Practicum I Journals

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I have neither given nor received help on this work, nor am I aware of any infraction of the Honor Code.

Journal #1 – Topic Numbers 1 and 2 – Classroom Climate and Demographics

**MARCH 7, 2016**

Today was the first day of my Practicum I experience. I was welcomed into Mrs. Anderson’s first grade classroom at West Elementary with open arms by not only Mrs. Anderson and her students, but also by the other three teachers on Mrs. Anderson’s first grade team, with whom she works very closely. Mrs. Anderson has been teaching for twenty-five years or more, and it is clear that she is the most experienced of the group of four teachers; they all come to her for advice several times a day, and she is always ready to help!

Mrs. Anderson loves whales, and her classroom is adorably whale-themed. Her twenty-two students are broken up into four groups based on level of ability, and each group is named after a different kind of whale (i.e. Belugas, Humpbacks, etc.). There are fourteen girls and eight boys in the class. Three of the children are African-American, one is Asian, and the remaining eighteen are Caucasian. Even on my very first day, I noticed evidence that equality is very much promoted in Mrs. Anderson’s classroom. For example, the class’s social studies lesson today was all about Martin Luther King, Jr. and all the work he did to make sure that everyone could live, work, and go to school together, no matter what their skin looked like. Mrs. Anderson explained that all people are the same and that skin just happens to come in different colors, but the color of skin that a person is born with does not make any difference in the person at all. Another thing that I noticed that proved how well equality is promoted in the classroom was that when I initially asked Mrs. Anderson about the ethnic makeup of her class while we were outside during recess, she was not 100% sure off the top of her head. She commented, “You know, I should probably know this. I think I used to know this. I just don’t ever really think about it. And I know the kids don’t. These kids really are all color-blind when it comes to people. There is just such innocence there. I wish the whole world could see people through the eyes of a first-grader.”

Mrs. Anderson has two children with special needs in her classroom (one with a speech/language IEP and the other with an IEP for a specific language arts learning disability). She also has ten gifted students; one is identified gifted and the other nine are in the SOAR program which means they have not yet been definitively identified as gifted, but they are on track to be. Out of the four first grade teachers at West Elementary, Mrs. Anderson has the most experience working with gifted students and enjoys doing so; she has also been teaching the longest out of the four, and therefore gets to slightly preference what her classroom makeup will be.

Mrs. Anderson already has been carefully giving me lots of work that I can do while still being able to effectively observe her classroom. As soon as I arrived, I was given the task of making a PowerPoint presentation for the four first-grade teachers to use for reviewing vocabulary words with the students. Then, I was allowed to grade several stacks of papers, which was a great experience. Mrs. Anderson helped me along the way with determining what types of answers were and were not appropriate, and she also helped me to pick up on out-of-the-ordinary patterns on certain students’ papers. One example of this is when she looked at one little girl’s reading test that I had graded, and she noticed that the grade was really uncharacteristic of that student. She then remembered that the child had been absent for most of the week leading up to that reading test and therefore had missed out on lots of the in-class discussion, review, etc. As soon as she remembered that, she ripped up the test and tossed it into the wastebasket, saying, “I’m not going to count that against her. I’m just not going to do it.”

The climate of Mrs. Anderson’s classroom did not seem to be bothered by my presence even slightly. I got the impression that the students are used to having visitors and volunteers in the classroom, which is great. The students are so well-accustomed to the steady routine Mrs. Anderson has put into place for them; because they always know what is expected of them, having someone new around barely makes any difference in the way the class is run. Mrs. Anderson’s classroom is such a calm, comforting, uplifting place to be that even I did not want to go home at the end of the day! She makes use of a wide variety of positive phrases of encouragement throughout each day. Two of my favorites that I heard today are as follows:

“Sometimes you just gotta say, ‘Come on, me! I can get this done!’ Encourage and motivate yourself to get it done! Believe in yourself!”

“I love you, and you shouldn’t be chatty.”

