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## School's In for Summer

*School is usually closed in July for a reason*, I reminded myself. Tensions were high and the building was hot, you could feel them both. Actually, hot is an understatement. Sweat dripped from every crevice of my face just walking towards the cafeteria. Air conditioning! Ha! I quickly tried to compare what I was witnessing today to my own experiences in middle school. About to be a junior at the University of Michigan, my pre-teen memory was a little hazy. Sure, there had been hormones and angst. And sure, I had witnessed fights at that age, but they were usually tame, premeditated affairs. In hindsight, I had taken for granted that I never had to be cautious as I walked from the cafeteria to the playground. And air-conditioning, *that* I had certainly taken for granted.

“Ayy! Watch it n—gga!”

“Ay shut the fuck up! I ain’t even no n—gga, n—gga!”

Two students I later came to know as Solomon and Antonio had bumped into one another while several of the “middle schoolers” made their way from lunch to recess. I am hesitant to call them “middle schoolers” because you might imagine children. These particular “middle schoolers”, despite being 14 years old, were my size, and I would’ve picked either one of them in a fight over me.

“Pshh whatever you say n—gga, fuck you.”

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Fortunately, Solomon walked away as he said that. Things seemed to be settling down, and any chance of a fight seemed unlikely. Still, having been the only staff member in the vicinity, I wondered what course of action I would've had to take if things had escalated. No longer did I have any idea what to expect, and no longer were these next eight weeks simply something I would anticipate. It was happening, it was real, and the questioning of my own capabilities produced a staggering amount of anxiety, excitement, and fear of the unknown. *Was this really where I wanted to be? How could I even be expected to know what to do?* After all, it was only my first day, and this wasn't even within the realm of what I had been hired for— a position which was anxiety-producing enough on its own. *Would anybody take me seriously? Could I really teach in a school like this?*

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The students in kindergarten through 8th grade at Phoenix Multicultural Academy were about to experience nearly two fewer months of summer vacation than they were used to. At the time, I didn't fully understand the politics behind it, but along with over a dozen other schools in the Detroit city limits, Phoenix was going to be operating under the administration the Education Achievement Authority (the EAA), rather than Detroit Public Schools, commonly referred to as DPS.

I later learned that the EAA was a well-intentioned, but mostly unsuccessful attempt to take over and turn around schools that had historically been “failing” in the state Michigan. First introduced by Governor Rick Snyder in 2011, by September 2012 the program had been

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implemented in several schools, Phoenix included. Schools that were under EAA were no longer public schools; more specifically, they became charter schools. Under the new regulations, most of the tenured staff was let go and entire educational staffs were replaced with young, enthusiastic, but inexperienced teachers from programs like TFA, or Teach for America. Other aspects of the program included three provided meals per day (before, during, and after the school day), and schooling from September to early August, with more frequent breaks throughout the year to compensate for the extra time.

The summer of 2013, during Phoenix's first trial run of their extended school year, was coincidentally the first time I set foot on this campus. Many of the kids were vaguely aware of what the EAA was, and perhaps some of the older ones had been informed that the reason school was in session during the summer this year was an attempt to close the achievement gap in their school, a gap that widens even further after students spend the summer months away from school. Even when compared to other schools in the EAA, Phoenix was in rough shape. In the year 2012, with its average attendance hovering around 50%, Phoenix had been ranked as one of the bottom three schools in the state on standardized achievement measures.

But kids are going to be kids, no matter what school they go to. Nobody wants to be the only kid on the block still going to school in the summer. And certainly not when the school lacks air conditioning. And when it's full of teachers telling you what to do. And kids that are going to give you shit. If your parents can barely speak English and don't understand why you're required to go to school in the summer, or if you come from a single parent home and your mom's either too busy, too strung-out, or too uninvolved to give two shits whether or not

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you go to school, what's stopping you from saying "Fuck it, I'm not going today?" Almost nothing. This is where Bridgepoint comes in, and essentially, what I was hired to do. Give the kids a reason to come to school, and to keep them coming back.

