

Student Teaching Clinical Reflections

Rosa Parks Elementary

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Introduction to the Exceptional Learner

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**13 April 2015**

At Rosa Parks Elementary the special education program is lead by four special education teachers, along with the support of multiple paraeducators, a physical therapist and an occupational therapist. For this clinical my supervising teachers are Miss Claire Oberle (who works with upper elementary) and Mrs. Jen Gates (who works with preschoolers and kindergarteners).

During this session, I had the opportunity to work one-on-one with two fourth grade students on math worksheets; these students, BH and AJ, are pulled out each day during math. I also was able to observe a pull out session for four students (kindergarten) to work on reading and writing. Two of the students would do activities with Mrs. Gates, including recognizing sight words, identifying letters, and playing Vocabulary Go Fish. One of the other students would have quiet reading time and the last student would work with the paraeducator to organize and copy down a sentence. The students would rotate between stations. It amazed me that despite the students all technically being on the same reading tier, each student was at a vastly different level. I was also surprised at how difficult it was to keep the students on task, even with the personal attention.

My final activity with students was participating in a physical therapy session. My supervising teacher told me that the session was designed by the physical therapist so that any teacher or paraeducator would be able to lead it. Two students participated in this session. The activities were relatively simple, including crab walk, wall sit, and some stretches and yoga poses.

**14 April 2015**

Because of state testing and a scheduled late start, the students' schedules were altered and as a result, my activities were different from what they will normally be. When I first arrived at the school, I worked with two students. Miss Oberle was in a different classroom to facilitate testing and I wasn't sure what activities the boys were supposed to do, we spent the majority of the time reading. The boys both had copies of the same books, but really just wanted to look at the pictures, rather than read. At first I struggled to get them to focus on reading, but I made a game out of it, by having the boys read alternating paragraphs. They became much more excited to read and engage with the text.

I also had the chance to help in a fifth grade classroom. In the class there were two children with special needs. The students were doing research for biography writing project. One thing that I noticed as I worked my way through the room was that although they had computers or tablets that were supposed to be used for only research, just having the devices on their desks served as a distraction. The classroom teacher remained at her desk and if the students had a question, they would go up to her. I understand that she had work to do, but the students were loud and, for the most part off task. I think that the students would have focused more successfully if the teacher had more of a presence throughout the classroom during their work time. One of the other major things that I noticed was that the students had no idea how to do research or look for information. Each student had received a structured list detailing how they should organize what information they found, but they still did not really know where to start. When assigning papers in my class, I will need to make sure that my students not only know grammar rules, but also how to start the writing process.

**15 April 2015**

During this clinical session I again had the chance to work with BH and AJ. We were working on finding circumference and diameter of a circle. Miss Oberle had me cut colorful circles out of cardstock in different sizes. The students folded the circles in half to find the diameter and rolled them along a ruler to find the circumference. I think that because of the visual and kinesthetic aspects of the lesson, BH and AJ seemed to understand it much more thoroughly than I would have anticipated, and they seemed to enjoy the lesson more than they normally do.

I also was able to help out with the reading group and physical therapy session with Mrs. Gates. In the reading group, the students again started out with recognizing sight words. The students were paired up differently that they had been before and the differences in reading levels were more obvious. Two of the students didn't know all the letters, but the other two could identify any of the words without error. I was amazed by Mrs. Gates' patience as she worked with all of the students. Although the students are happy and adorable, I think that if I did work with students in this age group, I would get burned out rather quickly. The physical therapy session was very similar to what we did on Monday. I had the opportunity to look at the two students' IEP goals for their motor/physical abilities and I was somewhat surprised by what standards had been established. Some of the goals included holding various yoga poses for six or three seconds. This is very different from how I remember physical education in my elementary school.

### **16 April 2015**

I worked with the same two fourth graders that I have worked with throughout the week. Miss Oberle was facilitating testing and had me review with the two students for the test that they would be taking on Friday. She also gave me two games to play with them for

after the review. Although I had worked with both students several times, until the review, I had not realized how different their ability levels were. One student (BH) could do triple digit math in his head while the other (AJ) struggled to understand the difference between when to use addition and subtraction. I had no idea how to pace the review. BH could have finished it in about ten minutes, but I'm not sure that AJ could have finished it at all. This was a very good reminder to me that I need to make sure that I understand each of my future students ability levels. At the high school level, their prior teachers will have shaped so many aspects of my students' abilities and attitudes and that although something my seem easy or obvious to me, it might not to my students.

