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Grace Pilz Reflection 1

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Grace Pilz
SPAN 380: Reflection #1
Professor Román-Odio
10/12/17

Never in my Kenyon career have both my privilege and my humanity been felt so acutely as in my experience at Columbia Middle School. In conducting a Community Engaged Learning project, my peers and professor (Clara Román-Odio) from “SPAN 380: Cultural Productions of the Borderlands” have met multiple times with the fifth grade class at their school in Mt. Vernon, OH. With one group of college students matched to one group of middle schoolers, we work together to analyze various literary works that relate to the idea of borders. From science fiction to poetry, there’s a selection for everyone. To better understand how and why so many barriers exist in life, weekly lesson plans guide discussion about plot, characters, themes, voice, connections to other works, and more. However, that’s hardly where the conversation stops. My partner Madi Maldonado and I constantly encourage our group of six kids to try and relate to the stories’ protagonists who encounter struggles on account of how they differ from others. Time and time again, Madi and I are taken aback by the powerful insights, painful parallels, and profound compassion of our students. They laugh, encourage one another, and stay hungry to learn even in between quick asides about the economic and social disadvantages that they face on a regular basis.

On day one, Madi and I sat down with these kids and it was clear that none of us knew what to expect. They looked at me, sporting Kenyon gear with a coffee in hand. Right off, at least half of them expressed their desire to attend my beloved college and I smiled and told them to keep working hard. When I looked back at them, I took in Maddie’s travel softball T-shirt, Ethan’s worn clothes, and Avery’s facial deformity and was not sure what to make of the group. Selfishly, I wanted to categorize them, define what forces held them back just for the sake of meaningful discussion. I noted zero students of color, eliminating any chance at connecting deeply with this particular border which had shaped our class discussions. So shallow was my idea of marginalization then. While I have not come to pity our new friends, I am awash with a sudden, deep understanding of everything that I’ll never understand.

Chance, one of our brightest lights, can’t afford to play football. His cheeky grin framed by adorable freckles doesn’t let on that his dad left recently. His face darkens when someone calls him the wrong name and he quietly admits that he and his identical twin get confused a lot. Our question about the US-Mexico border prompts him to confidently relay what his mom tells him: that Trump was destined to become president because it’s written in the Bible... he “thinks it’s in Revelations”. Despite clear economic, educational, and emotional barriers, he offers enthusiastic and thoughtful—albeit sometimes random—comments to the discussion. He tells us that he loves Tuesdays because we (the Kenyon students) visit to teach them things and draw pictures with them. As if it’s not a complete honor for us. Oh, and he also likes Tuesday’s after school program which he attends because Mom is working late. He has a special knack for honing in on the characters’ feelings and isn’t shy when he suggests that someone is sad or lonely, excited or friendly. I’ve spent 3 hours with this child and he’s kept me busy thinking about the desperate need to invest in every single student.

At Kenyon, we are fortunate enough to have frequent, close interactions with our educators. These relationships have bolstered my confidence, kept me on track, and inspired

me to go above and beyond. At Columbia Middle School, everyone from the principal (Matt Dill) down to the teachers (Mrs. Ferguson) goes out of their way to forge personal and positive relationships with the students. It's clear that the students trust these people deeply which gives me hope for the future of their education and the development of their character. Madi and I have also prioritized getting to know each student in the hopes that our short time together impacts them as much as it does us. Some are easier to crack than others. However, the quiet ones—no matter how much they insist—do have something to say. In fact, their contributions are often incredibly astute. Even the students who fall somewhere between boisterous and silent, like Connor, need to be given the floor every so often as they may get lost in our efforts to either control or encourage the other types of students. All this we have learned in just three visits. I'm overwhelmed yet overjoyed at how much every student has to offer, and the stories that they have to tell. They are are so precious, baggage and all. I hope we may continue to have fun with them and teach them new things and fill them with motivation.