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In the month June of 2013, I received a phone call from my ex-girlfriend's mom that would change my life. Despite no longer dating her daughter, our relationship had ended smoothly enough and her mom was friendly, so we stayed in regular contact. Earlier in the summer, I had made what I thought was a breakthrough in my career plans. Growing up with my father as a practicing psychiatrist, who also spent time teaching at Wayne State, I had been introduced to both psychology and education at a young age. Once in college for a semester or two, I knew I had wanted to study psychology. I was fascinated with the way the mind worked, and it seemed like the natural choice. Quickly, however, I discovered you could do very little with solely a bachelor's degree in psychology.

It was this summer before my junior year of college that a short-cut, and a short-cut I was passionate about, occurred to me. I had learned there was such a thing as a "Masters of Education"—a one year program that you could apply for with any bachelor's degree—and leave certified to teach primary or secondary education. I always thought that my high school teachers were cool, admirable people, and I was already passionate about education, particularly education in urban areas. Sure, the salary wasn't great, but only having to spend one extra year

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out of undergrad, and having a career that I imagined as fun and rewarding, suddenly seemed like a brilliant idea.

To this day, I am not certain whether or not my ex-girlfriend's mom was aware of my newly found interest in pursuing an educational career, but her timing could not have been better. Over fifteen years ago, she had been one of the founders of a large non-profit organization called Bridgepoint. I had known a little bit about this. The goal of Bridgepoint was to "bridge" the resources and community of suburban Detroit with the inner city of Detroit, primarily in the realm of education. She had called that day in June to inform me that due to a temporary shortage of faculty, a grade school Bridgepoint had previously done volunteer work with for years, called Phoenix, had contracted their organization this summer. As part of a "summer school" program, they were looking for young adults to plan and lead fun, but educational activities for the students every afternoon.

She was offering if that I could commit Monday-Thursday from 1:00-4:00p.m for 8 weeks in July and August, I would be a paid \$20 an hour as a summer enrichment teacher. I would receive real hands on experience, at times being independently in charge of an entire class of students. Apart from a couple odd, flexible, jobs I had been working, my only other commitment was a summer class I was taking that would begin in late June. My summer class was over by noon every day, leaving me just enough time to make it from Ann Arbor to Detroit. Although I only knew these few details, I knew this was an opportunity impossible to pass up.

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I was well into my third week, and things were going, well, better than expected. I was shocked at how many of the kids' names I already knew, and even more surprised at the percentage who knew mine.

“Mr. Conrad! Mr. Conrad!”

I had my slowly growing entourage of fans running up to greet me as I came in during their lunch hour, hands full of props and materials that were going to be used for the activities I had helped plan for the afternoon.

“Can you open up the gym?? Can you push us on the scooters again?? Matthew didn't get a chance yesterday but we're all here right now!”

“They won't let me right now! But later, guys! I promise!” I can't help myself from laughing as I reassure them.

“But Mr. Conrad...!”

“Guys! I promise.”

“Okayyyyy. We'll be waiting!” Arturo beamed a smile and ran away with the group.

Phoenix Multicultural Academy sits in the heart of Springwells Village, a lively neighborhood in Southwest Detroit where Latinos, blacks, and whites all intermix bringing their own traditions and pride. While Latin culture is dominant in Southwest, the region is home to some of the most diverse neighborhoods in Detroit, and Springwells Village is no exception.

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Roughly speaking, Phoenix was half Latino, 25 % black, and 25% white. It helped me that these kids had grown up with a lot of racial diversity. Many Detroit Public Schools had student and staff populations that were nearly 100% African American. Because my white skin was not threatening or foreign to the kids, I was able to receive a general level of respect faster than I would have otherwise.

We had been given a \$200 budget at the beginning of the program to spend on items we thought would be beneficial to the school, and to pay for materials we needed for activities. After seeing and hearing many of the kids struggle with the heat on these roasting July days, within the first week I decided to spend about \$20 to buy two handheld water bottle fans that can manually squirt a mist of water as the fan blows. These water bottle fans were an instant success, which naturally caused lots of fighting on “whose turn it was with the fan” or “who Mr. Conrad said could take the fan home that day”. After much begging from the students, and realizing that most of the kids didn’t have air conditioning at home, I systematically allowed some of the kids to take the fans home. This initial, and seemingly trivial, notion of trust sparked the development of a growing, positive relationship between me and many of the students.

