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Frustration, Excitement, Commitment: Preservice Teachers Reflect on their Fieldwork Experiences



The Purpose of Education: Engaging Active Minds

By Emily Arenz

My fieldwork experience broadened my views regarding the complexity of the current education system and helped me develop my own ideas about the purpose of education. In the school I observed, administrators and teachers genuinely promoted the importance of meeting statewide testing requirements. The content students were learning usually connected back to the standardized test questions they were going to answer on their future tests.

Overall, these efforts did help students reach higher test scores. However, this strong focus also led the school to adopt a fixed curriculum to better prepare students to meet testing expectations. This meant teachers often followed a script when speaking to their students and had very little room for creativity toward their lessons.

I noticed quickly that students seemed to struggle to stay engaged in these scripted lessons. While my cooperating teacher was able to have caring conversations with his students before and after class, he immediately switched personas when he had to teach from the conventional lesson. Although the students genuinely enjoyed their teacher, they had a hard time paying attention to these lessons and I was left questioning how much of the content they were learning. As an observer, I was able to see and hear what students truly thought about the content and this kind of instruction. In one instance, some students were talking in the back of the classroom and when I suggested that they pay attention they replied, "But it's boring and we can't focus." I realized they were right. The lesson was boring and it did not offer any opportunity for students to actively participate or engage with ideas. I was surprised that I was left feeling frustrated and even angry.

The purpose of education, in my opinion, is for students to flourish and learn to engage in a democratic society. Students can learn this if they are taught a broad understanding of the world around them and how to develop their own thinking on what that world means. Teaching this to students helps them become aware of current issues and recognize how their voices can have an influence in a democratic society. Although the scripted content taught in this classroom might be considered important for one kind of student growth, it is not enough for students to reach these broader goals. Instead of listening to a teacher routinely teach, students need to work together, engage in class discussion, and get involved with their curriculum as a whole.

As a future English teacher, I want to show students literature written by people of diverse backgrounds and help students form their own voices in their writing, as well as society. In my classroom, I want students to be able to freely express their ideas. Democracy is about being able to have individual ideas and respectfully voicing these ideas to possibly make a change in the world. I was frustrated that the school I observed seemed to be teaching students to achieve higher test scores instead of how to develop and communicate ideas that could lead to success for themselves or society. Teachers are there to guide and inspire, and to help students create their own ideas. Having a classroom environment that establishes the importance of developing informed opinions will help students flourish in a democratic society because it prepares students for a life of involvement with ideas. Instead of just listening to the teacher lecture, students should be able to talk among their classmates and learn from each other. On the few

occasions when the students were given the opportunity to work in groups, I saw how this type of interaction could motivate and energize them. They were extremely excited to discuss the topic they were learning. They were able to bounce ideas off each other and gain new insight. They were engaged in a way they were not during most of the lessons I observed. When I saw students working together, I realized this type of teamwork helps students grow through their peers.

My fieldwork experience helped me discover there is still work to be done in education. I believe there needs to be a better way to get students involved in their own learning. While I recognize

there is a specific curriculum teachers may need to follow, it is important that teachers are able to use creativity to make lessons that align with their beliefs about the purpose and goals of education. Although I was often frustrated, I also gained a new understanding of education that I had not recognized before. Teachers have the power to get students to find their own voices in society, and it is important that teachers use this to benefit their students. Ultimately, this experience makes me excited to pursue these goals and to continue to develop my skills in order to realize the positive impact I can have in the education system.



Understanding the Role of Teacher: Frustration to Dedication

By Alexa Thornton

When one thinks about the role of the teacher, it's easy to think that the role is simply to teach content, to set up lessons for students to engage in that lead to the successful development of knowledge and skills. As an aspiring teacher, this is what I thought my passion was: to learn and to teach what I had learned. After my fieldwork experience, I realized that having a passion to teach content was not enough to be a successful teacher. What is also necessary is to have the ability to prepare and support students so they are able to learn. For this to happen, teachers must know who their students are as people. Successful teachers analyze their students and explore their challenges and strengths. To make an impact, educators connect with their students in order to motivate them and engage them in learning. I learned from my involvement in the community that a successful education takes more than having an intelligent teacher. It also requires a teacher who can foster relationships in order to engage and inspire students.

I learned this lesson through my experience with a particular student. Jordan was kindhearted and witty, but he did not engage in class and I and

my cooperating teacher had trouble motivating him. I tried a lot of one-on-one attention, but, while we had some good interactions, he would not apply himself to assignments and spent a lot of class time engaging in disruptive and distracting behaviors. When I first started to observe in the classroom, I was expecting students to automatically listen, communicate, and ask questions. I found Jordan's actions and lack of focus, as well as my inability to change these behaviors, frustrating. I wanted to demonstrate my passion for teaching, but my ideas about what teaching means were consistently challenged by Jordan and students like him. My cooperating teacher also struggled with these students. He sometimes told Jordan to pay attention or to do his work, but otherwise he focused on other students. Looking back, it seems to me that Jordan did not have the benefit of a meaningful relationship with his teacher, the kind that can promote motivation and inspire learning. I believe these kinds of relationships between students and teachers are crucial in the success of a student and that what Jordan lacked was not intelligence, but connection.

I wish my experience was a success story. I wish that I could say I found a way to engage Jordan and that my passion for teaching was ignited, but I did not and it was not. As a student who had very little teaching experience, I did not have the tools, skills, or confidence to turn this into a success story. The reason I share this, however, is because I learned a very valuable lesson about the role of a teacher. I learned that rarely, if ever, do students come to school immediately ready to begin a day of strictly knowledge and skill acquirement. I realized that the academic learning aspect of school is only one part of students' lives. Everyone has different identities and experiences and teachers can use these details to connect with their students. Motivation comes from understanding. If a student can feel as if his teacher understands and respects him, a connection is bridged, and that connection is the beginning of meaningful learning. As a teacher, this fact is perhaps the most important thing to acknowledge in order to be the best educator for all students. By supporting, confirming, and accepting students, the wall between my passion and theirs can be brought down.

The only way to really understand students and relate to them is to be an active member in our diverse society. I do not yet know how to relate to every student, but I do know that to be a successful

teacher I must push myself to understand the students I work with. I must do so much more than teach content. After my fieldwork experience, I feel ready to dedicate myself to all the challenges that are included in being an educator. I wish I had longer with Jordan, and I think about him often. I know he was capable of success and achievement. Working in the community has taught me that I do have a passion to teach, but even more so, the passion to be a teacher. That realization is the most valuable asset to me and to my future students.

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