



SUMMER BRIDGE - A Teacher's Perspective

Jonathan Dec, Teacher, Great Oaks Charter School

I will be honest—I came to Princeton-Blairstown in August slightly disgruntled. Mid-August is a crucial time for teachers to prepare for the upcoming year, and I had planned to use that week to finalize my curriculum and get my classroom ready. I had just finished my first year of teaching, which was (by definition) rough, and I was looking forward to a chance to sit down and think about how to plan my classes before the students arrived. I'm a curriculum-centric teacher—I believe that the heart of good teaching is a good lesson. When I found out that I would be spending a week in the woods instead of at my laptop, I felt frustrated.

It's been more than two months now since we returned from PBC, and in hindsight, I am extremely grateful for the opportunity to go. I often fall into the trap of prioritizing lesson planning and instruction over building relationships with students, so I think I needed that week in the woods more than I realized. I spent the week with a group of roughly 10 boys and another chaperone, climbing rock walls, dissecting owl pellets, roasting marshmallows, and picking up (or not picking up) bugs in the river. My favorite part of the trip was the daily reading block, when my group would gather in the PBC library to read and discuss a coming-of-age novel about a boy growing up in modern-day Bed-Stuy. There, surrounded by a collection of yellowed classics and wildlife guides, with the doors left wide open to the pond, we had a series of deeply personal conversations about masculinity, race, and our responsibilities as men in today's world. I'd wanted to discuss those topics with my students in a safe space for a long time.

Pinpointing cause-and-effect in education is difficult, so it's hard to say exactly how the trip "changed" my relationship with students. What I can say, though, is that the trip reminded me of some important lessons I'd forgotten in the day-to-day grind of first-year teaching. During our ecology class in the river one day, I heard a scream coming from one of my more excitable students. "It's a snake!" he yelled, pointing at something in the water. I began reassuring everyone that the brown line in the river was just a stick, only to watch it slither away in the middle of my sentence. After a challenging first year of teaching, I needed to be reminded of something that now seems obvious: the importance of trusting my students and valuing their perceptions of the world.

I did lose a week of planning time to the woods, but now that we're in the doldrums of October, I think the trip did more for my teaching than any amount of time spent perfecting a year-long calendar. Seeing my students as "just people" outside the classroom was a powerful experience for me, and I hope that they left the trip with the sense that I am human, too.