

Tom's Work Placement Self Evaluation

During my 12 weeks at ACME Community School I was given the job of teaching assistant in the History Department. The *Essential Guide to Teaching* gives several objectives that a teaching assistant should achieve. These include strategic direction and development of year group/groups of pupils/individual pupils, assisting the teacher with delivering good quality lessons, supporting the teacher in managing the behaviour of named pupil(s), developing a supportive relationship with pupils in order to promote effective teaching and learning, mentoring specific pupils, supporting them and helping them to learn effectively.¹ I found several general themes which mainly affected my time at ACME that include confidence, discipline, teaching techniques and how the experience affected my future plans.

Confidence

I was reasonably nervous before my first day at ACME. I had not worked in a school before and did not know what to expect. Cedric Cullingford claims that going into the first day at a new school, "there are two things that we are afraid of ourselves and the reaction of the pupils."² The only prior experience I had had in a school was when I was in 6th form and I worked with a Year 7 pupil that suffered from autism. This was a challenge for me but I knew that working with a class full of pupils would be a very different challenge.

One aspect of my confidence that grew stronger throughout my time at ACME was my familiarity with the pupils. As we started to learn each other's names and started to talk more, we became more and more familiar with each other which increased the confidence I had in myself to do my job and increased their confidence in asking me for help when they needed it as well as talking to me generally around the school outside of lessons. The younger pupils especially became more inquisitive as they became more familiar with me.

Another aspect of my confidence that helped me from day one was my knowledge of the subjects being covered in lessons. The subjects I am most interested in are the First World War and the Holocaust. These subjects are what are being studied by Year 11 and 6th Form which meant I was offering my assistance confidently from day one. Other subjects being covered were the English Civil War and the Cold War, which are all subjects I covered while at school not so long ago. After refreshing my memory, I was just as confident in offering my assistance in those subjects as well. This helped me to eradicate my nerves right at the start of the placement and helped me to become a lot more confident in my ability.

From day one I analysed that the younger pupils such as Year 8s were a lot more inquisitive and were not frightened to ask me for help. This helped me to feel more needed in the classroom and helped me to feel at ease at the start of the placement. This differed with older pupils such as Year 11 and especially 6th Form. While Year 11 pupils did ask me for help, they did seem reluctant to do so in my first few days at the school but became more inquisitive as they became familiar with me. 6th Form pupils only asked for my help with their work on a handful of occasions as their knowledge of the subject was to a high standard. However, I did talk to them about the coursework they were going to have to complete, the prospects of them going to uni as well sharing my experiences of uni. This helped me to familiarise myself with the pupils in a different way. I noticed a marked difference in knowledge between Year 11 and Lower 6th Form pupils even though there was just one year between them. The 6th Form pupils were a lot more mature and had a far superior knowledge of the subjects covered which somewhat surprised me and meant that they were not in as much need for

¹ Susan Davies, *The Essential Guide to Teaching* (Pearson Education, London, 2006), pp.108-109.

² Cedric Cullingford, *The Effective Teacher* (Cassell Education, London, 1995), p.1.

help. I think that all of the 6th Form pupils that I worked with are ready for university. In *Child Psychology: The Modern Science*, the authors say that "Attention improves with age as attention span increases and distractibility decreases."³ This may be one of the reasons for the sharp increase in knowledge as the pupils get older and why the younger pupils are more inquisitive.

Teaching Techniques and Discipline

I encountered several different teaching techniques during my twelve weeks at ACME. I spent several lessons with a young teacher, with this being only his first year as a teacher. While he had a good sense of humour and a good relationship with the pupils, the classes did seem to get out of control at certain points and he had to raise her voice more often than he should have had to. While her generally 'laid back' approach was one of the reasons for this, I noticed that the fact that the pupils did not sit in a seating plan, in such a laid back atmosphere was the reason for this. I noticed a lot of talking about subjects that were nothing to with history such as football. It appeared they seemed to see the lesson more for socializing rather than learning. I also spent time with a more experienced teacher who had her pupils sitting in a seating plan. While she still had a sense of humour and was not too strict, the pupils sat in a seating plan and were pretty much silent for the whole of the lesson. They got on with their work promptly and appeared to learn more as a result of this. The pupils were sitting next to children they would not normally have talked to so were not as interested in socializing. This is something I will definitely remember for the future.

