

Professional Growth Experiences

Observe Another Teacher—Focus: Lesson Closure and Motivation

To complete this professional growth experience, I observed a fourth grade science class. The group of students the teacher was teaching during my observation was not her class; she works with another teacher and teaches both classes science while the other teacher teaches both classes social studies. The class session was held in the school's science lab, which consists of storage space, tables, stools, and a chalkboard. I observed the second lesson of the geology unit; the teacher opened the class with a statement reminding students of the unit title and that they had started the unit the day before. The teacher then asked questions and paused in sentences for students to answer/fill in information discussed in the previous class; all of these questions and fill-in-the-blanks were recall questions with one or two word answers. The objective for the day was neither mentioned nor posted anywhere in the science lab. She introduced the activity for the day using key words from the short answer recall warm-up, explaining that they were going to look at the weathering on tombstones. She asked students if they had ever had the 'creepy' feeling when in a graveyard where there are old graves. She referenced a local graveyard that had many heavily-weathered tombstones, and many students indicated that they had been to or driven past that specific graveyard. She also allowed students to share descriptions of old tombstones that they had seen. From this, she moved onto the main activity, which required students to be weathering detectives and decide which of the three pictured tombstones went with which of the stories (a mathematician who died 10 years ago, a musician who died almost 150 years ago, and a scientist who died over 200 years ago). This activity was part of a text book; the students had accompanying worksheets to record their answers and observations. The teacher allowed students to work in table groups for about 10 minutes to complete the accompanying worksheet, then brought student attention to the board, where she recorded correct answers as she discussed them with students. She also asked four more questions which were on the following page in the text, but she did

not direct students to that page, so there were several moments of confusion and frustrating for everybody. She concluded class with a connection to the next class, telling students that they would create weathering effects in an experiment the next day. Her final question to students, which was posed as something for students to think about overnight and bring answers back, was “is there anything that is really, totally weather-proof?”

As I watched the students participated in the opening short recall question dialogue, I realized that though it is an excellent way to get students thinking about the topic and remembering important ideas and vocabulary from the previous lesson(s), this strategy is perhaps overused, both by this teacher and by teachers in general. The students, though engaged in providing answers, were not animated and seemed to answer the questions in an almost dejected manner. In my own teaching, when I use this strategy—which I am sure I will, and in fact I already have since I completed this observation—I will be careful to not overuse it (not open every class with recall questions) and to both be animated myself to engage the students and maybe through in a silly question randomly to see if the kids are listening and get them to tune in. I really like how she closed the lesson with a relevant question that students could think about, do some research on, talk to parents, siblings, and friends about, and bring their findings back the next day. That also provides a nice opening for the next day, so that students will have had the chance to discover something to share—I think this will be increasingly successful as students realize that they will be given the chance to share answers to the take-home question. I did not feel that the lesson closure was particularly effective or strong, however, because the big ideas from the activity were not discussed, either in the closure or during the course of the activity, and no connection was made between the weathering that happened to tombstones and general weathering properties and effects.

Observe Another Teacher—Focus: Learning Environment

To complete this professional growth experience, I observed a fifth grade science class. The classroom was decorated with a minimal amount of posters, student work from each homeroom student, and class projects (e.g., an incomplete map of the United States, to which it seems the class adds states one-by-one). The desks were arranged in 3 rows of 4 pairs of desks for a total of 24 desks, all facing the SMARTBoard. This set-up allowed the teacher to move freely through the room and check students' work easily. Students were seated in pairs already, so short turn-and-talk exercises would be simple to use. During the lesson, the teacher used a globe and a flashlight to demonstrate the rotation of the Earth; the set-up of the room was not conducive for this demonstration (where students needed to gather around in order to see). The school is set up with 'house' areas that serve as a common space for a cluster of classrooms; I think that, with fifth graders, a teacher could reasonably take the class into the house area and conduct the demonstration out there, where furniture would not be an obstacle. The teacher dealt with behavior issues (students talking, not staying on task) quietly and promptly while students were working in partner groups. This seemed to be quite effective, as there were no repeat offenders. At one point in the lesson, she gave the students a tough math question about the number of rotations of a space shuttle around the Earth in a week and instructed the students to put a sticky note on her desk with their answer sometime over the course of the week. I really like this strategy—it allows students to work on the problem at their own pace and on their own time, and provides a way for the student to present an incorrect answer, receive feedback, and have an opportunity to revise in a private and comfortable exchange. There were no major behavior issues during the class period, and I could not identify a student who regularly has a behavior problem. It was clear that the teacher had established clear and firm rules about behavior and conduct in the classroom and that those rules were strictly enforced. Posted in the front of the room was a scale, running from 0 to 4, of noise volumes and the appropriate times to be using those volumes (0 when teacher is talking, 4 for outside, 2 for partner work). Posted next to this scale was a poster that read as follows:

