Community Connections

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Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for

Capstone in Reflective Teaching EDRS 698

Regis University

January, 31st, 2012

Camden Middle School, situated on the south side of Fort Collins lacks the diversity of several other Poudre School District environments. The school was built in the 1990’s with 532 students in attendance and has since ballooned to over 900, and is expected to be over 1,000 for 2012-2013 school year. This growth has been accentuated by two factors. The first factor simply is the growth of the Fort Collins community as the city continues an urban sprawl. The second aspect would be the stellar reputation that Camden is receiving throughout the community and beyond. Camden is a school that is of predominately Caucasian, with nine out of ten students fitting within this category.

The 10% of the students that are outside of the school norm, roughly half of those students are of Hispanic culture. Within my student teaching experience, I would estimate that these figures pertained to my classroom as well. Many of these Hispanic students seemed to struggle within my classroom as I tried to understand the reasons. During the first few weeks of school, before I had taken over any of the classroom teaching, my cooperating teacher had asked me to handle a new behavioral program called “check-in/check-out. This was a program aimed specifically at the students that had been identified with behavioral issues the year before, when the students were in 6th grade. The idea was that the students would have a form that needed to be signed by the teacher before class and after class in regards to their behavior. If they did well for that class period, they would receive a specified number of points, if that continued throughout the day, they would then be eligible to receive a predetermined prize at the end of the day (candy, game, extra lunch time, ect). At the end of the month, if the students had a specified number of points, they would then qualify for a larger prize (movie tickets, gift cards). Five out of the six students that were on the program in my classes were Hispanic. That led me to question why that would be, did they feel uncomfortable based on them being the minority culture within Camden? Did they just lack discipline? How was their behavior affecting their learning? My cooperating teacher had little insight (as she didn’t know these students either).

I remember the scared feeling I had knowing that I was going to have to teach these students very shortly and had no plan of action to do so. How was I going to reach these students if I could not identify with them, their culture, and simply the environment that surrounded them on a daily basis? I remember from reading Banks and Banks in regards to the four different levels of Integration and Multicultural content; the goal was to move past the Contributions Approach and curriculum continuity of the mainstream culture. I knew that I wanted to try and move to at least level three, The Transformation Approach; this calls for “restructuring the curriculum to enable students to view concepts, issues, events, and themes from the perspectives of diverse, ethnic, and cultural groups.” How would I do this within the class and how could I make sure that this group of behavioral students would be represented?

Within the classroom walls of Camden Middle School, there is the idea that what we do here in America is right no matter the negative affects it may present for others. We rarely take the time, at least at the seventh grade level to examine issues from different perspectives. I wanted to somehow accomplish this with my lessons, as I had the freedom to create and develop my lessons as I wanted.<--good you offered the structural conditions in which you worked! Currently, in social studies, we are not on the Colorado School Assessment Program, which allows the teacher to develop the lessons on the subject as they wish. As in many subjects, there are overarching themes that need to be presented and I wanted all students to understand that there are different viewpoints that are distinctively different from ours here in the United States. One of the lessons that I taught on perspective was called “Toilets from Around the World.” Without going into major detail here, this lesson allowed students to look at what and how the rest of the world used something that we consider very private. Many of the students assumed that the rest of the world has access to a toilet, toilet paper and clean water. They were appalled that some places in the world actually use their left hand to clean themselves. I wanted them to understand how fortunate we have money to buy toilet paper and then just flush it away (seventh graders like this kind of talk.) 🡨good use of voice For subsequent lessons, I would then try and demonstrate or have the students look at an issue through the eyes of the people that we were studying, such as a Muslim when we were talking about the Middle East, the United States dependency on foreign oil, the Iraq conflict, the hazard and the benefits of nuclear power when we talked about Chernobyl; issues that could be considered somewhat controversial but had different perspectives. When teaching social studies, it is imperative that both🡨many sides of an issue are presented to the students, so that they can draw their own conclusions. In consistently reminding them that it is okay to not agree with someone or something that a culture believes in, they still needed to learn about that culture before they formed their opinion.

Presenting another perspective would not be enough however, there had to be more “buy-in” from the students. Particularly the check-in/check-out students, one of my goals in being a teacher was to get to know my students on a personal level. A level that went beyond the classroom and would show these students that I really did care about them as students but as people as well, this started me thinking about starting to do home visits, with the approval of my cooperating teacher, I began to set up appointments with the check-in/check-out students.

