Field Experience Reflection

As a high school student, I always felt that my math teachers had it easy. It seemed anybody could throw some examples on the board and then administer a test at the end of a chapter. In fact, this was my exact impression of mathematics education upon deciding to invest my life in the profession of teaching. However, after several hours observing real teachers practice their craft, I have painted a new picture of the inspiring and impacting mathematics educator. In reality, this teacher has the great responsibility and privilege to create an enriching and positive learning environment for all. Simply regurgitating from a textbook is not enough. In addition to discovering the role of teacher, I have learned much about myself this semester. Through an exploration of classroom environment and teacher-student interactions, I have identified personal strengths and weaknesses, the beginnings of new professional goals.

Classroom environment can have a significant impact on a student’s attitude and learning experience. At Manchester Elementary the walls were a showcase for student products, and the seats were gathered in clusters for continual cooperative learning. The high school arrangement was standard and perhaps unappealing to those who favor spontaneity over logic. Desks were orderly situated in rows, and the walls had posters highlighting the friendliness of math and its real-world applications. Manchester Junior High proved to be a hybrid of the two extremes; students sat in groups that faced the
main area of instruction, and the walls were filled with both advertisements for math’s enjoyable nuances and exemplary student work. I witnessed firsthand the impact classroom atmosphere has on students in a visit to Manchester Junior High at the close of the previous school year. Many of the posters and colorful displays had been removed with thoughts of the last days of school. A student entered the room and immediately compared the environment to a prison. The teacher’s creativity and enthusiasm had seemed to brighten this student’s school experience to the extent that he quickly noticed a change. I do not consider myself a creative person. My mind is well suited to the study of mathematics because it values order and logical structures. This is how I enjoy my instruction as well. I know, however, that not all students excel in such an environment. Therefore, I need to stretch myself to plan in imaginative ways. Some of the lessons I have written incorporate artistic ability with math; these are just the sort of lessons I would have despised as a student. Even before experimenting with instruction, I can cultivate a creative side in the ways I arrange my classroom prior to students’ arrival. I need to design a classroom that both appeals to student interests and works in an orderly fashion. This will create a learning environment that is advantageous to both me and my students.

In addition to an overall classroom environment, student-teacher interactions also contribute to students’ perceptions of their learning experiences. Through both observations of lessons taught by licensed teachers and one-on-one tutoring experiences, I have learned a substantial amount about such interactions. During my field experience, it seemed that instructional communication became more impersonal as the grade level increased. For instance, the art teacher at Manchester Elementary gathered the students
around her and shared some of the history of North Manchester as the students built log cabins. The teacher at Manchester High School simply stuck to the math. The high school teacher did converse with students about their interests and extracurricular activities; it just happened before class or during independent work time rather than throughout instruction. There was also a logical increase in the complexity of questions as the grade level increased. At Manchester Junior High, the questions asked by the teacher seemed low-level and were answered in a chorus of student voices. The questions asked by the high school teacher were more abstract and required some degree of critical thinking. Students were not as quick to contribute answers. Finally, I noticed the challenge a teacher has in trying to assist each student during independent work time. Despite the fact that both the teacher and I were providing help, it seemed the hands just kept rising into the air. Efficient assistance is another obstacle for a teacher to overcome.

As a result of my observations concerning student-teacher interactions, I have identified new professional goals towards which to strive in the next five or six months. I need to develop a strong stage presence. I have never been one to value recognition or seek spotlights. Yet student attention will be directed toward me each and every school day. I also need to formulate or discover multiple approaches to teaching the same material. I have always been comfortable with a lecture and note taking process, but the effective teacher knows that not everyone learns best through this medium. I hold this goal in high regard because I have a desire to instill in students a love of math as strong as mine. The only way to achieve this circumstance is to make math appealing and connected to student interests. Finally, I will strive to avoid the frustration that arises when I struggle to explain math in ways that is beneficial to students’ understanding. I
feel comfortable with my content; I do not want that comfort to exist to the extent that I am unable to assist students in developing a similar familiarity. This goal can be achieved by eliminating the fear of asking questions or seeking guidance from more experienced colleagues. These professional goals promote student-teacher interactions that benefit both teacher and student.

The goal of this course is to expose a prospective teacher candidate to the surface of the world of teaching. Is this for me? Observing the power and influence of classroom environments and student-teacher interactions over the course of this semester has prepared me to answer this question. Working closely with dedicated teachers and enthused students who truly desire an enriching school experience tells me I made the right decision in pursuing teacher certification.