I loved that Mrs. Anderson said she loved the child “AND” he should not be chatty, rather than using the word “but.” “And” sounds so much more positive, and it is such a little word. I cannot wait to see what else I learn tomorrow!

Journal #2 – Topic Numbers 3 and 5 – Behavior Management and Supervision & Safety

**MARCH 8, 2016**

Today, while I observed Mrs. Anderson’s room, I paid attention mostly to how she handled behavior of her students, how she supervised them, and what sorts of information she could give me regarding safety in her classroom and the school. I particularly liked the way she handled her students’ behavior. She only used her behavior chart (where each child had a red, yellow, and green card to indicate how their day was going behavior-wise) for about the first month of school, while her expectations and the rules of the classroom were still being established. When I asked her why, her answer really resonated with me. She said, “By the end of about that first month, I know my kids and I let them be who they are; I only correct them when necessary. You learn which ones really are acting out and which ones just have little idiosyncrasies, and you learn to pick your battles. By the end of that first month I know them, and they know me and what I expect, so the chart pretty much becomes unnecessary after that.” As I watched for the rest of the day, I realized that Mrs. Anderson was right. There were some things that she just let correct themselves, like when a student was quietly crying at her desk out of frustration with her work, and there were some things that she quickly corrected and moved away from, like when a student was talking at a time she knew she should not have been talking. (After the crying child pulled herself together on her own, Mrs. Anderson did pull her aside and give her a pep talk! I liked that she gave the student an opportunity to get over the issue on her own first, though.)

All it typically took for Mrs. Anderson to regain control of her classroom was a single reminder. All she had to do was remind the students that they should be sitting, and they sat. If she did not see the result she sought after the first try, Mrs. Anderson simply informed the misbehaving student that he or she would be walking five laps at recess, and the student would say okay and correct his or her behavior, not even trying to get out of his or her punishment. The mutual respect in Mrs. Anderson’s classroom was refreshing.

Another way Mrs. Anderson eliminates distractions and maintains order in her classroom is with her bathroom pass method. Her students never have to ask to use the bathroom. A student needing to use the restroom simply walks to the filing cabinet where one boys’ bathroom pass and one girls’ bathroom pass hang, takes the pass and puts it on his or her desk to show Mrs. Anderson that he or she is in the restroom, and then the child simply goes. When the student returns, he or she replaces the bathroom pass and gets back to work. I have never seen this system used before, but it seems to work well, and it definitely eliminates disruptions.

During recess, Mrs. Anderson took some time to discuss supervision and safety with me. While she talked with me, she kept her eyes on her students rather than looking directly at me, which I appreciated. I noticed that even while they talked amongst themselves, all the teachers went into what seemed like protective overdrive while on the playground. The children could not have been in better hands.

While outside, Mrs. Anderson told me that the primary means of communication during an unsafe situation is the school’s intercom system. They have color codes that tell them what to do for different situations, such as bad weather or an intruder. They do numerous practices during the year with more than one plan of action to prepare for different situations, such as fire, intruder, bad weather, presence of weapons, etc. If the intercom system is down, the custodians go through the hallways to inform the teachers of what is going on. The school recently received a grant to install numeric keypads on all the doors so that access to the buildings must be granted before people can just walk inside, which will be a great improvement. An intrusion would be very easy in the school’s current state. Visitors are required to sign in, but it would not be difficult to sneak past the front office without doing so. West Elementary also has a resource officer who monitors the perimeter of campus regularly, but he is invited to stay at the school for a while when a potentially threatening situation is about to arise, such as a conference with a parent about a topic that might be hard to hear, especially if the parent is already known to sometimes be belligerent.

As far as advice about how to handle potentially dangerous situations, Mrs. Anderson conveyed that using one’s head is key. Protocol is always important, but sometimes it just is not enough. I will be excited to see what else I learn throughout the week!