Conversation
Help
Activity
Movement
Participation

When the teacher gave directions for the partner work activity, she walked to this poster and pointed to each letter in turn and reminded the students of their parameters. For C, she said they should be on a voice level 2, for H she told them that they could not ask for help for this particular assignment (it was a brainstorming activity), for A she repeated the directions, for M she told them that they may move to anywhere in the room but must stay put once they picked a spot, and for P she said that each partner was expected to contribute. This system makes a lot of sense to me and provides a stable, familiar, and difficult-to-argue-with outline of the expectation for student behavior tailored to every activity. I definitely want to implement this or something like it when I am a full time teacher.

Mentor Teacher Discussion—Focus: Student Assessment

When I first arrived in my anchor placement, I found the grading procedures unfamiliar and uncomfortable because my buoy was in kindergarten and at the beginning of the year, so most papers received a smiley face or a sticker. I quickly began to understand and appreciate the grading system that my mentor teacher employs. Students turn in homework, classwork, quizzes, and projects for a grade, and are also graded on participation; participation grades are more common in science and social studies than in math, reading, and writing. Students are given the opportunity to redo any work (not quizzes or tests, however) that received a grade below seventy percent. The replacement grade for a redone assignment cannot exceed seventy percent. All grades are recorded as percentages rather than as points, so each assignment of the same kind carries the same weight. Homework, classwork, projects, and quizzes/tests all figure into the final grade at different weights. My mentor teacher uses both an electronic and a paper grade book; she leaves columns after each assignment to record redos

and marks off students who are not eligible to redo. Grades are done by quarter. Each Friday, students are called up to the teacher's desk to get their grades, which they record in their agenda and must have a parent sign. Formalized grade reports go out 8 times a year, and every grade below a C must be accompanied by at least one comment explaining the poor grade. Grades are also always available to parents through the Home Access Center as soon as teachers enter grades into the electronic grade book and publish them. Papers are returned to students at the end of the day; one of the student jobs is paper passer, and that student must pass out all papers in the 'pass out' bin each day. Papers are returned as soon as they have been graded.

The aspect of her grading system that I appreciate the most and wish most to emulate when I have my own classroom is the openness with which my mentor implements her grading system and inclusion of students in the nuances of the system. The students know exactly how their grades are calculated and my mentor teacher always lets students know if an assignment, like a formal writing piece done during class, will count as more than just classwork. The students are rarely surprised by their grades, and when they are, it is usually because they turned in work without a name and therefore have a low grade they did not expect. Once they recover their work from the No Name folder, their grade returns to what they expect. The students are free to ask questions about their grades, either on an individual assignment or cumulative. I have found myself struggling with grading over the past few weeks, especially grading writing pieces, because I am afraid of accidentally being unfair. I have discussed this with my mentor, and she has assured me that her students know to come ask if they feel a grade is unfair, and she assured me that our students will do just that. I hope to set up that kind of relationship with my students in my future classroom, for my own peace of mind and for their development.

Interview an Administrator

In a conference with the 5 other interns at my school, I had the opportunity to sit down and chat with the assistant principal. The assistant principal's passion about the goals laid out in the SIP was evident in our discussion. In addition to briefing us on the nature and contents of the SIP, with which we were generally familiar, she encouraged us as interns to engage with the SIP by being active members who ask questions, attend the monthly SIP meetings, and offer suggestions to clarify and expand the SIP. She also encouraged us to take on an active role with the SIP of each school in which we teach. The SIP, she explained, is important for teachers to know and understand because it is part of the educator effectiveness academy plan (and therefore part of teacher evaluation); however, she stressed, we should be involved with the SIP to bring our deep knowledge of our students to a place where we can set up plans to help those students throughout their entire time at the school, rather than limiting our influence over and assistance to students to the year they will spend in our class. To support teachers in increasing effectiveness, both in terms laid out in the SIP and in general, the school and school system offer many professional development opportunities. New teachers in the county are supported through new teacher sessions throughout the year, a mentoring system within the school and preferably grade level, and extra support from administration and IRTs for the first few years. The school system can also help new teachers find housing, insurance, and other essential supports and services in the community to ease the transition to a new location. Professional development days are scheduled on a fairly regular basis throughout the year to allow teachers to focus on key strategies to assist various learners (advanced, struggling, etc.).

