

Although Riverbend Academy (RBA) is located in a traditional old brick school building with off-white walls, rows of windows, florescent lights, high ceilings, and two large blackboards, the style of education that goes on inside the building is unique. RBA supports a project-based academic setting, meaning each student works independently on projects, and everything is self-paced. There are eight male and seven female students in the Algebra II classroom in which I am observing, and there is almost no diversity with only one black student. It is a multi-level classroom for grades 9-12.

Because of this unique educational model, the students enjoy a more relaxed atmosphere. Students sit in pairs at L-shaped tables, and each table has a computer. The room itself seems dreary, with cream-colored shades drawn over the windows and only a couple of faded posters on the walls. The students seem quite comfortable in this relaxed setting that allows coats and hats to be worn all day, iPods and walkmans to be used during class time, and food and beverages.

The project-based and self-paced instruction for students means that the teachers, known as advisors at RBA, do not stand in front of a classroom and teach often, or even at all. The schedule allows for all students to take math and English classes at the same time each day, as all the advisors teach both subjects at a variety of levels. The advisor in each room spends his or her time answering questions that might arise from the self-paced study. No two students in the Algebra II classroom are at the same place in the curriculum. Students work alone and there is often competition among the students for the teacher's time and attention. Aside from the times when a student sits down at the teacher's desk to ask a question, most of the interactions between instructor and student are in the form of short questions and responses or for disciplinary reasons.

This classroom environment is not conducive to all of the students in attendance, especially being a morning class. The environment is great for those few highly motivated

students, which maybe totaled five in the classroom. The other ten students had varying degrees of focus and involvement. Two students had their head down on the desk and appeared to be sleeping for over 30 minutes of the class. Several students looked at their assignments for a few minutes at a time and then looked up to talk to others or just stare into space. The classroom was only quiet for six minutes the entire hour, and even the quietness was not quiet as you could hear music being played from someone's headphones, wrappers being crinkled, and clicking computer keys.

Although I did not see any rules posted on the walls, the students seemed to know the rules of the classroom. For the most part, the students were respectful of the teacher when he was talking during the morning "circle" time, which is when announcements are read, students sign up for lunch, and attendance is taken. When students started to talk to others during inappropriate times, the instructor typically just looked at the student or said the student's name. The disruptive behavior typically subsided, at least for a while. Also, cell phones seemed to be an issue, and were only allowed to be used before and after school. If this rule was broken, the cell phone was confiscated for the day.

In making a generalization, I found the class to be a bit "rough" and assumed that most of the students attended this school because of problems at other schools. Many students were dressed in all black, and trench coats and chains were quite common. On my first day of observation, the class seemed to be fairly well behaved, although on my second visit they were no longer trying to impress me. Swearing was a problem, there was a lot of violence between students, things were being thrown around the room, and inappropriate conversations were taking place. Of course, all of this took place the instant the instructor stepped out of the room.

This is not to say that there were never any problems while the teacher was in the classroom. The entire hour during math class, students were constantly interrupting and being

disruptive. Part of the problem was the noise level in the classroom. Although some students were working, once the instructor started to answer someone's questions at his desk, someone else started talking to their neighbor, and the problem just exploded from there. Soon the entire class was abuzz. In one hour's time, the instructor needed to "hush" the classroom as a whole at least eight times and remind students to stay on task. Many of the disruption instigators were simply seeking attention from the instructor and their peers.

Although I have made it sound like this was a chaotic classroom, there were some students who seemed to thrive in this environment. They were the students who were awake, on time to class, motivated, and making progress in their studies. These were also the students who did not seem to belong to one of the "clicks" in the classroom. These students who were making progress were praised by the instructor for their accomplishments. Those who did not thrive in the environment were chatty, bored (perhaps because they were not being challenged), lacking focus, tired, and appeared to have no drive to learn or complete assignments. Those who fit into this category did not receive praise or encouragement from the instructor, but did receive a lot of negative attention from the instructor for disciplinary reasons.

If this were my classroom, I would make some changes while still following the school's educational strategy. I think that students need to be instructed at some point during the day, not just shown how to answer a specific question. This could be done by splitting the class into smaller groups based on their level of understanding and achievement. Groups could receive instruction at different times during the hour, and could then work together to discover solutions to the problems. I would also spend time moving around the classroom. In general, the instructor sat behind his desk the entire hour, only getting up once to wake up a student at the end of the hour. I think the class would be better behaved if the teacher roamed around the classroom answering questions rather than having the students get up and come to his desk.

These have been my observations and impressions in my first week at RBA. I have not had a chance to observe any other time of the day when the students are working on projects that they themselves have designed. I am also not completely convinced that working by oneself is always the best solution in education. These students work completely by themselves, and I feel that there are some important things that are learned when there is collaboration going on in the classroom. My time at RBA has been eye opening thus far, and I am interested in seeing how the students continue to react to my presence in their classroom.