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HN 110 College and Community

Service Learning Journal Entries: STARS

Monday, September 10, 2007

Background:

For my service learning project, I have chosen to work with a program called STARS. The program is through James Walker Elementary (JWE), and my supervisor is the University of Missouri Fellows director, Mary Smith. I have been working with STARS since my freshman year in high school. My duties entail tutoring students with troublesome subjects, helping them complete their homework, and talking to them about troubles that may be occurring at home. I chose to continue participating in this program because I have never had a desire to teach, especially elementary school children. However, I have acquired a liking for tutoring by exploring something that I had no previous interest in, and I discovered that I liked it. I have found that elementary education is very unique in that, the children aren't necessarily required to retain all of the information that is given to them. Elementary teachers are merely giving the students a basic foundation of the subjects. Therefore, this allows the students to begin formulating good study habits early on so that it will better prepare them for their future academic careers.

I have noticed that there is a tremendous amount of stress in these young lives. Of course, all of the students that I work with are having trouble in school which is primarily caused by trouble that they are having at home. This is extremely challenging for teachers and someone like me because it makes it more difficult to reach the kids on a personal level. Not all of the aspects of volunteering at JWE are difficult, but most of them *are* challenging. By volunteering

at JWE, I have gained a great appreciation for elementary school teachers. Hence, this is the reason that I have decided to become involved in a small portion of their lives.

(*Please note that all of the names present have been changed in respect of privacy for both the students and teachers involved.)

Monday, September 10, 2007

First Session:

Upon arrival to JWE, I had expected the day to be slow in the tutoring aspect. Because school only started two weeks ago, the teachers are still trying to determine who is having problems in class. Therefore, I wasn't surprised when Mary informed me that I didn't have any "buddies" yet (as she calls my students). I spent the duration of my time at the school helping Ms. Brown prepare the reading room. Blue Springs is starting a new reading system that is supposed to encourage a high level of reading. Books are placed on a point system, and the points represent the reading level. I helped Ms. Brown prepare the titles and document them so that they would be more accessible to teachers and students. This session wasn't very exciting, but I had not expected it to be so I wasn't let down. However, I am looking forward to my next session very much. I can't wait to meet my new buddies!

Monday, September 17, 2007

Second Session:

Today I worked with three fifth grade students from Ms. Thompson's class. R, A, and J all needed help with math. They were struggling in math greatly because they were just introduced to algebraic expressions. This is a completely new concept for each of them, and they just needed a little extra help. I had expected this visit to be a little slow like last week, but I was pleasantly surprised. At first, they were very talkative and uninterested, and that made me

frustrated, but eventually they calmed down. We managed to get through the lesson, and they all seemed to understand it. I'm looking forward to next week, and I predict that the students will get progressively better once a strong routine is built.

Monday, September 24, 2007

Third Session:

Ms. Thompson gave a math test on Friday, and the scores weren't very good. She sent R, A, B, and C with me. (J wasn't at school today, or she would have sent her with me too.) Their scores were pretty poor; consequently, we went through the entire test together, and I had them correct all of their mistakes. They all seemed pretty confident that they would do better on the next test, so I told them that if they ALL improved their scores, I would bring them a special treat. I expected to see only J, R, and A today, but I was excited to see two more faces. I must admit; I was a little relieved not to see J at the session because without J, R was able to get all of her work done without distractions. When J was present last week, she kept R from listening to me. I thought today went much more smoothly than last week.

Monday, October 1, 2007

Fourth Session:

Ms. Thompson didn't have the test graded from Friday, so I had no idea how they were doing or if they were improving. I was very disappointed at this because I'm very anxious to see how my tutoring is affecting their scholastic work, if at all. I had the three original students: R, A, and J, and I was very happy to see that they were all attentive! We went through a math and reading assignment, and they only had a few questions. I am thrilled that they are becoming more familiar with me, and they know that I'm serious about finishing their work. I feel that they enjoy the sessions better than class because they get the opportunity to ask questions that

they are otherwise scared or embarrassed to ask during class. I hope that Ms. Thompson will e-mail me their scores so that I can see how each of them is performing in class.

Monday, October 8, 2007

Fifth Session:

They all improved! Ms. Thompson sent me an email giving me each of the students' scores, and they were all much better! I'm very excited about this; however, today I have learned that I have a new challenge ahead of me. The children are all struggling greatly with their simple multiplication tables. For instance even a simple problem such as eight times two takes a hesitation and may even require the "finger counting method," and they are in fifth grade! This upsets me because I don't understand it. From now on we are going to have to practice their multiplication tables avidly in every session until I can see some sort of improvement. I certainly did not expect this because I know that multiplication is taught starting in the third grade; therefore, I'm very curious to know why fifth graders are struggling this much with the subject.

Monday, October 22, 2007

Sixth Session:

I missed last week because it was Fall Break, and I was out of town. I honestly expected to go in today and notice a great improvement in their work. I was terribly wrong! We did a worksheet that contained division problems, and the children seemed to forget everything we had talked about just two weeks ago. I don't feel like this session was a success at all! I left feeling very frustrated because I want these kids to get something out of me working with them, but I don't feel like they know how to learn. I thought the session went very rough, and I am not looking forward to next week at all!

