

I. Introduction

The goal of the elementary education system is to provide children with the support and direction necessary to develop the intellect, independence, stability, skills, and motivation to thrive and be successful in childhood and the later years of their lives. The definition of “successful” varies though, and may include anything from being able to manage disabilities to achieving great awards. However, many elementary schools provide the same basic structures and supports to help all children strive towards and achieve their potential. Schools provide the basic necessities of life, space for the children to learn and move, other resources and school supplies, teams of professionals trained to meet the education, mental, and emotional needs of the children, and the classroom teacher who fights for, works with, and focuses on the students every school day. The classroom teacher is also often undervalued despite all the work he or she does for the students, the children’s parents, the administration, and the school. While it is the school system that provides the teacher for the students, it is the teacher who gives the students the guidance, enthusiasm, and aptitude for learning the things that are crucial for a meaningful life.

For this reason, it is not surprising that many people can conjure up an image of a “good” teacher they have had in their life without necessarily crediting the school where they met that person. What, though, are the qualities that this individual has to be remembered so positively? Was he or she fun, enthusiastic, or inspiring? Did she get to know and take an interest in each child individually? Did he push you to do what you thought you were not capable of? It is difficult to put into exact words why a teacher had an important impact on a life, but the reason could possibly be seen through their teaching.

As I began cultivating my interest in teaching, I wondered how and where these “good” teachers learned the methods, strategies, and principles that were effective enough to be praised and remembered after many years. I soon found that individuals pursuing a career as an elementary educator spent many more hours in the classroom than I had thought, but much less of that time was spent studying from textbooks. Student-teachers are placed into elementary classrooms alongside professional and experienced teachers to experience, firsthand, the multifaceted role of being a teacher and the many aspects of the classroom set up by the teacher that can effectively contribute to the students’ learning experiences. For this reason, I found myself in a second grade classroom at the Heath School in Brookline, MA.

The students in my second grade classroom are experiencing a year of many transitions and much growth. They are changing from dependent young children to more capable, independent, and excited learners as they prepare for 3rd grade. More than ever, the students are experiencing a need to belong as they make friends, learn about who they are, and find their place in the classroom. The teacher, in turn, has the vital role of supporting and guiding the students as they begin to **connect** with others, **contribute** to the classroom, and feel and become **capable** of dealing with social situations and completing tasks and assignments. In the book *Cooperative Discipline*, Linda Albert explains how students rely on the development of these “3C’s” for positive school experiences. In the five aspects of the classroom I address below, the achievement of these 3C’s is an underlying goal of the experiences in the classroom. The teacher helps the students to achieve these as well as the other learning goals by consistently expressing her expectations of the students.

The expectations the teacher has are based on her knowledge of the MA curriculum standards and also the developmental abilities of seven and eight year old students as described

in the book *Yardsticks*. I have found that many of the students in my classroom are described well by the descriptions of the seven and eight year old students. However, some of the students with learning disabilities compare better with the descriptions of the six year olds. There is also one nine year old student who is described well by the characteristics listed in the book and a few other students are developmentally somewhere between eight and nine. Because of the age range present in the classroom, the class is dynamic and always changing especially as children make and break friendships and explore the world around them.

II. My Observations

Preparing the Classroom and Laying the Foundation

The teacher in my 2nd grade classroom was able to set boundaries, create routines, and lay the foundation for a steady and organized classroom through careful planning before the students even stepped in the door. She used information gathered from teachers who previously had the students to anticipate the needs of individual students and the class as a whole. In these discussions with other teachers, she was able to learn about the class dynamics, conflicts, needs, effective supports, challenges, and strengths. She then applied and integrated this knowledge into various aspects of the classroom.

The room was planned based on the physical space and the anticipated needs of the students. The teacher arranged the 24 desks into four clusters of six desks in a semi circle around the rug area used for class meetings. The clusters allow the children to communicate and work together easily with one another. The arrangement of the children was also carefully considered so that major conflicts were avoided and complementary learning styles existed to help the students see different perspectives when working together. For example, concrete and abstract learners are intermingled among the groups. The clusters also require the students to

learn self-control during silent working times when they are tempted to talk to their neighbors. The students, in turn, help each other through daily routines and tasks, but conflicts and arguments do arise. I find that the clusters help manage the large group of 24 students by breaking the class into four smaller and more manageable groups. By having the students in this arrangement, it is also easier to quickly look around the room and find the student that is absent or interrupting the lesson. The children in 2nd grade are developing communication skills and relationships with peers, and they therefore need the opportunity for interaction with their peers as often as possible without hindering other learning experiences. For these reasons, I believe that this arrangement is more effective for classroom management, communication, and cooperation than isolated desks or desks in smaller or larger clusters.