After Miss Oberle was finished with her testing session, I asked her how she generally paces things. She said that she keeps up with BH, in order to not hold him back and that she might have AJ skip a few problems to keep up with BH. I'll have to remember this when working with both of them in the future. While playing the matching games with the two students I quickly noticed that BH was a sore loser. He was pouting and whining, but I didn't want to interrupt the game, because I thought he might self-correct. He did not; in the future, I will intervene sooner if I notice signs of frustration.

### **17 April 2015**

The fourth graders that I normally work with were on a field trip, so for the first part of my session, I was observing and assisting in Mr. Blasl's kindergarten classroom. Four of the students, who I worked with in other pull out sessions, were in his general education class. This was helpful to me, because I was more aware of which students might need additional help with different activities. Blasl used a very interesting and effective program for classroom management. He used an application that was connected to the

smart board. Each student's name was listed along side a number of points. Blasl awarded the students point individually for positive actions and participation and would award the whole group points if they made it through an entire activity and remained on task. I think this was really helpful for classroom management because the students were frequently recognized for good work and were responsible to their peers to maintain certain behaviors.

For one activity, Blasl had me take two of his students out into the hall to work. Neither of the students had trouble understanding what they were supposed to do, but they struggled to remain focused. This activity in particular required the use of pencils, scissors, and glue. It was very difficult for me to pay attention to what both of the students were doing. At one point, I was helping PR pick up the pieces of paper that he had dropped, and despite that only taking a few seconds, when I looked back, TH had cut the sleeve on his t-shirt. It amazes me how teachers can have students like PR and TH, along with special needs students and non-disabled students and keep everything together and on schedule. Although I am enjoying working with each of these students, I think that in the long term, my disposition is much more suited to secondary education, rather than elementary education.

For the second half of my session, I was with Mrs. Gates. I was able to observe and assist with a math group and a physical therapy session. For the math group, the two students are also in Mrs. Gates reading group. We did three different activities. We played Go Fish with cards, only numbers 1-10; and we did two number guess and identification games. In all of these activities, number recognition was stressed. Both students could successfully, albeit reluctantly, identify the numbers 1-12, but struggled on most of the

numbers past that. The physical therapy session was very similar to the previous ones. I also had the chance to observe a conversation between Mrs. Gates and a student who had misbehaved. The student had wanted to sit on a particular polka dot on the rug, but another student sat there first; he hit the other student. I thought that Gates did a wonderful job of addressing the issue. She asked the student to explain what had happened and then continued asking questions to prompt him to tell more about what had happened. She asked him if he remembered the school's rule on hitting, rather than simply telling him that it was wrong. She also provided him with a sample situation to help him empathize with the other student. Finally, she helped him to figure out what was the right thing to do upon returning to the situation and with a smile, instructed him to "Try again." By asking the student questions, rather than simply accusing him of inappropriate behavior, Gates got the student to respond more openly and modeled good social and problem-solving behaviors. This method will be good for me to remember in my future classroom.

### **20 April 2015**

I proctored a math test for BH and AJ this morning. This test was almost identical to the review that I had gone through with them on the previous Thursday. The test started with a self-assessment. The skills from the chapter were listed on one side of the paper and the students needed to indicate which category they were in, in regards to each skill: "I can do this and explain how I did it," "I can do this," or "I can do this with help or guidance." I was shocked by how difficult it was to get the two students to fill out this short questionnaire. Even when I assured them that I wasn't going to be graded, both resisted answering the questions. What surprised me even more was that both students really

underestimated their abilities for each skill, marking that they need help, even when I knew that they did not.

I was very surprised by BH's activity during the test. When we were reviewing the week before, he was able to complete all of the problems virtually without issue and very quickly. As soon as I said that it was a test, BH froze up. He got very frustrated and threw his pencil and ruler repeatedly. He talked about how he hated making mistakes and wished he could erase every mistake he had ever made. I tried to calm him down and assure him that it was okay if he made a mistake, saying that everyone, including Miss Oberle and me, makes mistakes. Honestly, I was unsure how to respond. I didn't know if he needed time or if he needed my attention. I think that he would have felt less pressure, if I had allowed him a few more minutes by himself. This is something that I will have to remind myself of when I work with him in the future.

During the time that is normally allotted for reading group, the four boys were again split into pairs that rotated stations. One station focused on recognizing letters and sight words and the other was in the motor room. In the motor room the students watched a video called "MeMove" which modeled various slow, controlled movements and exercises. The students were supposed to mimic what they saw onscreen. To me, these movements seemed very simple and easy to do, but for the students, it required a lot of concentration and was very difficult. None of these students look like they would have a physical disability, but after this activity it was very clear that not all physical or motor disabilities will be visible to me, but I am still responsible for recognizing them.