Another reason I got along with the kids was due to the fact that I was assigned to plan the outdoor activities for a majority of my afternoons at Phoenix. Some of the other summer enrichment teachers did primarily arts and crafts or educational activities. While these were different and supposed to be more exciting than what they were doing with their academic teachers, often times many of the students had little interest and were disengaged from these tasks. When it came time to come outside to “play” with Mr. Conrad, many of the students, and

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in particular the boys, viewed this as the highlight of their school day. I would usually come prepared with a few options of team oriented games people could play, and I would let them choose among whatever sounded best to avoid imposing an uninteresting activity on them. When I had picked poorly that day, soccer was almost always the back-up option of choice.

Soccer is incredibly popular in Latino culture, and many of these young boys were obsessed. I was always one of the first choice picks after captains for the soccer games were decided upon. This wasn't something I had ever used to, and I could finally understand why people enjoyed playing team sports. I started to love playing soccer with the students, and I grew close to many of the boys as a result. I must admit, however, that not all of my interactions with the kids were this pleasant.

One particular day during my third week we had a bagpiper, a friend of one of the members of Bridgepoint, come in to Phoenix to play traditional Scottish music for one of our activities. Many of the younger kids really enjoyed this, and we were proud to have pulled it together seeing as almost none of the kids had ever heard a bagpipe in real life. During the performance, I found myself seated in the dilapidated auditorium next to Joseph, a rambunctious 6<sup>th</sup> grader who was always getting into trouble.

“This is gay, even I could do this. I'm bored!”

“Joseph, please be quiet.” I whispered.

“Are you a faggot? Do you like the peeeenus?” Joseph taunted, getting close to my face.



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I ignored him, although I was mildly impressed that this annoying 6th grader was using the term faggot correctly, and for a brief moment I wondered if I would have been able to do the same at his age.

“Hey! I said do you like the peeeenus? Faggot!”

I managed to laugh saying, “Joseph, please shut up, this will be over in a few minutes.”

I was betting that Joseph had just learned the word faggot that week, because he proceeded to call me a faggot and ask me the question multiple times, to which my combination of ignoring him and telling him to be quiet were futile.

The last couple weeks I had heard young children say both very inappropriate and ridiculous things. While still jarring and unsettling, I was usually able to brush off kindergartners dropping f-bombs, or 2nd graders joking about “poppin mollies” when eating skittles. Today, however, I was losing my patience. Previously, if kids had personally given me lip or refused to participate in my activities, I would just send them to a teacher or administrator who would then discipline them. Perhaps this was different because we were stuck sitting next to each other, and it didn’t seem like it was going to stop anytime soon.

“Actually, no, if you must know, I do not like the penis; it must be you that likes ‘the penis’ since you can’t seem to shut up about them.” I harshly whispered, playing along.

“What!? No! I ain’t no faggot, I get all the girls!”

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It dawned on me that I had overheard two girls talking about Joseph earlier that day. From what I could tell, one of the girls had been laughing about how she broke up with Joseph, and both the girls were trash talking him. Somehow, with almost no delay, I managed to say:

“Oh yeah? Is that why I heard that Summer broke up with you? Is that why you weren’t able to keep her satisfied?” I grinned coyly.

“What??? No, you heard wrong! I broke up with her!”

We were getting too loud for the setting, but thankfully I didn’t hear a peep out of him for the remainder of the performance. While I watched him slump back in his chair with his arms crossed, I felt far too pleased with myself for the reality that I had just outwitted a 6<sup>th</sup> grader.

This entire day I had been thinking about the task that lay ahead of me for the following week. Thus far, my role in the school felt more like a camp counselor than an actual teacher—but that was all about to change. In a few short days I would have to prepare two separate half-hour lectures for two consecutive school days, which I would then deliver three times in a row to different groups of 6<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> graders each on each of those days. Finally I would be doing some actual teaching.

