Practicum Reflection Essay:

My 320-Hour Experience

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It truly is amazing the difference one year can make. I completed the 100-hour general leadership practicum in the 2020-2021 school year and the 320-hour principal practicum in the 2021-2022 school year and my experiences were vastly different. The 20-21 school year was a hybrid schedule where I had one full day each week to work with students who chose distance learning. Teaching in an ALC meant that we had very few students choosing distance learning that were really committed to the time it takes to make it work, so I had more free time on Wednesdays than one might have expected. With that free time, I was able to devote at least an hour or more towards practicum activities. This year, however, we were back to a regular schedule with school five days a week and I was out of school for nearly a month due to COVID. This meant that I had to find more opportunities to fulfill my practicum requirements on my own time and serve on more committees and meeting teams that fit in with the principal role. We also have three new administrators in our district this year: curriculum director, middle school principal, and high school principal. Despite trying circumstances, I was able to participate in many new experiences thanks to this practicum. There were four experiences that represented the big learning opportunities for me. They included creating master and student schedules, serving as a substitute for an administrator, working with ALC staff to change our grading methods to competency-based education, and when I administrated a summer targeted services program called Otter Adventures.

My practicum was supervised by the high school principal in Fergus Falls, Mr. Mark Anderson. For the previous nine years that I have taught in Fergus Falls we have had an

administrator setup that had one secondary school principal over the middle and high school and an assistant principal at the middle school and an assistant principal at the high school. When the secondary school principal retired at the end of the 2020-2021 school year, the school board decided to split his position in two and hire a head high school and head middle school principal. Mr. Anderson is that new high school principal. At first, I was apprehensive about asking him to be my site supervisor simply because it was his first year in the district and I didn't want to add more to his plate. After meeting with him during the summer along with the rest of the ALC staff, it was clear to me that he would be an excellent mentor and I asked him to be my site supervisor. Mr. Anderson is an incredibly passionate educational leader, and I learned a lot from him about the level of dedication it takes to be a great principal. I also would like to mention the ALC Director, Mrs. Kristin Tuel. Mrs. Tuel is not a licensed principal, but she has been the director of the Fergus Falls ALC for over 15 years and unofficially served as an administrative mentor for me this year.

The first major project that I worked on for my practicum was to help create the ALC master class schedule and assign students in grades 9-11 into their first semester classes. While many schools have guidance counselors and software to create student schedules, the process at the ALC is much more nuanced. Nearly every ALC student has experienced a course failure during their time in high school or has at least one class that is incomplete from previous years. Student personality and maturity are other factors that need to be considered when creating student schedules. Combine those with the fact that there are only five or six sections every class period and scheduling students at the ALC becomes a complex task. I spent 15 hours in August creating semester 1 schedules and 20 hours in January creating semester 2 schedules. This work on the schedules helped me to grow in the "Monitor Student Learning" and "Early Childhood

Through Grade 12 Leadership" competencies of the Minnesota K-12 Principal Competencies (B1, B2, B3, B4, B5, B6, B7, & C1). I had to learn to see all the pieces to the puzzle when creating the master schedule and assigning students to different classrooms. I had to understand what students needed academically, emotionally, and socially, and think about teachers' need to have well balanced classes and keeping student behavior "hotspots" spread out. I found out after the first week that I had placed a few students in one classroom together that created a toxic learning environment for everyone involved and had to adjust some schedules as a result. I learned more about how the other core content areas sequence their instruction throughout the four years of high school. The process of creating student schedules taught me so much about what students really need beyond just checking a box on the transcript. Some students can handle a lot while others need to be eased into the day with a class that they really enjoy so that the rest of the day can proceed better for them.