The space in the room was also designated as either individual or shared as the teacher arranged the supplies. She gave the children individual desks, hooks for coats and backpacks, mailboxes, binders, folders, and bulletin board space so that they could each have pieces of the classroom that belonged to them. This helped them gain a sense of belonging and importance in the classroom as a whole. The rest of the room and resources are shared among the students which show the existence of the classroom community. The students appreciate their individual space and care for the classroom which can be seen through their words and actions. For example, the students often ask cluster mates to “please get your things off my desk.” The students also participate in the classroom jobs willingly, which include neatening the library books and cleaning scraps off of the rug. I believe this division and acknowledgement of space is necessary so that children can learn to share with and tolerate others while knowing they have a safe place of their own to return to.

The teacher also laid and reinforces the foundation of the classroom through a variety of schedules, reminders, and checklists that are both posted and given to students individually. The teacher finds these checklists and schedules to be one of the most important and invaluable tools in this particular classroom of students. There are checklists for the morning routine, how to solve math problems, and how to hold discussions appropriately. The schedules include a monthly calendar, a weekly specials list, the schedule of subjects for the day, and lists of tasks to be accomplished during subject blocks. While these tools may not be necessary for all of the children in the class, they are helpful for most and critical for the students with learning disabilities. The students have come to value their checklists and ask for them when the teacher forgets to hand them out. The students have also become accustomed to the use and purpose of the various schedules and are also flexible with changes in the schedules. I think by warning about changes in the schedules and reminding students that the schedule may change, rigidity with the schedule is avoided. I also believe that the schedules and checklists encourage the students' independence because they are more able to rely on themselves and their environment to determine what they should do doing.

Another set of schedules that exist to maintain order in the classroom are the sharing and "Star of the Week" schedules. The sharing schedule gives each child time during one morning a week to share one thing, whatever they want it to be, for a few minutes. The children appreciate this opportunity which is clear by their excitement to share. However, the children do not always choose to share every week, but I think that by knowing they have the ability to, they still have the sense of contribution and connectedness to the class. The "Star of the Week" schedule is similar, but offers one student the whole week to share various things each day and also have special privileges, such as leading the line and running errands. The teacher finds that this

prevents many problems such as the children seeing the teacher “playing favorites”, a child being overlooked or unintentionally neglected, and fights between classmates. This fair way of taking turns also prevents time from being wasted on who gets to do what because each child will have the chance to be a “Star” eventually. I agree with the teacher that this saves time, energy, and feelings while also offering students the chance to get to learn more about each classmate.

The foundation for communication has also been laid in the classroom which allows for more open conversation, constructive criticism, and engaging conversation. This was done first when the non-negotiable rules and expected consequences were discussed, determined, and established. The teacher involved the students in this aspect of classroom development so that they can express what is important and relevant to them. For example, the students did not want to be made fun of for a comment that they might make. This concept was generalized into a rule based on respect. The concept of respect was then discussed in terms of appropriate and expected behavior and what is okay do to at school versus home. In time the students were also taught that respectful discussion included responding to others and making eye contact which the teacher has them practice daily during the morning meetings and greetings. The teacher also explained how everyone has ideas and these ideas are different, which is okay. She went on to explain that ideas can be commented on whether you agree with them or not but it is *respectful* to say “I think differently than Sue because I think...” rather than “Sue was wrong because...” By offering the students examples and even giving them the chance to role play in these situations, the students were able to generalize this skill and practice it with the teacher’s guidance during the discussions. While the students did struggle with this in the beginning, which often looks like tattle-tailing, they are now able to discuss behavior problems in the classroom as well as the learning experience context. For example, students may say, “I noticed some people did not

make eye contact when they were greeting someone, but I think we should try to think about this when we do the greeting tomorrow.” I think the students’ ability to address problems and have discussions about ideas in this manner is a crucial ability to practice and develop as a lifelong skill.

The teacher was able to lay this effective and organized foundation for the classroom because she clearly and often states the expectations she has for the class as a whole and individual students. Rather than becoming frustrated when students forget what they should be working on, the teacher has them look at the schedule or reminds them in a different way to see if they respond better to a different way of thinking. For example, she might ask them to think about what they did yesterday after snack rather than looking at the posted schedule again because that child might learn and remember better by experiences than by visual information. She also clarifies the goals and purposes of the structures created in the classroom so that students know how or why to use it. For instance, she says, “Remember the checklist is for you so that you can get all the important things you need to do done and add to that list if you need to. It’s yours.” In all of these cases the teacher is prompting the students to take ownership of their thoughts, words, work, and classroom so that they can find their place.