Although home visits certainly have some risks, I believe the benefits far outweigh the dangers. The United States government seems to agree as President Obama announced a proposal for the inclusion of home visitation fiscal support as part of his approach to comprehensive education (Lin and Bates.) 🡨Great! I did not know this and it will be helpful info when this assignment receives resistance from some faculty…There are several other benefits of home visits such as parent involvement increases’, seeing how a student lives provides in-sight to their organizational skills as well as showing the student and the family that you do care about their background, culture and ultimately them as human beings. One gets to see how they interact outside of school, with siblings, other adults, and how a teacher could use that information in their classroom to meet the students’ needs. When I saw these students at school it was in a negative connotation environment for them. Looking back now, was the check-in/check-out process affecting how I taught or treated these students? As Allen and Porter detail on page 128, “we assimilate, differentiate, and classify people into separate “groups” because it is more cognitively efficient.”

An aspect of teaching that I don’t feel that I was very aware of at the time would be my own background and how my past experiences could possibly have a negative effect on my students. I came from a white, urban, middle-class background, was that affecting my students in some way? If I am expecting my students to “critically think” about two sides of an issue, was I doing the same? I felt knowing the background and culture of these students was very important. What type of community did they live in, what were some of their strengths that could be identified outside of school? I thought that actually going out into the field and seeing for myself was the best remedy. “most important to the value of teacher ethnography in education is the willingness and motivation to understand things from another’s point of view – a motivation to empathize with a different cultural group.” (Trumbull, p. 104)🡨Ken, I think you got the hang of this. You are using voice, questioning, personal theory and lit to discuss this!

I began my study with a check-in/check-out student that I will call Trey. Trey came from an impoverished background; this was evident simply from the fact that his family could not afford school supplies. This was demonstrated the first day of school as my cooperating teacher was going through the supply list for the course; Trey had spoken up and said that he would be unable to purchase the needed supplies. In seventh grade, one of the “life” skills that we try and teach them is organization; how to use a planner, how to stay structured within the eight classes that they have during the day, making sure that papers are put in a place where they will not get lost in the notebook. Trey scoffed at this by saying “the Goodwill doesn’t sell student planners.” Luckily, the counseling office had collected excess supplies and planners for students who were in Trey’s situation. Trey was a good kid but felt that because he was “Mexican” (his word), the system was out to get him and that everyone had a pre-conceived stereotype of his culture. He would be my first home-visit.

I called his home and arranged to meet his mother, Rodrica, she seemed very skeptical at first but I explained that as a new educator, I felt that I wanted to understand the culture of students in my classroom in order to better teach them and design lessons that would have a more meaningful impact, and help all students to understand different cultures from other perspectives. This seemed to open her up and she quickly agreed, although I felt like I was “selling” the idea to her, I could hear in her voice that she respected my thought process. This would help me to answer the puzzle of how can we, as educators, teach to a population that we can’t identify with. If we don’t understand their culture, norms, and background how can we not be influenced by our own background and experiences.

When I arrived at their home for the visit on a Friday afternoon, Trey was very excited to see me and invited me into his single-wide mobile home. The residence had no yard and was three arm’s length away from the next lot. Trey was the middle aged student of three, an older brother in ninth grade, (who Trey says doesn’t like him) and a younger sister who was in fourth grade. Rodrica was cooking dinner in the small kitchen and came out smiling; she had to be at work shortly but wanted to talk with me before she left. She explained that she was a cook and waitress at a small Mexican restaurant and could not be late for work. Just looking at Rodrica, it was evident that she had been through a tough life here in the United States. Her broken English was not very good and she was forced to raise her children here without the support of the father (this I later got from Trey) as he hadgone back to Mexico. Rodrica did have a male friend that would help with watching the children at times, but they were alone frequently as they would be on this night. Rodrica lamented to me that she wishes that she could be a better parent, and that many times there was yelling and screaming in the home, many times the boys would have fist fights with Trey always coming out on the short end. 🡨good job with your description Ken. I can get a picture of what you saw and how it seems you were perceived.

Trey wanted to show me his bedroom that he shared with his brother, I thought this was a good idea and would allow me to gain some insight into what kinds of things that interested him outside of school. It wasn’t a far leap to tell however, where Trey received his organizational skills as the floor of his room was barely visible. As part of my check-in/check-out process, I required the students to show me their planner, what homework they had due, how they were going to study for their tests, this was for all of their classes’ not just mine. I wanted them to develop a study plan and not rely on “cramming” the night before. Trey never had anything written down in his planner, I would ask him if he ever took his planner home and he said “no” as he would lose it. I could now see how that could possibly be true.

