As a novice teacher, this class provided me with invaluable classroom experience. I was expecting to tutor a few students and wound up with the equivalent of a small class of 7th and 8th graders. Since I have never taught before in this type of setting, I had my hesitations about feeling comfortable and/or confident in my role as teacher. In my Middle School in a Diverse Society class we read an article about an amateur teacher who viewed herself as an imposter in regards to her status as a teacher. Though she had been educated in her profession, she did not initially feel worthy enough to carry the label of a teacher. This was and still is one of my biggest concerns; especially in terms of how my students view me and accept me as an educator. Fortunately, this content class only had five grad students, thus throwing each of us into the role of a classroom teacher with fifteen or so students. Despite not feeling ready for this position at all, I had an amazing time stepping into this role and learning as I went. The most surprising and relieving concern that was addressed was my ability to feel comfortable leading my students through a lesson plan. I am not the most confident public speaker, yet I felt fairly at ease with my students in leading discussions and directing my lesson plans. This is not to say that there were not instances where I felt lost, however these experiences served in educating me as well. I learned firsthand how the specific content and implementation of your lesson plan is crucial in engaging your students’ attention and getting them excited about learning. I learned that busy work is just that, and does not inspire insightful learning or discussion. I learned that my students get excited to share special aspects of their personalities or lives with the class. I learned that classroom management is better facilitated through an engaging lesson plan that negates the need for discipline, which is typically a result of student boredom and/or frustration. Most importantly, this experience taught me the importance of assessment in becoming a more effective and confident teacher. Though I may not feel like a worthy member of the teaching community, this class affectively jump started my journey down this road.

Our first tutoring session served as an introduction in which we learned some of our collective interest, hobbies, and reading habits. Through my first couple of classes I was very impressed with the reading abilities of many of my students. I was surprised at their willingness and confidence in reading out loud in class. While only a few of my students voluntarily expressed being independent readers, I had my suspicions that a good amount of them were. Once we decided on our animal theme for the summer, which they were all enthusiastic about, we read, discussed, and participated in a number of activities involving the themes of endangered species, indigenous animals and people, wildlife preservation, and environmentalism. I found that guessing games served as a good intro into lesson plans and were good at identifying students’ prior knowledge on a topic. In particular, the anticipation guide was an activity that they were familiar with and really responded well too. This activity allowed them to critically analyze a text and evaluate some of their prior knowledge and pre conceived notions. I learned that my students responded best to a text when I was able to help them breakdown the analysis into manageable parts. As Beers points out in relationship to students’ reading, “Building on that premise that classroom talk about literature is important, I’d like to suggest that it is more critical for dependent readers to talk about texts during the reading than after it.” (p. 104).
This was evidenced by the fact that my students could not as easily recall relevant content after reading an entire text as they could paragraph by paragraph. Often, my students would either mix up information from a reading or unknowingly make assumptions that were not necessarily supported by the text. When this occurred, I would challenge the individual student to find direct evidence from the text that supported his/her claim. This would force them to consider the difference between an inference, an interpretation, and his/her prior knowledge and conceptions. Furthermore, when we addressed a reading one paragraph at a time, my students were better able to analyze specific content and have a better overall understanding of the theme of a text.

Though I was very impressed with the reading level of my students, I found that they were still in the early stages of developing their critical analysis skills as readers. This was particularly apparent when we read poems and tried to identify an author’s perspective, message, and motives. In “or will the dreamer wake,” a poem about endangered species, the author uses an ambiguous dreamer and unnamed grandchild to represent the present and the future. When I questioned my students to think about whom these characters were and what they contributed to the poem’s message, many of them quickly blurted out responses like, “they are the person dreaming,” or “the grandchild is the kid.” While these answers are not necessarily wrong, I had to challenge them to think about the question from a metaphorical standpoint. “They need to know the author’s intent, to understand the sociocultural influences, and, as Pearson (2001) suggested, to comprehend with a critical edge.” (p. 52). I used questions like: What do these characters represent? Why do you think the author chose these specific titles and how do they relate to the poem’s theme? These questions helped them move beyond the straight forward act of reading into the realm of critical literacy. I was encouraged that many of my students stepped up to the challenge and volunteered thoughtful responses that made connections between the characters and the poem’s message. I remember one student said, “The grandchild could be any of ours,” indicating that the author intentionally gave this character a vague label as a representation of our future generations. This was a very insightful response that I could tell got other students in the classroom thinking. Another example from this poem is when I asked, “Do you think the dreamer wakes up?” Many students were quick to offer a simple yes or no to this potentially complicated question. I think this lesson taught me the value of thinking about the ways in which you can present a question to foster critical analysis. If I could give advice to these students’ future ELA teachers, I would tell them to phrase questions in such a manner that encourages the possibility of having more than one right answer. Throughout our readings this semester, there have been many examples of school structure that led to a mindset of right and wrong answers, actions, and beliefs. The role of a multicultural conscious teacher is to dispel these attitudes and promote learning as a process of ideas and perspectives. My experiences in this class have helped me to identify some of the questions or prompts that facilitate a more intriguing student outlook on education and learning in the classroom.

