Self-Assessment Following the Practicum Experience

I feel that I have demonstrated tremendous growth during my practicum experience. Having completed over 45 hours of instruction in a pullout classroom for identified gifted students, I am more confident in my abilities to deliver instruction for students of high ability. My initial goals for this course were to become more adept at pacing lessons, making informed instructional decisions following formative assessments, selecting curricular materials for the gifted, and making spontaneous decisions during teaching related to students’ responses to questions and on assignments.

My cooperating teacher indicated that she felt little, if any, improvement was warranted in the pacing of my lessons when I verbalized this concern to her. She expressed that I am very intuitive in the lesson ideas that I had for her students, and that she thought I spent an appropriate amount of time on each activity with them. In hindsight, I believe that my pacing concern was related to my second practicum goal of bettering my ability to spontaneously address students’ verbal responses made during instruction and written responses on in-class assignments. After further consideration, I realized that my perceived difficulty in pacing could be attributed to the trepidation I experienced while teaching of not being able to respond in the most accurate or appropriate way when students asked a question or made an insightful or slightly inaccurate comment about a topic of study. I addressed this goal by spending a great deal of time planning each of my lessons in great detail in the initial weeks of the practicum in terms of content, as well as anticipating students’ responses. As I progressed through the practicum and had additional conversations with my cooperating teacher, she suggested ways of approaching lessons that would better help me to respond to students’ comments in relation to the specific content I was teaching. When I taught 5th grade students about circumference, for example, she
advised me to approach the material in relation to what the students had learned about area of quadrilaterals previously as a way of directing students’ responses to one particular topic. This suggestion made my anticipation of student responses more manageable, as I then guided my questions to one specific domain of math. I internalized what my cooperating teacher taught me later in the practicum when I taught a 3rd grade lesson about perseverance. After introducing this concept, I chose a specific topic (i.e., persuading a friend to persevere in learning to swim) to guide their responses about the importance of this characteristic. In effect, I still allowed for many different responses about the importance of this topic despite limiting the scope of students’ responses. By the final week of the practicum, I could perceive a noticeable increase in my level of comfort in responding to students’ answers and questions as they arose. I grew in my confidence and ability to ask open-ended questions of students that allowed for many interpretations of a situation or problem.

My reflection on using pre and postassessment data to make informed instructional decisions addresses this personal goal for the practicum in detail. As I gained a greater familiarity with the students in my practicum setting, I was better able to meet my goal of providing structured, yet open-ended questions for them to consider that also applied to their interests. As an example, it was very apparent after the first poetry lesson I taught to the 5th grade Language Arts students that they were highly interested in and observant of patterns. After noting this interest, I began to ask students to consider the patterns they observed in particular styles with one another. In the area of written assignments, I improved my ability to evaluate and follow up with students regarding their responses on formative assessments in several instances. There was one occasion in particular when 5th grade Language Arts students did not meet my expectations for a homework assignment that required them to select a song of their
choice and write a paragraph explaining how it was like a narrative poem. Nearly all of the students only superficially addressed the aspects of their chosen song that were like a narrative poem, so I selected a song and wrote a model paragraph of what I had been expecting and asked the students to redo the assignment. The work they produced on their second completion of the assignment was great improvement from their first effort, and demonstrated to me the importance of defining clear, specific expectations for students’ performance. I experienced a further indication of the necessity of clearly delineating criteria for students’ work when I created a through rubric for evaluating 5th grade students’ poetry portfolios at the end of a poetry unit I taught them. Having the rubric on hand facilitated my grading of their work and was a clear means of conveying students’ grades to them. The rubric was also a visual validation of the grades I assigned to individual students.