One trait about Trey that I noticed was that he liked Eagles, his wall had several posters of them and he had figurines of Eagles scattered about in his room. I wondered how I could relate this to his classroom learning and my teaching. I never came up with any answer on that but I did find a program at the local library called “Colorado Raptors” that I asked if Trey wanted to attend (Exhibit 1). He did attend the program with his older brother and I had asked him to tell about it the next day in class, you could see the sparkle in his eye as he raised his voice when reaching up into the air as he demonstrated with his arms, Trey asked if he could stand on his chair to tell the story, which I thought was interesting; I took this as someone who liked to be on the stage or the center of attention. The manner in which Trey told the story, was very good, he read a synopsis sheet that he had received from the library and even shared a book that he had checked out on the subject. When he read, it was wonderful as he raised and lowered his voice based on the type of raptor he was referring to. Immediately, this brought to mind a program that Camden was offering as an enrichment class, Improv, I thought he might be a good fit for the program. I went to speak with the counselor after school that day about him being placed in the class.

When I had told the counselor about the way Trey had performed while telling the story, how he was able to hold a conversation and keep the class attention during his impromptu presentation, I was informed that he would never succeed in that class. She said the class was for Gifted and Talented students and that Trey certainly didn’t qualify for that program. I left that short meeting angry for Trey, I think he has a talent in this area and the school was unable to view Trey from another perspective. That same perspective that I ask my students to have, the school doesn’t have. 🡨good job explaining the situation AND your thoughts. I think you could go deeper and more critical in an explicit way by describing the kind of curriculum IMPROV offered and how it is being reserved for GT who are definitely NOT check in check out kids…What does this suggest about the school and the way that students are educated toward their future place in society… I called Rodrica to inform her about what Trey did during class and that she should consider possibly putting him in drama, acting or impromptu classes. She was grateful for the information but I could tell by the tone that this was not possible. Most likely a financial issue, but that could be helped some way, could it not. My thought was that why couldn’t anybody see that we may have tapped into a creative strength that this student has but would potentially go unused. Why does the school seem to think that he can only be successful in a subject that they deem to be of high importance? I agree with James Noll when he says “The prime object of education is to know what is good for man, it makes no difference how they earn their living. In talking about a liberal education, it is not to teach the young all it is that they will ever need to know. It is to give them the habits, ideas, and techniques that they need to continue to educate themselves.”(Noll, p. 13)

I did connect him with two students who I later found out participated in plays at drama at the Lincoln Center in Fort Collins but nothing ever became of the situation.

Another teaching goal of mine was to stay in contact with parents. I believe that parents are the link between how students will do in school and their future success as a student and in life. When I took over the classroom, I sent home a brochure explaining who I was, my background and educational beliefs. I now wonder if this could be even read or comprehended within some of the check-in/check-out students. As my first class assignment, I had the students create a postcard addressed to their parents, so I could later send it out detailing how well (hopefully) their student was doing in class. How many of those were also read or understood? As a pre-service teacher, I went in with such good intentions but now see that my inability to understand that some of these parents are unable to read or understand English was such a monumental assumption on my part. To be honest, that thought never crossed my mind and I am a bit disappointed, sad, and upset with myself that I didn’t think of this. 🡨Ah, but that is why you are here now. You will begin to notice more and more assumptions we all make based on our own dominant culture membership. Good job describing your heightened awareness. Although Rodrica wanted to, she could not help Trey with his academics, she was too busy working to support the family, and also she could not understand the content to be able to help teach him. Trey’s older brother didn’t do homework, why would Trey?

My home visit allowed me to see many things that I would not have known had I not visited their environment. The lack of parent involvement was certainly not by choice, I suspect this would be the case with many single parent families. When the parents are not involved and children are left unattended as this family is, homework simply is not a priority. It wasn’t just Trey who lacked the organizational skills to be successful in Middle and High school but all the siblings as well. I was able to glance into Rodrica’s bedroom and it was the exact opposite of what Trey’s room and the rest of the house looked, no clothes on the floor, bed made, neat, and clean. I suspect that had she not worked twelve to fourteen hours every day, the home may have looked more organized. I believe that being organized is the first step for these students to be successful, not just for students like Trey but for all students. 🡨It would be interesting to speak to families about what fundamental skills they believe lead to success and how they work with their children to develop them. Even what is success?

