Journal 10

I remember vividly telling my assistant during my first long term sub (prior to starting my MAT) that I was amazed by how much she noticed about the kids and I just didn’t seem to pick up the details like she did. As a “doer” by nature, stopping, thinking about and analyzing a situation and people is not something that was inherent in my nature. This whole writing and reflecting pushed me beyond my comfort zone. As the end of my gen ed student teaching draws nigh, it was a treat to go back and reread my Reflective Journal entries from pre-student teaching. I started reading them with a little trepidation - had my thoughts and feelings changed over the last couple of years? Had I changed as a teacher and as a person?

As a special ed teacher, I have a great affinity with those students that struggle in a more traditional setting. I’ve had the opportunity to have two-long term subs in ASD categorical rooms and I’ve subbed in gen ed rooms on and off over the last nine years. For the last 12 weeks, I’ve student taught in a 1st grade classroom. Journal 1 reminded me about all the wonderful articles I’ve read, both assigned and on my own, over the last four years. I went back and reread the article I discussed in Journal 1. As I read it, two of my current students came to mind and I’d love to try and implement the check in/check out schedule highlighted in the article. I find myself reading articles about education and certain students will come immediately to mind and I find that I now stop and reflect on how to incorporate that strategy into my work with a particular student or situation.

I was grading math worksheets the other day when it dawned on me that I should be using these not just a summative assessment for the students but as a formative one for me as well as for my students. My first graders use a scripted math and ELA curriculum, so there is little apparent way to go back and reteach a section That really shouldn’t stop me from taking those worksheets and really examining at the areas the students are struggling with and I might not be teaching effectively. As I teach the next prepared lesson, there may be an opportunity to reiterate and review the topics that are struggles for the students. I need to see the formative assessment as my grade on teaching a concept as well as the kid’s grade on learning it. Because I’ve spent much more time teaching in a special ed setting, Journal entry 2 reflects my use of more informal assessment rather than the concrete assessments used in a gen ed setting.

My principal, Walt, from my pre-student teaching (Journal 3) has been a principal for a long time and in different settings. Jeanne, the principal from my student teaching is brand new to the job and it’s been interesting to see the similarities and differences between the two administrators. Walt, due to his longevity in the school, has a much better handle on knowing both his staff and his teachers. Jeanne is new to the school and the job and is working hard to gain a working knowledge of her staff and students. I never really thought about until now, but they are very much like a parent. They have to be the role model, the task master, the nurturer and the confidant – sometimes all in the same day. It’s fun to watch them morph from role to role.

Ah, challenging moments and the most rewarding ones, Journal 4 really brought back some memories. I have to say my challenging moment in that journal entry was still one of the most challenging of my career. And the rewarding one still probably takes the cake. This year, I probably had one of the most challenging moments in a long time when my pumpkin lesson plan didn’t go exactly the way I had planned and dreamed. It had too many moving pieces for my kiddos and while they had fun, they didn’t get out of it what I had planned they would. Nothing like falling flat on your face after putting hours of time and a lot of money into a lesson! After a good cry and talking it out with my supervising teacher, evaluating teacher and the principal, I picked myself up and retaught the lesson again the next day. The children learned the lesson better and I was able to expand on it and add growing and planting pumpkin seeds. One of my most rewarding days this year was sending the pumpkin seedlings home with the students and seeing the pride in their faces as they walked out the door with their very own pumpkin plant. I was able to make a purse out of a sow’s ear. I’m proud of myself for being innovative and reflective in this situation and making the best of it. The pumpkin lesson is really a great lesson as well – just for older students! My bug lesson was another rewarding moment. I love being creative and adding cross curricular components to my lessons. My bug lesson included ELA, math and science and is representative of the innovative lessons that I develop.

Journal 5 was all about love and that being the key to teaching – loving the kids as the starting point to being an effective teacher. I still firmly believe that but now I would add another quality as well: perseverance. This quality is needed for those days and times that love is not enough. I referenced principals being like a parent but so too is a teacher. The principal is the school-level parent, while the teacher is the classroom-level parent. And as a parent of three - 17, 19 and 21 years old, I know that there are days when you need to persevere to get through the day because love just won’t do it. I love my students and my supervising teacher, but sometimes 27 first graders are more than I can handle especially when I’m getting tired. I know that I’m like the pot on the potter’s wheel. I am being shaped to be an even more effective teacher and once I’m put in a kiln, the fire will strengthen me even more. I need the perseverance to keep from jumping out of the kiln some days.

One of my big frustrations, in my gen ed student teaching, is the use of a very scripted curriculum. This would be a wonderful curriculum for a student who is a very oral learner who can sit still for long periods of time and repeats what is told to them. If you are a visual or kinesthetic learner, you are in big trouble. Journal 6 talks about differentiation and modifications and how this needs to be carried out in the classroom. Unfortunately, there is no way to differentiate these scripted lessons to make them appropriate for a variety of learning abilities. We are finally splitting the reading groups in to two levels – high and low and switching with a partner 1st grade. In math, we’re all on the same lesson with a huge gap between abilities. My struggling students are just falling further behind because the curriculum doesn’t match where they are academically; and my above level kids are bored. The frustration level some days is almost palpable in the classroom – both the teachers and the students are discouraged. We all enjoy the science and social studies lessons because they can be crafted to meet the students where they are in terms of learning.

Journals 7, 8, and 9 were written this year and taught me a lesson. I am a verbal learner especially with directions! As a fast reader, I sometimes skip over important things and read what I want to read, not what is on the paper. Because I only had written instructions for journals 7, 8, and 9, I rewrote the assignments for my student teaching district rather than comparing and contrasting the two experiences.

What is amazing to me is that as I drove down the street to Patton Elementary on my first day, I immediately went to an observant mode so that I had some visual clues about this new-to-me community. I have learned that this school is dealing with a big range of incomes – from homeless to middle class; and that as a teacher I need to listen to my students to learn more about their home life. There is almost as wide a range culturally as economically. My students come from around the world and this makes for a wonderful mixing pot of cultures in my classroom. It also requires me to be sensitive to issues like diet and food restrictions.

While I can develop lessons for science and social studies, the math and ELA curriculums are a scripted curriculum that is supposed to be used by the book. So far, I have developed cross-curricular lessons that have touched on ELA, math, science and social studies and have incorporated both GLCEs and Common Core standards. I had a great experience making sure that different learning styles were incorporated as well as modifications due to ability.

One of the areas that I have grown in is classroom management. My style is very different than that of my supervising teacher. At times this has caused some confusion, but as I am spending more time with the students they are learning about my expectations and I am learning about how to modify my classroom management style to work with this group of 1st graders. I have also learned that I am an effective teacher when I am myself and not trying to be someone that I’m not.

At the end of the day, I have grown and changed not only as a teacher but as a person. I’m finding that I am much more observant than I once was and that I take the time to reflect on students and situations. I have grown to be a reflective urban educator who is committed to diversity. I can’t wait to go out and teach!