I also grew in the area of using assessment data specifically as it pertains to the identification of students eligible to receive gifted services. In Williamsburg-James City County, students are formally identified as gifted in the spring of 4th grade. Beginning in the 3rd grade, they may be considered for receiving pullout instruction in for Math and/or Language Arts based on results on the Cognitive Abilities Test (CogAT) taken in the spring of 2nd grade, or recommendations from their parents and/or regular classroom teacher. Because I completed my practicum in the spring, the identification process of 4th grade students was well under way when I began observing my cooperating teacher and teaching in her classroom. Consequently, I witnessed several instances of her acting in an administrative capacity by formally assessing several of her students to determine if they would be eligible for gifted services. On several instances, students returned permission forms that had been sent home to their parents inquiring if they would allow their child to receive gifted instruction if found eligible for them. I observed
my teacher’s administration of the Screening Assessment for Gifted Elementary Students (SAGES), a standardized test of verbal abilities, to 4th graders who had exhibited high CogAT scores. I also observed her administer the Test of Mathematical Abilities for Gifted Students (TOMAGS) to these students. She also administered the Otis Lennon School Abilities Test (OLSAT) to students who had low CogAT scores in the 2nd grade as an alternate means of validating their placement in the Visions gifted program. My cooperating teacher further emphasized the importance of using alternative assessments to grant students (especially those of low socioeconomic status and minority backgrounds) entrance into the gifted program. This notion had first been conveyed in my classes in gifted education. As an example, I learned that my practicum placement recently began using results from the Virginia Standards of Learning tests as a means for considering minority students as eligible for the Visions program because these students have typically received scores at or below the proficient level. Two of her 4th grade Language Arts students were African-American boys who received Pass/Advanced scores on their Language Arts SOL tests in the 3rd grade, yet would not have been deemed eligible for the Visions program based on their CogAT scores. One of these students scored above the 99th percentile on the SAGES test she administered. He also responded in a very creative and elaborate way to an assessment I gave to the 4th grade Language Arts students following a lesson on Langston Hughes’ Dream Deferred poem that asked students to create their own description of what happens to a dream that has been deferred. His response and drawing, included below, are indicative of the ability alternate open-ended assignments have to demonstrate the promise for high potential of students have who might not ordinarily be considered eligible for gifted services based on more conventional standardized ability and achievement tests.
Finally, I grew in the area of selecting existing curricular materials to use with students of high ability, as well as creating my own during my practicum. In teaching lessons from The College of William and Mary’s Center for Gifted Education’s Language Arts units, I became more familiar with the units themselves and their models for teaching. While these materials had already been developed for the target population of gifted students, I gained experience in differentiating existing curricular materials for students of regular ability. The Virginia Extended Scope and Sequence for 6th grade Math provides an exploratory activity related to integers that calls upon students to compete with one another to move 10 spaces on a number line based on cards that they pull that has a positive or a negative number on it. I increased the level of challenge for this activity for the 5th grade Math students by including cards with numbers that had absolute value signs around them, which required a higher level of reasoning than the activity as written in the Scope and Sequence. I also required that students move a total of 30 spaces on a number line that spanned from -30 to 30 (rather than -10 to 10 as the original activity specified) in order to win the game. I also created some lessons entirely on my own, as was the case with the poetry unit the 5th grade Language Arts students completed. The SOLs for 5th Language Arts simply stated that students should read and write rhymed and unrhymed poetry. I devised a series of lessons that explored narrative poetry, limericks, cinquains, and haiku and allowed for exploratory and open-ended activities that encouraged students to make a personal and high-level connection with the content we studied. The haiku lesson, for example, involved students going into the school butterfly garden with digital cameras to capture a scene that spoke to them in some way, to write a haiku about it, and create a PowerPoint slide of the photo and haiku. The results from this assignment were impressive, and many students commented that it was a favorite activity.
In conclusion, I feel that I have evidenced much growth in my progress toward becoming a teacher of the gifted. Although I still have much to learn as far as how to best meet the needs of these exceptional students, I gained much practical experience and knowledge from observing and conversing with my cooperating teacher and teaching in her classroom. As a result, I feel better prepared to teach students of high ability in either an inclusion or self-contained classroom.
One student’s response to and accompanying drawing for the assignment, “What happens to a dream deferred?”

4th Grade Visions

What Happens to a Dream Deferred?

Think about how you have felt when you had a dream deferred, or put off for later. What did you feel like on the inside? Use the organizer below to write down your feelings and to create your metaphor. The example we talked about is provided for you to jumpstart your brain.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>How I feel</th>
<th>Things that look how I feel</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Like a goopy mess. All my strength that has been holding me together is gone.</td>
<td>Runny ice cream someone left on the counter for later</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

What happens to a dream deferred? Does it melt like warm ice cream forgotten on the counter? Does it fly away like a bird that was released from a cage.

Wow! Fantastic description.