Role of the Teacher and Formation of Relationships

The teacher has a variety of roles that include foundation layer, confidence builder, supporter, and motivator among many others. The teacher therefore builds a relationship with each student which depends upon that child. She also reaches out and develops a partnership with the parents and also helps the students build relationships between one another. However, the teacher does not have control over the perspective of the students or parents, so she must also find ways to define the intention and boundaries of the relationships. In combination, the role of

the teacher and the relationship between the teacher, students, and parents as seen by each student affects that student's motivation, viewpoint, and perception of the classroom.

The teacher recognizes the importance of strong, authentic, and appropriately personal relationships between each student and the teacher, and therefore builds these relationships by sharing information about herself and by having students share about themselves. The students write about their hopes and dreams, create descriptive self portraits, share pictures of their families, share things that are important to them, and talk about their cultures and traditions through classroom tasks and assignments early in their year so that the teacher can gain a sense of who the child is. The teacher then spends time during the day with each different child talking about something that the student said or reviewing work as a chance to open communication. While time and energy might not be equal in the development of the relationships, it is fair based on the needs of the student. The students respond easily in discussions with the teacher but do not seem to recognize the teacher's effort in building the relationship. According to *Yardsicks* by Chip Wood, children at this age enjoy this type of one-on-one conversation and rely on adults for constant reassurance. While issues do arise where a student may talk back to the teacher, the relationship has already been established and the teacher has an easier time regaining control of the situation by talking about the situation with the child. I think that these relationships are important for several reasons. First, a positive student-teacher relationship now might allow the student to have similar positive relationships with teachers later on. Secondly, when a positive relationship is built, teacher approval may affect a student's motivation to do well. The student may also be more accountable for their work because they are pleased when the teacher is pleased. Lastly, a good student-teacher relationship can be the last thing supporting a child when

the child feels like everything else has failed. In this case, the teacher would not give up on a child, so I can see how the teacher would have the ability to put the child back on track.

The teacher also reaches out and develops relationships with the parents to create a partnership for each student's learning and progress. The teacher knows that each parent or guardian is an essential source of information about the child. A relationship between the teacher and parent is also important because the more difficult issues that arise later can be addressed effectively. The more open the discussions and the relationship are the more comfortable and appropriate conversations can be because information and situations are understood by both parties and blame can be avoided. The students in the class seem to respond to the teacher and the relationship similar to how the parents do. For example, if the student knows that her mother and the teacher talk regularly, she feels more comfortable with the teacher. On the other hand, I have seen the case where a parent is distrusting of the teacher, and the child has then lied to the teacher. Linda Albert, author of *Cooperative Discipline*, also believes that the involvement of the parents is crucial for a number of reasons including for help in determining appropriate intervention techniques and encouragement. I think that the teacher needs to make this connection with the parents to not only understand the child and the child's life better, but to show the child that school is not disconnected from the rest of life.

The teacher also has the job of guiding and developing relationships between the students. More than simply suggesting students belong to friendship groups, she teaches the students how to greet one another and work together on games and assignments. She also models language when students get into arguments. She provides chances for students to learn more about one another through sharing time and by having them observe one another and write down something nice they saw the other child do. She also models situations that show

consideration and caring such as by making “get well” cards. She also encourages high-fiving when working on tasks, boys and girls working and sitting together, and teamwork for getting classroom jobs done. The students are always excited to work with one another and no longer seem distressed when they have to work with a member of the opposite sex. The students also model the language they have been shown. For example, students often say, “Good morning Sue, what did you do this weekend?” which they were often prompted to do during the morning meeting. I think that it is crucial for the students to feel comfortable with and capable of working with one another because they will often be dependent on each other for help, such as when doing projects or when they don’t understand a problem on a math worksheet. These informal situations will not always include a teacher standing nearby and students need to be able to communicate and cooperate by themselves based on the tools they have.

After the teacher established a relationship with a student, she used her knowledge about the student and opened communication to support the child and work on lacking skills, which include the important skills of confidence and independence. The difference between having the relationship and not is the difference between the teacher responding to the question “Is this okay?” by saying “Well, what do you think?” (because she knows) and “Yes, now move on.” Similarly the teacher could respond to a different student by saying, “Well, think about what we worked on yesterday.” In both of these responses, she is asking the student to think rather than thinking for the student. Again, the roles of the teacher are countless, but her interactions with the students are based on the relationships formed and what she knows about the students. This also includes understanding an individual student’s progress while still recalling expected developmental abilities.

