

Reflection #2: School Learning Environment

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I had asked to be placed in Roanoke for my field experience so I was pleased when I found out that I had been assigned to William Ruffner Middle School. I was looking forward to gaining experience in an urban setting. However, I was a little apprehensive in the beginning simply because of what others told me about that particular area in Roanoke and I was worried about how I would be accepted by the students. I was told that, out of all Roanoke City schools, I would be working in the roughest location. I was just hoping that I would go to a school that was as open to diversity as I was. I did not want to be the “white teacher” in the classroom, but instead wanted to be seen for who I am and what I could bring to the classroom. I was not sure, upon talking to those who live and work in the area, what the school atmosphere would be like. I thought that there was a high possibility that the students would be a “rough” crowd. I was also curious about teacher collaboration. Good communication in an urban school could either be made a priority or totally lacking. However, I do not get hung up on expectations. I usually do not think too much about a situation until I have the opportunity to see something for myself.

One word describes my first day: awesome! It sounds clichéd but that’s truly how I felt. I was so impressed with the administration (office secretaries, principal). They were friendly, helpful, and very welcoming. I was also incredibly comforted by the welcoming attitude of the other teachers (from all parts of the building). I have yet to feel that teachers consider me less of a colleague because I am “in training!” I have been asked for input on many occasions and they seem very willing to share those things that have helped them throughout their teaching experience. In addition, you can tell that the majority of school personnel enjoy their students and are incredibly protective and caring of them. I assume this from the way that they talk about their students. I do not hear nasty, non-constructive comments. Instead, teachers and other faculty keep up-to-date on student progress and behavior and talk with one another extensively about what could be done to get kids on track.

As far as team-teaching is concerned, the four teachers I work with are a unified front. What one knows, they all know. They listen to each other, assist each other, and have a great rapport. I remember being so impressed one day when the teacher next door needed a few minutes to get away from students in order to recollect herself and my cooperating teacher went next door and watched the class for a few minutes. This little needed break helped the one teacher get through a stressful period. Team teachers meet on a daily basis during one planning period and make decisions together. I have been welcomed, trusted, and included as part of the team. My cooperating teacher has an amazing outlook on collaborative teaching and has had no issues with allowing me to “get my feet wet.” It’s been an important and enjoyable relationship thus far.

I am also impressed with the collaboration between the two seventh-grade science teachers. They ride together to and from work every day from Blacksburg and thus have a unique opportunity to stay up-to-date with what is going on in each classroom. Although there are variations in their lesson plans, they tend to stick to the same activities and concepts as much as possible. This way, they can ensure that students are learning the same basic concepts regardless of the team they are assigned to.

The student/teacher interaction has also captured my attention in a very positive way. On my first visit, I was part of the “student court” process where teachers sit down with students whom they feel are not meeting expectations (for various reasons) and develop a plan to make positive changes. Teachers and students seem to have very open and honest communication. My cooperating teacher, especially, does not allow students to be disrespectful or dishonest. Expectations are very clear as are consequences for particular actions. For the most part, students and teachers work together in the classroom and inquiry-based teaching is more common than traditional lecture-based teaching. Students are encouraged to think for themselves versus regurgitating material.

Overall, William Ruffner has a very team-oriented way of doing things. Everyone is supportive of each other and teachers continually interact with students to let them know what they are doing well on and where improvements can be made (whether that be with school work, behavior, citizenship, etc.). I have thoroughly enjoyed every single day I have been there and my cooperating teacher has done an excellent job of enforcing the respect students should have when interacting with me. I was relieved to discover that these kids were not just the “rough” crowd I was warned about, but were actually very open to having another teacher in the room with whom they could learn from. I feel I have established a good relationship with students and colleagues, and feel very much a part of the William Ruffner team atmosphere. Any expectations I did have for my field experience have been far exceeded.