Denise Manning

Plan for Practice

**Creation of the Learning Specialist Support Group**

**Encouragement and Motivation**

The original key concern for the course was not to let my professional environment affect me personally. During the course it was found that there was no reasonable way to separate my personal feelings from my professional environment as my work is incredibly personal to me. In my current professional environment I have been punched, kicked, bitten, spit on, had chairs thrown at me, and have been hit in the stomach with a large textbook. Even with the physical assaults in this environment I believe in the mission of education. Public education is provided for the enrichment of all students. I became an educator under the belief that a quality education makes it possible for students to make progress in life. I can not give up on students. With this said my professional and personal environments are intertwined and there is no way to create separation. Through the course it has been found the only way to remedy my concern is to focus on the positives of my work environment and enrich those around me with positivity and knowledge.

In focusing on the positives I have decided to start a support group for learning specialists and paraprofessionals. In this position learning specialists and paraprofessionals are considered the second adult in the classroom and teach lessons along with formal teachers. The learning specialist position is highly decorative as they are paid as cluster substitutes. Learning specialists and paraprofessionals are not paid the same as teachers but are called teachers when discussing students with staff and parents. School rules state that the second adult in the classroom must escort disruptive students out of the classroom. This puts learning specialists and paraprofessionals in the position to be abused by students with developmental and behavioral concerns. The abuse has been reported to school administrators but is a result of job performance and must be seen as such. This belief has lead to high turnover in the position as well as low moral. The learning specialist and paraprofessional support group is to help the participants deal with the stress of the environment and to reflect on their professional aspirations.

*Creating a Community of Practice*

As previously outlined the support group would be the formation of a community of practice in my professional environment. The World Cafe readings indicate the learning specialist and paraprofessional support group would be a space where participants can share techniques to address conflict. As well as addressing the goals and dreams of participants. A community of practice is described as a group of people “pursuing their interest in their domain, [where] members engage in joint activities and discussions, help each other, and share information. They build relationships that enable them to learn from each other; they care about their standing with each other”. The group would meet bi-weekly to discuss the professional environment and the ambitions of the participants in an effort to combat stress and feelings of working in a “flat” profession with little room for growth.

In an effort to be concrete rather than abstract about the intentions of the support group I have engaged in meetings with two interested participants. The continuation of this paper will relate in detail the initial efforts to create interest in the learning specialist and paraprofessional support group.

**Anna:**

Anna is a learning specialist with aspirations of becoming a kindergarten teacher. Anna currently works with K1 and first grade students. She is an immigrant from the Middle East and has two children in elementary school. Anna has no plan in place to make her dreams come true. She consulted with me about how to become a licensed teacher. We met after-school in the teacher’s lounge. As she insisted that she wants to work with early education students I let her know the Massachusetts Tests for Educator Licensure (MTEL) that she would need to pass as she completes an educator preparation program, the Foundations of Reading and Early Childhood. Anna then asked about the preparation programs. I informed her that as a substitute teacher she can apply to pathway programs that could help her obtain teacher licensure while working full-time. Some programs require a summer of intensive coursework before a practicum can be completed. Once a practicum is completed she can earn preliminary licensure and dependant on some programs, initial licensure. Her current concern is cost. I suggested that the learning specialist and paraprofessional support group could tackle this concern as a community of practice of open discussion through skillful discussion, conversation strategies, and personal mastery principles.

*Application of Personal Mastery Principles*:

As “no one can increase someone else’s personal mastery. We can only set up the conditions which encourage and support people who want to increase their own”. The support group would encourage participants to realize their own personal vision. During one of the meetings participants can engage in a conversation with themselves engaging in dialogue to reflect on what they want for themselves and the reality of their circumstances. Through this technique Anna can create a mindset where she can see the changes she must make in her life in order to meet her goals. As a result she can become self-sustaining rather than relying on the support group to *push* her to meet her goals. Encouragement and motivation of a group is not a substitute for individual purpose.

For participants that do not have a vision in mind they can practice the *Drawing Forth Personal Vision* exercise described by Charlotte Roberts, Bryan Smith, and Rick Ross in The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook by Peter Senge. Utilization and reflection of these practices as a support group can create a stronger community of practice as we would share knowledge with each other and continue to build relationships.

**Michelle:**

Michelle is currently working as learning specialist. She has two children one in elementary and one in middle school. She has previously worked as a paraprofessional and substitute in two different school environments. She is in a master’s degree program in education but is currently stalled as a result of not passing her MTELs. Michelle has postponed her tests several times over the past year. This year she has been detached from the classroom environment and has sought comfort in the greater school environment. As a result of her school participation she appears more interested in working as a community outreach specialist. She recently asked me to discuss with her my educational plans to support her in her own evaluation of teaching. We sat down in the teacher’s lounge during lunch. During the discussion I noted her distance from the classroom. She became frank with me in stating that she no longer wishes to be a classroom teacher. I asked her why considering the fact she has worked on becoming a classroom teacher for the past five years. She responded that she wants to work for students and not feel the burden of student abuse and teacher ineffectiveness. I let her know that the right master’s degree program could provide greater professional opportunities outside of the classroom but not to throw away her years of coursework. The learning specialist and paraprofessional support group could help with open discussion of programs that interest her using the force field analysis to discuss pros and cons of a professional environment and master’s degree program.

*Application of Force Field Analysis*:

Any participant of the support group can complete the force field analysis template when trying to come to terms with a decision or an environment. The forces for and against template can be applied for Michelle when trying to decide on a possible master’s degree program or an educational community outreach organization. The change to be decided will be helpful as her presence in the classroom causes Michelle distress.

*Providing Opportunities of Growth*

The learning specialist and paraprofessional support group will provide the participants a place to be encouraged and motivated toward meeting their professional aspirations. In discussing opportunities and information with Anna and Michelle I highlighted the importance of needing an ear to work through professional conflicts. We would effectively be supporting each other in our growth and development as professionals. Since the goal of the learning specialist and paraprofessional support group is to put our ideas into practice we are practitioners in a community of practice. In the support group we will “develop a shared repertoire of resources: experiences, stories, tools, ways of addressing recurring problems—in short a shared practice”. The community of practice evident in the learning specialist and paraprofessional support group will have to evolve as conflicts may erupt. I believe that if the group remains focused on the mission the encouragement of participants will only deepen an individual’s purpose. Using this thinking the group needs to be short term to be effective. The support group can not become a crutch but must remain a motivating and encouraging tool for participants to access.