

EDU 390: Diversity Practicum Summary

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Diversity really is all around us. Though some people think diversity is synonymous with race, yet diversity encompasses many components, such as religion, health, socioeconomic status, heritage, race, gender, location, and more. I have found this to be very true in my practicum experience at both Wachter Middle School and Jeanette Myhre Elementary School. There were many aspects that made this experience valuable and one to remember: the demographics of the populations, environmental adaptations, instructional adaptations, and successful interventions used in the settings. In addition, these elements related to the course standards, mission statements, objectives and outcomes for this course. In all, there were many learning experiences that I will carry with me into my future classroom and profession.

#### **Demographics**

The demographics of the environments that I observed in were very different yet very alike. At Wachter Middle School, I tutored 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> graders in the AVID program. This was very interesting because I saw the differences in maturity and work ethic that existed in kids only one year apart in age and grade. Seventh graders are roughly 13-years-old, and this is a huge year because it is their first teenage year. Psychologically, the transition to being a teenager is huge because there is a false sense of greater independence and wisdom. Eighth graders are an entirely different story, for though they are only 14-years-old, they are suddenly the oldest kids in the middle school. In both classes, the gender distribution from boys to girls was about even. Typically, I tend to see more males in the AVID classrooms, but this year was different. For the 7<sup>th</sup> grade class, about 50% of the students are white, 30-35% of the class is Native American, and about 15% are Hispanic or African American. For the 8<sup>th</sup> grade class, about 50% of the class is Native American, 30% are white, and roughly 20% are Hispanic or African American students.

This is very fascinating, for when I was in school, approximately 90% of all my classes were white children. As far as socioeconomic statuses go, I would say that 70-80% of both the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade classes are of low socioeconomic status. The remaining 20-30% would represent the middle class. Many of the kids in these classes can't afford new pencils or binders after theirs have broken, and the teacher is often making accommodations to get them the supplies they need. In the AVID classes, I did not notice any physical disabilities, and hardly any students had visible cognitive challenges. The main conditions that I see with these students are ADHD, ADD, depression, and some with behavioral disorders. I would not consider these limitations, though, for I see the students grow stronger as people each time they overcome the setbacks that may be present because of the conditions they have or situations they have been through. For example, one student in the 8<sup>th</sup> grade had visible ADHD, and he brings the excessive energy and movement he has in him to bring life to an otherwise, sometimes dull environment. It breaks my heart to see the mental illness that is present in many of these students, yet I feel I can empathize with them, as it is something I struggle with myself. Hearing the trauma these students have experienced has encouraged me to receive more training to become a trauma-sensitive educator. Overall, this was a very diverse environment, and it was one I did not experience as a child. I am fortunate to have worked with this amazing group of students.

When I followed the behavior specialist Tiffany Perrin at Jeannette Myhre Elementary School, the students were between the ages of six and eleven. I noticed that there were slightly more male students in the school as a whole, but classrooms seemed to do a good job of making gender distribution as even as possible. Tiffany works with the students who have behavioral challenges, and I did not see a great disparity between males and females in regards to which gender seems to have more behavioral challenges. From what I saw while observing, less than

half the students are white while the rest are mainly Native American and Hispanic students. This was a shock that I greatly welcomed, for it is so great to see this diverse population in the Bismarck Public Schools system. The students were all so kind to me, and I even made a few young friends. I would guess the majority of the students at this school are of low socioeconomic status, for all students are given free breakfast and lunch at the school. In addition, the low socioeconomic status is apparent by lack of parent involvement due to the jobs worked by the parents, as well as how students dress, what parents can afford, transportation, etcetera. I did not encounter any students with apparent physical disabilities, but there were numerous students with cognitive disabilities. A great number of students at this school experience trauma on a daily basis, so I saw students with PTSD, emotional disturbances, severe behavioral disorders, anxiety, anger problems, ADD, learning disabilities, and more. This is heartbreaking to see, for it seems so unfair that these innocent children have been through, and seen, so much that they now have these extremely challenging disorders to manage on top of the trauma. If nothing else, this experience taught me to appreciate the constancy in my life and the normalness of my situation. I highly enjoyed viewing the EL program, for they did a great job of incorporating these students in the classroom in many ways. I have so much compassion for these students and their situations, and it has inspired me to want to work with this population in my profession. My dream would be to have Tiffany Perrin's job someday.

### **Environmental Adaptations**

Working with AVID at Wachter Middle School, there were very few environmental adaptations that were made to increase the students' success. Part of this is because the students in the AVID program are so bright, initially, that they do not need as many accommodations or enhancements, but also, there is less funding at Wachter for such adaptations. Because AVID is a

college preparedness course, the teacher has flags of about 50 different universities hung up around her room, as well as helpful tips and tricks posted around for the students' benefit. Of course, she has an agenda, I Can statements, objectives and tasks written out for students to help them with transitions, keeping track of homework, and overall anxiety. Other than that, there were not any other environmental adaptations in this AVID classroom.