**21 April 2015**

Today I conducted the student interview for one of my portfolios. I asked ten questions of BH and AJ, because I work with them almost every day. The interview went well, but it took a lot longer than I expected. The boys both enjoyed doing the interview but I was surprised by some of their answers. I expected both to have a lot of complaints about their classrooms, workload, and overall experience, but both BH and AJ had a much easier time listing and describing the things that they enjoyed about school. I was so happy to hear that from both students, but particularly BH because I know how stressed out and frustrated he gets about school. I think that I could have done a much better job keeping them focused during the interview, but they were both so full of energy and stories that I just let them get off track, particularly because it wasn't like they were avoiding a particular assignment or lesson.

My favorite part of the day was when I found out that BH spoke Spanish. Both of his parents are from El Salvador and Spanish is the primary language spoken in his home. When I told him that I speak Spanish, he told me to talk about food in Spanish. As soon as I started talking, BH's face lit up. We were able to talk for a couple of minutes and he told me about his family and his home life. It was awesome to be able to connect with him like that.

With Mrs. Gates, I helped with a reading group and another physical therapy session. They were very similar to the other sessions that we have had, but what I particularly noticed was how important and effective modeling is. One of the students in both the groups, EJ, became very attached to me on the first day that I worked with them. He often asks me to come to his other classes with me. Today, EJ wasn't really acting like himself and was hiding under the furniture to avoid doing the physical therapy activities. While Mrs. Gates worked with BW, I asked Ethan if he would do a wall sit with me. He came

over and we both got into position. I was surprised because generally when EJ does a wall sit he leans against the wall with straight legs, but when he was next to me, he had his legs bent as a 90° angle, just like I did. This was a good reminder that rather than trying to break down instructions with words, modeling is an equal or better way to convey meaning.

## **22 April 2015**

I began my clinical session by sitting in on an IEP meeting for one of the students that I work with in the reading group. The meeting was much more casual than I expected it to be. The mom of this particular student was very easy going and open minded to all of Mrs. Gates suggestions for home activities, modifications in the classroom, and changes in his IEP. The student was able to be in the meeting but he didn't have much to say. Mr. Blasl, the student's general education teacher, was at the meeting and contributed to deciding the goals for the next year. He shared some of the standards for first grade and I was very surprised by how high they were in regards to both this student's current academic level and the standards that I had at that age. I was shocked by how much educational expectations have changed in the last fifteen years.

Because no MCA testing was being done, I had the chance to observe Miss Oberle teach a math lesson to the boys that I have been working with. I was amazed by how consistently and successfully Miss Oberle was able to get appropriate responses from both students. It was very evident how much rapport there was between her and the boys. While I didn't necessarily struggle to communicate with the boys, there was still a very visible difference between how they interacted with me and her. As a teacher, it will be

critical for me to develop positive relationships with my students and have a thorough understanding of their needs, motivations, and attitudes in my class.

During the reading group, the boys were a huge handful. Even though there were an equal number of students and staff, the kids were in and out of their seats and consistently exhibiting off-task behaviors. One thing I noticed was that when I requested a particular behavior with a question; ex- "Will you read the next page?" I was much less likely to get a successful response as compared with when I stated it as a command; ex- "Please read the next page." The students didn't understand that just because it was phrased as a question, it wasn't necessarily optional. This was a good reminder about having clear instructions, especially for students with developmental delays or slow processing speeds.

### **23 April 2015**

Today AJ was taking his MCAs and I had the chance to work with BH alone. I had much more success than when I would try to work with both of them, because of the difference in their academic ability. BH and I were working on division problems, using counters and we worked on perimeters again. The division went really well. Using the counters and physically dividing the items into groups made the concept of division much more approachable and functional. The section on measuring the polygons and finding the perimeters did not go as smoothly. BH definitely knows how and is able to do this type of problem, but for whatever reason, getting him to do it is like pulling teeth. The majority of the problems had three or four sided polygons, but one problem had an eight-sided shape. When we got to this problem, BH threw his ruler and immediately began demonstrating off-task behaviors. I picked up the ruler and held it in place so that he would simply have to look in order to get the measurement; I did this for the first three sides. I then asked if he

was ready to hold the ruler. He took the ruler and started working, but did so hesitantly. I then suggested a count down for the remaining five sides. By doing that, I attached a greater sense of accomplishment to doing the problem and he became much more excited to work on and finish it. I wish I had thought of that for the earlier problems as well.