I learned a great deal about my strengths and weaknesses as a teacher throughout the five or so sessions we had with our students. Like I mentioned earlier, I learned that I had a good rapport with my students and I felt surprisingly comfortable addressing them from my role as a teacher. Unfortunately, this is only a base for the other copious aspects necessary to be an effective educator, classroom manager, and role model that the teacher has to juggle, consider, and adjust to in his/her career. I just recently wrote my first “official” lesson plans using the rubric provided by the Atlanta Public School Standards. The implementation of a good lesson plan is complicated and integral in keeping students engaged and on track. Sometimes my classroom would get a little rowdy, but I much
preferred enthusiasm and a lack of order to blank stares, or worse yet heads down on the desk. Not having any prior experience or previously instated curriculum to work with, I head to prepare all my lesson plans from scratch. From this, I really got a good sense of what kept my students interested and engaged. When I did use handouts, I found that the ones that had multiple ways of interacting with the subject matter (i.e. coloring, drawing, predicting, reading, writing, assessing), led to greater student participation. Furthermore I learned that effective lesson plans take careful planning in order to provide differentiated teaching to a wide variety of students and learning styles. After the first couple of sessions I found myself calling on the same students (the ones I knew would offer a response or volunteer to read) because this was easier and safer in facilitating my lessons. In retrospect, I should have focused more on what engaged the different personalities of my students and then altered my future lesson plans in aims of encouraging everyone to participate. The text set effectively helped guide me along in working towards differentiating my lesson plans. However, I think experience will help foster my evolution in this regard to a more sophisticated approach. The experience we had in this class was probably equivalent to the first week of school during a normal semester, so I am not sure how well I could have really gotten to know these kids.

I think my biggest concern in my development as a teacher is being comfortable in my position as an authority figure. I already made mention that I was relieved to discover that I felt relaxed conversing with and guiding my students along in a lesson plan. However, when I speak of my position as an authority figure, I am considering my classroom management skills in terms of discipline and knowledge demonstration. I recognize that a teacher, just like a student should not always be expected to produce a “right” answer. That is the reason why we are in school in the first place. The classroom should be an environment in which it is safe to admit when you do not know something and would like to figure it out. However, I have never been in a position where people necessarily look to me for the answers or solutions to a problem. This includes disciplinary problems as well. I am the type of person who likes to avoid conflicts at all cost. I definitely do not want discipline to be a main focus in my classroom, as learning, discussion, and social development should take precedent. Unfortunately for teachers, this is not always the way things work out. In our tutoring sessions we were fortunate enough to have the help of teachers in our classrooms who would manage the behavior of the students that were acting inappropriately. I was very grateful for this since I was basically the equivalent of a stranger to these students on our first day and I did not want to deal with a particular student or situation in an inappropriate way. Again, I think that this type of classroom management concern will only be resolved via experience. I think the more I get to know my students the more comfortable I will be at dealing with their individual needs and/concerns. Furthermore, when I get more experience with the curriculum I will feel more comfortable as someone who is expected to be vassal of knowledge and answers.

Due to my inexperience as a teacher and the nature of these tutoring sessions in which we only had a short time together overall, I was very lenient in the direction of my lesson plans. If I could tell my students were not into a particular exercise or reading I would not force the issue. On the contrary, I would often ask them to make suggestions that would make the subject matter or activity more interesting to them. Even going so far as to offering the students examples of other ways in which they could express their understanding of the content. I remember classes where things went strictly according to plan and I remember other classes where student’s had their heads down on their desks. In instances like these I felt it necessary to change things up to get students reengaged in the content. Furthermore, I learned that even though students may appear excited about a video clip, if
not used properly the video may be an excuse for them to tune out or drift off. The main lesson I took away from this short experience is that the best lesson plans keep students actively engaged by making them participants in the learning/teaching process. For example, in my third class we watched a ten minute video which wound up being too long to keep some of my students’ attention. Noticing a lack of energy, I tried to get things back on track with an activity focused on group discussion. Unfortunately, I learned that getting students reengaged in the day’s lesson can be even more difficult than initially sparking their interest. The same is true when students notice that a lesson or class time is coming to an end. These examples only further convinced me of the importance of having an engaging well thought out lesson plan. The ability to adapt in the classroom is essential; however thoughtful planning should lessen the need for these deviations.

The most surprising aspect of my experiences this semester (my ah-ha! moment, if you will) was the overwhelmingly positive attitudes and behaviors of my students. I was fairly concerned about my students’ willingness to open up to me as a new teacher and be enthusiastic about being in class during the summer. While the more outgoing students were more responsive at first, by the end of our program I think nearly all of the students felt comfortable sharing or reading in class. I admit that these attitudes affected my teaching in many ways. First of all, I noticed that early on I would rely disproportionately on the outgoing students to help spark class participation or discussion. Let’s face it, I was not all that comfortable at first either. Another thing I noticed is that when I perceived that students were bored it really affected my confidence and the rhythm of my lesson plan. This showed me how the classroom is a highly interactive environment in which the moods and behaviors of its inhabitants can greatly affect the overall climate. As a teacher, it is my job to create a classroom environment in which students do not have time to be bored or reason to be frustrated. Not only will this be encouraging to the learning of my students, but also the confidence and esteem I have in myself as an educator. In this way I can hopefully create an environment in which all students feel safe and excited to participate openly in class. I remember my most outgoing student, Shakira, being one my favorite kids throughout these classes. And yet, one of my initially quietest students, Angel, had just as much to offer the classroom by the time we had to part ways. The last thing I learned through the behavior of my students is that just like me and everyone else, we can all have good days and we can all have bad days. This is why I think it is so important to get to know your students, so that you can better understand what might be distracting or frustrating them on a given day. Taking the advice of Christensen, “(I) attempted to find ways to make students feel significant and cared about as well, to find space for their lives to become part of the curriculum. “ (p. 19). Typically during the beginning of class I would invite my students to share something interesting from their lives. This was successful in getting them to warm up and start an open dialog. Unfortunately for us and our students in this program, our time was limited and our relationships ultimately undeveloped.