Monday, October 29, 2007

Seventh Session:

Today was a drastic improvement from last week. The kids and I had a terrific time together. We got a lot accomplished, and I felt reassured about their improvement when I spoke with their teacher. She explained to me that although I may not see a great improvement when they are working one-on-one with me, she has noticed a tremendous improvement in all of their work in the classroom. I definitely did not expect this, and I was relieved when she shared this with me.

My main concern now is with J. It has come to my attention that J is having a lot of issues at home. Apparently her parents have continued to show no interest in her work at school, and she is suffering greatly from this. I feel very helpless because although I want to reach out to her and help her, I'm not sure how to do so. I have noticed a little noncompliance with her in our tutoring session together, but it is clear that her frustration stems from home and not from the work. I personally feel that she is so greatly affected by her issues at home that when she is at school, her work seems insignificant, and rightfully so. If she has no support at home, I would think it to be nearly impossible for her to put emphasis on school herself. The ability to strive for excellence in education, in my opinion, begins at home.

Monday, November 5, 2007

Eighth Session:

We had a great session today! I was very excited, once again. Our main focus today was a worksheet with new division problems, and by the end of our time together, they were actually begging me to give them more problems because they were so excited to be doing so well with the concept. I was pleasantly surprised because I certainly hadn't expected them to be as

enthusiastic as they were with these new concepts. I'm looking forward to seeing their improvement for our next session.

Monday, November 19, 2007

Ninth Session:

Today was a special, different kind of session. My boyfriend Jeff was in town for Thanksgiving break, and he expressed a lot of interest in wanting to come along with me to see me interact with the students. As I had expected, they were all delighted with the idea of meeting someone new. As he tried to merely observe our tutoring session, the kids were insistent on his being a part of everything. We did multiple practice problems, and I was very impressed with the way Jeff came up with word problems that incorporated many concepts. Today was a great success, and I think that it was good to surprise them and do something different. They seemed to like the idea of having both of us to work with.

Ms. Thompson pulled me aside to tell me that J's parents had failed to go to their parent/teacher conference from three weeks ago. In the Blue Springs School District it is routine that the parents get their child's report card at the time of their conference. Since J's parents had failed to come to their conference, they have failed to see that J is failing miserably in all subjects. Ms. Thompson asked me to speak with J at our next session and stress to her the importance of doing well in school.

Though I believe that this could be somewhat effective, I am not sure that it will make a drastic difference in improving her grades. Once again, I feel helpless. I realize that J cannot possibly be the only student like this, and I feel the pain of all teachers because I know that they must experience this feeling on a day to day basis. I am more than happy to speak with J, but I certainly do not think that this is all her fault. I also do not expect a fifth grader who has never

had any true academic guidance to be solely responsible for her scholastic activities.

Nevertheless, I will do my best to try and convey the importance to her with the hope that it will make even the slightest bit of difference.

Monday, December 03, 2007

Tenth Session:

Today was my last official meeting with the kids. All were present except for J, which was very disappointing because I wanted to be able to take my last session with her as an opportunity for me to discuss the importance of her doing well in school. Because she wasn't at school today, I am going to make a special trip to the school tomorrow to discuss her future with her.

With the children that were present, I went over a work sheet with them that dealt with basic conversion factors. I was very impressed with all of the students' improvement. I spoke with each of them, and they all agreed that my time spent with them during the duration of this semester has been both fun and educating. I am extremely glad that they had a great experience working with me. This session was definitely a plus especially compared to how the service learning project took off in the beginning. I feel that we have all come a long way and made a lot of progress together!

Tuesday, December 04, 2007

Eleventh Session:

Today I had my special meeting with J. I asked her if she was excited or nervous about middle school next year, and she expressed both excitement and apprehension. I tried to explain to her the usual idea of how middle school teachers don't remind you to get your work done on time. However, I knew that this would be redundant for her because it's redundant for me. I

have heard this same line countless numbers of times, and it's always wrong. I never had a teacher in middle school or high school that didn't remind kids to get their work done or that didn't "baby" their students. Knowing that this was probably a waste of breath for me to say, I said it anyway. Then I decided to take another approach. I had J right down all of her current grades, and then I had her set goals for her next report card. After she set her goals, I asked her to write how she was going to accomplish these goals. At first this idea seemed so obvious, but I felt that I may have gotten through to her.

Before I left, I explained to J that if she kept up with trying to achieve her goals, I would come back and visit her. She seemed very excited about this idea. Therefore, I am confident that I did make at least the smallest bit of impact on her. I feel that this was the best way to approach the situation, and I hope that she will keep her promise in trying to achieve her goals.

As this was my last official visit to James Walker Elementary I feel that overall it was a success. I learned just as much from the students as I feel that they learned from me. We learned how to work with one another, and most importantly, we gained the respect, confidence, and trust in each other that is vital to the learning environment. I feel that I impacted each one of their lives simply by showing that I cared. Through this process, I gained a great amount of respect for teachers. I realize how difficult it must be for them to try and reach out to every one of their students individually.

However, the most important concept or idea that I will take away from this experience is that teaching is an art. The importance of education begins in the home, and is reiterated by the teachers. The teachers must strive to instill the importance and value of learning during the hours of the day they spend with the students. Not everyone can be a teacher. There is a certain

type of person that this career calls for. If a teacher lacks the love of teaching, that teacher will fail miserably. Consequently, the students will do the same.