

Reflection #4: Teaching in the Real World

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The field experience with my cooperating teacher has been an amazing learning experience. She has allowed me to work closely with her in all aspects of being a science educator, an educator in general, and an employee of a school system. Each role carries different responsibilities. Inside the classroom, a science educator needs to be comfortable with the material, strive to meet the standards that are placed upon him/her and the students, know how to adapt lesson plans to diverse learners, create a positive learning environment (which includes behavior management), address students' personal and social development, maintain communication with other teachers, parents, and school staff and administration, and carry out other day-to-day necessary tasks (recording grades, correcting papers, gathering classroom materials, etc). Being a general educator includes completing those duties such as filling out required paperwork, attending IEP conferences, assisting with the organization of (or at least participating in) school activities, advocating for necessary school changes, assisting in decision-making processes, attending meetings and conferences, keeping up with the daily needs of students (assigning lockers, collecting picture money, etc.), and the list goes on. As an educator, we are often put in the position to be teachers, parents, guidance counselors, psychologists, special needs professionals, babysitters, and so forth. Lastly, as a school system employee we are expected to meet specific requirements such as giving city- or county-wide tests, covering specific labs or material and posting certain information in the classroom, giving students required "snapshots" of progress and reporting to administrators on a weekly basis (regarding testing results, lesson plans, goals), and becoming re-certified. It really does appear to be overwhelming at times.

The one thing I had not witnessed before my field experience was the extent to which city and state standards can influence a teacher's curriculum. These same standards did not exist when I was in school, so I was completely unfamiliar with this obligation even though it has been a topic of debate in many of my education courses. However, I now know that my cooperating teacher must have a few required items on the board every day for class. This includes general learning objectives for the day, specific goals, an instructional focus, and a "Minds on Science" activity. She must post certain items in her class (fire drill procedures, SOL map, Scientific Method). In addition, she is required to cover certain specific labs and lesson plans throughout the school year. She must give students "snapshots" on each learning objective and must re-test every student until they receive a passing grade. Scores are submitted to the administration on a regular basis. In addition, any test my cooperating teacher gives in class is formatted exactly as the SOL would be, even using exact practice questions. I knew that standards were being increasingly enforced, I was just not truly aware of the extent to which they could control each individual classroom. That will be something I'm sure I will find increasingly hard to meet, especially with having my own educational goals and way of doing things.

During this field experience, I have definitely been able to apply what I have learned in my courses. However, I have also now witnessed the many factors which influence exactly how one can teach. This includes behavior management and budget, time, administrative and/or resource constraints. Things work very differently when you talk about how education should be provided to students versus actual options depending upon the school. The one thing I want to focus on during my student teaching is practicing the integration of how I *want* to teach and how I *can* teach. One thing to really

establish during my student teaching is my behavioral management policy. I have observed this semester that nothing is accomplished when the students are not required to meet certain expectations. I will be in the school five days a week, teaching every day. Thus, it will become extremely important for me to set up expectations for behavior and respect. This will be a great time to explore what works and what doesn't (and in what circumstances) when addressing student behavior issues. The one thing I've learned is to make expectations clear and be consistent. It is hard to make up for a loss of respect early in the game. As my cooperating teacher has shown, I need to be comfortable and relaxed with students but still maintain my authority in the classroom. I am not there to be their friend. As we have discussed, it is possible to be an inquiry-based, hands-on educator and still provide structure and discipline in the classroom. In fact, to be successful with this kind of methodology and pedagogy you need *more* structure than usual. I need to establish structure first and then I can accomplish the goals in my lesson plans.

This field experience has been great in that I've been involved in a little bit of everything – observing, teaching, planning, grading, attending meetings, etc. However, I was still just an intern (there only about fifteen hours a week) and so my exposure was minimized in all aspects. To be successful in my student teaching, I will need to continuously provide engaging, inquiry-based learning opportunities and I will need to establish my position of authority and respect. I will accomplish the latter by making expectations clear from the beginning and by staying consistent. To accomplish the former, I will make sure to utilize all of the resources available to me, network with other professionals, and use what I have learned in my courses to teach students as I believe to be appropriate.