Behavior and Classroom Management

The methods and strategies used by the teacher for behavior and classroom management are directly based on the foundation that was laid for the classroom and the relationships that were built within the classroom. The teacher not only addresses issues with individual students and the class as a whole as they arise, but she also prevents behavior issues such by arranging seats in the classroom and integrating outlets for feelings and energy.

Since students in 2nd grade are not yet easily able to control their feelings, the teacher created a few different supports to help them figure out how they are feeling and to offer them space, time, or quiet when they might lose control or already have. All of the students are given a thinking book where they can write down anything they are thinking whenever they need to. The students are told that the when the teacher sees a thinking book she thinks “Tom needs a few minutes to collect his thoughts or feelings in peace and quiet.” While they are not told when to use their thinking book, the students are asked if they need to take it out for a few minutes. This is how its use is modeled for them. The students also have a “break-out” spot in the classroom, which is a mostly enclosed area with a few cushions, books, and posters, that is used when a student needs to leave a situation for a few moments. At the beginning of the year the students discussed how to use the “break-out” spot respectfully and determine a “reentry plan” for when the student is ready to rejoin the group. The reentry plan includes not talking, teasing, or laughing at a child who used the “break-out” spot when they return to the group, cluster, or activity. This prevents a cycle of “break-out” spot use, being made fun of, and getting upset from occurring. The students have learned to use both the thinking book and the “break-out” spot appropriately when necessary and show mood improvement after they have been given a few minutes to relax and think. In *Cooperative Discipline* the idea of a “time-out” is discussed as a place to go before, during, or after meltdowns to get collected before returning to the group.

However, this type of self-isolation usually has a negative connotation when discussed by the class no matter how much you tell the seven and eight year olds that it is a good thing. The use of a “break-out” spot is more effective because it is not a place that children try to avoid. I think that these tools are necessary to provide and model for the children to prevent complete frustration or meltdowns. They also help students learn to self-regulate and understand how they need to respond to situations in order to move on.

In cases where a child has a meltdown or gets severely reprimanded, especially enough for a complete change of mood or attitude, the teacher uses a tool called the “reset button”. The reset button is drawn on a piece of scrap paper and the student pushes it after saying what they are resetting. The student verbalizes what happened and what they want to change and they visualize pushing the button to start their day over. The students respond well to this technique and show a significant change in mood and motivation once they have pushed the button. The students do not do this often which makes it a more effective technique because it is not overused or made into a joke. I think that this technique works because it basically shows the student and teacher both recognizing together that the problem or situation has been learned from and needs to be put in the past or even forgotten about. I believe that the influence of the teacher also contributes to the students ability to get over the issue so fast, because if the teacher is able to do it then the student is too.

For less severe issues, several behavior and classroom management techniques are used. Combinations of verbal warnings, dead silence, and “the eyes” are used to stop disruptive or inappropriate behavior from individuals or small groups of students. Often the class discusses behavior issues as they arise and the children offer problem solving ideas to resolve the issues. In this case, embarrassment is used to prevent the behavior from occurring again. In some other

cases, the child is individually reprimanded for an action and then tells the class what they should do if they are ever in the same situation after they have talked with the teacher. The students that usually talk in these cases are not embarrassed but instead pleased that they have learned from their behavior and are teaching others about what they should do because they found a solution with the teacher's help. When talking with a student individually, the teacher will often stress that they are talking not because the teacher wants to yell at the student, rather she does not want the behavior or problem to happen again. When the children become more involved in the problem-solving aspect of their behavior, they are less likely to repeat the behavior or problem. They also hardly ever get upset with the teacher for getting "yelled" at because they understand that the teacher is not actually responding in that manner. I think that these talking methods of behavior management are more effective than simply stopping the behavior because they take advantage of the learning opportunity rather than silencing it. The only problem that I see with this though is that some of the students have become more concerned with the behavior of their classmates than they should be sometimes. For example, the students were listening to a song about one of the artists they were studying. Some of the students decided to dance and move around a bit in their seats. When the time came after the song for the discussion about the song, the students were mostly talking about how they thought it was distracting that the other students were dancing, instead of commenting on the song's lyrics. Even after being prompted to talk about the lyrics, the students would still respond with suggestions for making a rule about not dancing. However, I do understand that this might happen during the learning process because 2nd graders need significant help learning how to find balance.

When the behavior of a student affects or hinders the learning of another, the teacher has the student write a letter of apology to those that were distracted, annoyed, hurt, or bothered. The teacher will then have the child read the note, give the students involved a few moments to talk about it, and then have the child take the note home so that the parents can sign it and have an idea of what their child's behavior issues at school are. The children usually follow through with this without complaint because it was established as an expected consequence when the non-negotiable rules were written. I cannot tell if the letter writing has made improvements in the behavior of individuals or the class because it seems like only a few students have behavior problems or situations that require letter writing.

