Practicum for Diverse Learners: Capstone

Juliana Berger

Practicum: Diverse Learners

December 11, 2015

I began my Diversity Practicum 3 years ago at Saint Anne Elementary School volunteering in the Parish Religious Education Program (PREP). I started as a simple volunteer, teaching 7th grade students with my brother in the evenings every Wednesday during the academic year. Over the past 3 years, I can say that I have learned a lot about teaching, students, and the diversity that can be part of the educational setting. From the first day I started volunteering, I had a drive to do something for these students, and I have since been asked to be the Assistant Director of Religious Education for the Church of Saint Anne PREP. This has added to the diversity experience, which I am grateful to share.

 The demographics at Saint Anne, considering the criteria of age, gender distribution, ethnicity, socioeconomic background, and cognitive and physical limitations, are actually rather diverse. Age ranges anywhere from first grade students to eighth graders preparing for the Sacrament of Confirmation. There is an obvious ratio difference between males and females, with there being more girls than boys every class. This can create a different dynamic within the classroom, because often times the girls tend to talk and participate more, while the boys passively sit and either listen or daydream while teaching is in progress. It requires extra effort on the part of the teachers to get all students actively engaged when this is noticed. The ethnic background of the students is not very diverse. There are a few African American students, but otherwise, ethnicity does not play a very significant role in PREP. At Saint Anne School, the socioeconomic background is perhaps the most diverse demographic. The students that we teach come from Horizon, Wachter, Simle, and some from Mandan Middle School. The majority are from Simle because of the schools’ proximity to each other. Because of Saint Anne’s location in the city, there are a significant number of families coming from low SES backgrounds. It can be observed with the naked eye, in students’ physical appearance, but also through speech and things they say about home life. This also probably contributes to some of the cognitive disabilities. There are no students with physical limitations, as far as I have been able to tell, but there are many students with either a cognitive disability or limitation. Each year, in my teaching, I have had at least one students who has attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. There are some teachers who have children with autism, ADHD, ODD, or a learning disability. One particular student in a 5th grade class has severe autism spectrum disorder, and leaves the class almost every week because something is “stupid.” The other week I asked why the game was stupid, and he said because “It doesn’t make sense and those girls are cheating.” It made me very aware of the limitations that his disability causes him.

 In the Saint Anne School environment, there are not many adaptations that have been made to the physical environment. However, there are rooms in which students are allowed to sit on the carpet, exercise balls, or in desks and chairs that are suitable for their age. This has allowed students to engage in the program more fully. Especially in 7th grade, we allow our students to sit on the floor, because we teach in the music room. We gave them a choice between the floor and chairs, seeing that both options could be fair. They chose to sit on the floor because they sit in desks all day, which we agreed was a good choice, as long as they still focused on what was being taught. The advantage here can be seen in light of classroom management. It is a valued classroom management technique to give students choices, that way, when there is a situation in which it is better that I, as a teacher, tell them what they will do, students will respect the decision more because I had given them the opportunity to make many environmental and educational decisions in the classroom and in assessment.

 A new system that PREP implemented last year was the use of two video programs for the 7th and 8th grade Confirmation preparation and Confirmation programs. I am a firm believer that the use of these two programs has enhanced our curriculum instruction in the Saint Anne environment. Saint Anne School has not updated many things. It does have ActivBoards and fairly updated netbooks and laptop computers, but there are not many tools that students can use to enhance their education. This program is very engaging. Students in this program come after about 6 hours of school each week. By the time they come to PREP, they are not super excited to sit through yet another hour of school. The video program gives prompting question guides, activities, and journal activities to enhance student engagement and enable teachers to instruct the students in a much more suitable environment. In order for students to be successful, they need to be actively involved and engaged in the classroom. By implementing question guides and lesson activities in addition to having a short video, the students are automatically engaged in this classroom setting. I have noticed a significant difference in student interest which, in teaching religion, is one of the most important aspects.

