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Student Teaching Reflective Essay

Throughout my time as a student teacher, I found myself making comparisons between growing as a teacher and learning to play the trombone. When I learned to play the trombone, it was only in the very beginning stages where I was naively convinced that I was good at it naturally without hard work. However, pretty quickly as you learn what notes and rhythm should sound like, it becomes pretty apparent with almost every note and sequence you play how much you have to learn. And it becomes frustrating how much you can hear yourself doing it wrong, but it is a slow and painful process before you begin to make split second adjustments to improve your sound and even longer before you do it right the first time. I felt this way as I developed my craft of teaching. I was constantly doing things that I started noticing after my first week were far from perfect. I wasn't explaining directions as succinctly and explicitly as I had been taught in class. I wasn't a commanding presence at the front of the classroom. I struggled to support students in one-on-one conversations. All of these things I was doing felt wrong at the moment or after, but it was always too late to make an adjustment, or I just didn't know what adjustment to make. Slowly, as I took over more responsibility in all three of my periods of World History, I felt myself starting to make adjustments in between periods. Then, I made adjustments during periods. Lastly, I started to feel proud of my lessons from start to finish and could begin to think about how I would make them great because I thought they were already solid. This last step has only really happened in the very end of my student teaching and still, I find myself having lesson plans that I plan from scratch that feel like a disaster. However, I always feel as though I am able to make adjustments for the following period and make sure to take space to reflect on what I was asking of students and why those expectations were not met, or why maybe those were the wrong expectations entirely.

One of the most valuable lessons that I gained from my student teaching was that teaching is a craft. Teaching is something that you do not do passively, being a teacher in a school building is a skill that you can hone. You may have good days (and you definitely will have bad), but there is always forward progress to be made towards better supporting your students and their learning. The time I spent at Central High School with my cooperating teacher, Sophie Date, gave me this opportunity to really meaningfully understand this.

I could say a lot about my teaching practice that I have spent the past 3 and a half months (and many more before that) developing. However, the most core principle that I hold is that my teaching practice is just that, a practice. I'm excited for future years where I feel as though I can be more confident in my approach to teaching. However, I don't think that I will quite ever reach a place where I feel as though I have mastered the profession of teaching. A lot of this belief comes from the breadth and depth of the field of education that my experience with the Swarthmore College Education Department. This department opened my eyes to the complexities of the education system and all of the multitude of ways a teacher can improve both as a facilitator of learning and as person working for a more just society. I see a lot of room to grow as I consider how to be a facilitator of learning. As an early career teacher, I know that developing justice-oriented practices are potentially my most important room for growth.

This question of justice in the classroom is informed by fundamental texts like Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Freire offers the problem posing method of teaching as an alternative to the banking method. The former asks students and teachers to learn together from each other, where the latter posits that teachers (as the keeper of knowledge) must bank

information upon students (the receivers of knowledge). After a semester of student teaching, I understand that the banking method is certainly a default. I felt the constant friction of trying to engage in a problem posing method in a school system that really heavily emphasizes the banking method. It is important to admit that I didn't always engage in the exact practices I know are most important to me in my teaching. When I was overwhelmed with lesson planning and classroom management, I felt myself fall back on the idea that I know what the kids are going to learn and that I need to impart that knowledge on them. This is a habit I hope to break early and one of the more important areas for growth in my practice. I've noticed that as I start to settle into teaching, it becomes easier to catch my breath and be less oriented around a banking method, but it is still a challenge and is an area that I strive for improvement in.

Throughout my student teaching experience, the importance of Culturally Responsive Teaching became increasingly clear. Culturally Responsive Teaching is a term coined by Geneva Gay but heavily influenced by the work of Gloria Ladson-Billings around Culturally Relevant Pedagogy. I first read Ladson-Billings during the fall semester of my freshman year at Swarthmore College. This scholarship has greatly informed my practice as a teacher. I believe that collective empowerment is a fundamental part of the classroom, and this happens through Culturally Relevant Pedagogy and taken a step further by Culturally Responsive Pedagogy. I want to grow a lot more in this area. I have a conceptual understanding of the importance of this work and feel as though in my daily practice I implement the practices that these scholars recommend. However, as I begin to plan and implement wholly original lesson plans, I hope that this will grow as a practice that is baked into the content that I teach as well as my daily practices.

