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Shadow Study

October 31, 2014

*Introduction*

I’m glad this experience was included as a learning requirement because it opened my eyes to the many aspects of teaching that I had never considered before. It helped me truly understand the importance of being and having a committed teacher. I also learned the range of jobs and responsibilities of teachers in the Special Education Field. In addition, I experienced the varying degree of skills that students in the same class can exhibit.

Most importantly, I was able to see a really great classroom of people working together to benefit students. This amazing group of adults worked cohesively and you could see and feel that the students felt safe, supported and loved. The reason why it worked so well was because they all cared about the students, understood the schedule and goals for each student and communicated well with each other. I definitely would love to work with a group of individuals like this. This experience reinforced the importance of clear communication and shared goals as a means of effectiveness.

*Teacher Information*

I had the opportunity to shadow Pam Sutherland’s class on Friday, October 31, 2014. Mrs. Sutherland begin here career in education as a Resource Aid at her children’s school in 1998. It was through that experience that her lead teacher encouraged her to pursue a degree in Special Education.

Mrs. Sutherland took her advice and sought a dual degree in Elementary Education and Special Education Mild Intervention for 3-21 year olds. She attended classes at Ball State University on Tuesdays and Thursdays form 7a.m. to 9p.m. Then on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays, continued to work as a Resource Aid. It took her 4 ½ years to complete her degree.

In 2009, she started her teaching career in a Muncie High School teaching life skills. Then she transitioned to Elementary as a Special Education teacher assigned to the resource room. In 2012, she started at George Washington Community High School as an Inclusion teacher for 10th grade English. Currently, she is the lead teacher for the middle school mild to moderate self-contained classroom that I observed.

Mrs. Sutherland loves working with students with special needs and feels that these diverse experiences has contributed to helping her be a great teacher. I plan to do my student teaching in her classroom this spring because she is truly an amazing, caring, resourceful teacher who is open to working with and learning from others.

*Class Environment*

There are 13 moderate to severe needs students in this class from ages 13-17. Most of these students have been identified as having cognitive disorders such as autism or downs syndrome. However, two of them have severe medical needs as one has Cerebral Palsy and is in a wheelchair. The other, has a heart condition that contributes to a significant number of absences throughout the year. Another one is non-verbal and utilizes an assistive technology device to express her needs. Then, three are called “runners” which means that if you don’t keep your eye on them, they will run off.

There are three Special Needs assistants assigned to the classroom because of the challenges these group of students face. One has been working in with special needs students for over five years. The other two have only been in their position for a year.

The classroom is set-up in an open format as to allow the student in the wheelchair freedom to maneuver around the classroom. There are two bathrooms in the classroom; one for students and the other for staff use. There is a computer area with four computers; one equipped with a joystick just for the student with Cerebral Palsy. There’s also an area where students are able to rest. Plus there’s a small kitchen area furnished with a microwave, toaster oven, mini refrigerator and various utensils for preparing and making food. Instead of desks, students sit at four person tables.

I also noticed that all of the staff desks were spaced out evenly around the perimeter of the classroom. The room was also equipped with a convey system to watch videos or project information for all to see. There was also a large cabinet where supplies was stored including extra clothes, hygiene items and even shoes for students who need them. Finally, the walls featured pieces of student work and brightly colored signs with the bell schedule, events, etc.

*Schedule for the day*

*7:10*- I met Mrs. Sutherland and her Classroom Aids in the Main Office to sign in for the day. Next, we went to the classroom to wait for buses to arrive. Most of the students ride the bus with general education students. The difference is that special need students receive door-to-door service. The only exception is for one of the students because he tried to grab the wheel as the bus driver transported students and it was determined that he needed to ride by himself because this created safety concerns for other students.

*7:15*- Students were met by staff and immediately escorted to the cafeteria for breakfast. I did notice that the teacher and Aids greeted each student as they arrived.

*7:15-7:40*- In the cafeteria, students sat together at two tables with the staff split between both. As the students ate breakfast, staff asked them questions about their evening, what they ate, what they did last night and did they do anything interesting or exciting. Not only did the students answer, staff also shared in the conversation. When I asked one of the Aids about this, she said this is their way of setting a positive tone for the day.

*7:45-8:00*- During this time, students were escorted to their lockers to put up their belongings.

*8:00-8:30-* This is considered Morning Work Time where each student received a packet of work based on their skill level. The packets included math, coloring and language arts worksheets. The students are then split up based on their grade level and each Classroom Aid focused on one group. The majority of the students, 8, fall within the 1st- 4th grade range. Two were at the 5th-6th grade level and two at the preschool level.

From what I observed, most of the students were working on the packet except for the non-verbal student who sat and played with yarn alongside the teacher. I learned from the teacher that it is challenging to get her to do the work. She usually stays to herself and enjoys sensory activities.

