

Assignment #2: Culture and Community of James Lyng High School

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My first classroom experience at James Lyng High School was not tremendously positive: the teacher was more concerned with keeping the class quiet than productive, yelled at some students and mocked others. I had been prepared for so-called “problem” students but was taken aback, not by the students but by the teacher. Since then I have observed several teachers—I had the opportunity to see a different teacher deal professionally with a difficult bullying situation, for example—and participated in the community life of James Lyng, and I have developed a much more positive impression of the school. I have concluded that the school, while it has its rough edges, is overall a positive space of education, innovation, and most of all support for a disadvantaged student body.

To understand the school, one must first know some facts about its urban environment (Parkay et. al., 2009). James Lyng is in the poorest category on the MELS socioeconomic scale, the only English school in the province with this distinction. 57% students live below the poverty line, 69% live with single parents, and 44% have MELS special educational codes. (Evans, 2011) According to a Secondary 1 teacher, many Lyng students progressed through elementary school by learning performance-avoidance techniques rather than academic skills; others are in high school only due to social promotion. In a recent year, the entering Grade 7 class tested at an average Grade 3 reading level.

It was emphasized by many staff members that for many students the school was the only safe, predictable environment in their lives, and I could see this reflected in student

behaviour. Inside the building, the students' behaviour was not much different than other kids of similar age that I have observed. Some were bright, some not; some were happy to be there, some not; some had a rambunctious energy and some struggled with depression. The youth culture the students bring into school is coarse and informed by their difficult lives, but they also deal with issues common to many teens: early relationships and sexuality, for example (Parkay et. al., 2009).

While the students influence the school culture, it is really the administration and teachers that construct it (Parkay et. al., 2009). James Lyng could easily be a school similar to the urban Baltimore high school in Season 4 of *The Wire*, where the focus is exclusively on maintaining acceptable test results. Lyng takes a different approach, concentrating on the underlying educational issues and offering support in an effort to give its students a chance to be successful in life, rather than just on tests. Faced with very low graduation rates a decade ago, the school used a funding influx to implement a Core Program for Secondary 1 and 2 which helped students transition from elementary and focused on improving literacy. (Evans, 2011) With only seventeen teachers, the school has fourteen student service staff, including a community outreach worker who gets parents involved in their children's education ("James Lyng", 2011). James Lyng has now improved its graduation rate dramatically and helps even those that don't earn a leaving certificate make a plan for after they leave school (Evans, 2011).

Just as different teachers have unique teaching styles of varying effectiveness (Royal Bank, 1995), the teachers at James Lyng approach the school's educational philosophy in varying ways. At best, I have observed teachers that really offer an alternative education well-

suited to their students. For example, in a science class I observed a teacher who kept the math simple but helped students understand the underlying phenomena by using funny demonstrations and leading questions. James Lyng has a Work-Oriented Training Program for students who cannot adapt to the main student stream (Evans, 2011), and the numerous support staff fill out the positive, alternative feel to the school by emphasizing help for students with special needs, behavioural problems or life issues.

At worst, I feel the “non-academic” approach is used as a justification for teachers to set low expectations of themselves and their students, which then negatively affects student performance (Ormrod, 2006). A few teachers I observed overtly communicated their lack of confidence to students, and some taught without reflecting on how to improve their teaching practice to better help the students. Indeed, I even had a conversation with one teacher who defended an intuitive, unreflective and unvarying teaching style.

I had a fantastic opportunity to learn about the school’s wider community by attending the English Montreal School Board meeting which discussed the possible closure of James Lyng after this school year. The school, with only 221 students, had a turnout of 80-100 teachers, student teachers, students and parents who came to express solidarity for the school and to argue that the school fills a vital niche in supporting students who would fall through the cracks in larger institutions (Evans, 2011). What teachers kept saying about the school suddenly struck home: James Lyng is indeed a home to many of its students, and they will fight to keep it alive.

References

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