Kelly Mavrick

Professor Eastman

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Field Experience Reflection

 The Head Start program in Laketon, Indiana is just that, a head start into education. It focuses on children from the ages of three to five in order to prepare them for kindergarten. From February to March I had the opportunity to observe a Head Start classroom, and I was surprised to see how much work and learning took place among such young children. When I was younger, I did not attend a preschool, so I do not have anything to compare to the program; however, I did notice that the work the children were doing was more advance than what I remember doing in kindergarten. Moreover, during my time at Head Start, I was able to observe many facets of an early childhood classroom such as student-teacher relationships, curriculum, and the characteristics and behaviors of young children. My observations helped me to realize not only areas where I am strong, but also parts that I need to improve.

The classroom environment and daily activities at Head Start were different than most classrooms I have seen. For example, I was surprised to find out that the program was full-day, Monday through Thursday, and that the children did not take any naps. Because the children were in the classroom so long, they ate breakfast and lunch at the school. For meals, the children would sit at long, rectangular tables, and they would have to pass food and help set the table just like a family. The arrangement of the classroom also made it feel more home-like rather than school. Instead of many small desks there were a few larger tables, and there was a large rug in the center of the room for whole-class discussions.

Furthermore, the environment encouraged academic learning through methods such as writing, playing, and hands-on activities. The whole back section of the classroom was a play area for the children that had blocks and pretend cooking equipment. The room was also furnished with several books and magazines and areas devoted to reading and writing. The children at Head Start were encouraged to work independently in a number of those areas doing diverse activities that were all going on at the same time. When I was in elementary school, I remember doing the majority of activities as a whole class. Contrary to my school experience, I learned through my observations at Head Start that I communicate better with students when they are working in various group activities. During my observation it was easy for me to walk around to all the different groups and talk with and help the children as I went. The activities required a lot of the children’s focus, so I did not have to worry about keeping their attention. Although I realized my ability to work with students individually, I also became aware of my struggle to keep the attention of an entire class all at once. A goal that I have set for myself is to have as many whole-class experiences as possible in order to prepare for being in charge of a classroom of my own.

Although the environment was different than the experiences I had as a child, there was one aspect of the Head Start program that was not surprising: the student-teacher relationships. Like many classrooms I have observed and have been in as a student, the children and teachers at Head Start had close relationships. I often saw the children hugging the teachers or sitting in their laps during group reading. I think that such student-teacher relationships are an essential aspect of children’s education, but I have also realized, through my observation at Whitney Young, that there can be too much interaction. The classrooms at Whitney Young were full of couches, chairs, and students being held by adults. Although the relationships at Head Start did not reach that extent, I did have a little trouble with a few of the children. During activities a few girls would usually come over and hang on me, and I tried to tell that to go back to their work, but they would not listen. I did not want to be mean to them, but I also knew that they were supposed to be doing a certain activity. In order to keep the student-teacher interactions healthy, but not excessive, I will need to learn how to tell my students when it is time to work and when it is time to play.

Moreover, from talking with the teachers I realized that they were very familiar with their students’ lives, inside and outside of school. I could also tell that hardships in a student’s life meant worry for the teachers. For instance, a dad of one of the students had recently been sent to prison, and the two teachers were sympathetic toward the child. I have always had empathy for people, and I know that it will carry out through my years as a teacher; however, I am not sure how I will respond to similar issues in my future classroom. I sometimes find it hard to know the right way to comfort someone if I have not experienced a tragedy similar to theirs. Before I become a teacher I need to work on correct ways to act toward my students in regards to hardships and struggles they may have faced.

Overall, my experience at Head Start in Laketon was very beneficial. Since I did not go to preschool I was unsure of what to expect, but after all my observations, I feel like I have a better understanding of an early childhood classroom. In addition, the experience helped me become aware of some of my strengths and weaknesses as a teacher. I learned that I work well with smaller groups of students, rather than the whole class at one time. In return, that strength shone light on my struggle of keeping the attention of an entire class. I also realized the trouble I have with relaying to students the differences between work and play. And lastly, my observation helped me recognize the difficulty I have in communicating my sympathy for others in certain situations. My experiences at Head Start helped me evaluate myself as a teacher and set several new goals, and I plan on pursuing those goals through many more classroom experiences and studying of education.