The assistant principal then spoke about the parent-school-community relations, headed by the PTA, glowingly and with pride. According to her, the PTA is "fantastic" and is heavily involved in raising funds to improve the school. One example she provided was that the PTA raised enough money to equip most rooms in the school with Promethean boards. The PTA also ensures that needy students have access to school supplies, runs the box tops fundraising program, provides support for bus drivers and teachers through lunches, breakfasts, and little gifts to demonstrate appreciation. She described the membership of the PTA as large and dedicated, with a core of about 25 dedicated parents and a support network of over 100 members. The PTA also supports LEAP programs, which are offered to students as after school enrichment classes which cover topics of interest.

The assistant principal highlighted ensuring the safety and education of the students as both the most challenging and the most rewarding aspect of her job. It is challenging, of course, because there are over 500 students in the school and each student has individual needs, concerns, and talents. However, she explained, being able to help students, one at a time, to meet them where they are and

make the best of what they have, is also the most rewarding aspect of her job. From my observations of a normal school day, the administrators clearly know their students, greet many by name, and are actively involved in supporting teachers and students however they can. The assistant principal also identified organization as another challenging aspect of her job, because in addition to documenting all of the support given to students, she must also meet the needs of her staff and ensure that everything in the school, from the lunch room to specials transitions to FLOW mentoring, run smoothly and in a way that is the most beneficial for the kids.

After this discussion and many other less formal discussions, I have the deepest respect for administrators but do not think that I will one day count myself among them. In my various teaching experiences so far, the most motivating, satisfying, and rejuvenating aspect of teaching for me has been getting to opportunity to know individual students very well, and using that information to plan lessons, activities, and assessments that will allow each individual student to demonstrate their talents, knowledge, and hard work. Though administrators clearly do have relationships with students, the demands of their job limit the depth of their interaction with each individual student, and that depth is what I most value.

Special Education Services

In my placement school, students with special needs are placed in inclusion classrooms and might receive pull out services, where they leave their regular classroom for portions of the day, or in classroom services, where a special educator comes into their classroom to work with them on the assignments and content being covered by the whole class. There are also a few paraeducators who work one-on-one with students with behavior or emotional problems or students with severe learning disabilities. Students with extreme special needs, including physical, emotion, or learning, are typically moved to one of the special education resource schools in the county. Students with existing IEPs that require push-in services are generally grouped together in one classroom when classes are arranged over the summer, to allow the special educator(s) to work with several students for a longer period of time. Theoretically, these inclusion teachers are supposed to receive more support and help from Instructional Resource Teachers (IRTs) and special educators; however, this does not seem to be the case. Other than the parents of students with special needs, I have not seen any evidence of community support services being used for special education.

Students are recommended for special education screening based on the recommendation of the teacher. Parents are involved in this process as well, and have the power to deny testing. Over the

course of my internship, I helped with the process of gathering information for two of our students about whom my mentor and I had concerns. One, as the result of our recommendation, the testing completed by the IRT, and information provided by the parents and the doctor, has received an IEP that addressed the specific needs. Another student, designated as a ELL upon their entrance to the school, has also received an IEP that provides accommodations while they learn English and catch up with content material. I have also had the opportunity to participate in the screening process for ADHD and have learned to cope with and get through to a class consisting of 10 out of 24 students diagnosed and medicated for ADHD, with more students in the screening process for the disorder. In the screening process, the teacher and parent(s) fill out surveys about the student's behavior, academic success, habits, and engagement. The rest of the process is conducted outside of the school system.

During my internship, we gave a test designed to identify students that are gifted. Students identified by that test or by the classroom teacher then completed a QRI to identify reading ability. Students should be able to qualify for the enrichment pull-out program for either reading or math, and should not have to qualify in both, but the testing process seems to require advanced skills in both to qualify, since the initial test was math based and the second test was reading based, and students had to excel on both to qualify for the gifted program.