January 26

Although I have shadowed and observed a few special education teachers in the school setting, today I realized just how much of the job description includes time set aside for meetings and paperwork. After observing my first IEP my practicum teacher shared with me that she sets aside one afternoon a week specifically for meetings. I knew that as a special educator that I would be required to lead meetings and advocate for students within these meetings but I may not have realized just how tiring and time consuming this can be. My practicum teacher had to redirect the conversation to the matters at hand, lead the parents through the IEP process and even organize the PT, OT, SLP and principal to focus on the matter at hand with this student. In my thought process of an IEP meeting I always viewed the special educator to be an observer in such meetings, not a leader so I was able to reflect and view that role through this meeting.

***January 28***

***Today I was able to observe one of the many strategies teachers use as a motivational tool to encourage student learning: the sensory room. I spent a better part of my day with a few students in the sensory room and I was able to observe how beneficial this sensory break was for many students. The paraprofessionals or special educators would set a timer and allow that student to use any of the resources available in the room. One strategy that I had heard of before was used in a creative way; this was the idea of the “weighted vest”. There was not a weighted vest in the sensory room at the moment, so my practicum teacher used a rubber mat to roll up the student into a “burrito” and place bean bags and weighted pillows on top of this student. I admired her creative thinking because she knew that is what the student needed at that moment. Even if she did not have the specific tools to give to that student, she thought on the fly of an alternative way to bring the student the service he needed at that moment.***

February 1

It is interesting to me how different of a schedule special educators have compared to general education teachers. The schedules are not necessarily “easier” but just more flexible in the sense that you can move with your student to different classrooms, environments and take the sensory breaks. I have also enjoyed the one-on-one experience with many of the students receiving special education services, which is an opportunity that is difficult to have frequently as a general education teacher. As far as comparing the two environments, I cannot say I like one environment more than the other, but I have been grateful for the opportunity to view from the special education perspective.

February 3

One observation that is common throughout all of the students I have observed is that it is extremely difficult to maintain motivation and attention. Many of the students are diagnosed with autism, ID or other health impairments and are behind their classmates in many areas academically. This causes students to struggle with motivation to improve their learning and stay on task while Mrs. Varriano is working with the individual. One of the strategies that I have found to be most helpful in this is giving the students choices and allowing for sensory breaks. When a student is given a choice, cooperation is much more likely to occur; when sensory breaks are given upon the completion of work, concentration and motivation to perform the next task is increased.

February 4

There is a lot of paperwork that is involved in special education! In all honesty, the paperwork does seem a little intimidating, but not in regards to difficulty as much as the amount of time filling out the paperwork takes. I feel that so much of special education is law-based due to government services that are provided through schools and that area (of law) intimidates me. All of the special educators, OTs, PTs, school psychologists and administrators seem to feel so comfortable with what is required by law, it makes me wonder how long it took for them to comfortably refer to areas of law to back up their statements. It will probably just take lots of experience and even then, each student and each “case” is different than any other. I will always be learning new areas of law in special education as they come at me in different scenarios.

February 8

An aspect that I have not considered very much is the “legal” side of special education. It can be easy to forget that there are laws regarding special education services and protocol that has to be followed and if not followed can come back to haunt you. I experienced this today with an individual who receives housing from HIT and has a distant relative as a guardian. Sometimes it is the word of the guardian against the word of the teacher or service provider when there is no paperwork or files to back the information up. It is so important to document ALL information regarding a student to keep on file in case an unfortunate situation were to occur. Documentation is not an aspect of teaching that is seen in action where observing so I was glad to have this discussion with Mrs. Varriano on its importance and see the outcome if it does not occur.

***February 9***

***Alternative education settings are an interesting addition to the educational setting. I was observing an IEP today at the Welcome Center due to the individual being an ELL learner and needing an alternative setting to best learn with other ELL learners. Another interesting aspect of this IEP meeting was that there was a Spanish translator involved to help with communication throughout the meeting. Part of me feels that alternative settings can be extremely restrictive for students and can cause a sense of isolation socially and academically. However, in some cases alternative settings such as the Welcome Center provide a safe and proactive learning environment that a student may not be able to receive in a traditional school setting. I think that each student’s situation needs to be evaluated in regards to providing an alternative setting because overall, the needs of the student are what should determine the setting in which he or she will excel in.***

February 10

Throughout my practicum I have been fortunate enough to see interaction between students and a variety of paraprofessionals. Centennial Elementary has 15 paraprofessionals on staff, which is more than the typical amount for a school to have, certainly more than any other school I have observed at. This large amount of paraprofessionals available allows for a daily rotation to take place with each student that receives services or intervention. As discussed in Moderate to Severe Disabilities, it is important for students to consistently rotate and “switch up” paraprofessionals for a variety of reasons. I have most definitely seen this practice take place at Centennial and it is a neat process to see. Each para has a unique relationship with each student and a different practice or intervention to bring to the table.

