Field Clinical Report

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Introduction to Diversity for Educators

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My fifteen hours of clinical experience was completed at J. Michael Conley Elementary School in the new SouthWood Development at 2400 Orange Avenue. Laura Brooks is the principal of this two year old elementary school. “Engineering our Future” is their motto. The school was built to serve the newly developed SouthWood community and its surrounding neighborhoods. The SouthWood community is predominantly single family middle class homes, however there are townhomes located within the community. The school also draws from some surrounding communities which tend to be working class mixed African American and white communities. There is a trailer park close by as well.

Conley is in the process of being approved for a Primary Years International Baccalaureate Program. This program is an interdisciplinary approach to education, showing students how each area of learning is interrelated to one another. This means they will also teach a language other than English at the school. The school has the latest in technology using four – six networked computers per class with SMART interactive whiteboards, document cameras, iPods a “rolling” laptop lab and software technology.

Students attending Conley Elementary seemed to come from a variety of ethnic backgrounds. I would say that there was a slight majority of students from the dominant culture, but there were also a number of African American
students. I also noticed a number of other ethnicities such as Indian, Middle Eastern, Asian and a few Hispanic. The staff is predominantly young, white and female. The only men on the teaching staff were a Caucasian male teaching third grade and an African American male teaching P.E. There seems to be a balance between African American and white custodial, cafeteria and office staff, most of whom are female and older than most of the teaching staff. I was not able to ascertain social class/socioeconomic status or sexual orientation of staff or students. Everyone seemed to be clean and neatly dressed. It felt good to be in a school where there were students from a variety of ethnic backgrounds.

Teaching staff, administration and support staff were genuinely friendly and helpful. They seemed to care about the school and the students who attend. I was able to observe student–principal interactions. I was not aware when I observed the principal interacting with students in the cafeteria, but I could sense this was someone in the administration. I later learned that she was the principal. She knew the names of every student that spoke to her and many students wanted to talk to her on the day she was in the cafeteria. She had hugs for those that initiated a hug. She jumped right into the scene, helping students with lunchroom issues as needed. The interactions seemed relaxed and light. Often I have seen a distance between principal. It was several days later that I say a picture of the principal on a school wall and realized she was the one who had been in the Cafeteria. This led me to assume that the administration
takes time to get to know the students and that for the most part, many students feel comfortable with the principal.

I liked that the administration was friendly and appropriately affectionate with the students, where it seemed as though the school personnel cared about students and wanted to do their best. I have been in schools where it did not feel as though administration and staff genuinely cared, where you could tell they liked young people, where young people were treated with respect.

I felt that while there was diversity with regards to ethnicity, that was fairly easy to detect, it was difficult to detect other diverse attributes. All the students were neatly dressed in this class. One of the young girls was always “just so” with matching ribbons for her dresses and sweaters to match her dresses, a variety of shoes. Most everyone else was dressed fairly simply, very much like one another. I would guess that many of the students were either from working class homes or middle class homes with resources enough to dress them in appropriate kindergarten clothing; nothing fancy, nothing holey or in need of mending. Less than half the students received free breakfast or lunch from federal programs. I was not able to tell just by observation who received these programs.

The students related to one another without any obvious disrespect for one another. The teacher treated each student respectfully and did not seem to exhibit any obvious prejudice. When she spoke to the class about behavior she
talked about how this was a family, her family and how should we treat each other within a family.

The most profound experiences for me were the ones I had with the student with whom I worked one-on-one with. The first time I worked with him was deeply disturbing for me. I have worked in schools over 15 years, either as an aide on the few occasions in which I sent a child of mine to public school or as an educator in a school. I can’t remember a time when I worked with a student one-on-one and no progress was made. When I work with a student, if something is not working, I try a different method and keep trying until something begins to shift. I usually only have to make one shift, two at the most. With this student, I tried a variety of different approaches with no visible results. He was not belligerent or resistant, that is another challenge. He didn’t seem to be absorbing or retaining anything we did. His eyes lacked the sparkle of life that most people have to some degree. He was African American and so when I began to get nowhere the first thing I did was check my demeanor and modify my approach in several ways trying to not appear like the “white do-gooder” or “white authority”, all to no avail. I watched myself go through extreme disbelief, to anger, to frustration. I could not believe that a six year old would not know information such as basic colors, numbers 1 – 10 or the letters of his name. The outrage came because this child lives in an environment in which he is deprived of normal adult/child interaction. Colors are adjectives we use all the time to talk about what we see. I began to wonder what the degree
of neglect was and even if there was abuse in his environment. This child, a kindergarten student is possibly well down the path to failure at school and it does not appear to be his fault; the adults in his life have failed to give him basic attention and information that he needs. If his mother had not made the effort to obtain custody of him, he could have continued on this path and who knows where he would end up. As I learned more of his story, as resources were made available to him, I began to see progress, slight, but progress and I began to see a ray of light for him. I do not know what has come of his custody hearing. I do know that his mother was concerned and according to my supervising teacher was making an effort to work with him at home. I have a tender spot for someone in his situation, for all children who live in situations where their basic needs are not attended to. Children lack the ability to tend to their own needs, to even know they are lacking and I hold children as humans to be cherished, nourished, nurtured and uplifted.