Journal #3 – Topic Number 6 – School Policies

**MARCH 9, 2016**

Today I focused on paying lots of attention to the school policies to which the teachers at West Elementary adhere. Most of what I learned about this topic came from discussions I had with Mrs. Anderson throughout the day. The following outlines the topics about which I was supposed to learn more, and what Mrs. Anderson shared with me:

**Toxic supplies banned from the classroom.** The only thing Mrs. Anderson said she was not allowed to use in her classroom was bleach or anything with bleach in it. She did not really have to worry much with cleaning supplies because the janitors typically had everything she needed. I asked if any specific markers or school supplies were banned, and she said none were to her knowledge.

**Dispensing of medications.** Any and all medications that would be administered to a child must be brought directly to the school nurse by a parent. All medications must be accompanied by a written prescription and must be contained within the original bottle with the prescription on the outside. If any over-the-counter medications should be administered to a student, the parent must bring them to the nurse in an unopened bottle. Teachers may never administer medications to a child, unless it is in the case of an emergency, like an allergic reaction that requires the use of an epi-pen.

**Medical supplies required for classroom use.**  The only medical supplies Mrs. Anderson was required to have inside her classroom were bandages and gloves. Nurses and janitors have everything else that might be needed.

**Head lice, scabies, and other communicable diseases.**  If a teacher notices a child who seems to be very itchy, the child is sent directly to the nurse to be checked. If the child is found to have lice or something of the like, someone else comes to get the child’s things and the child is sent home. The nurse then lets the teacher make an appointment to get checked and parents of other students are notified.

**Handling various allergies suffered by students.** Every teacher must go through epi-pen training. Teachers have a list of all their students who have allergies requiring them to carry epi-pens. Students with allergies are not allowed to go on field trips without taking an epi-pen with them. If a child’s allergies are really severe, the child’s parents must accompany them on their field trips. When student’s ID numbers are punched in the machine at the lunch line, the computer alerts the aide if the child has an allergy, and the aide must check the child’s plate to make sure he or she will not eat anything that might harm him or her. Mrs. Anderson said that all teachers must be “respectful and aware” when it comes to students’ allergies.

**AIDS and Hepatitis prevention.** All teachers are taught how to properly clean up blood and other body fluids. Teachers are required to wear gloves when tending to a mess involving body fluids.

**Other chronic conditions.** Students with other chronic conditions such as asthma or diabetes are treated on an as-needed basis. The teachers can buzz a nurse at any time to bring a wheelchair to roll an ailing child to the clinic. Teachers consult heavily with the nurse regarding their students’ triggers and warning signs for asthma attacks, epileptic seizures, etc. Each child has a schedule for when he or she goes to get his or her medication from the nurse and takes his or her clinic folder to the nurse to get it checked off during each visit.

Journal #4 – Topic Number 7 – Remediation and Intervention

**MARCH 10, 2016**

Today Mrs. Anderson spent a lot of time discussing the different programs and resources available to students who struggle. First graders at West Elementary have a great deal of resources available to them. One of those resources is their Title I program. Students in the program are referred at the end of the previous year and their need for the program is assessed based on socioeconomic status, tests they take, academic needs, etc. MUST is another program West offers; it stands for Measure Up Skills and Time. Essentially, MUST students are on a “watch list.” The teacher pays extra attention to assessing and teaching these students all throughout each day. MUST students are typically those who repeated a grade or who have learning gaps, and they are generally the bottom 25% of the class. Students at West sometimes have their own intervention record. This is when a student might need to drop back a little bit so he or she does not get behind just because he or she did not grasp a particular lesson. Students with intervention records might have struggles with reading, for example. An intervention record is basically like a case file that can be opened whenever necessary. Tutors are available for students with intervention records. Teachers at West also participate in whole group remediation, which basically means that they remediate as they go along to prevent having any students or a whole class falling behind.

Mrs. Anderson said that there is always some sort of resource available to help a struggling student, even if it is just one-on-one time with her. I really admire how much time she spends making sure that each of her students is on track and making some sort of progress.

