A Voice from the Field: An Interview with My Mentor

This semester I did my service learning with Mrs. W, who has been teaching at Greenfield Elementary School for 19 years. Before she began teaching at the school, she was a substitute teacher for grades K-6. Throughout the years, she has gained lots of experience working with a wide variety of different grades and students. Mrs. W’s top priority is meeting the needs of all of her students. Luckily, Greenfield Elementary School has many different programs for the students, such as the gifted program, the before and after school program, and special education program. These programs are beneficial to the students and the teachers, allowing the students to get the specialized help they need to succeed in school. While interviewing Mrs. W, I learned about the importance of observing the students learning abilities, behaviors, and respecting their differences.

1. **Describe what your first year of teaching was like. What challenges did you face? Is there anything that could have prepared you more for the job?**

“My first year of teaching was great! I started my first year at Greenfield Elementary School and have been at the school since then. An interesting fact is that my first year of teaching was also the first year Greenfield Elementary School opened. I began my first year of teaching in a fourth grade classroom. I feel like 4th grade is the best grade to start teaching because the students are more independent than the younger grades, but they are still young enough to want to please their teacher. When I started teaching, I felt very prepared because I had previously been a substitute teacher. I did substituting at a few different schools and in all grades from kindergarten to 6th grade. I gained a lot of experience working with many different grade levels and knew what the expectations were for the students in each grade level. By being a substitute teacher, I also experienced many different types of classroom management. I paid close attention to how the teachers managed their classrooms, and used a lot of what I learned from their classrooms in my first classroom.”

2. **What are the differences and similarities between teaching different grades?**

“One of the differences I noticed is that the primary grades are much more dependent on their teacher than the upper grades. With the upper grades they care more about fitting in with their classmates, while the primary grades want to be the teacher’s best friend. The maturity level between the primary grades and the upper grades is very different; although, in each grade there are always the students who are more mature than the others along with students who are less mature than the others. Some of the similarities between all of the grade levels is that there is always a mix of students who want to please their teacher and students that simply don’t care. There are always students who have lots of confidence and students who don’t have a lot of confidence in every grade.”

3. **What role does gender play in your classroom? What differences have you noticed between boys and girls?**
“My classroom has a good mix of boys and girls. Almost half of class are boys, the other half are girls. The boys and girls get along very well this year. If someone walks into my classroom they are just as likely to see a boy and girl working together as seeing two boys or two girls working together. In general, I think girls try harder to please their teacher. They tend to work harder on assignments and care more about getting good grades. The boys are usually the ones who mess around more, talk more, and get distracted more easily. Boys are also not as fashion sensitive and don’t care very much about what they are wearing.”

4. **Do you have any students who come from low-income families?**

“Right now, I have a few students who come from low-income families. When Greenfield Elementary School first opened we were more of a lower class school. Throughout the years as Gilbert has become more urban, Greenfield has become more of a middle/upper class school. At this school we have a before school and after school program called the VIK Club which many of our low-income students attend daily. Greenfield Elementary School also offers free/reduced lunch and breakfast for the students who come from low-income families.”

5. **What was one of the most challenging discipline problems you’ve experienced in your classroom? How did you handle it?**

“A few years ago, I had a boy in my class whose older brother was in a gang. His brother was a bad influence on him, leading him to make many of the same bad decisions he was making. This boy was one of the most disrespectful students I have ever had. He would not follow directions and would say offensive things to my students and I. Throughout the year I had to meet with the principal and his mom because the boy had been telling the principal lies about me. He told the principal and his mom that I was throwing erasers at him and treated him differently than the other students in the class. At the meeting the principal suggested putting him in another class. He immediately refused and said he liked being in my class. The principal called him out by saying if your teacher is that bad why do you want to stay in her classroom. At that moment the boy could no longer continue lying. He remained in my classroom for the rest of the year, continuing to act out. Towards the end of the year the boy ended up getting arrested for breaking and entering someone’s house. He spent two weeks in juvenile detention before returning to school. When he came back he had an ankle bracelet, which restricted him from going anywhere other than his house or to school.”

6. **Have you dealt with bullying in your classroom? What do you do when you notice a student being bullied?**
“There is a lot of bullying happening in schools today. The types of bullying I have seen in my classroom is name calling and talking about someone behind their back. I have never had a student bully someone because they were a different race. I did have an African American student in my class one year that always thought the students in the class were racist towards him. One day I talked to him about it. I told him that he had lots of friends in the class and that no one made a big deal about him being African American beside himself. After we talked he realized I was right and stopped accusing the students of being racist. A lot of bullying happens outside of the classroom, like at recess or when there are not many people around. Sometimes it’s easy to identify if someone is being bullied, other times I have no clue and find out about the bullying once a parent informs me. If I notice a student being bullied I contact a social worker and they take care of the situation.”

