

*Yellow Hammer Summer Learning Project: Teacher Assistant Final Report*

**Purpose**

The Yellow Hammer Learning Project is a program in Greensboro, AL that offers intensive study in Reading, Writing, Math, and Science for rising 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> graders. The main goal of the program is to bridge the summer learning gap. The program aims to help these children become better learners and citizens by building the tools needed to become life-long learners.

My purpose in this report is to offer an introduction to how Teaching Assistants most often aided their students, first by use of the Reading Level, and then subsequently in the Small Group setting. These two settings I feel encapsulate the majority of the Teachers Aid component of the internship. From there, I will address the two biggest hurdles I observed TAs overcome as they grew into the position. The purpose of this is so that the prospective TA does not repeat the same mistakes.

**Reading Level as a Tool**

The students were grouped by reading level (unbeknownst to them), and Teachers Assistants (TAs) were assigned to an individual group that was subject to change as Running Records were taken, and reading levels progressed. This was an effective manner of grouping because it gave the TA a framework of what needed to be focused on most. For example, Student A at reading level W may be incredible in Fluency but his Comprehension needs work. In this case, the TA would know to focus on understanding and tools that let the child know it is indeed their job to understand a text.

The Reading Level guides the TA to make level appropriate decisions so as to not overwhelm the student, as well. This approach is effective because it gives the teacher

resources to draw on that encourage what the student already knows, thus building confidence in the learning process. Amazingly enough, the information gleaned from reading level often-reflected general confidence in the classroom. The kids at higher reading levels appeared to be far more comfortable with education than their struggling counterparts. This building process gives education and knowledge a more personable face, not one obscured and unattainable. There was a definite push to separate the idea of failure and success from education, at least in the traditional sense. Kids were not encouraged to “be smarter” but to work harder to get where they wanted to go. This gave the kids a path to success instead of an uncontrollable expectation they either met or they did not.

### **Small Groups**

Small groups allowed the TAs to form connections with the students that formal class environments often would not allow. TAs saw students in every class, not just one, as well as during all free time, thus giving ample opportunity to make and implement observations in how that student learned best. The TAs duties were primarily that of advocate and teacher. This insight into how a student actually learns is invaluable to prospective teachers as it expands the learning experience from just in the classroom, to the school experience as a whole. This shift from localized classroom learning to real understanding changes the way most have looked at education because it shifts knowledge from a thing obtained to an ever building process merely facilitated by the teacher. This organic style of education requires a great deal of both control and friendliness, teacher and camp councilor, in its TAs and Lead teachers.

## **Things to Consider as a Future TA**

Full disclaimer: I cannot begin to encapsulate how all this changed my perspectives on education so I will not try. I will however, offer thoughts on things I saw TAs do unintentionally wrong that may need work as the program grows. This is in no way trying to say everyone was like this, or that one particular person was like this, or even that the problem was not resolved quickly. I hope to hasten the revelation process for the TA so that these thoughts, attitudes, changes, what-have-you are considered before the kids enter the classroom.

To begin, the biggest issue I saw arise from my fellow TAs was a lack of initial respect from the students. This was entirely due to how the TA carried themselves. Going into this internship, the best way to get the discipline and respect you want is to be the adult you needed as a child: confident, fair, and compassionate. It is very important the TA understand that to the kids, they are an adult. You cannot act like a college student. As the adult, you must set limits and expectations for your individual Small Group. This was of course done for the group as a whole and in terms of the Lead Teachers, but TAs often left this distinction unclear leading to eventual discipline issues and undue stress. TAs must understand that you EARN respect from these kids through leadership and example; it is not given as these kids have no reason to trust you. You are judge, jury, and executioner to them. Give a child one reason to mistrust you by not maintaining consistency, and getting that trust back is nearly impossible. This is not babysitting for extra cash, you play a bigger role than you think.

On a separate note, it is understood that some of the circumstances surrounding these kids are less than ideal. But, it is not our job to fix or save anything (within reason

of course). All you can do as a TA is love your kids and stay in your lane. If you can show your kids that you love them, and want to see them succeed, that is enough. Much like when a church goes on a mission trip, it is important to go out of love instead of misplaced passion. Respect is key. It seems silly to say this, but remember to respect the dignity of every human being. Your experience is not the only one that matters here, and truly, it is not the one that matters anyway. To quote the Sawyerville Day Camp motto, "It's all for the kids." This particular education program is very clear on that. One of my coworkers from Greensboro astutely remarked to me, "Greensboro is just like any other town with any other problems. We want to be better, not be any body's charity case."

### **Final Thoughts**

To draw this report to a close, I will say that the only way to properly experience YLP is to be apart of it. It will and does change your life. There will be kids you cry over; there will be circumstances you cannot change. But, when you get one kid that you connect to and help succeed (no matter how you are defining that) it makes every single bit of emotional turmoil you experienced teaching worth it. I have learned so much in my time at YLP; I got invaluable teaching experience and exposure to the age group I want to teach. I would highly encourage the experience to anyone interested in teaching Middle School, or even teaching at all. I am incredibly grateful to have had this opportunity to grow and learn.