While most of the teachers that I worked with operated a more laid back approach while maintaining control of the class, I worked with one teacher that was teaching at the school, when my Mum was a pupil there around 30 years ago. I instantly noticed the strict 'old school' approach that she operated with the pupils being in silence throughout the lesson. I would not adopt this kind of approach if I was a teacher as the pupils appeared to be scared of the teacher which meant they were not comfortable in the classroom. I would like to find a 'happy balance' between the 'laid back' approach of the younger teacher and the strict approach of the older teacher. This is the kind of approach that I believe my mentor has.

The *Essential Guide to Teaching* says that teachers who are firm but fair and have a sense of humour are those who are most likely to win the hearts and minds of pupils... Showing personality, but not too much, introduces a sense of humour and a more human aspect.⁴ David Fontana claims that shared humour reduces the barriers between teacher and class, provided that it is not overdone, it helps the class to see the teacher as an ally and friend rather than as a member of an opposing species. Children are much more likely to co-operate with allies and friends than with opponents, thus reducing the number of incidents that can lead to class control problems.⁵ This kind of approach is the kind of one that my mentor takes in her classes. She makes lessons enjoyable while commanding the respect of all of her pupils. The pupils are allowed to talk after work has been set although the work is always completed by the end of each lesson, but while she talks, the class is silent. I spent more lesson time with my mentor than any other teacher and I never once witnessed bad behaviour in her classroom. She used several teaching techniques which I believe worked well and helped the pupils to learn. Hetherington and Parke talk of peers as teachers as an effective teaching technique. They say that peers as teachers helps pupils gain self-esteem and status and derive satisfaction from helping others.⁶ My mentor used this technique several times during my

³ Ross Vasta, Marshall M. Haith and Scott A. Miller, *Child Psychology: The Modern Science* (John Wiley & Sons, New York, 1995), p.241.

⁴ Susan Davies, *The Essential Guide to Teaching* (Pearson Education, London, 2006), p.137.

⁵ David Fontana, *Managing Classroom Behaviour* (BSP Books, Leicester, 1994), p.140.

⁶ E. Mavis Hetherington & Ross D. Parke, *Child Psychology: A Contemporary Viewpoint* (McGraw-Hill, New York, 1999), p.558.

time at the school, with pupils delivering Power Point presentations to the rest of the class, each of them presenting a different aspect of the subject so that the whole of the subject was covered after every group had presented. I observed that the pupils seemed to gain a lot from this and that it is good to use these kinds of techniques rather than teaching in the 'normal' way every lesson.

I spent two lessons during my time at ACME in classes with supply teachers. This was an entirely different experience for me as these teachers seemed inexperienced and did not have any knowledge of the subject. The pupils were not focused at all during the lessons and did not respond to instructions issued by the teacher at all.

Discipline did not seem to be a problem in many of the classes I worked in. The book *Child Psychology: A Contemporary Viewpoint* claims that a technique proven to be effective in maintaining class control is using social reinforcements (praising appropriate behaviour and disciplining bad behaviour) as well as material rewards.⁷ At ACME, stamps are given for answering questions correctly and completing work in a set amount of time. If enough stamps are earned by the end of the school year, the pupils can go on trips to places such as Alton Towers. On the other hand, verbal and then written warning are given for bad behaviour, which result in detentions if a certain amount of warnings are administered. These were not in place when I was a pupil at this school and behaviour appears to have improved since that time.

Future Plans

After finishing my placement I have realised that I will definitely look at going into teaching in the future. The placement helped me to realise that I really enjoy working with children. The influence of the staff at ACME is one of the main reasons for this. I was constantly observing the other teachers and their techniques, thinking which ones I could take into future employment and which ones I would want to avoid. My mentor encouraged me by saying she believes that I would make a good teacher if I decide to do it in the future. She also said I am welcome back anytime if I would like any more experience and asked me if I would take charge of a lesson on essay writing to help the Lower 6th Form with the coursework they will have to complete. This experience will definitely give me even more of an insight into teaching.

Although my placement was in a secondary school, I think I would prefer working in a primary school. This is because I felt that I connected better with the younger pupils such as Year 7s and Year 8s better than I did with the older pupils such as Year 11s and the 6th Form. I will seek some experience in a primary school before I decide whether I definitely want to pursue this career path, but at the moment I think that it will suit be better. The fact that I was a teaching assistant may be one of the reasons why I felt more needed by the younger pupils who were more inquisitive and less needed by the older pupils who did not need as much help. If I had experience actually teaching the class then my mind may be changed. Therefore, I will definitely look to gain some experience in doing this as well.

⁷ E. Mavis Hetherington & Ross D. Parke, *Child Psychology: A Contemporary Viewpoint* (McGraw-Hill, New York, 1999), p.557.

Bibliography

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