One important behavior and classroom management strategy that I do not see implemented in the classroom has to do with stressing the deed and not the doer. What this means is that the child is told clearly that the behavior they chose was inappropriate, disrespectful, or bad, but the child is not bad. The book *Teaching Children to Care* by Ruth Charney describes the strategy and how it is used "to notice and name the specific behaviors that work and don't work rather than to rely upon general impressions and global judgments." I have seen the opposite of this in my classroom though; for example, the teacher once told the student after a poor behavior choice, "you're a smart guy, but you're rude." What stressing the deed would have looked like is, "Your choice to talk while I am giving directions is disrespectful and rude." Therefore the child does not feel stuck to a label and has a clear idea of the behavior that needs to change. *Teaching Children to Care* goes on to explain the importance of also using the "I voice" when offering this feedback to show that the feedback is based on personal feelings. This, in turn, is how the child is taught to care because they are shown how their actions or words affect the feelings of others including the teacher. Furthermore, the students

need to see how this is modeled and to be encouraged to speak to classmates in this way rather than how I described previously in the case of the song. For example, instead of saying, “some people were dancing when we were supposed to be listening to the music, and they should not have,” the student would be encouraged to say, “I get frustrated when people are dancing around me because it makes it difficult for me to concentrate.” The children who were dancing then not only have to think about how the other child felt but also think about how they will behave next time the music is played. I think the children would respond positively to this feedback and practice because they could see how their thoughts and feelings are important and more powerful in the classroom than tattle-tailing and blaming other children.

To encourage good and positive behavior from individuals and the class, the teacher uses positive reinforcement of feedback usually without rewards, integrates physical activity to release and redirect stored up energy, and creates situations for the students where bad behavior can be avoided such as by keeping them busy while transitioning. The combination of prevention and swift and clear resolution of behavior issues keeps the classroom running smoothly. The students have also described the teacher as mean and demanding respect, but what they are actually describing is the high level of expectations and accountability of words, work, and actions that the teacher has. It does not matter how the child translates or interprets that as long as they understand that the teacher is serious.

Delivery of Instruction

The teacher is very knowledgeable about the topics and information she teaches the children because she has done research about the most effective teaching practices and the natural learning styles of children. For example, she has studied how to teach math based on Piaget, Vygotsky, and the way students naturally group numbers in their mind while doing

mental math. She has also read that multiple word studies are more effective than having children study and take weekly spelling tests, so she is trying that method out this year. She also often gives children room to draw pictures on pages where they are writing stories and narratives because many children write more effectively when they can visualize what they are writing. The teachers understanding of the developmental abilities of the students nearly match that of the descriptions in the book *Yardsticks*, however Chip Wood says that children at this age often write without drawing. Regardless of what may actually be true, the teacher provides supports for both of these types of writers and all types of learners based on what she sees happening in her class. Her ability to change and adjust the curriculum, not read directly from the lesson book, and be open to new ideas and suggestions allows the classroom to be a place more tailored to the learning of the children rather than a place where children are trained to learn by a certain process. The teacher's planning is based on her experience of what has and has not worked in previous years and her knowledge of the learning types, styles, and needs of the students in the current classroom. However, this does not usually effect the guiding questions, learning goals, objectives, and skills that she is teaching the children about, rather the delivery of the instruction. Her curriculum unit plans are focused around the essential understandings and questions similar to the plans discussed in *Understanding by Design*. She then determines what concepts are important that the children will find interesting and engaging. With these ideas, the purpose or goal of each lesson or activity is determined so that they are not just hands on activities. The learning goals for these activities are based on what is developmentally appropriate for the 2nd graders and are in turn more based on exposure, exploration, and breadth rather than the depth that will be focused on in later grades. After the creation or adjustment of

the curriculum unit, the teacher then determines how to differentiate and integrate the lessons based on where the children are and how they learn.

The teacher is a strong advocate for differentiated learning practices and uses them in a variety of places in the classroom. As described in *The Differentiated Classroom* by Carol Ann Tomlinson, differentiation “begins where the students are” and is used to “engage students through different learning modalities, by appealing to differing interests, and by using varied rates of instruction along with varied degrees of complexity.” This definition matches the differentiation used in the classroom. The word study homework lists many different choices for how the word study can be done and the children are then able to choose what they want to do based on their personal learning style. The math help worksheets are also differentiated by the way the teacher decides what extra support each different child needs. She puts an appropriate worksheet in a folder with their name on it for the student to work on. The level of difficulty of assignments is also differentiated. For example, all of the students were answering research questions with a piece of written text. For the more advanced readers, the language was more difficult and the text was longer while the emerging readers had a simplified text. While the students do notice and appreciate their ability to choose what work they want to do and the way they want to do it, they do not notice the difference in the levels of difficulty of some of the differentiated assignments. I think that it is effective for this class because the differentiated assignments are all based on the same learning goals and outcomes, challenging for the students doing them, and done appropriately. It is also realistic to implement differentiation in this simplified way rather than through the creation of well defined rotating centers because of the larger group projects that the children are always working on. While the children do cycle through stations, many are not able to complete tasks in a set amount of time, so entire groups