Mrs. Gates had a substitute teacher, but when she initially warned me that she was going to be at school, I was nervous about how the day would go. Mrs. Gates seems to have every part of her teaching down to a science. She really relies on structure and predictable behaviors and expectations. I was worried that without the structure and familiarity of having her as a teacher, the students would really struggle to stay on task. The substitute teacher worked really well with all of the boys, but she ended up deferring most of the morning's activities to my direction. I really enjoyed the chance to teach and lead the kindergarteners, because up to this point, I had just mostly observed their sessions. The students listened to me just as well as they listen to Mrs. Gates, which was very encouraging to me. Although, I still think that secondary education will be the best fit for me, I can definitely recognize the joys and rewards of working in an early childhood or elementary education setting.

### **24 April 2015**

Today BH was taking his MCAs and I had the chance to work with AJ alone. I appreciated the chance to work with AJ independently because of the difference between his and BH's academic ability. AJ and I were working on division problems, using counters and we worked on perimeters again, as I had with BH. There were also a few basic problems that involved triple digit subtraction. Whenever I asked AJ to do this type of problem he would avoid it or just guess an answer. I showed him how to do subtraction

vertically instead of horizontally and he totally understood. He even asked if he could do extra problems like that. It was so rewarding to see the light bulb turn on as he figured it out.

### **27 April 2015**

Miss Oberle was supervising the third graders for state testing. As a result, I was again able to teach AJ and BH a lesson. The majority of the content was reviewing the skills learned the week prior, but the major skill for this lesson was differentiating between when multiplication or division should be used. It was noticeably more difficult to work with both students as compared to when I was able to work with either of them individually. However, it is still a considerable improvement from when I first worked with them because of the rapport that I have been able to build with them. This particular lesson was more difficult to teach than the other ones have been, because it is more conceptual than skill based. One thing that I noticed while we were working on practice problems was that the boys were both very tempted to copy the other's answer. So about halfway through, I gave the boys different numbers to use in the same problems. This kept them from cheating and it helped me a lot with the pacing as well. If Brandon finished one problem, I had no trouble moving him on to the next problem while continuing to work with AJ. I was also able to manipulate the difficulty of the problems to be more appropriate for AJ by using simpler numbers.

I spent more time with the BH and AJ working on math because of the testing and I then missed a part of Mrs. Gates reading group. When I came into the conference room, Mrs. Gates and the paraprofessional had all four boys together, playing Candy Land and practicing sight words. In order for students to take their turn, they had to successfully

recognize a sight word. When I walked into the room, it was complete mayhem. Having all four boys to distract each other made learning virtually impossible. While I do think that the game was productive and could be effective for practicing those words, I also believe that the game cannot be effective when there are that many students.

I ended my day by doing a few informal reading assessments for various kindergarteners. Rosa Parks uses DIBELS. The assessment that I was giving focused on students' abilities to identify each sound in a given word. The test only lasted a minute and I would read a word out loud and then the student would identify each sound. The assessment was very easy to facilitate, particularly because the students were familiar with its structure.

### **28 April 2015**

My fourth graders were taking the MCAs today, so during the time that I normally work with AJ and BH, I went and helped out in Mr. Blas's Kindergarten classroom. The students were working on long versus short vowel sounds. I took two students with me out of the classroom to work on two vowel worksheets: HA and TH, who I had worked with the last time I helped with Mr. Blas's classroom. For one of the work sheets, there were images with two spellings of the work (ex- picture of a bicycle with "bik" and "bike" written next to it) and the students were supposed to choose the correct spelling. HA had no trouble with this worksheet, but TH was less successful. He flew through the worksheet very quickly, but made many mistakes. When I ask him orally to choose, he didn't have trouble saying the right answer, but I could not get him to slow down on the worksheet in order to do it correctly. Once he had finished, I went back through the worksheet with him. However, TH noticed that I was only commenting on the ones that were incorrect and as soon as I would

say a number, he would change his answer. I should have gone through each problem so that I could not only correct the wrong ones, but reinforce the ones that he had done right.

I also worked on sight words with various students. Mr. Blasl had a list of students that I took one by one out into the hall; they practiced naming sight words as I showed the words on index cards. The first two students that I worked with went through all the cards with almost no problems, but the third students had to sound out many of the words. Because of the pace established by the first two students, I was less patient with the third student, and a few times; I accidentally flipped to the next word before she was ready. As a teacher, it will be important for me to remember that each student is at a very different academic level and that as a result the appropriate pace for each student will be very different.

While working with Ms. Gates, we again did Candy Land with sight words, but today two of the kiddos were sick and so it was Mrs. Gates, one student, and me playing. The difference between today and yesterday was shocking. While yesterday, we only got halfway through one game, today we had time to complete three full games. I think that both ET and JA were much more successful and got to practice the sight words more than they would have if SA and AL were there.

