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Field Experience Reflection

Observing a variety of classrooms over several weeks turned out to be a valuable, authentic educational experience. Besides exposing me to different physical layouts, management strategies, and approaches to literacy, the opportunity to watch teachers in action bolstered my confidence that I, too, could one day run a classroom. I learned four main lessons from my school observations. 1) I was most interested in how the teachers' attitude affected learning, and I began to understand the difference between a teacher-centered and student-centered teaching orientation. 2) Watching effective teachers taught me that the concepts of student responsibility and accountability relate to academic performance, not just to behavior. 3) Balanced instruction really serves the students best. It is no accident that this idea is one of the eight principles of effective classrooms (Tompkins, chapter 1). 4) Because of my interest in words, I thoroughly enjoyed watching how vocabulary was taught and received. In reflecting on my observations, my powers of evaluation have sharpened enough for me to judge what I should and should not emulate in my future classroom.

Most of the teachers I observed showed confidence in their students and seemed to enjoy their work. In each room, I located the teacher's college diploma. A few teachers held masters degrees. An advanced degree might allow teachers to move into administration, but students need highly trained teachers right besides them, not just in management positions. So a teacher with a masters degree who remains in the classroom can be a good sign. My next comment might seem superficial, but I admit that I took

Comment [BS1]: Excellent introduction

Comment [BS2]: Good for you. This is an important part of the reflection process.

Comment [BS3]: Master's (???) check...

away a better impression of teachers who decorated their classrooms — not only with instructional posters but with pieces of themselves: equestrian paraphernalia, family pictures, original artwork, personal memorabilia, etc.

Closely related to the teacher's attitude is whether the teacher sees learning as a joint venture involving both themselves and the students. I saw evidence that most teachers were building responsibility and accountability in their students. Classroom rules and roles were established, which freed up the teacher to focus on teaching. The simplest (yet the classiest) example of this was what happened when I entered a third-grade classroom. Two students quietly welcomed me to the room, offered to hang up my coat, and then showed me where to sit down. Wow! Being the student welcomer is an authentic and practical responsibility. And who knows? Maybe the teacher instituted this role in response to book the students had read as a class. Another simple way that some teachers built accountability was in the way they asked questions. If a student could not answer a comprehension question, some teachers just posed the same question to a different student. Other teachers pressed the student with rewording or hints based on a more familiar comprehension strategy, or they allowed the student to call on someone for help. Although it's easier and less awkward for both teachers and students to call on students who answer correctly, students must learn to care about and monitor their own learning from an early age. Most teachers used some kind of reward or penalty system for behavior. Usually, students experienced individual consequences, but one teacher used a group based system. One person's choices benefited or hurt his or her whole group (e.g., the group earned a token). I guess this example sounds heavy on behaviorism, but I also saw examples of teachers building responsibility in other ways—ways that evidenced

Comment [BS4]: Excellent!

Comment [BS5]: I don't know where this was, but I had a similar experience and it's powerful!

Comment [BS6]: Good connection!

their understanding of how students learn (Tompkins' first principle of effective teachers of reading). One teacher, whose classroom looked plain and almost barren nevertheless treated students as active learners. Just before reading aloud a passage from *Hate That Cat*, one teacher invited the students to think about how *they* listen best. If they listened well while doodling or taking notes, she wanted them to doodle or take notes. If they listened well with their heads resting on their desks, she wanted their heads down. I thought this prereading pep talk effectively prepared students to successfully construct meaning from the readaloud. And it gave students time to gear up for the reading without the teacher just shushing them.

I saw balanced instruction happening in many classrooms, especially in grades 3–6. The teachers who used basal readers also arranged for small group work. The teachers conducting literature circles also used workbooks sometimes. Teachers exploring literature focus units also worked on skills and ISTEP preparation. One first-grade setting seemed like a disaster the day I visited, and the teacher did not recognize that she needed to supplement the dull basal reader to address the students' inattention. Then again, maybe she knew that explicit instruction was needed that day, whether the students liked it or not.

Last, I was fascinated by the way teachers led students to explore vocabulary. Of course, the more I learned in Lit. Block, the less amazed I felt! I see now that teachers did not create all those wonderful ideas themselves; they were following research-based strategies mentioned in our textbook. I loved hearing students *select* the tier 2 words *they* wanted to learn (from their particular literature circle books), and watching them present the words in a sentence and question other students about the words. In another case, a

Comment [BS7]: Excellent! This is an important part of the reading process, isn't it?

teacher performed a short, entertaining skit to introduce a new word each day, and the class collaborated to write a sentence for the new word. Instead of a string of unrelated sentences, the sentences formed a story, which probably aided the students' memory even more.

Which practices will I include in my own classroom? First of all, I will allow college students to come in and observe **me!** Without cooperative educators, teacher candidates will miss an essential component in their preparation to teach. Since I believe I am a pleaser and have trouble holding students accountable, I will incorporate most of the lessons I learned relating to my second point: fostering joint responsibility for learning (e.g., when asking a question, don't let students off the hook). I doubt I will let students graze on snacks all day as a reward. I want to avoid using food as a motivator, if possible. I look at this issue from a parent's perspective. Some days after school, I want to take my son out for a treat, until he tells me about the food-like heap of sugar he ate for a morning snack and an afternoon activity. As I think about the school's physical environment, I do not know exactly what my walls will look like. I can think of a hundred posters that need to be displayed for students' benefit, but there is limited wall and ceiling space, and too much clutter can distract students. (No one seems to acknowledge this conflict except during discussions in Education 206—special education.) Since I am a word nerd, I am excited about all strategies that I observed relating to vocabulary, spelling, and word study. I thoroughly enjoyed observing several excellent educators, and I look **forward to attempting to follow in their footsteps.**

Comment [BS8]: Whew! You are absolutely right. Our program would not be successful without the help and support of local teachers.

Comment [BS9]: Joanne, you will have your own amazing classroom, and you will contribute greatly to education. ☺

Excellent reflection paper.

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