Working on projects like scheduling was very enlightening to be able to see the big picture, but it is still necessary to understand what the day-to-day grind of administration is really like. I was able to experience that firsthand for eight complete days throughout the year as I subbed for the ALC director. The first time was for a whole week when she went on vacation, and I was able to organize and run a schoolwide event we do every year called Advisory Olympics. That week had relatively minimal student discipline issues, but I was able to meet with several seniors and juniors to talk about their path to graduation. Later in the year I subbed for three more days, and this is when I gained some valuable experience dealing with more serious student discipline issues. The biggest issue was with a student who was reported to smell like marijuana. We called the high school principal over to the building and I assisted in searching the student's locker and backpack to find marijuana and paraphernalia. I was able to

observe Mr. Anderson's handling of the issue and how he spoke with the student. He was very direct and yet treated the student with dignity and respect. He influenced my handling of a similar situation that came up a few weeks later with the same student. I learned to see the person and not just the unwanted behavior (MN K-12 Principal Competency B4).

One area that I have learned a lot about through my courses at MSUM but did not have a lot of practical experience in before this school year is the MN K-12 Principal Competency "Instructional Leadership". I was able to actively participate in and help lead the ALC teachers and staff as we began the process of moving to a competency-based education (CBE) grading system. This shift was about more than just changing grading practices, but also about changing the way that both students and staff view the process of progressing through courses towards graduation. It became clear that under our old system students were just putting in the time to do the bare minimum and be done without regard for actual learning. Throughout the process of switching to CBE, I had the opportunity to practice and grow in both areas of the "Instructional Leadership" competency as I supported teachers and staff in the implementation of state standards, instruction that promotes the mission, vision, and core values of the school district, and lead school-wide literacy efforts. The biggest learning opportunity came for me when the ALC director and I found out that several teachers were not actually implementing the new CBE system the way that we all agreed upon. One teacher was retiring, and another was a new teacher that was not being renewed after the school year. They both seemed to be trying to slide through the end of the year without any additional work. Another teacher was overwhelmed by personal tragedy outside of school, and the last teacher who didn't implement CBE was hiding that he didn't truly understand the concept and chose to not try it. I personally spoke with the latter two teachers who would be returning next year in informal conversations. In both conversations I

conveyed to them that I understood their reasons for not implementing CBE and helped them to see the benefits of it. I helped them understand the process better and made it a point to put it on our next meeting agenda to have a group discussion about the process and details of how to implement CBE for the next school year. After that meeting we decided to go all in on CBE next year.

The competency that I have had the least experience and instruction on is the third of the Minnesota K-12 Principal Competencies, “Early Childhood Through Grade 12 Leadership”. I have taken courses that have had a slight lean towards elementary and had only one short experience with elementary during my 100-hour general leadership practicum. Going into this school year, working in elementary education felt like visiting a foreign country that speaks English: you know the language, but it’s a completely different dialect and some things don’t have the same meaning as they do in your native vernacular. I was fortunate to have two different opportunities to work with a targeted services program in Fergus Falls called Otter Adventures to gain experience at the elementary and middle school levels. I was able to facilitate the regular school year program a handful of times when I subbed for the ALC director and was more hands on when working with the summer Otter Adventures program in June 2022. Through both experiences I had a chance to grow in all three of the MN K-12 Principal Competencies (A1, A2, B3, B6, B7, C1, C2, C3, C4, C5, & C6). In a short amount of time, I learned a lot about elementary literacy program implementation, the alignment of curriculum from the elementary years up to high school, and how to work with students, staff, and parents in different levels of schooling. My time working with Otter Adventures was not only valuable for the experience of working in the elementary and middle school settings, but also to learn more about targeted services and the interventions that we have in our district for at-risk children before they reach

me at the ALC. There is a lot that we are doing well, and it became clear that without the dedication of Mrs. Tuel, the ALC director, our district's targeted services would be non-existent. Having the right leader in the right position can make or break an entire program. I strive to have that level of dedication in my own career and to be the best leader that I can be for the students and staff that I work with. I also discovered that I have more to learn and need more practical experiences in the elementary and middle school levels.

My practicum experience has been a wonderful expansion upon what I learned in the 100-hour general leadership practicum. I value the academic knowledge I have gained through my courses over the last few years, but real-world experiences like this practicum cannot be replicated through reading and discussion with others. I know that I have a lot left to learn, but I also believe that I am ready for the challenge of being a full-time administrator. It might not be pretty all the time and there will definitely be some growing pains, but I have the right temperament and attitude to do the job well and good mentors to rely on when I need help.