I hope to engage with Culturally Responsive Teaching by also creating lessons and material that teach social studies in an intellectually honest way, while maintaining a lens of criticality (Gholdy Muhammad). I value intellectual honesty in my work as a Social Studies teacher. I believe in the power of teaching history and what historical thinking skills can provide for young learners. I also know that teaching history comes with a responsibility to teach it honestly and to teach it critically. While I am not concerned with my ability to do research about what is intellectually honest and honors history as a discipline, I am always growing in how to make this content appropriate and, importantly, exciting for young people.

One practice I have developed over the course of student teaching is to develop buy in from the students about what precisely "doing history" means in my classroom. I often discuss with my students about history is not about "easy answers" – there's so much work to do around investigation and answering questions that have nuanced answers. The work of historians, I tell them, comes from reading, analyzing, thinking, and writing. "Doing history" means much more than rote memorization and is actually the creation of knowledge.

I am excited to continue to find creative ways to scaffold this content and knowledge production for students. In my practice, I pull on Jerome Bruner and the concept of the spiral curriculum. Bruner explains that "any subject can be taught effectively in some intellectually honest form to any child at any stage of development." (Bruner, 1977, p. 33). I find this particularly true for history. During my student teaching experience, I was lucky enough that my cooperating teacher aligned with me on the concept of teaching history in an inquiry-based way. I led students through historical documents, supporting them through annotating the documents and constructing evidence-based claims around them. I watched students grapple with these concepts asking "well, what is the right answer?" It was a joy to watch them productively struggle with the answer being "its complicated!" However, sometimes I find myself daunted by

the task of explaining something quite complicated to my 9th graders, and I know that that is a skill that will become intuitive. I consider the work of teaching history to be really important and gives people lifelong skills of thinking about the world critically. I will never be able to teach a class every fact about history and even doing so would be fruitless because they would forget the next year (or month). However, giving students these skills is especially important considering the ways that oppression intermingles with historical documentation.

I also consider the representation of marginalized groups of people (or as Tadashi Dozono frames, “the subaltern”) in historical conversation and learning in the classroom. In “When the subaltern cannot speak: Teaching about and through historical silence”, Dozono discusses the work of teaching 9th graders the content of World History which is a challenge when faced with archival silence. The archives do not necessarily include voices of the subaltern and thus does not give representation to many marginalized students in the classroom. Beyond that, silence also creates a less robust, less critical understanding of history for every student in the classroom. I have attempted through my student teaching experience to weave in alternative ways of historical knowing. This has mostly come from discussion around oral history. I know that I have a lot of room to grow in developing this criticality and building a robust curriculum. Teaching history requires a lot of frontloading that I didn’t really have the pleasure of working with as much during my student teaching but really look forward to building as a full-time career teacher.

I have accepted a Long-Term Sub position with Central High School within their Social Studies department. I am very excited about the opportunity to continue to learn on the job and develop practices of meaningful reflection and adaptation. Taking on a new classroom in the middle of the year is a daunting task, but I will always remember the words of my students from my student teaching classroom as I left the class. Students relayed that I made them feel supported and how I made sure to explain concepts clearly. I was overwhelmed with joy when students told me that I made history fun and that they looked forward to the class. At the end of the day, one student in particular approached me and said, “even in your bad days, you really showed up for us, and you matter a lot.” I was incredibly touched by this sentiment and felt as though it was a brilliant acknowledgment of that student’s emotional awareness, but also that honest and growth-oriented teaching is something that even students understand and really appreciate.