Field Experience #2

By: Carinna Sabetti

 On November 30th, 2018, I was able to sit in and watch two music classes at St. Thomas Moore Catholic Elementary School. Erin Thornes, the music teacher, held two great sessions. Each session was 40 minutes long and included 2 full sets of classes; one with grades 2 and 3 and the other with grades 4 and 5. Both groups were practicing their performances for the Christmas concert they were having in the next few weeks. It was interesting to see the dynamic change between both sessions. Both groups were rehearsing in the gymnasium. With the space being so large, there was more room for the students to be free with their movement and actions. She ordered the students by height and had them alternating formation with boy, girl, boy, girl etc. She wanted to make sure everyone could see her and that she could see them. If the teacher can see everyone, then that means the students can be seen by their parents. Having approximately 50 students in one space is a huge challenge, but Mrs. Thornes was able to get throw rehearsing all the pieces and go over any troubling parts that needed extra clarification.

 For choice of repertoire, I appreciated that Mrs. Thorne was able to challenge all the students musically with contrasting pieces. I noticed that with both groups, she was able to adapt accordingly based on the responses she was getting from the class. She took the time and initiative to go over the parts that needed the extra attention on and kept repeating the phrase in context for the students to really solidify their part. Each group sang two pieces that had a Christmas theme. I also noticed that for each group, they both had a religious piece and a more upbeat/catchier piece. St. Thomas Moore is a Catholic elementary school and I acknowledged that she successful brought religion into something fun. In this way, the students are praising God, being educated by their religion and enjoying themselves by singing with holiday cheer. She used a backing track recording for the accompaniment which was connected to a set of speakers. One small minor detail that was brought to my attention was that she mentioned to the students that when using technology for the accompaniment, sometimes you may not be able to hear it especially when performing in a new space. She asked the students what you should do if you were not able to hear the music clearly and how would the group would still stay together when singing. After many guesses one student finally said watch the teacher. In that moment I think it really clicked in to all the student’s heads that it is really important to watch the teacher at all times and not just for when you don’t know the words.

 With both groups, I noticed that many of the students couldn’t stay focused or stay in one spot for very long. Especially with the grade 5’s, they were a huge issue with not paying attention. Throughout this occurrence, I continued to wonder how the teacher would address the issue and find a way to get her students back on track. Mrs. Thorne was firm but patient with her students and used a call back phrase and other strategies to get their attention. She would sometimes wait and not say a word to see how long it would take before any of them would notice they weren’t doing what they were supposed to be doing. Some of the students who continuously listen and participate would tell their other classmates to stop because they wanted to sing. Unfortunately, when some of the students aren’t cooperating and disturbing the lesson or rehearsal, it affects the whole group. Occasionally teachers have to stop all things and take away any privileges in order to get the point across more clearly. She would sing “boys and girls” and the students would respond back and sing “stop and listen” to a tune they all knew. It was a great way to get their attention instantly when they are out of hand and the students know they have to quiet down and have all their attention and eyes focused on the teacher.

It is very different being the one watching the teacher running the class and seeing how the students respond versus being the one in the class participating and watching the teacher from another angle. It has opened my eyes tremendously and has showed me a new perspective of the occupation of being an educator. Watching the class from an outside perspective allowed me to develop an understanding as to how to approach teaching music to students at a young age. It is important to be patient when the students get out of hand but also you need to set boundaries, and discipline if needed. It is important to have a balance between the two or else the students will walk all over you rather than respect you. Mrs. Thorne did an excellent job with handling both big groups. She warned me at the beginning that the second groups behavior isn’t up to pair with the first group. I appreciated her honesty with warning me.

 When the teacher conducts the class, she used actions and mouthed the words in order to help remind and keep all the students on track in case their mind had drawn a blank. She also used her right arm/hand to show the direction of the pitch and whether the next note is higher or lower than the previous note being sung. Watching it from the side, I thought that was an effective way to conduct the students without doing complex beat patterns which would most likely cause some confusion. The students all knew how to respond through these non-verbal communication visuals and actions that Mrs. Thorne was displaying. I have never seen someone conduct a group like that and I believe having a visual for young students to follow, that is not also complicated, is effective and will be beneficial in the long run as they explore their musicianship.

 The music class was more of a rehearsal then a lesson with learning new material. I wish I was able to see her teach something new, but her rehearsals were still both educational and informative. I also wish I asked her how she originally taught the songs to the students. In the Music Education in Elementary Grades course I am currently taking, we learned about teaching music by rote and by note. Both these ways of teaching are both effective, but I am curious to know how Mrs. Thorne had taught it. All the pieces had their challenges rhythmically, especially for the older students. They sang a song called Hot Chocolate and during the middle section, the big group was split into three sections and each section sang an ostinato. One group started and then after a few rounds of that ostinato, the other two groups were layered one at a time on top to join in to the round. Mrs. Thornes did an excellent job with bringing each section in and helping them out with using actions. You could tell some groups were very excited to sing their parts because they were so loud and energetic. There was one group that came in very strong when Mrs. Thorne brought them in but once she moved onto the next group to sing their ostinato, they lost it a bit. Definitely with a few more practises they will have that section solidified. I was very impressed when they sang this ostinato round and came out singing it successfully.

 I noticed throughout all pieces from the older group and also for the younger group, that they had actions to go along with their songs. I thought that was very smart to add in. It makes the performance more fun for the students and it also helps with the memorization. The actions corresponded to the words and phrases being sung. I observed that throughout watching both groups perform they were more confident with knowing their actions than with the memorization of the words. Of course, I wasn’t there for any other rehearsals, so I don’t know exactly what Mrs. Thorne has mentioned to her students but explaining to them that if you forget the words, you can think about the actions you’re doing and relate it back to the text.

In conclusion, I had such a great experience overall watching both the rehearsals for the grades 2 and 3 and then the grades 4 and 5. Having the opportunity to go and involve myself in a real-life classroom is so educational. You can educate yourself all you want by reading books or having a phenomenal Dr. Veblen teach you, but it is so different once you get out there and be in a space with children. I would love to continue to explore my knowledge by visiting other elementary schools throughout my undergrad to gain more experience and expand my work with children.