*8:30-10:15*- Students were divided into smaller groups of four, again based on their developmental levels. This time, two groups left the room to spend time focusing on progress toward IEP goals. The group I observed worked on identifying the letters of the alphabet. It was interesting to see this interaction. The teacher had them sit in a circle and showed flashcards of upper and lowercase letters. I watched as some had a difficult time identifying an uppercase “D” from a lowercase “d”. None of them knew that the uppercase and lowercase “Q” was the same.

After this activity, the students were given lined paper and told to write the alphabet from A to Z, in lowercase on one side and uppercase on the other. Some of the students seemed to struggle with remembering how to write the letters. Most were able to say them but it was harder for them to write them down. Also, one of them seemed to have major issues just focusing on writing and was easily distracted by what was going on around her. Not one of them successfully completed the assignment.

I asked the teacher about this. She said that they have been working with this group of students since the beginning of the school year on this skill. They practice it at least four times a week yet the students continue to struggle. She says it seems that by the time they leave and return the next day, they forget everything they learned.

*10:20-11:10*- The students then transitioned to the gym for Adaptive P.E. which is taught by a General Education P.E. teacher. This specific period combines middle and high school self-contained moderate to severe students together to participate in physical education. Today, there were 22 students, four Classroom Aids and the General Education Teacher.

As soon as the students got into the gym, most grabbed a ball or started playing with other students. Once the General Education teacher came in, she instructed them to put up the ball and walk eight laps around the gym. Some of them had to be coaxed. Others walked around a few times but then stopped to talk to friends.

This gave me a chance to ask the P.E. teacher a few questions. I learned that there used to be 46 students in the class which made it challenging to really get anything done. Now, with the smaller group she’s able to work with the student on basic skills such as hopping and skipping. She stated “now I’m able to differentiate based on the needs of each student”.

Next, the students were instructed to make a circle and were led through several stretching exercises. I noticed that there was an enormous variance of flexibility between students. I also noticed that some students had challenges with doing what the teacher asked even though she modeled it for them. There were also students who were doing their own thing and she seemed to be o.k. with that. What I really enjoyed was that she allowed students to take turns leading the group through the exercises.

Finally, they did the Noodle Activity. I had never heard of it before but the P.E. teacher said it’s a fun way for the students to strengthen their upper body. A noodle is a long hollow circular piece of foam originally created for use in the pool for learning how to swim, as a rescue device, or aquatic aerobics. Each student received a noodle and for a few minutes was allowed to hit the ground, wall or bleachers. I did it and it was fun and seemed to release pinned up energy. To conclude, the teacher led them through a series of fun relay exercises holding the noodles in different ways.

*11:10-11:35*- This was the students’ lunch time. The higher functioning students were allowed to sit wherever they wanted. I noticed that some of them talked with several general education students and even greeted them with hugs.

*11:40-12:15*- When the students returned to the classroom, each received a laptop and headphones to work on an educational program called Molby Max. The teacher aid I talked to about this program bragged about how it helps the student progress through math and language arts skills based on their developmental level.

I sat with one of the students as they focused on math and it seemed more like a game than learning. The student was engrossed in it because not only was it visually appealing; there was an audio component as well. It also wouldn’t allow the student to move to the next level until they could achieve at least 75% accuracy.

*12:15-1:30*- To celebrate the Halloween Holiday, eight students from the high school self-contained classroom came down to make candy apples and enjoy apple cider. It was great to see these students, Aids and teachers working together. Some of the students were able to follow directions independently and make their own apples. Several needed help. You could tell the students really enjoyed this activity.

*1:30-2:15*- The high school class stayed to participate in a WII Fit Challenge. Two students from each class went head to head with Mario Cart; a popular driving game played on the WII game system. The kids had a lot of fun!

*2:15*- Students prepared to go home. Each Aid helped the students get their belongings together and escorted them to the buses.

*Teacher and Classroom Aid Interactions*

I was impressed by the level of cooperation between the teacher and the Classroom Aids. All seem to know what they were doing and worked together effortlessly. They communicated positively with each other and were willing to help one another.

*Adults and Student Interactions*

The adults interacted positively and lovingly with the students. I could tell that they knew each student individually and gave them the appropriate support they needed to thrive. I was very impressed by the fact that the students seemed comfortable interacting with each of the adults.

*Challenges for working with students*

I honestly expected it to be hard to meet the needs of such a variety of students but I didn’t see that in the classroom. I know it helps because they do have a 4:1 ratio. But I also feel that this group of people really cares about the wellbeing of each individual student. Also, the way they grouped the students during certain activities I feel also helped.

I think that this experience has helped me see that the right group of adults can create an extraordinary learning environment for students. From my observation, I believe the key is having a dedicated teacher that’s able to encourage and foster an environment of mutual respect and collaboration. This then inspires the Classroom Aids and students to give their all.