I attended an “activity night” (exhibit 2) later in the semester and hung out with Trey and a couple other students from the check-in/check-out students. With Camden being upper-middle class and predominantly a “white” environment I can see from their “perspective” how they might feel inferior to the majority culture. I just never really looked at it from a different point of view. Why? I ask my students to look at other cultures with an “open mind, “was I guilty of not doing so within my own classroom? Examining this from a “Reflection-on-action” viewpoint, I believe that I have to grow in this area to become the teacher I want to be and my students deserve for me to be. Zeichner and Liston ask the question “do you ever react differently to students (or to their parents) depending upon their gender, race or social class background?” (p. 15). 🡨good, again you are connecting your thinking and the literature AND your emotional side. Well done! Hard work! Looking at this objectively, I am not sure I want to answer.

Home visits are certainly nothing new, I would even suggest that this type of paper has been written over and over in the past; student doesn’t do their homework, lack of parental involvement, harsh home environment with siblings, family living on the poverty line, these are common among many multi-cultural students, to be sure. However, to see this up close, to get attached to a student and their family elicits the type of change that is described by Trumbull in “Bridging Cultures.” As an aspiring educator, it is my responsibility to understand other cultures, celebrate their heritage and write that into my lessons. This seems especially important while teaching social studies. While it is not possible to do this with every student as I found out (Trey turned out to be my only home visit), I can utilize what I learned and apply it to other situations in my teaching career. 🡨you can also make an effort to make 1-2 home visits every year to start to build a better understanding of how some of your students live.

How will this affect my teaching in the future? I am not 100% sure at this point, but I do know that it starts with eliminating the word “assumptions” when I am dealing with students. In Trey’s case, I assumed his parents were married, I assumed they would help him with his homework right after the family dinner. While student teaching, I assigned projects or homework that required the use of a computer; I don’t remember seeing a computer at Trey’s house. I just assumed all students have one. I assumed that parents would explain any misunderstandings of the homework assignment to their child in plain English or send me an email if they had questions, how presumptuous of me. 🡨exploring these assumptions is so critical to “getting it right!”

How did my home visit affect the way I did certain aspects in the classroom during student teaching? First, I made students show me that they could be organized; we would write assignments, test, and quizzes down together in their planners. I would circulate three hole punches when I would hand out an assignment. I would also allow class time for students to complete the assignment, knowing that if it would be assigned for homework, it may never make it that far. If the work required computer time, I would reserve the computer lab or bring in the IPADS. 🡨excellent, you used the knowledge to provide the tools for ALL of your students to be successful in your class!

In Trey’s situation, I allowed him to have extra time to complete the assignment, he was also a talented kid that I felt needed the opportunity to feel successful in the classroom. In one assignment in particular when we were learning about the Euro and how it shaped the European economy, I had them create their own money. I remember thinking that this type of assignment would allow Trey to exhibit his creative nature. (Exhibit 3)

Trey did a great job on this assignment and he said it was the first time that he had received a “4” since the school changed to standards based grading two years earlier. I felt I had reached a new level with Trey after this assignment, even though I believed that he could be successful, I felt this assignment proved to him that he could as well. As his instructor, I needed to continue to create assignments like this; all the students liked them, not just Trey. 🡨yes, multiple pathways to demonstrate knowledge!

Being a novice teacher, I know there is plenty of room for growth in many areas of my teaching; I do think I accomplished a portion of my goals in engaging the students on a personal

level. This was made possible by the home visit and understanding what type of environment that Trey grew up in. I need to find a way to expand this to all students. One of my last assignments was directed at the multi-cultural population. I asked all students to outline the issues they would anticipate having if they lived? had to go to a foreign school. I gave them several minutes to compile their lists and then we listed them on the smart board (the students came up and listed them one by one.) Finally, I asked the students to list anyone that they would consider having these issues within Camden based upon them being foreign to our country. I could tell from the reaction of the students that they might have a small understanding of what Trey and the other check-in/check-out students might be experiencing at school. It certainly had a positive impression on Trey as two days later I received a thank you call from Rodrica. 🡨great, so you are broadening your growing awareness to the student population. You are raising their awareness!

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Wow Ken! This had so much voice, feeling, deep and critical reflection and an agile use of the literature. You really are getting the whole idea here—in the next paper, you might try to focus a little more, so in this case, you might have answered the question via the story on Trey. Also, the puzzle of practice, you might need to explicitly note, this is my puzzle of practice as I am uncertain if I correctly identified it! This is an excellent first attempt and tightening the focus is really my only significant recommendation.