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My Secondary Education Experience: How Maine Teachers Prepared Me For College

Abstract. This article addresses the author's experience in two different types of secondary education institutions in Maine: a public middle school and a private, college prep high school. The author will examine the differences between the two experiences and the strategies behind what made the experiences drastically different.

During my time in the College of Education and Human Services here at Seton Hall, I have had the opportunity to reflect on my own educational upbringing as I learn to transition to "the other side of the desk". My educational past is far from straightforward, especially in the secondary level: the area in which I intend to teach. My middle school and high school experiences were drastically different. My middle school was a small, rural public school in central Maine whereas my high school was private, college prep school in the city of Bangor, Maine. Both schools represent opposite ends of the education spectrum but both, I believe, had a positive effect on my growth and development as a person. When reflecting on these experiences, it is not the structure or overall performance of the separate schools that comes to mind: it is the teachers. Regardless of the perceptions around the schools' ability to teach, it was the teachers who are responsible for shaping me into the person I have become today. In this reflective essay, I intend to explore a selection of teachers from both schools to discuss how those teachers helped me in my educational journey and which school ultimately had the greater effect on me.

For those who do not know much about the state of Maine, I will give a brief description to provide perspective and context to the rest of the article. Maine is the northeastern most state in the United States, neighbored by Massachusetts to the south and New Hampshire to the west. As of 2019, according to the U.S. Census Bureau, it had a population of 1.3 million, and has the oldest population in the United States. It is often characterized by its vast pine tree forests and rocky coastlines which attract tourists in the summer and by freezing temperatures and snowstorms in the winter, making it more of a travel destination than a place of residence. Because of this, much of the population residing in central and northern Maine lives in small, rural towns: one of those towns being Hartland. In terms of education overall, Maine is ranked just below average at 28th, according to the U.S. News and World Report. As someone who has lived in Maine my entire life, I can say that the state may not be the best, but it is not the worst and can improve, especially in my field of study. With the background and context laid out, we can now examine the two school experiences in relation to education.

My middle school experience was perhaps the most interesting of the two schools; it is also the experience that I remember more fondly. The middle school I attended, Somerset Valley Middle School, was situated in a below average, both economically and educationally, school district known as Regional School District 19. As of the 2019-2020 school year, according to the National Center for Educational Statistics, the district accounts for the education of 1,895 students, grades pre-kindergarten to 12 from 8 towns. To put that in perspective, the largest high school in Maine, Lewiston High School, covers approximately 1,500 students. The size of the district meant that classrooms generally had a smaller teacher-to-student ratio, ...about 12-to-1. While the class sizes were good for a teaching environment, there is little else that can be said kindly about the district's situation. Over

58% of its students qualified for free or reduced lunch, a program that aids students whose families cannot afford the standard fee for school lunch. Over 300 students had IEPs a sixth of the student population. IEP, or Individualized Education Program, is a system under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) that identifies additional support structures a student may need in the classroom, usually stemming from a student's disability. The district faced numerous challenges, mainly in adequately teaching its diverse student population. This task ultimately fell on its teachers, who had the task of dealing with these troubles in the classroom.

From the outside perspective, the school district may have seemed to have no ability to teach its student population, based on the statistics I shared. The truth is, however, that several teachers were hard at work giving students the best education possible with the resources they had. I experienced this firsthand and was lucky enough to be a student with multiple teachers who fostered my learning beyond the levels that were standard for an average middle school student. The success of my middle school education was orchestrated by the principal, Mr. Roux, who had a keen eye for spotting the strengths and weaknesses in his students' learning. While I cannot truly know the intentions of his thoughts and actions, I can presume that he was heavily focused on the success of all his students, judging by the structure of the schooling I experienced during my time there.

Most interestingly was his inclusion of two additional, proficiency focused English Language Arts (ELA) and math class periods, known as T1 and T2 by students. From my recollection, the names of the class had no important meaning outside of the ones the students attributed to them: they were simply another math and English class to us. The classes worked on a progression system in which students would be tested on their competency in the respective subjects. With this information, students, regardless of grade level, would be placed in classrooms which focused on improving the areas in which students struggled. When a teacher felt a student was making adequate progress, they would then be assessed and either moved to the next level of learning or return to that class to continue building skills and knowledge. I fell among some of the upper levels of both ELA and math classes, compared to my classmates, which caught the attention of my principal.