***February 18***

***Many schools in Bismarck are beginning to pursue “push in” programs instead of the traditional model of “pull out” programs. While Centennial is not one of these schools yet, I participated in a discussion today about the possibility of the shift from pull out to push in over the next few years. Centennial has already accomplished what can be viewed as “partially” push in; each classroom has a connected workroom that special educators or paraprofessionals work with students in. It is easy to work with students who need services and intervention without isolating them completely from their classroom and it allows students to “pop” back and forth from the classroom to the adjunct room. However, Centennial’s vision wants to pursue a deeper practice of push in, and I was grateful to be a participant and observer in that discussion today.***

February 23

An IEP meeting can be rather productive if conducted in the proper format, for example the IEP I witnessed today. Instead of reporting back simply the scores of assessments to the parents, each IEP team member explained what the score meant and what was tested underneath each category. This allowed the parents to better understand what their child needs to work on and how he or she is performing in school. Also, each member of the IEP team should be able to assess and discuss results with parents in order to create a more personal relationship. The only problem with this much detail is the amount of available time, which may always be an issue. However if you make time, the IEP meetings can go extremely well, making every member of the IEP team on board with services and intervention.

February 24

One area I have always struggled with when observing educators is knowing my place to talk and discuss with students they are working with. While I want to sit back and allow the educators to do the work they need to do with the student, I do not want the student to feel uncomfortable with me watching or the teacher feeling as if I do not care. Half of the time I am just not aware of my role when I observe. In contrast, today I was asked to record data while working with a student, and through this I was able to connect with the student and feel more comfortable later on when observing. Allowing myself to be thrown into the daily work of the students has had more benefits than negative impacts so I hope to continue to experience situations such as these.

February 25

The severity of some disabilities continue to blow my mind each day; yet something that blows my mind even more is the dedication that some individuals with disabilities have in bettering themselves and their education. I witnessed this with my practicum teacher’s substitute on Thursday and Friday. The substitute teacher has cerebral palsy, yet walks, talks and communicates just as any other individual without a disability. While he is difficult to understand his speech and he walks differently, it was amazing to see how inspiring he is, not just with himself but the students he was working with. Many of the students were afraid of him at first, which was to be expected, but after seeing his care for them, the student began to open up to him. It just goes to show that no disability can completely debilitate a person in all areas of living. A disability may hinder development and learning, but with true dedication and hard work, development and learning can never be stopped.

February 26

It is so much fun to spend the day with children. While I love being around adults and people my own age, children have the tendency to lighten the mood or stress one can be feeling in a day. However, this is only true if the teacher acts in a similar way. For example as a future educator I will be responsible for the attitude and behavior of my students. If I come to class every day with a frown on my face because I had a bad night or I take out the anger I have from my family on my students, my students will learn to do the same or will be unwilling to have a positive attitude. On the contrary, if I come to class in a chipper mood and use positive language, in return my students are more likely to react positively within the classroom. As a teacher, I will have an unimaginable impact on my students for the year. It is my duty not to abuse it, but use it.

February 29

Having been observing my practicum teacher for just over 30 hours now, I have been able to be in the special education setting consistently throughout the last 5 weeks. Being in the setting consistently, I have seen the impact a relationship a teacher has with his or her students makes of breaks the educational foundation. For example, my practicum teacher is extremely firm with the students on her caseload, but because she shows that she cares, the students do what is asked of them (most of the time!). Sometimes I see paraprofessionals that spend more time on their phones or talking with one another than interacting with the students around them, and it’s no wonder these students act out towards them or prefer not to listen. Children are extremely perceptive so it is crucial to make it known to a student you care not just as an educator but as an ally and advocate for their learning and development.

March 8

The more I observe within the special education setting the more I realize how much is “on the plate” of a special educator. Many special educators are not only responsible for students who receive services on an IEP but are also responsible for students on behavior plans, require sensory breaks and basically any negative or maladaptive behavior. For example, a student at my school is not on an IEP or even a formal behavior plan, yet my practicum teacher is oftentimes the one being called to the classroom or office because of this student’s behavior in the school setting. If she is not called down, one of the paraprofessionals must leave his or her current student to take care of the situation. I had never thought much about these situations, but after observing for several weeks now I see this take place quite often.

March 9

I am double majoring in Elementary and Special Education, so I am quite partial to the elementary setting. However, I would also be very interested to experience special education at the middle school level. While middle school is never a place I would necessarily want to teach in a traditional classroom setting I find the age group extremely interesting (and challenging)! High school, while I would be willing to take a job at any level, is not my ideal placement. I do not feel as comfortable around high school students and become nervous especially within the special education setting. Right now I have a mentor within the ED classroom at Legacy High School and have fortunately become more exposed to the high school level of special education. While it will take some getting used to, I am grateful to have the variety of experiences.

March 10

One of the larger challenges I have experienced throughout my practicum so far is the amount of legalities that take place within the realm of special education. It continues to amaze me how much there is to keep track of, such as dates or meetings and IEP renewals, testing information, the proper CPI training, the complexity of goals and so much more. I find all of this information extremely interesting and I am excited in learning more about these areas as I continue on in the special education world but it is very intimidating when looking at special education as a whole.