### **30 April 2015**

I started the day with BH and AJ again, but instead of working on math, we were going to work on reading and writing. Miss Oberle just told me that they hadn't had a full reading group in a long time, just because of all the state testing. There was a student taking her MCAs in the classroom, so we went into the hall. I asked the boys how they were doing and both of them responded positively and seemed to be in a good and energetic

mood. However as soon as I told them that we were going to work on writing instead of math, both boys just shut down. Their attitudes changed immediately and they began furiously explaining why that was not fair. AJ specifically said that he could only do writing right before recess. I was very surprised by how strongly both were opposed to changing the schedule. While neither of these two students particularly enjoys math, both are very dependent on having the consistency of a rigid schedule. The boys remained resistant for most of my lesson, which was very frustrating to me. The boys both demonstrated the skills that they needed to complete the practice problems, but were so unwilling to do any of them.

Earlier in my clinical, Mrs. Gates had mentioned that one of the kindergarten teachers does not keep to a tight schedule, which makes it more difficult for her to work with each of the students that she is supposed to. She also said that it makes it harder for the students to be successful. I had heard this before, but I did not realize just how true this was until I saw how BH and AJ responded to this minor change in schedule. As a secondary teacher, I don't expect to run in to this situation, only because I'll always be teaching English. However, I think that it is also a good reminder to be consistent and straightforward in how I structure my lessons. It will also be important for me to stick to my syllabus so that students know what to expect for their workload.

Mrs. Gates brought the boys out to the playground for today's reading group. They did an activity wherein there were mats with letters on them scattered throughout the play area. The boys had to find a mat, pick it up, and bring it to me or to Mrs. Gates. When they brought it up they had to say the letter, the sound of the letter, identify the picture on the mat, and then say a sentence using that word. The boys had a

blast. They were so excited because it was a game; I highly doubt that they realized that they were learning. It was amazing to watch how much fun they had and I can definitely see how the elementary education setting is so rewarding.

### **1 May 2015**

Testing was officially finished so I was able to observe Miss Oberle teach a math lesson. The lesson was very straightforward, and a majority of it was review. I then got to play a math game with the boys. The game was that we would be multiplying simple numbers (0-10) and that one would use a calculator and the other would try to beat the calculator by doing the problem in his head. As soon as Miss Oberle explained the game to me, I was a little nervous. From what I knew of the boys, I was fairly certain that they hadn't practiced multiplication enough to play this game, at least not successfully. I was also nervous because of how much BH hated having competitions, or more specifically, losing them. The game pretty much went how I expected. The first modification that I made was the boys got to pick the numbers and then it was me versus the calculator, but this wasn't doing either of the boys any good. I then changed it to addition instead of multiplication, but even then, both boys consistently lost to the calculator. This game was just not a good fit for either of the boys, but fortunately, Miss Oberle had a back-up plan. The boys finished the hour by playing a math game on the computer.

For math group with the kindergarteners, Mrs. Gates modified the Candy Land sight word game by replacing the sight word with simple addition problems. We used counters to help model addition. I noticed several things. First of all, kindergarteners really like to cheat on board games. I frequently had to ask the students to double-check what space they had moved to. Secondly, while counters can be helpful in explaining concepts in math, they

also can be very distracting to students. Both boys just wanted to play with the counters rather than do the addition problems. Thirdly, students really want to be helpful. When it was my turn, I would use the counters instead of doing the problem in my head to model the activity to the students. AL was sitting next to me and he was being particularly distractible today. I asked him to help me with the problem, not only did he come up with the correct answer, but he worked much more quickly and was even excited to do it. It was interesting to see how differently he responded from when he was simply told to do the task. I was really glad that I came up with that idea and I think asking AL to help me helped him to stay on task for the rest of the activity.

**Final Reflections:**

While this isn't exactly what I would have considered an ideal clinical placement, my time at Rosa Parks Elementary was my favorite early field experience. Both of my supervising teachers were so wonderful and kind. They both are very passionate about what they do and they were very willing to work with me on all of my assignments or clinical requirements. I learned a lot more than I expected and gained a much better understanding of and appreciation for what all goes on in the special education setting. While I still think that teaching English at the secondary level will be a better fit for me, I can see how teaching students with special needs is a wonderful balance between challenge and reward. The students that I worked with are younger than the students that I will have in my own classroom, but I think that many of the lessons that I learned will be equally applicable with older students. This clinical experience has made me so much more excited to be a teacher and to make as much of a difference for my students as Jen and Clare make for theirs.