resources than the average Philadelphia public school. The parents in this neighborhood are, in general, highly involved in their children's lives and invested in their academic futures. In a city where elementary school grades actually matter because of the selective nature of middle and high school admissions, parents are naturally concerned. The fact is that by the time students at PAS reach the 4<sup>th</sup> grade many of them are competing with one another for the few available spots at Masterman. I have to wonder whether some of this translates into pressure that is then, most likely unintentionally, transferred onto the students to do well academically.

I have designed a unit on citizenship in the hopes that it will allow me to address some of these subtle classroom-dynamic issues. I want my students to understand what it means to be not only a well-educated, capable and productive member of society, but also a thoughtful, compassionate, and fair member of society. I want them to learn problem-solving skills, ways of communicating difficult and negative emotions, and self-awareness skills that will allow them to monitor their own actions and reactions to life events.

I have also designed this unit while keeping in mind my focus of inquiry. About 1/3 of the students in my class are well above grade level in terms of their achievement in both Math and Literacy. Many are right on target, a few are slightly

below, and two are well below. I have spent a lot of time thinking about how to find a way of striking that perfect balance between academic rigor and appropriate/necessary scaffolding for *every* child while instructing to the whole class. Differentiated instruction is the cornerstone of effective teaching. As such, it is a skill that I constantly strive toward.