A Reflection on Teacher Education

To truly know one must experience. When I first made the decision to return for a fifth year of college and seek teaching certification, I honestly believed the transition would be a fairly simple process. If I already knew my math and had experienced years of observation as a math student, how hard could it be to show some examples and then leave some time for homework? In just a year’s time, my perception of the profession has been radically altered with my exposure to the rigorous demands of both the education courses and student teaching. My experiences at Manchester College and my student teaching placement have initiated my drive to discover what most inspires students to embrace the beauty of mathematics. Most importantly, I learned my preparation is not yet complete because I can and should always seek the means to become an impacting teacher.

Teaching never crossed my mind until the spring semester of my senior year at Manchester College. With simply a major in mathematics, I was exploring jobs in the banking industry or admittance to graduate programs in statistics. After significant time spent on weighing my options and seeking advice, I decided I wanted a career that would provide continual stimulation and interaction. As a student in high school and even college, I was not one who enjoyed the spotlight or was willing to take risks. Teaching provided an avenue for redefining my own personality while simultaneously impacting
those of others. As my student teaching experience begins winding down, I realize
teaching has allowed me to become a different person, one who seeks to showcase
mathematics with enthusiasm and application.

While my math courses strengthened my understanding of the key concepts that
lie behind the math I will be expected to teach, my education courses and student
teaching have aptly prepared me for the life of a teacher beyond communicating content.
One must really consider his or her audience before planning a lesson. Instruction on
solving systems of equations by elimination for an advanced Algebra II class looks quite
different from a lesson on the same topic to an Algebra I class with several juniors.
Differentiated instruction or structuring my lessons to meet several learning styles (those
different audiences) was something I never would have considered without taking classes
such as Junior High and Middle School and Adolescent Exceptional Learners. I also
learned the value of pushing students to think critically through application and
appropriate questioning techniques. Why simply use direct instruction on how to find the
slope of a line when students can gain an understanding of slope’s impact on the
construction of roller coasters through a hands-on experiment that involves foam tubing
and marbles? Students appreciate the material all the more when they see where it has
been an impact in their own lives. Proper questioning practices was something I
struggled with early in my student teaching experience. If I was not developing the
questions prior to my lesson, those that were asked in class typically did not stray far
from Bloom’s levels of knowledge and comprehension. Without being required to think
about the structure of a lesson plan and how questions can be used to give students a
chance to learn while simultaneously challenge them to strive for new heights, I am
afraid my questioning strategies would still be far from heading towards those used by a master teacher. Finally, my development of a classroom management plan and my experiences with managing a classroom in student teaching have given me plans to both altogether prevent misbehavior and correct those instances that will manage to avoid my anticipations. I, as an aspiring teacher, must keep in mind that all ideas and plans are open to alterations and modifications as I continue to explore the best practices in teaching and work with those who have the knowledge and experience.

As I prepare to find a job, it has become obvious that teaching is not an endeavor one should think they can face alone. My experiences within my college courses and my many collaborations with each of my cooperating teachers have proven that teaching is a profession undertaken within a special community. During student teaching I have had the chance to interact with a math department full of open doors. More experienced teachers (including beyond my cooperating teachers) have been available to turn to for advice about new ways to teach material with which I consider myself quite familiar, strategies for improving assessment, differentiating within direct instruction, and ways to handle student behavior that does not align with a positive classroom environment in which all feel open to sharing opinions and viewpoints. My job search will focus on finding that community of professionals who seek ways to interact with colleagues in an effort to become better teachers. The expertise of the experienced and the molding of the ideas from more than one mind will provide me opportunities to continually improve my teaching skill set.

Moving from student teaching with a mentor to finding a place in my own classroom has altered my educational goals. I wish to improve upon my teaching each
and every year. Even as student teaching winds down, it is clearly apparent that I (and ultimately my students) have much to gain from seeking the means to become the best possible educator I can. Improvement could emerge in the form of attending the latest workshop, using the newest manipulatives or technology, or just seeking advice from those who have practiced this art for some time. I also want to increase my ability to provide differentiated instruction within my mathematics classroom. During my student teaching, I have done small things to differentiate traditional assessments (more time, one page at a time, the use of a calculator where one is not typically permitted, etc.), but I have struggled to figure out strong strategies for restructuring my instruction. I could explore the intricacies of the different learning styles or consult my future school’s special education professionals for advice in this area. Finally, I want to find connections or relevant applications of all mathematical concepts I teach. While it is hard to believe, not all students enjoy aspects of pure mathematics. If I can find some link between the subject and their lives, they may begin the development of an appreciation, a key step towards true comprehension. These goals will require me to adopt the mentality of a life-long learner; I can serve as a model for the students I will one day teach.

The last year has certainly not been the simplest of my five years at Manchester College, but I would definitely call it the most rewarding. I have a direction for my life that was once nonexistent, and that path will cross the paths of so many other lives. As long as continue to know that my education and preparation for becoming the best possible teacher is ongoing, I should experience success. Forgoing graduation and choosing a career in education is among the better decisions of my life thus far.