At Jeannette Myhre, the population is a lot more challenging, and as I said, the students have been through much more trauma that attributes to their need for environmental adaptations. The school really does a great job at making the environment as conducive for learning and success as possible. I so appreciate teachers who go above and beyond the call of duty to make learning and succeeding a positive experience for students. I hope to be this kind of teacher. Some of the adaptations included alternative seating for students, noise cancelling headphones, limited noise and light stimulation, fidgets placed around the room for students to use, individualized seating arrangements, and more (see Appendix A for common environmental adaptations). The rooms were visually appealing and calming for the students, for the school felt warm and cozy. This is ideal for students who have experienced trauma. Overall, the students seemed much readier to learn with the environmental adaptations than without, and I will use some of these adaptations in my own classroom.

### **Instructional Adaptations**

The AVID program is all about instructional adaptations that make students more successful. The tutorial process as a whole is an instructional adaptation that greatly helps the students. There are two main instructional adaptations that I will focus on, the Tutorial Request Form and Cornell notes. Both of these elements are critical parts of the AVID program, and both aide with instruction in AVID as well as in other core classes. The Tutorial Request Form (TRF)

is what the students use prior to and during tutorials. This form is filled out with a point of confusion they have from another class or test, and they must work out the problem as far as they can go until they get stuck. Then, during tutorials, the students present their points of confusion that are on the TRFs, and their team asks them questions to help them get to the answer. To see what a TRF looks like, view Appendix B. Then, students are required to take a certain amount of Cornell notes per week, and these are highly organized notes that are supposed to make studying for quizzes and tests easier, as well as completing homework. After looking through many students' Cornell notes, I see that it is a very effective way to take notes, and I appreciate the way AVID utilizes them to help students succeed. To see what the Cornell note format looks like, see Appendix C. As a whole, tutorials are a very unique instructional strategy that utilizes tutors and the students' peers to help students find the answers to things they are confused about. Tutorials utilize a questioning technique that is not common to the general education classroom, and I have seen great achievement with the strategy. This makes the students think more critically, and it makes the learning experience more meaningful. I believe all teachers could learn a thing or two from the AVID program in terms of instructional adaptations.

At Jeannette Myhre, I was able to observe a few instructional adaptations that made learning easier for the students. First of all, many teachers used graphic organizers and pictures for nearly everything. This is great for young kids who need information to be in a more appealing visual. Next, the teachers were always giving additional demonstrations of how to do things for students who needed to see it again. In addition, they provided a variety of differentiated materials knowing that all students are not at the same academic level. Then, I saw a teacher who went absolutely above and beyond to use positive reinforcement when instructing students. I could tell that the students were much more receptive to him because of the kindness

he showed and the way he encouraged them in everything they did. Finally, I saw many teachers checking for understanding constantly throughout their lessons. Some teachers were definitely better at this than others, but I saw a very positive difference in the students whose teachers knew where they were in terms of understanding compared to those teachers who did not.

Unfortunately, I did not get to observe as many instructional adaptations at the school as I would have liked to because I worked mainly with Tiffany Perrin and students with behavior challenges, but this was a great experience nonetheless.

### **Successful Interventions**

In addition to the amazing environmental and instructional adaptations that can be utilized in a classroom to maximize success, there are a variety of successful interventions that can be used outside that classroom. I did not see any intervention strategies being used at Wachter Middle School, for I was only in the AVID classroom for the tutorial process. However, I saw a few different successful interventions at Jeannette Myhre when I observed and volunteered. Because Tiffany Perrin is the behavior specialist and the professional I followed, the majority of her job is about conducting successful interventions. The school has come up with an “amend slip” which is used in many cases when a student does something of concern, such as bullying, physical or verbal aggression, and any other inappropriate behaviors. The teachers, or Tiffany, will write up an amend slip that explains the situation from all involved parties’ points-of-view, how it was handled with the students, what the student thinks is a good way to solve the problem, what the actual consequences are, and how the parent will be notified and work with the school to solve the problem. Typically, the school always opts to have a parent meeting. This meeting is crucial for parents and students to know the seriousness of the situations at hand, and it typically gets the job done. In addition, the amend slip is a great way of documenting the steps

the school takes in times of student crisis. I have learned that documentation is everything. The amend slip is great, but what I loved the most is when Tiffany would pull students out of class who were having difficulties and talk to them with such respect about their situation. She would be extremely firm with them in explaining that the behavior is not appropriate, but she would also make sure to show respect to the student by listening to all sides of the story, using compassionate language, modeling the appropriate response, and being rational with the student when it came to consequences and explaining how the student would correct the situation.

