

Joanne Case
Educ 410
May 2012

Reflection on Student Teaching

My student teaching experience was an enormous opportunity for growth. I never thought I would fly through it, but I admit I was surprised at how much time and energy it required. As I look back on my semester of teaching, I see at least three major lessons that caused me to grow as a teacher. First, I needed to treat my student teaching as a chance to practice rather than to prove myself. Second, many students do not come to school to learn; they often come because they are required to come, and they want to spend the day as painlessly as possible. Third, teachers just might be heroes!

Practicing the craft

At the beginning of my time in kindergarten, I did not remember feeling nervous. Looking back, my nerves definitely affected the way I approached the classroom. My classroom teacher did not push me to be involved beyond my comfort level, so I delayed full-time teaching as long as possible, and the longer I waited, the more I feared that I could actually handle the class in a way that I could be proud of. I felt pressure to apply everything I had ever learned about education, children, psychology, politics, etc. while emulating my excellent cooperating teacher. My kindergarten class included a child who was probably on the autistic spectrum, and three students with severe behavior disorders (most likely) — none of whom had been diagnosed. Without a diagnosis, they could not receive the school's support services. I watched how they attempted to control the class, and I just knew they would overwhelm me. I tried not to show my weakness because I was supposed to know what to do! My teacher encouraged me to do whatever I wanted with the class. That kind of blank check almost paralyzed me when it should have invigorated me! Near the end of my kindergarten placement, I realized that I should not be so afraid to fail. I tried to take this lesson with me to my 5th grade placement, so I worked hard to try a variety of teaching methods and discipline methods. I tried to emulate my teacher (again), and then he, too,

encouraged me to try anything—even if it differs from his style. I finally accepted the fact that only a terrible teacher will truly damage a student academically.

If I could pass on anything to a new student teacher (at least, someone with a personality similar to mine), I would suggest not being afraid to try new methods. A student teacher spends 16 weeks teaching more to gain practice than to prove oneself. I'm grateful that both my cooperating teachers gave me the freedom to practice on their classes, even if I did not consistently accept the challenge.

Why do students come to school?

It's no secret that motivation, background, interests, and aptitude vary widely from student to student. I knew that as a student teacher, I would have to address this spread. I assumed I would address it mostly through differentiated instruction.

One day, knowing that I was apprehensive about disciplining 5th graders, my supervising teacher mentioned that I have to assume that most students attend my class in order to have fun. That assumption should underlie all my plans for instruction and management. What I have found is that even the students who *do* come to school *to learn* appreciate and deserve engaging lessons. I can't spend all my time trying to engage the students who don't want to be in class; if I raise my standards, I will likely reach more students regardless of their motivation, background, interests, and aptitude.

I have also learned that we still need to teach the old-fashioned values, like respect, honesty, and unselfishness, even if students learn contrary values at home and through pervasive commercial culture. In my 5th grade class, there is always an undercurrent of talking, even for my very strict male cooperating teacher. I think their behavior is rooted in an apathetic (but not mean-spirited) lack of respect. This attitude will not serve them well, and teaching this lesson to students is part of my job. I have observed that the students who *do* keep rules and show respect appreciate when that standard is upheld. They feel validated.

Teachers might be heroes

Often, students spend more waking hours of the day with their teachers than with adults in their families. As a teacher, I need to be my best every day. My principal pointed out that teachers must be good actors for the sake of the students—even if teachers are under great stress at home or over health or other issues. Many times when I felt overwhelmed with simply planning and managing every minute of kindergarten, I thought, “What is wrong, here? I don’t have time for this!” I have now tasted the lifestyle and pace of a teacher. It is an amazing profession. I wish I had begun teaching 15 years ago, so I could establish that rhythm in my life. Changing at this point in my life looks very daunting, but there are times when teachers impact lives in powerful ways, and I want to be part of that positive energy! I love the ways that teaching benefits my family. I try out ideas and activities on them. Unlike many professions, as a teacher I am always learning. I’m not just picking up new facts or new educational trends, but I value lifelong learning on principle. Teachers might not be heroes every day, but by showing up every day, they are in the right place when the moment comes along.

Conclusion

Student teaching has surrounded me with great teachers and many approaches to reaching all kinds of students. More than a requirement, student teaching has been a privilege, though not always an enjoyable one! I’m grateful I could experience the thrill of seeing students learn and grow, and seeing myself grow along with them.