There were also two young men who came into the class during “Walk and Read” that caught my attention in somewhat the same way as the above mentioned student. They seemed older than the rest and I learned that for both of them, this was their second time through Kindergarten. They did not catch my attention right off the bat, but as I continued to visit, I became aware that for one of them, attendance was sketchy. Ms. Roberts confirmed that attending three days per week was normal. Both of these boys were not at the top of the class with regards to skills, but they were not that far behind. One of them
seemed eager to please, and seemed to need to be close by me. Ms. Roberts affirmed that he needs physical touch and seems to do better when you can lay a hand on his shoulder or back. She seemed to think he did not get much attention at home. Both of these students were African American and I felt myself, once again, upset with a culture that disenfranchises young African American males. I did not observe that Ms. Roberts treated these two young men differently than she treated the other students in her reading program. Had I not asked about them, I would not have learned that they were repeating kindergarten.

There was one other student of concern whose attendance was irregular, whose behavior was consistently troublesome when he was there who also seemed to lack the ability to focus and who appeared to lack basic skills. His writing abilities were quite under developed, he lacked the ability to color or draw – poor small motor control capabilities. He was of Asian Indian ethnicity and had some scarring on his upper lip that looked like repair scarring from harelip. I did notice that Ms. Roberts did not have much attention for the problems he presented in the class. He was the only one I observed this attitude with. I have no idea what had happened earlier in the year for her to be short with him, because she showed great patience with everyone; holding a line, expecting students to rise to the occasion, instituting consequences as necessary in a fair, clear and firm manner, allowing students to earn back their “blue colored card,” – blue being the color everyone starts the day with.
I would say that there were more boys who were challenging with regards to behavior. They were more likely to move down the color card system than girls, although there were two girls who were constantly stirring up something, usually something mild, but on occasion, more serious. The majority of the girls were more quiet, and on task more often. I would say this was also true of the Asian students. I could see how a teacher would naturally gravitate toward those who were easier to deal with. I was impressed with Ms. Roberts ability to stay back out of this and treat most everyone fairly. I hope that I will be able to do this. It seems as though every class has a few who make teaching challenging through their behavior. I know my patience has been tested on many occasions. I was fortunate to be able to send a disruptive student outside my door to shoot some baskets or to go stack firewood on the porch or something active. I will have to find other avenues of dealing with students who don’t seem to be able to sit very long, or who have more energy than they know how to manage. These students can sometimes be the ones who are struggling with acquiring basic skills as well, although not always.

It did not seem as though there were discrepancies between genders with regards to who was a good learner. The distribution between students who did well with understanding the concepts presented seemed to be fairly evenly spread between male and female. There seemed to be slightly more males than females who were at the lower end of academic performance. At this age, I do not find this particularly alarming as I have noticed that this tendency before and
watched the young men settle into the classroom routine and become good students by second grade. I have a paper that I have not yet read that addresses the issues of how schools have become more female friendly, especially since the AAUW report of how young women entering puberty begin to disappear, academically. I look forward to reading the paper and learning more about this topic.

There was no way of knowing the different religious cultures of the students. I did notice that the two boys of Indian ethnicity brought their lunch everyday and so I suspect they were vegetarian. I did not see any meat in their lunches. There was no mention of religion, although there was an egg hunt coming up the last Friday prior to Spring Break. There was mention that this was not an Easter party, but rather celebrating spring and the last day before a week off. I was glad to see the distinction made. I don’t think celebrating holidays in school is a good idea because even the aspect of the holiday being mentioned is only the commercial aspect, the commercial aspect is derived from the religious holiday and in maintaining a separation between Church and State, neither is appropriate. Celebrating also bumps up against those who do not celebrate or recognize the holiday in any fashion. Also not appropriate in a multicultural school setting.

The only exceptionality issues that arose were only possible exceptionalities. The young man with whom I worked one-on-one with was in the process of being evaluated. He was being pulled out but the evaluation
process was not yet complete. He was the only student in this class being pulled out for special attention. I found this fairly amazing as I had expected there would be more students with exceptionalities. I did not see any students with different physical abilities during my time. Again, I find this hard to believe in a fairly large sized elementary school and wonder if I just didn’t know they were there. As I search their web-site I see that there are three special area staff – a speech specialist and two ESE teachers.

While there were several students from different ethnic backgrounds, everyone in the class spoke English as a first language. I do know that two of the students, those of Chinese ethnicity were learning Chinese. I do not know if those who were of Indian ethnicity were bilingual or if they only spoke English. Their English was the same as the rest of the students. There were two young men who spoke a more southern rural dialect. They were fairly easy to understand. Ms. Roberts is from Gadsden County and she once made some joke about the pronunciation of a word and the correct way to say it was given and then she made light of how she grew up saying it another way. It was a way of acknowledging that in this country there are different ways of pronouncing words, some are more acceptable than others.

I felt that Conley was a good school, one that I would enjoy working at. I had a sense the staff were supported by the administration from a few things that Ms. Roberts said in passing. The students seemed fairly happy most of the time and eager to learn, to do well in their studies, with a few exceptions. I felt
that the school was what I term, “fairly iceberg lettuce”. There was diversity, but not extremes. It seemed to fit a mostly upper working class to middle class appearance both with regards to the students who attended and the professional educators as well as with the regards to the resources available to carry out their educational goals. I appreciate what I learned about working with a group of elementary school students. My observation experience last semester was with a local charter middle school and the experience was very different than this one. I still hope to have time in one of the schools of our community where there is a large population of students are from a lower socio-economic background. It is an experience I seek as I seek opportunities to broaden my horizons and my limited experiences. If I were not taking an extra course load, assisting in caring for my granddaughter and setting up a new home and life for myself I would have taken the opportunity to mentor at Bond. I hold out the possibility of being to mentor their next year. I take seriously the opportunity to learn and to experience all that is reasonably possible while I am a student at FAMU.