 The Church of Saint Anne has several teachers from the public and private school systems volunteering. With this said, we have noted and begun implementing certain interventions to involve the family and community more in PREP. To bring PREP into the home, especially in the Confirmation program, we send a set of 10 questions home with our students that they are supposed to discuss with the family. Questions like, “What do you think it means to be a saint?’, or “How is religion seen in your family?” This is very important to get families firstly, involved in their child’s learning and secondly, getting them to take responsibility for the religious education in the family and outside of PREP. I have spoken with several students in which they share with me that they talked about it with their parents and/or siblings and in some, very few, cases, the students and family develop an intervention themselves, planning on going to mass more or pray together, which is exactly what we desire from this intervention.

Another way in which we have tried to involve families in PREP is by requiring parents to attend a monthly session entitled Catholic for a Reason, which is an hour and a half talk given by our parish priest, Father Wayne Sattler, in which he addresses certain issues or important aspects of the Catholic faith. One of the biggest challenges we face in PREP is parental involvement. The complicated task is determining whether these parents are not involved because of the diverse factors threaded in their lives or because it is religious education, and that reason solely deters them. In Saint Anne’s situation, there are more parents who do not truly see the importance of faith formation than do. Now, requiring parents of eighth graders to attend “Catholic for a Reason” has been fruitful in several situations. Parents who were not Catholic have decided to continue with RCIA and others have begun going to mass as a family. However, even though the meeting is mandatory, not all parents come. There is only so much we can do to try to assure parents that their involvement in their child’s religious education is the number one factor in retention and continual involvement in the Catholic faith.

I started teaching in PREP because I wanted students to fall in love with the Catholic faith just as I did when I was around their age. The minds of middle school students are so malleable, and faith formation is vital, especially in a society that tries to eliminate and persecute people for having moral standards. Since I began teaching, my philosophy and methods of instruction have changed significantly. For one thing, I have learned a lot in my education classes which has allowed me to practice certain techniques and engagement activities in the classroom. For example, aside from watching the videos, I really try to implement classroom management procedures. From day one, I started class with beginning and ending classroom procedures. I also begin every class with a “Respond To” prompt or review question. In this, I have also decided that it is important for my students to know that I am aware of the diversity in each of their lives. In this way, I have begun some of the “Respond To’s” with a segment I like to call, “Ordinary Facts in Extraordinary Lives.” I explained to my students that I want to know about them. I asked them to journal about something they did that weekend or in the past week that may not be perceived as “cool,” but that they really enjoyed doing and wanted to share with me. I understand that there are students in my class whose parents are going through divorce, whose home lives are not safe, who live very frugally, or whose parents don’t have jobs. This I can carry over to my future classroom. Another experience that I can carry over to my future classrooms occurred 2 weeks ago. After 4 weeks of PREP, we got a new student. This new student seemed perfectly normal. He acted just like every other student in the program, which I just associated with every other boy. However, after class, the Director of Religious education filled us in on why he hadn’t been in classes before this point. His parents are going through a divorce, his mom got a new boyfriends who had been in jail recently, his mom decided to sell the house they just built, his mother and aunt are fighting about the lack of faith in their family, his parents are constantly arguing, and his mom tells him about all the bad things his dad has done. My eyes were wide open. How could I, an educator, just assume that this child with nice clothes and good behavior is living a normal life? I told my brother about what I learned, and as I was talking, I had a sudden realization. How many of my students that I think live totally normal lives are experiencing similar or worse things than this other boy? I decided that, from that point on, that I MUST bring love and joy into the classroom. Every day, no matter what is going on in my life, bringing love and logic into the classroom is extremely important for all students.

My diversity experience has indeed been a fruitful one. It has provided me with the opportunity to expand my horizons and develop skills in working with a diverse culture and diverse students that I would not have otherwise been able to do. Practicing classroom management techniques, getting the weekly opportunity to be in front of a classroom, and playing a key role in involving parents in their child’s education are all ways in which this has helped me become a better educator. I am extraordinarily grateful for this opportunity. It has definitely helped me shape my teaching philosophy and view of the field.