Reflecting on CI 295

During my time in CI 295, I have learned a lot about being a good teacher. My previously held beliefs have been challenged, the lenses I didn’t even know I’d been looking through have been shattered, and my ideas about the education system in the United States have been confirmed. Looking back, it has been a semester full of lessons for me as I make my way along the road to becoming an educator.

One of the most outstanding lessons I have learned through the course of this semester in CI 295 is that there are certain times when it’s okay to deviate from the lesson plan. Sometimes the real learning happens when something unexpected comes up, whether it’s a comment or question from a student, or a suggestion from a colleague or other professional. In the end, that is the goal we are all working toward: helping students learn.

This realization that it is sometimes alright if a lesson does not go according to plan came to me during my field experience at Cochran Elementary School in the Williamsport school district. I was shadowing the special education teacher, Mrs. Jones, and she was teaching a lesson about Helen Keller. On that day they were going over the part of the book where Annie Sullivan takes Helen to the Perkins Institution. Mrs. Jones talked about how most children with disabilities like Helen’s would typically be locked away and deemed unteachable. One boy spoke up, and asked, “So the kids across the hall wouldn’t be allowed at school?” The “kids across the hall” were students in the autistic support room.
Mrs. Jones explained that no, children with disabilities like autism would have been locked up. The boy replied, “But I thought they could learn, but just differently than other kids.” Mrs. Jones assured him that his beliefs about autistic learners were correct. The other students in the group commented on how unfair it was that kids in the past were not given the chance to learn and expressed distress over the thought of the students in the autistic support room not being allowed at Cochran, so she took the time to explain and comfort them.

Hopefully I don’t get so caught up in meeting standards and preparing my students for testing that I overlook these types of opportunities for learning. While it may not have been extremely relevant to the comprehension of the reading, or a topic on the PSSA’s, this was an important discussion to have and Mrs. Jones recognized that and went with it, and I can only hope to be as effective when I become a teacher.

Another lesson I have learned this semester is how my own learning styles impact my teaching methods, and how I need to understand that what works for me might not work for all students. Since every person is different and learns differently, it only makes sense that I will have to adapt my teaching style to those of my students to help them achieve in the classroom.

I recognized this during my experience tutoring at Mount Nittany Middle School. When I looked back at the first paper I wrote for CI 295, I saw that I tried to implement those strategies I identified in that assignment while tutoring. For instance, I tried to allow my students to be in control of what they were learning by choosing what assignments to work on first. Another thing I tried to do was not “spoon feed” them answers to their questions, and instead just point them in the right direction to locate the information they needed. While this worked for some of the students, others needed a little more structure and direction. One example of this is when I asked
one student what he wanted to work on first, his response was “nothing.” As a result, I had to take control and pick one of his assignments for him.

This was a significant realization for me because I always envisioned my teaching strategies as fool proof. I never took into account the student who would challenge me, even when I think I’m trying to be nice. Tutoring has been a big help in making my fantasies of being the perfect teacher become more grounded.

I also learned that the teacher’s job description doesn’t just include the role of educator. When you are a teacher, you are also a caregiver in some way, shape or form. When you are helping a student feel safe, it demonstrates that you care about them and makes them feel more secure about the environment in which they are supposed to be learning. We learned that there are three levels of safety in class: social, emotional, and physical. Over the summer at my job as a camp counselor, I was able to help one of the campers under my charge feel safe. This student was a seventh grade girl whose mother was supposed to come pick her up at the end of camp at 6 p.m. However, six o’clock rolled around and her mother didn’t show. We ended up waiting for over an hour and half for her mother to come. Through the course of that 90 minute period, the student worried that her mother had a car accident or was hurt or in some kind of trouble, and was very upset about it. She didn’t have a cell phone to call her mother, and she wasn’t answering at the contact number we had listed for the student. It turned out that the mother was only stuck in really bad traffic, but they were both thankful that I had stayed long past my shift to make sure everything was okay.

The thanks that I received from the mother and student showed me how important it is to keep students’ feelings in mind when interacting with them. Obviously, if a student has some worry about his or her personal safety on their mind, they are not going to learn very much. I
want to be the kind of teacher that students can feel comfortable coming to with their problems, because no one should have to feel afraid while they are in school. Teachers are the first line of defense students have when there are problems of safety in the school setting, and it is vital that I remain alert to potential issues among my students.

Taking all of this into consideration, I think I have a long way to go on my path to becoming an effective teacher, but I think it is the right path for me. My own experiences in school combined with the experiences I’m getting as an education student are helping me shape the kind of teacher I want to be. While facilitating learning is of course the most important part of being a teacher, there are other duties that teachers are also responsible for, such as keeping students safe, making sure students feel in control, and helping them shape their own opinions about the world, among many others. The thought of helping students learn and achieve in school is an exciting challenge that I can’t wait to tackle.