During the first couple of years in middle school, Mr. Roux took a more informal approach to testing my competency in math specifically, partly because of his degree in mathematics. In between classes or sometimes after school, he would introduce me to math problems and concepts beyond what was being taught in my classes at the time. My curious, competitive nature led me to accept these problems as challenges, not realizing he was trying to determine the level of math I was prepared to take. It was an interesting teaching technique to employ on his students. It was often outside the classroom and presented in an informal manner: a way in which a student like myself would not realize they were being taught and assessed. In retrospect, it was ingenious, approaching students in casual conversation before leaving them with a question to answer at a later time.

For me, it left me constantly inquiring for more problems to solve, to take every opportunity to meet with him to devise a new one to answer. Inadvertently, it made me a better learner. Consequently, in 7th grade, I was placed in an Algebra I class among other 7th and 8th graders and then Geometry the following year. Unbeknownst to me, my principal, in conjunction with my teachers, were preparing me for a smoother transition into high school. Many students in the district struggled with this transition, which explains my principal's insistence on his students understanding the fundamental skills of both math and ELA: something that the nation primarily tests its students on. However, when the time came to transition to high school, my parents, teachers, and principal felt that the local high school would not give me the education I was looking for and had received from my middle school. As such, my parents and I began the search which would ultimately lead me to enrolling in a private, college preparatory school within the city of Bangor.

John Bapst Memorial High School was the one that I had picked in my search for schools that would hopefully lead me to more college opportunities after graduation. This school had a strong reputation among all the schools in the state, often cited as one of the best in Maine. For my parents

and I, it seemed like the right choice. Despite being in the city, this school had a size similar to that of my hometown high school: enrolling just over 500 students at that time, creating a similar teacher-to-student ratio. One of the major differences was opportunity and experiences. The school enrolled many international students from Asia and Europe, alongside local students, and class choices were almost like what I see here at college. Students had more freedom in terms of which classes and subjects they chose to focus on and the level of instruction. Some chose to take extra classes in the arts, while others focused on Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics, also known as STEM. I took a more balanced approach, taking classes of various placements across all subjects.

The teachers I had were experts and knowledgeable in their field, often having credentials prior to the start of their teaching careers. As someone who enjoyed learning, it was nice to talk to and hear from people who had a passion for the subjects they were teaching to their students: it was these teachers who inspired me to consider becoming an educator myself. Despite all these great benefits I got from attending John Bapst, I felt that something was missing from truly connecting and enjoying it more: something that I had back at my middle school.

The connections I had with the teachers in my middle school, I feel, were much stronger than those I had in high school. That is not to say that I didn't develop connections with teachers at high school, but rather it is to say that they did not feel as personal. The middle school teachers were covering only a small portion of the entire student body, having students from one or two grade levels multiple times a day. The high school teachers, however, were covering the entire student body, from all levels and even different students each semester depending on the class.

That personal connection had a more profound effect on me, I felt encouraged to try my hardest without worrying about the mistakes I might make, I knew the teachers were there to ensure I was learning. In high school, however, I felt as if there was pressure to perform. If I was attending this institution in hopes of making it to college, I would need to focus on getting good grades and showing that I belonged there. Ultimately, because of this, much of what I remember of high school is the stress and anxiety associated with assignments and projects. I became too focused on the end goal rather than learning and enjoying the subjects. While grades were still important to me in middle school, the teachers always had an emphasis on competency rather than performance. In a school district labeled as an underperformer, the teachers still made sure that their quality of education did not reflect the assessment they had been given. To the benefit of me and many other students, it truly set us up for success.

From an outsider's perspective, it would seem rather odd that I preferred the education of a public middle school over a private high school. While high school did offer better educational opportunities, the middle school fostered a better learning environment. It was those personal connections that were more easily developed in middle school, which led to an alternative method to learning. Although my principal is just one example, many of those teachers found time to take the learning outside the classroom, imploring me and others to use our knowledge in skills in a real-world mindset.

While I cannot deny the quality of education I received at the private school, it comes back to the demographics I established earlier. These two schools, in different areas serving different students, had to adapt the learning to fit their audience. A prestigious private school can use formal education more effectively, given that its students typically are there specifically for their education. A public middle school, however, deals with a varying degree of students both in knowledge and motivation. Ultimately, the impression a school's method of teaching leaves on its students is important. Psychologically, we want students to remember what they learned and do so by finding ways to imprint that knowledge into their long-term memory. This is something I am currently learning to understand but have already realized that it has been used on me in the past, and it clearly has made an impact on my learning and development as a student and teacher.

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