7. **What serious health issues have students in your class had? How do you handle these issues?**

“I have not had any students with serve health issues in my class. Most of the health issues students in my class have had include bad allergies, diabetes, or asthma. I have had a lot of students in my classes that have had peanut allergies. One year I had to have an EpiPen in my classroom at all times because a student had severe peanut allergies. The student was not allowed to eat anything that contained peanuts and could not come in contact with them. If something with peanuts touched her, her skin would burn and she would break out in a horrible rash.”

8. **What changes have you made as a teacher to meet the needs of diverse students in your classroom?**

“One of the changes I made was getting rid of individual desks. I now have tables in my classroom, which gives the students more space to work and move around. I have also figured out a way to teach students based on their learning ability. I have created three different categories to place my students in. The first category is advanced, the second is average, and the third is lower. Each category has a symbol that corresponds to it. The students look at the whiteboard, then find their symbol under each of the reading, writing, and math sections to find out what problems or questions they have to answer. For example, when we were reading Holes all of the students were assigned to read the same chapters. When they looked at the whiteboard, depending on what category they are placed in, it showed what questions they had to answer. Sometimes the advanced group and the lower group answer the same questions, but my expectations for them are different. I expect the advanced students to give me a more detailed response than the lower students.”

9. **What lessons have you taught to teach your students about diversity?**
“One of my favorite lessons is when we read *Number the Stars*. We get to discuss the differences among others and the reasons why it’s unacceptable to treat someone differently because of their race. Another lesson that teaches the students about diversity is our world reports. The students each choose a different country to do a report on. This gives the students a chance to learn about another culture and appreciate the traditions and values that make that culture unique. Another way I teach my students about diversity is through the SPICE program offered at Greenfield Elementary School. The SPICE program was created for students with autism. Some of my students have volunteered to interact with the students who have autism. They spend time reading to them or going outside to recess with them twice a week. The students in my class learn that students with autism have to be approached differently. I teach them about the differences and encourage my students to interact with the autistic students as much as possible.”

10. What special education classes are offered at the school? How do their classrooms compare to the general education classes?

“At Greenfield Elementary School we offer resource math, reading, and writing classes. We also have a language delay class for preschoolers who have not learned how to use words to express their emotions. We have an Autism Program, which is a self-contained classroom. We try to include these students with the general education students as much as possible, usually during P.E. or recess. The Gifted Program also known as ALP is for accelerated students in math. The students are in a different classroom for math and are working on more advanced problems to solve. The main difference between the special education classrooms is that there class size is much smaller than the general education classroom. For 6th grade there are only three students who belong to a resource class. Each Autistic classroom does not have more than seven students in them. In a classroom of six or seven there are at least five aides. The autistic classrooms have many different centers and stations for the students to go to, while general education classroom normally don’t do centers and are arranged with desks or tables.”

11. How do you make sure your students feel welcomed in your classroom?

“I greet my students each morning as they walk into the classroom. I give each of them a high five and tell them little things like good morning or I’m glad to see you. I also take time to listen to what they have to say and talk to them as much as possible. Having a sense of humor is important in creating an inviting classroom environment. I really enjoy teasing my students and giving them a hard time in a joking way. The students love it and tease me back all the time. Another way I make sure my students feel welcomed is by supporting them and encouraging them. I let my students know that I am on their side and will stick up for them whenever they need me to do so. I want them to feel comfortable
talking to me, knowing that I care about the way they are feeling each day they enter my classroom.”

After asking Mrs. W these questions and listening to her responses, I learned even more about the differences among students. As a future teacher, this interview will help prepare me for the challenges and rewards I will face in my future classroom that relate to diversity. I never realized how important learning about diversity was until I enrolled in the Cultural Diversity class at CGCC. My service learning has given me the opportunity to experience diversity inside a classroom instead of just reading about it in a textbook. By doing my service learning in Mrs. W’s classroom, I have learned the importance of creating a welcoming environment, where all of the students feel accepted and respected for who they are. I have also learned about the different needs all of the students have. Determining the best ways to meet the needs of my future students will require me to listen and observe my future students all of the time.