The biggest lesson I learned from watching Tiffany was the way she saw each student she dealt with as a “good kid”. She didn’t see them as their race, religion, parents, past, etcetera. Instead, she viewed them as human beings that are inherently good, just in need of a little guidance. This is why I really want her job. Tiffany knows how to work her students to make them more receptive to what she says, and many of the techniques I watched her use I remember reading in Nieto’s book, *Finding Joy in Teaching Students of Diverse Backgrounds*. The quote that says, “She tries never to humiliate her students if they misbehave or threaten to call home or to call them out if they haven’t done their homework, knowing that their ‘walls will go up’ immediately,” and this was exactly what I witnessed Tiffany Perrin do with her students (Nieto, 2013, p. 39). I noticed the amazing relationships she has formed with the students, even those she does not work with, and I can see the way some students view her as a parent or guardian. The students need her. In addition to the interventions Tiffany provides, there is a sensory calm-down room that is used when students escalate in the classroom. This is utilized when a student needs to be separated from his or her peers and need additional help to calm down, either because they are harming themselves or others. In conjunction, the sensory tools in this room are also used for positive reinforcement when students who commonly have behavioral problems perform the jobs



they are supposed to do throughout the day without issue. These students are awarded “breaks” where they can choose which sensory items they want to use for a specified amount of time. I witnessed the Crisis Prevention and Intervention team be called to a kindergartner who was yelling and punching a teacher and at risk of harming herself, and this student was safely de-escalated and brought to the sensory room. After the sensory time was over, the student was required to perform three tasks designated by the teacher to be done outside of the classroom, under Tiffany’s supervision, that showed the teacher the student was ready to return calmly to her classroom. In this case, the student was required to finish a writing assignment and play two math games. Because Jeannette Myhre has a mainly low-income, highly diverse population, it can sometimes be hard for the school to work on intervention strategies in the home or community. Unfortunately, many of the students’ parents do not care about the success of the student, so the teachers have to do the best they can with those students in the classroom setting alone. These were the main intervention strategies that I saw used, and I found them all to be highly effective in circumventing negative behaviors as well as correcting existing behavioral problems and incidences.

### **Connections to Course**

As one can tell from this in-depth explanation as well as my journaling from the experience, my practicum experience connects heavily to many areas presented in the course syllabus. There are two InTASC standards that I thought connected best to my practicum experience. Standard #2 says, “The teacher uses understanding of individual differences and diverse cultures and communities to ensure inclusive learning environments that allow each learned to reach his/her full potential” (Taylor, 2018, p. 4). Also, InTASC Standard #9 says, “The teacher is a reflective practitioner who uses evidence to continually evaluate his/her practice,

particularly the effects of his/her choices and actions on others (students, families, and other professionals in the learning community), and adapts practice to meet the needs of each learner” (Taylor, 2018, p. 4). These standards go hand-in-hand, for learning about the individual differences and diverse cultures at the schools I observed in helped me to become a more reflective teacher who grew as a person because of this experience. All of the state program standards connected greatly to my experiences because the entire practicum was dripping in diversity in every possible way. This submersion in differing cultures is exactly what I would have hoped to get out of this practicum experience. As a student who is majoring in elementary and special education, I was very fortunate to observe a multitude of students with exceptional needs, and therefore, I was able to connect my experiences heavily to the NBPTS Standard III, and CEC Standard 3 and 5 (Taylor, 2018, p. 2). These standards are about working with learners with exceptional needs to adapt the school setting in ways that make the students more successful, as well as being an advocate for those students and the changes that need to take place in the special education and general education system. All standards, objectives, and outcomes addressed in the syllabus were acknowledged by my practicum experience, but the ones I described had the greatest connection.

The servant leadership aspect of my education at the University of Mary was greatly enhanced by this practicum experience. I found myself praying about the students I was doing my best to serve at both Wachter and Jeannette Myhre. I will not lie and say that I can relate with the trauma and adversity these students have felt to any degree, but I will say that I felt connected to them in Christ. This allowed me to truly delve into servant leadership by showing students Jesus Christ and the Benedictine values through my words and actions. Though I cannot speak to my own beliefs in the classroom, I know it is important for me to show these students

the love that Jesus has for them, regardless, and I want to model what it is like to live in His image. With that being said, the largest connection from the syllabus to the experience is that of the Servant Leadership Experience (Taylor, 2018, p. 3). This practicum ignited a fire in my heart to serve more and to devote my life to serving those who are different from me or those who have not been as fortunate as me. I hope to continue to reflect Christ's love when I have my own classroom, for curriculum alone does not make upstanding citizens, mothers, fathers, neighbors, or friends.