I already felt uncomfortable with some of the topics I had been assigned to give lectures on. The first was a presentation on points of attraction and hidden areas of beauty within the city of Detroit. There was something troubling in telling people predominately in poverty about the beauty of their own city, particularly when you are not a member of the community. I set these thoughts aside and spent the weekend preparing for the lessons.

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At this point, I would love to say that despite my doubts, I was a successful teacher. Somehow, despite all those years of hating giving speeches, I discovered that I loved standing in front of the classroom. That somehow, my lectures had gone smoothly, the kids were engaged, and there was not a doubt in my mind that becoming an urban teacher was my destiny. Sadly, this was nowhere close to the reality of what happened.

To my initial relief, the teacher of the first middle school class sat in the classroom with her students as they arrived to my lecture. After I confirmed that everyone was there, I began.

“Okay, umm, today we are going to be talking about some of the hidden beauty in Detroit...”

I found myself hurrying through a series of slides, worried about the way I was coming across, worried about if anyone even cared. At some point my voice must have started trailing off, because I was soon interrupted.

“Can anyone hear Mr. Conrad? I know that I can’t! What he’s saying is actually very interesting! Here, let me...” The teacher that had been in the room was making her way up to the front of the classroom and basically reiterated the last several points I had made, asking me to go back to specific slides that contained pictures of buildings I had taken. I knew that she had probably meant well, but at the time, her taking over my presentation only added to my embarrassment.

Despite my rehearsing, I periodically froze, avoided eye contact, and was somewhat awkward overall throughout the six lectures. These same kids I had earned respect from, who

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felt comfortable to talk to me about issues they were having, who truly seemed to value the time we had spent together these last few weeks, suddenly seemed like strangers. So many of these kids had already grabbed my heart, but it seemed that most of my success in building relationships with them had been in one-on-one or in small groups. When speaking to a larger group in a more formal setting, I had lost my ability to connect.

Yet often times, opportunity has a peculiar way of presenting itself. Only a couple days later, I was goofing around in the cafeteria of Phoenix with a friend of mine I'd invited for the day to play guitar for the kids. Two older adults approached us, one a janitor, the other a guy had I had seen walking around but had no idea what he did.

“Hey man, nice set up!” one of them exclaimed.

“Mind if we come back here at four o’ clock when the day is over and try it out? We used to do a little playing back in our day!”

“Yeah, of course!” my friend replied.

The school day came to an end and as promised, the guys were waiting for us. The janitor began talking to my friend who was holding the guitar, leaving me alone with the other guy. We had a surprising amount in common. After some small talk, I found out he was a U of M grad who studied psychology as well. This led me to ask about what exactly it was that he did at Phoenix, to which he explained: he was the *school psychologist*. After listening in awe to his professional opinions on urban education, and specifically the politics at play in Phoenix, my head was already swirling with new ideas.

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*You mean there's a career where you can work with urban youth in a school setting, and not be a teacher?!* I prayed that my friend and the janitor would stay occupied, because I needed to know more.

Anthony Moffitt gave an honest explanation of the different challenges and rewards he had experienced during his time as a school psychologist, especially as a school psychologist in inner city Detroit. School psychology was actually going through some major structural changes at this time, and he explained to me how the approaches he was taught in his Master's program were gradually being replaced with a new model that was found to be more effective with at-risk children.

Without hesitation, he also informed me that the students I was spending time with at Phoenix were the cream of the crop. The roughest kids rarely came to school, and if they did, they were often spending time with him. He did a lot of work with families of the students too. Carlos, a 1<sup>st</sup> grader I knew well, had been waiting in the cafeteria for his mom to come and walk him home well after school got out. He approached us at one point while we were talking, and after his mom came and they left, I was astounded to learn that Carlos was one of seven children to a single mom, all seven of them having different fathers.

Before heading over to listen to my friend crank out some Jimi Hendrix, we exchanged contact info and he offered me the opportunity to shadow him if I wanted to learn more about the occupation. I already knew that I would be taking him up on this. *Maybe there was a reason school had stayed open this summer.* Thank goodness I had decided to show up.