cannot often stay together as suggested by Tomlinson. Much of the differentiation that occurs in the projects is based on what the child is able to do and is examined and supported as the child is working. I think that this type of “real-time” rather than planned differentiation is more ideal for all of the students in the class, especially those with learning disabilities.

The teacher also uses integration practices to manage time, resources, and the unit. The teacher has developed curriculum units where the lesson plans overlap in the various subject areas to maximize the opportunities to make connections to the unit. In 2nd grade, literature and English language arts can easily be integrated with social studies, and math and art topics can easily be integrated into the units. By using literacy time to research information needed for social studies assignments, the teacher can teach reading comprehension while the content is about the social studies unit. The teacher uses integration to make other lessons more relevant and meaningful because the students understand the context. For example, in math the students were learning to add money while in social studies the children were studying Ghana. The math was easily integrated into the unit by having the students think about and write math word problems that had to do with buying and selling Ghanaian food that they had learned about. The students respond well to integration like this because they are able to point out the connections and make meaning for themselves. I think that this method of overlapping concepts saves time and creates more relevance and is an integral aspect of effective teaching.

Whenever the teacher is able to, she has the children play an active role in their learning, understanding, interpreting, and processing by having them state and explain their thinking. In other words, instead of telling the students everything she wants them to learn, she asks them about what they think. When discussing the reading comprehension strategies, she asked the students to use words to describe what that meant. As she collected their ideas she was able to

use the appropriate terms and language for the grade level. For example, “reading comprehension strategies” was translated into “things that help you understand what you are reading.” There are many times where students are asked to use what they know to come up with a definition. For example, students developed their definition of a polygon which is a closed shape with three or more sides and none of the sides are rounded. The students can more easily remember these definitions that they make and repeat than ones that the teacher feeds and sound more complicated than they really are. This can also be done in math or other general places in the classroom by having students explain their process for solving a problem. The teacher is then able to use this process as a way to teach a similar problem next time because she knows at least some of the students are thinking in that way. She also collects different interpretations to problem solving and other various questions because one interpretation or explanation offered by a student might be the key understanding or way of thinking for another student. The students also benefit from this way of teaching because they are able to work together and teach one another based on how they learned and practiced explaining their thinking process. I think that these strategies help in achieving independence which increases intrinsic motivation and overall interest in learning.

Other tools and strategies are used in the classroom to help provide support to the different types of learners and differentiate the instruction. Materials such as notebooks, dry erase boards, and physical manipulatives are offered to all students and some benefit more than others from certain tools. The students also become more excited in their role in their education when they have found a tool that greatly impacts their learning ability. For example, one student who is usually a child with behavioral issues found the hundreds grid dry erase board was a useful tool for him and was able to complete a math assignment correctly when the more gifted

students struggled on the same assignment. The right tool makes all the difference, but I do worry about the child's dependence on that one process or way of thinking. In that same case, the gifted students struggled because they were using a new approach to solving problems that could be solved in a more time-consuming way using the hundreds square grid. I do feel that practicing another way to think is imperative to a well-rounded understanding of the problem or concept, but for the child with the behavioral issues, having the consistency and steady fall back might be safe for him, whereas the other students deal well with difficulty. Another tool used to help all the children in a classroom where the students are at different levels is wait time. Increasing wait time by a few seconds can be just enough for a struggling child to make a significant connection or revelation. Communication also greatly impacts a child's understanding, and a few simple practices can make all the difference. Visual children need written communication on the board to be directional from left to right so that they know where to start and where to go. Other forms of communication also include the creation of finger or hand signs to show when a child is making a connection that they might like to share. This non-verbal and non-disruptive form of communication also aids in making learning more relevant and meaningful for each child. Different students respond to different tools, communications, and ideas differently, and effective teachers are willing to try new methods in different combinations to ensure that every child has been reached.