### **Summary and Key Experiences**

Looking back on the experience, I worked with a very diverse demographic. I am grateful for this because I have never been exposed to this population before. When I was going to school, everybody looked and talked like me, and most of my peers had similar familial situations. Fortunately, I was able to observe this diversity in a middle school and elementary school, and this brought an interesting perspective to this practicum. There are immense differences in the two age groups, and seeing how some negative behaviors evolve from elementary to middle school makes me want to work even harder with my elementary schoolers to correct the behaviors. I was also able to see environmental and instructional adaptations in both settings. Elementary school teachers have a great opportunity to make instructional adaptations because they remain with the same group of students throughout the day, unlike middle-school teachers. The intervention strategies that I witnessed at Jeannette Myhre were unlike any I have seen elsewhere. I truly believe the school is trying its best to work against students' negative dispositions to help the students succeed. Tiffany Perrin and the rest of the teachers seem to recognize the hand that each student has been dealt, and they work tirelessly to show those students compassion and work to their strengths. I saw the action demonstrated in

this quote at Jeannette Myhre, that says, "...thriving teachers recognize that all students, including students of diverse backgrounds, have assets that they bring with them to school, and they build on those assets" (Nieto, 2013, p. xv). Overall, this practicum experience aligned perfectly with the standards, outcomes and objectives for this course, and it was everything and more that I wished to get out of the class.

It is challenging for me to pinpoint exact observations and experiences that I will carry with me to my future classroom, for I truly believe each minute of my observations continued to positively shape me as a teacher. Though I probably will not work in a middle school, the experience of working with many diverse students who intend to be first-generation college goers is inspiring. I will do my best in every classroom I teach in to encourage students in the pursuit of higher education, regardless of background, race, family, or religion. In addition, I will take the questioning techniques that are required for tutorials into my future classroom. It is so important for students to think critically rather than be given the answer, and I also think that it is important for students to know how to ask the right questions. From Jeannette Myhre, I will take every experience with me. Tiffany Perrin was the best person I could have observed, and I truly left each observation in awe. I will take with me the way she handled conflict with students and all intervention strategies that I saw used. I want to have the kinds of relationships with all students that Tiffany has with hers. It is my job to learn about them, care about them, and fight for them. The more I observed in these diverse environments, the more I realized how much I need to be a powerful, loud advocate for my students, especially those who are disadvantaged. To get a clear idea how much the observation at Jeannette Myhre meant to me, I got very emotional writing this paper and thinking back on the amazing students and faculty I met. It really is true what Nieto says, "Nevertheless, all teachers can find joy in teaching students of

diverse backgrounds. It takes a humility, willingness to learn, an openness to acknowledging and valuing the tremendous assets of students of diverse backgrounds, and a commitment to public education” (Nieto, 2013, p. xiv). I realized that working in this school is my dream job, and I now feel confident that special education and working with students with behavioral problems is what I am called to do. I cannot wait to observe more at Jeannette Myhre and other diverse environments next school year.

References

Nieto, Sonia (2013). *Finding Joy in Teaching Students of Diverse Backgrounds*; Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

University of Mary. (2018). *EDU 390: Diversity Practicum Syllabus*. Bismarck, North Dakota: Professor Mike Taylor, Ph.D.

Appendix A



Alternative seating



Fidgets



Noise cancelling headphones



Appendix B

# Tutorial Request Form A (TRF)

## Pre-work Inquiry (Before the Tutorial)



|  |                       |                                   |                                     |                        |                    |
|--|-----------------------|-----------------------------------|-------------------------------------|------------------------|--------------------|
| Subject:   |                       |                                   | Name:                               |                        |                    |
| Standard/Essential Question:                                       |                       |                                   | AMD Period:                         |                        |                    |
|  |                       |                                   | Date:                               |                        |                    |
| Pre-Work Inquiry<br>_____ /12                                      | Resources<br>_____ /1 | Collaborative Inquiry<br>_____ /2 | Note-Taking<br>_____ /3             | Reflection<br>_____ /1 | Total<br>_____ /25 |
| Initial/Original Question:   |                       |                                   | Source, Page # and Problem #: _____ |                        |                    |
|  |                       |                                   |                                     |                        | /1                 |
| Key Academic Vocabulary/Definition Associated With Topic/Question: |                       |                                   |                                     |                        |                    |
| 1.   |                       |                                   |                                     |                        |                    |
| 2.   |                       |                                   |                                     |                        | /2                 |
| What I Know About My Question:                                     |                       |                                   |                                     |                        |                    |
| 1.   |                       |                                   |                                     |                        |                    |
| 2.   |                       |                                   |                                     |                        | /2                 |
| Critical Thinking About Initial Question:                          |                       |                                   | Identify General Process and Steps: |                        |                    |
|  |                       |                                   |                                     |                        |                    |
| /3   |                       |                                   | /2                                  |                        |                    |
| Question From Point of Confusion:                                  |                       |                                   |                                     |                        |                    |
|  |                       |                                   |                                     |                        | /2                 |



