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ENGL 444

Clinical Reflection Paper

Clinical Placement at Dakota Meadows Middle School

Over the course of five weeks (April 4th through May 6th, 2016), I spent approximately sixty hours in Mr. Dustin Buttell's seventh grade English classroom at Dakota Meadows Middle School (DMMS) in Mankato, MN. This clinical experience was embedded in ENGL 444 "Methods in Teaching 5-12" at Bethany Lutheran College. I worked the sixth, seventh, and eighth hour sections, two of which were instructional periods and one of which was a study hall/What I Need (WIN) time. I worked directly and consistently with approximately 90 students. While many were general education students, there were several students with learning and/or behavioral issues and there were also many students who were in the Challenge Group, which was made up of high level readers and writers, based on MCA scores and teacher recommendation. At DMMS, there is a significant amount of ethnic and racial diversity, with one of the prominent minorities being the Somali population. In my class sections, the Somali, African-American, Asian, Indian, Native American, and Hispanic minority groups were all represented. During my placement, I had the opportunity to work with students in one-on-one, small group, and large group settings. I was responsible for whole class instruction for four of my five weeks. My instruction was based off of the novel *Walk Two Moons* by Sharon Creech and focused on writing personal narratives. This clinical gave me valuable insights to student interaction, classroom

management, and methods of assessment, along with confidence as I continue to pursue my career in education.

DMMS as a whole has a focus on building positive relationships among students, teachers, and administrators. Buttell, along with the other teachers in my hall made an obvious effort to carry out this mission. Between every class period and at the beginning and end of each day, every teacher was out in the hall, greeting and talking to students. Because of the personal narrative assignment, I was much more able to get to know my students and their stories. Even if the students struggled initially to come up with an idea for their narrative, it was very rewarding to figure out which stories were important enough to them to tell. One student in particular that I worked with ended up writing his story about his baseball career. He struggled with writing and had no idea how to write a paragraph. His final copy may not have been the best in the class, but he was proud of what he had written and excited to turn it in. I was far happier to read that narrative than any other because I recognized how much effort the student had put into it.

Another awesome opportunity that I had to build relationships with students came in eighth hour study hall. One of the students flagged me over and said that she had a question for me. "Is college hard?" I told her and the other girls at the table that it was and then we launched into a wonderful conversation about what these girls wanted out of life and school. I had not imagined that that is what my conversations would look like in the classroom, but I learned so much more about each of those girls in forty-five minutes than I could have in a year's worth of direct instruction. It was a small thing, but after having that conversation with those girls, they each went out of their way to talk to me or say hi, even if

I was distracted by correcting papers or another student. I could have used that time to work on a lesson plan or a project, but I was able to do so much more by giving them one study hall's worth of my full attention.

Another way that I realized the importance of connecting with students was through my speaking Spanish. In my seventh hour, the subject of foreign languages came up. One of my students asked if I spoke anything other than English. When I told them that I was minoring in Spanish, he instantly told me to say something to a student who was a native Spanish speaker. I said something simple, but the way his face lit up when I spoke in his language made my day. Generally speaking, this student was very reserved and did not participate in class, but after that interaction, he seemed more willing to engage with the class.

Mr. Buttell provided an excellent example of successful classroom management. He would speak louder in a one-on-one situation than he would to the entire class. He refused to compete with his students for control. Buttell pointed out to me that if he were to get louder, the students would simply get louder; by keeping his voice low, the students are forced to listen silently in order to hear any of what he is saying. He also made use of proximity in his management style. I was able to follow his example, particularly in regards to proximity when I would read aloud from *Walk Two Moons*. Simply standing next to the students who had been talking made all the difference. His classroom centered around the idea of respect: his students had a high level of respect for him and he reciprocated it. I hope that in my classroom, mutual respect will be equally evident.

This clinical gave me many opportunities to improve my assessment and rubric writing as well as practice including ELA standards in all classroom activities and assignments. Buttell made a very conscious effort to constantly improve everything from handouts to exams to rubrics. He made use of standard-based grading on a four point scale, following recommendations of educational theorist Rick Wormelli. Throughout my clinical experience, we made at least four major revisions to the layout of the Personal Narrative Rubric. We read and reread the quiz and summative assessment questions. Beyond all of that, we constantly went back to the standards to make sure that we were addressing the correct academic skills and assessing each student's proficiency in a way that was both ethical and accurate.

This was easily the best and most beneficial clinical that I have participated in, largely due to my supervising teacher. Buttell was both honest and encouraging, whether giving me feedback on a lesson plan or talking about teaching in general. I recently stumbled across an article titled "How to Teach a Middle School Class in 49 Simple Steps." The article was written to entertain and focused on the humor and chaos that generally goes with middle school. I forwarded the article to Buttell, knowing that he would appreciate it. His response reminded me yet again, how fortunate I was to work with such a dedicated and passionate teacher. He wrote back saying that the article was very accurate, but missed number 50: "We teach children how to read, write, speak, listen, respect others, respect self, build and maintain lifelong relationships, etc. The list could go on and on with what we do. When you feel a passion and purpose for your work, your students, you feel a passion and purpose for life. This makes me happy! You will read and hear so many

negative things about teaching...Don't Believe It! Believe in your purpose and trust your passion!" Buttell made this clinical about so much more than learning how to plan a lesson or grade a paper. I learned about interacting with students and teachers and administration. I saw some of the frustrations and challenges of this profession, but more importantly, I was reminded why this is what I want to do.