There are also many ways to incorporate thinking, writing, reading, and discussing, and the teacher does use a variety of these methods to keep the lessons changing and interesting. Students work individually and together during a whip around, turn and talk, small group discussion, large group discussion, and individual thinking and writing time, and by changing these interactions from day to day and subject to subject, students are continually challenged by

the way they need to express their ideas and by the information they gain from others and their reflections. The teacher also incorporates games into the lessons to integrate other valuable lifelong skills. The students respond well to the variety of interactions and use of games in lessons which also break up long lessons into segments. I believe that games are valuable in particular because they offer the students a chance to practice skills, increase speed, and work on their proficiency after they have learned something new.

However, all of these activities and games need to have a clear and expected order and understood purpose. The children should know why the concept they are learning is important to help them find relevance and make meaning which they often cannot do on their own. For example, the student teacher was doing a lesson on finding the shortest path, but she did not make this clear for the students. In turn, they did not understand why she was walking all over the room in the introduction of the lesson and she continued to make any path between destinations in their work because the idea of the *shortest path* was not stressed during the lesson. The lessons should also be done orderly which returns to the importance of routines and schedules. I have seen that some of the most effective and memorable learning experiences for the students have occurred when the lesson was built into the usual activity. The instruction is also effective when the teacher bases the discussions and learning experiences off of what the students are interested in at the given time. This allows the students to have a more active role in the lesson and makes them feel more comfortable and excited about contributing to discussions.

Use of Feedback and Assessments

The teacher uses different types of assessment for a variety of reasons including to determine the progress of a student and to address issues with the delivery of instruction. The teacher conducts reading, reading comprehension, and reasoning tests to determine the

appropriate levels each child should be working at. She also does these evaluations twice during the year to document the changes, difficulties, and strengths of the child as he or she develops. The students question what the testing is for, but they do not respond negatively to being tested. The teacher also explains the need for the testing in terms of how it will benefit them.

Other types of assessments include checking homework, math tests, portfolios, and observational assessments for understanding. The grading or marking of tests and papers show checks for what the student did well or correctly and circles for the things that the student should review. The teacher uses the trends from the test and homework to determine what needs to be reviewed in following lessons before the students are prepared to move on. The students have a variety of responses to the grading. Some students will question what they did wrong, others will not even check to see how they did, and others have already developed the idea that they need to get everything correct. I feel that this last issue should be discussed because while it is important to do your best, getting every answer correct on a homework page is not what the students should strive for; rather they should try to understand the material correctly.

The teacher also uses more specific and reflective feedback of student work when appropriate. The feedback is given individually to students in informal conversations and also in front of the group when the work is something all the students should try to do well. The teacher uses the current moment while the student works on a task or assignment to address issues or strengths she notices. In *Feedback that Fits*, effective feedback is illustrated similarly to what I have seen and described above. The feedback needs to be clear with a positive message and based on what the student can see themselves by looking at their work. The students respond well to this timely and authentic evaluation of their work and are easily and willingly able to change any issues that are present. The students are often excited and satisfied when the teacher

offers feedback such as, “The way you drew your diagram clearly shows what the problem asks and what you were thinking, and see, you got the question correct.” I believe that the teacher’s ability to remember how literal the children are helps her to avoid somewhat confusing feedback such as, “good job,” which doesn’t actually comment on anything the student has done. I think that the avoidance of failure behavior does not exist persistently in the classroom because the children do not have the chance to experience failure fully. Even though the class is large, the teacher has the experience necessary to know what students need more attention and what students can work together and peer review work as a form of assessment. The goal of this method of the teacher’s assessment is to model what they students should be looking at when they are evaluating their own work so that they can determine their progress and strengths which contributes to their accountability and independence once again.

III. What is “Good” Teaching?

My definition of “good” teaching is centered on three aspects of the teacher: character, perception, and goals and expectations. Together these fundamental pieces amalgam into a prepared, aware, understanding, and effective teacher. “Good” teachers include many of the qualities of my cooperating teacher that I have discussed and agreed with above. They create organized, structured, safe, reliable, and engaging classrooms. They also build relationships with students, parents, and members of the community who can contribute to the understanding and support of the children. “Good” teachers also take a step back to observe the many facets, dimensions, and relationships within their classroom to make sure that the learning experiences are reflective of the environment and vice versa. They listen and watch often before they speak allowing the child to direct much of the content, direction, and depth of the lessons. This allows for realistic, appropriate, and practical differentiation as well as integration which help in the

creation of a well-rounded educational experience. In order to be able to do all of these things and take on the many necessary roles teachers need to first possess two crucial qualities.

