

My work this summer consisted of designing an extracurricular program for a select group of students at Spoede Elementary School in St. Louis in an effort to address the achievement gap. The gap consists of a discrepancy in achievement between African American and Hispanic American students and their Caucasian and Asian American counterparts. I first became interested in tutoring elementary school aged children in middle school and continued to do so during high school. Although it was only after entering Princeton and beginning my freshman year studies that the achievement gap struck me as a particularly compelling issue in education.

Over the summer I worked under the guidance of the principal of Spoede School, Dr. Connie Brawley. Before starting the actual teaching I took suggestions for potential students from Dr. Brawley and met with the students' teachers about their strengths and weaknesses, in addition to the specialist teacher at the school. I worked with three students total: two students entering 2nd grade and one student entering 1st grade. Each of the students were at very different stages in terms of ability. Upon meeting the students, I began planning the curriculum for each session day based on my observations of their interests and needs, all while adhering to their individual levels of ability. My program consisted of a five-week session for the students, which included three hours for classroom only learning and five hours for classroom learning and an excursion per week. Throughout the five weeks the children and I focused on the following themes: problem solving, critical thinking in math and reading, and race and identity. The race and identity aspect of my curriculum followed the following evolution: exploring the definition of African American, interacting with history in St. Louis' Wax Museum of Black History and Culture, reflecting on our own physical qualities that people can see and comparing them to our likes and dislikes that people can't tell from looking at us but that we share with the outside world.

After the five-week teaching session, I met with the principal for a reflection on the students progress and my observations. I always mailed the parents a "newsletter" informing them of what I worked on with their children and the progress they made. To conclude the program, I donated three children's books, on behalf of my sponsors, to the Spoede School library in addition to giving each participant a book as a reward for completing the program. A striking aspect of my work was becoming aware of the degree to which one of my students was already falling behind at 1st grade level reading and math. In interacting with his parents, I learned that he had no way of completing the required student coursework for that summer because his parents had lost the materials and had no intentions of replacing them. But for my program, during which I personally made contact with the Board of Education in order to secure materials on his behalf, he likely would not have had the same opportunities to improve his math skills over the summer as his classmates. I felt very privileged to be given the opportunity to work with such talented and promising students and give them the attention and encouragement necessary for success. Thank you Class of 1995 for making my summer experience possible!

Note: one student participant not in pictures (parents declined from giving permission to have photo taken)