March 15

One of the deficits of the special education services provided at my practicum school that has come to my attention is the scheduling of the pull-outs and services. I have noticed that many times, while special educators and teachers try to practice consistency, the students receiving services are missing out on whole class instruction or classroom activities that separate them from their peers. This can be extremely problematic for students and teachers; students, because they miss out on foundational instruction and the interaction with their peers, teachers because they will end up re-teaching and will lack consistent attendance in classroom activities.

March 16

I find it intriguing that students who do not receive special education services seem so comfortable with paraprofessionals coming in and out of the classroom as often as they do and not getting distracted or thinking it is “abnormal”. This goes to show the impact inclusion in the classroom has had on students with AND without disabilities. Even looking back on my elementary school days, it was a huge deal if a paraprofessional came into the classroom and worked with a student or pulled a student out of the classroom; it just did not happen. In public education today, it is almost impossible to find a general education classroom that does not have a paraprofessional working with a student or group of students.

March 17

My practicum teacher is the definition of organization! She has her own label machine, laminator and color/design coordinated binders for each of her students. While sometimes she may go overboard on organization, this practice has immense benefits. If she has a substitute, she does not need to lay things out for the student to do, all of the instructions, goals and activities are within the binder; information regarding a student’s past IEP or goals can be found under that student’s name in the file cabinet along with additional information regarding the student; anytime my practicum teacher needs a more challenging activity or something new for the student to work on, she can go look in the cupboards and find activities labeled under money, time, fractions, reading, and so many others. Though it has taken her time to get to this level of organization, it has paid off for her in the long run and in the years to come.

March 21

As I work more with students who receive services under the category of ID the more I realize how degrading it can be for students categorized as ID. All of the students I work with want to learn, communicate and have relationships with their peers and teachers, yet many of them struggle to attain this goal because of their categorization. It is beautiful that these students receive the services to help them attain the above goals, yet these services can sometimes stand in the way of these goals. Other students see the services and care they receive, and wonder “Why does she get that” or “What is wrong with him”. It pushes me all the more to ensure that the students I serve know they are no different from any of their other peers just because of their “categorization”.

March 29

Today I was able to observe my first teacher in service that included collaboration withal of the teachers of the school. I found this to be extremely beneficial because you can observe a lot about a school based upon the environment and energy of the school. The teachers discussed a variety of topics including CPI training and procedures as well as PBL and push-in practices. Participating in a discussion such as this one opened my eyes to many of the considerations to take when incorporating and investing in a new curriculum practice. The teachers discussed so many aspects of implications that can take place that I never would have reflected on.

March 30

Education in general is extremely unpredictable, regardless of the general education or special education setting. However, in special education unpredictable can mean a variety of things, including one day a student having to go to the quiet room 5 times; the next day maybe not at all. This type of unpredictability forces me to be flexible, something that I have never been too good at. While being flexible and “thinking on the fly” used to make me nervous, I am no longer intimidated. I get excited to try new activities and be challenged to adapt my lessons and work on the fly. I am trying not to look at it as losing control, but as gaining experience and acquiring a competence that would not have otherwise formed if not practiced.

March 31

Today was the first day I observed specifically in the area of ED in the elementary setting. While I am observing in the same school with the same paraprofessionals and special educators, I see so many differences in the structures of the day and the behavior that occurs. ED is a special education category that intrigues me, mainly because so much of the cause appears to be due to a traumatic home life or environment. All of these student desire love, but it is so difficult for them to accept it, even in a safe environment such as school. As I continue to observe the ED setting I hope to learn more about emotional disturbances that are affecting students in school today. I want to learn more about how this diagnosis affects students academically, socially and mentally at all ages.

***April 5th***

***After observing two students identified underneath ED or are on intense behavior plans, I can see just how fuzzy the line is between providing the Least Restrictive Environment but also ensuring a student’s best interests. Today, one of my students is a known “runner” and is extremely disruptive during class. This student is also classified as an attention seeker, so in each situation the paraprofessional or special educator has to decide whether the student’s negative behavior should be addressed or not. I find this very intimidating because these students are smart. They know how to push the limit and it can be difficult to follow through with reinforcements or punishments. I am grateful for the paraprofessionals and special educators that I am observing because they are helping me look at each situation differently to decide what the best direction to move towards is***.

April 7th

Emotional Disorders can be extremely difficult to service, especially when the individuals are young students. Children should be living carefree lives; enjoying learning, playing with friends, and laughing often. However we do not live in a perfect world and because of this reality many students in our classrooms suffer from trauma and emotional disturbance. In order to help these students, we as teachers must have a special desire to create a safe environment for all students. These students may not see home as a safe place, but there is no reason why school should not be seen as a safe place. Some days students with emotional disturbances will kick you, swear at you and do anything to get away from you, even if you are doing your best to help them. Yet, on those days or brief moments that they smile at you, give you a hug or present you with a flower, you can know that all of the work is worth it.