A “good” teacher’s character includes two vital qualities that allow for many more essential characteristics. “Good” teachers need to be honest and authentic. By being honest and authentic, the reflections and experiences based on observations and the relationships built are representative of what is actually happening with the students in the classroom. It is difficult to admit that something is not working as arduously planned, but that is the first necessary step in order to fix the problem. Honesty requires strength and commitment and allows for effective change. Authenticity allows for open conversation, effective feedback, and a real model for children to learn by. I also believe that “good” teachers exemplify empathy as well as these things so that children can learn about the real importance of feelings and other people, therefore teaching them to care. With honesty and authenticity comes awareness that allows teachers to be cognoscente of perceptions including judgments that should be eliminated.

“Good” teachers have a perception of their students and their class based on observable facts and deeper understandings and free from preconceived ideas. Teachers should not label “smart,” “dumb,” “lazy,” but may recognize personality types and learning styles, such as concrete versus abstract to help in the delivery of instruction. The teacher also sees children as children and not robots or beasts to be tamed, and he or she understands the natural tendencies of children, such as their literality. They should also not only tolerate and recognize the various aspects and cultures of the different children, but they should encourage the exploration of differences as well as similarities. “Good” teachers should also not see children as empty-minded and in need of ideas. Rather, teachers should recognize the knowledge and abilities that

students possess and help them bring those ideas out for exploration. The students are capable and need to be seen that way.

“Good” teachers should push, motivate, guide, and support students without causing frustration or anxiety. Students in 2nd grade do not like to take risks or make mistakes as discussed in *Yardsticks*, but “good” teachers will help students to face these issues before they lack the ability and creativity to strive for more. “Good” teachers aim for students to gain independence and therefore hold students accountable for their work. They do not make excuses for the students and do not allow students to make excuses. They consider the child’s needs and difficulties as well as strengths and developmental abilities. They measure the child up against that child and encourage the students to help one another. They only look to state and national standards for guidance and frameworks but not goals and measuring sticks. “Good” teachers also aim to achieve a classroom filled with respect, patience, understanding, and students dedicated to their own education.

IV. Planning My Classroom

While I will consider all of the aspects of teaching and teachers that I have previously discussed when I plan my classroom, there are several factors that are more important to me than others. The establishment of routines, schedules, and expectations, the use of time, and the incorporation of differentiated lessons are the three most important aspects of effective teaching for me based on my interest in structure, organization, management, and needs of children with learning disabilities. While I understand that every child is different, I believe that children thrive in structured and well managed environments regardless of whether they are abstract or concrete thinkers. I also recognize the difference between classroom and behavior management and controlled and restricted environments which hinder the growth and development of

children. As stated in *Cooperative Discipline*, “the behavioral choices students make are greatly influenced by the style we choose to use in managing our classroom.” I also think that these priorities may change with experience, but as I picture myself in my first year classroom, I would like to set a strong foundation and figure some of the rest of teaching out with the children as we go through the year.

Previous to the first day of school, I will prepare the weekly and daily schedules that will be posted, several checklists that will aid in transitions and morning preparations, and my list of expectations for the students consisting of respectful words and actions, honesty, best effort, and positive attitude. On the first day, the students and I would discuss what these words on my list mean and then create a set of classroom rules and consequences based on what the students want to see and to happen. The first few weeks and days will help in the establishment of these schedules, rules, and expectations, and we will all work together to enforce our ideals. As I get to know and build relationships with the students, I will reflect often on how the students would benefit from differentiation. I believe that it is more important to establish the routines and schedules within the first few weeks then to create rotating centers, for example, that might only add to the confusion of the classroom with different people doing different things in different places. However, as I get to know the students, I would be more able to prepare differentiated homework plans or in class assignments or even learning centers. I think differentiation is essential because it allows all children to progress naturally without worrying about catching someone up or having a student fall behind. Time management will also be one of my biggest considerations in teaching my first year. I feel that my dedication to my students motivates me to want to make the most of our time together. I enjoy spending time with my students especially when I am able to keep the interest of all the students and engage a student that other

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teachers have found difficult. I have found the most satisfaction in developing a relationship with a student that my teacher could not reach because it reminds me that I am needed as a teacher in my classroom. I would also look to integrate content area to help students make clear and simple connections and to “double dip” lessons so that we could have more free and choice time which is necessary for the development of independence.

My goals for the year for the class would be to develop a sense of independence, begin to understand empathy, and express respect for others daily. I would also encourage individuality, creativity, and reasonable defiance. However, I am also very aware of the extreme difficulties in the class that I am not prepared for, moments of frustration and anger that I have not experienced, and the desire I might have to leave and find a job working in a lab without any children. In these times, my goal for myself would be to maintain my perspective about the good in each child and exercise my patience. As I think about my preparedness for a future student-teaching position before my first year teaching position, I am also reminded of my expectation that my definition of “good” teaching and how I want to teach will change.