Journal #5 – Topic Number 4 – Instructional Technology

**MARCH 11, 2016**

Today Mrs. Anderson told me how she incorporates current tech into her classroom. She is fortunate to have access to an abundance of technological resources. There are enough iPads available for all of her students to use them at the same time, as long as another class is not using them. They practice their spelling words using a whiteboard app, and they go online to play math games and practice phonics. Mrs. Anderson has a VCR and DVD player that is connected to her projector so that she can show educational videos. She also has a Mimio, which converts her whiteboard and projector into a SmartBoard. She can then use any SmartBoard resources with it, or even create her own. There is also a computer for student use as well as a computer for Mrs. Anderson’s use in her classroom. Finally, she has a document camera that she connects to her projector, as well. This allows her to show the whole class all at the same time any examples or instructions she wants them to follow on the worksheet they will be doing, as well as other things like playing flash card games using the doc cam.

Because I did not know in which journal entry to include this, I will include it here; Mrs. Anderson also has three pets in her classroom: a betta fish, a hermit crab, and a turtle!

Journal #6– Topic Number 8 – Overall Reflections

**OVERALL REFLECTIONS**

Spending one week in Mrs. Anderson’s first grade classroom did not feel like nearly enough. This year at college was when I experienced my longest time away from an elementary classroom in nearly four years! I had been a first grade teacher’s aide for about an hour every single day during my sophomore, junior, and senior years of high school. I was so enjoying having the opportunity to learn so many different things in my general education college classes that I had not really been spending much time actually thinking about being a teacher anymore. It simply was not something that was at the forefront of my mind like it had been for so many years. Getting back into the classroom with Mrs. Anderson at West Elementary felt so good. I felt like I was exactly where I was meant to be and did not want to leave! My first practicum really solidified my desire to be an educator and reminded me how much I miss being an aide!

Being placed in Mrs. Anderson’s classroom was an eye-opening experience. Coming from an old fashioned private school, I had a very different idea of how things are done in elementary classrooms. I was certainly aware that public schools run things differently, but being that I had no experience in a public school, I did not know exactly what those differences were. The main thing I noticed was a stricter adherence to a predetermined curriculum. There are also so many more protocols that have to be followed in a public school, and teachers have a more solid knowledge of how they are expected to handle certain situations. At the school I attended, different teachers handled situations in different ways and had lots of responsibility placed on them to make the right decisions at the right times. For instance, if I asked elementary teachers at my school the same questions I asked Mrs. Anderson regarding things like potentially dangerous situations, school policies, supervision and safety, etc., I would likely get a slew of differing answers. However, if I asked three different teachers at West Elementary, I would probably get nearly identical answers from each teacher. That solid knowledge was refreshing. It was comforting for me to know that most adults were on the same page and that there was consistency in the school. I think adults crave consistency just as much as children do; I know I want to work in a place that is consistent!

I learned a great deal about classroom management throughout my week at West. I also learned more about ways to differentiate instruction, which was one of the things I hoped to learn about! I loved watching how Mrs. Anderson always had different groups of students working on different assignments, but they all ended up finishing the same basic things by the end of the day. I also liked how she instructed her students; sometimes she instructed specific groups, and other times she instructed the entire class. The routine she had in place seemed to be very effective. She needed to offer very little direction to keep the students on task. They always knew what they were supposed to be doing, usually without even being told. I never expected to walk into a room full of such calm and efficient six- and seven-year-olds!

I struggle to come up with a single thing that seemed to “not work” in Mrs. Anderson’s classroom. She is such a seasoned teacher that she seems to have nearly every kink already worked out. There was not a single thing I watched her do that I would have been uncomfortable doing myself. I based a lot of the ideas and concepts I used in my portion of our Future Classroom Project on things I observed in Mrs. Anderson’s room. The only thing I can even consider changing would be some of the decorating of her classroom! While her classroom was bright and cheery, it was also a bit “busy.” Her sense of style incorporates more bold patterns, and I tend to like softer, solid colors.

I had a wonderful time during my practicum and learned so much more than I ever though a single week could teach me. I look forward to learning even more during my next practicum!