Special Education Teacher Interview

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Abstract

The following paper will begin by providing a summary of the interview held with Mr. Hazzard, a special education teacher at Bobier Elementary school. After his responses to the interview questions are documented, a summary of the observation will be provided. Lastly, a reflection of the insights gleamed from the observation and interview, with a focus on the principles of Universal Design will conclude the paper.

**Summary of Interview**

I observed and interviewed Mr. Hazzard, a special education teacher at Bobier Elementary School in Vista, CA. The students he worked with represented the student body, in that there were about 90% Hispanic/Latino students, 5% African American students, 1% White students and 4% other ethnicities or mixed students, and about 65% English Language Learners in the class. Additionally, about 90% of these students are on free and reduced lunch plans.

The following interview took about forty -five minutes to conduct. The questions and answers are provided below.

1. What is your current position?

“My formal title is an Education Specialist for Bobier Elementary School. I have been teaching at Bobier since 2003, but have taught previously in Northern California and in Las Vegas.”

1. What are the ages and grade levels of your students?

“I work with students from Kindergarten into 5th grade. We typically don’t see TK or preschool students because they haven’t gotten diagnosed that early. Majority of our students are 4th and 5th grade simply because it is easier to get diagnosed in the later grades.”

1. What student information system do you work with?

“We work with SEIS, which is a data collector, houses our caseloads and their IEPS, and helps create goals for each IEP.”

1. What data is collected for teacher use?

“We mainly monitor goal progress. Teachers have copy of each student’s goals and accommodations, so we provide them with updates to these goals and the student progress we are seeing.”

1. What are the assessments used in the process of early screening and/or identification?

“We use the Woodcock Johnson IV to test for academic needs such as letter identification, spelling, comprehension, writing, reading fluency, and math fluency. It was developed through the SST process. SST is a student study team that can be called in to propose interventions for the student in class. If a student receives two SST meetings, a special education teacher, like me, is asked to come in to follow up. We determine if testing should happen for the student and then can administer the Woodcock Johnson battery of tests. It is harder for younger students to qualify because there is not as big of a gap between what they can do and what they are expected to do on these tests and in class.”

1. What are the most important legal mandates a general education teacher should be aware of regarding services for students with special needs?

“Well their IEPS include accommodations that are required to be implemented. The student is required to be provided with the accommodations in his IEP even when being in a general education classroom. This could look like assignments being modified, having preferential seating, or needing a peer buddy to support the student at different points during the day.”

“They should also be aware that at this school we follow the learning center model, where students come in for support in academics. There is a certain amount of time each student is required to be provided for help in whichever area their IEP is for. However, here math assistance is mostly pushed in with roving and some individualized attention.”

1. What are important insights for a general education teacher regarding issues related to common medications administered to children and adolescents?

“Well we do have some children, mostly the older ones, on medication. But that is mainly dealt with by the school psychologist and their doctor. We aren’t allowed to make recommendations that a child be on medication because we aren’t doctors. In fact, we have little contact with the child’s doctor. We receive the form from the doctor after they prescribe medicine to simply inform us what medication the child is on and what the common effects are so that we can monitor the child’s progress on this medicine. Teachers monitor success on the child’s medicine, or lack of success, and fill out evaluation forms that are shown at parent meetings.”

1. What is your experience implementing UDL in your teaching practices and / or collaborating with other teachers?

“I have some experience. Our goal is to help accommodate individual learning differences by providing modifications to assignments and different motivations to learning. These are the goals of UDL too. However, I think UDL promotes team teaching, which we don’t do as often here. We tried team teaching a few years ago, however, because we only have two special education teachers qualified to team teach at our school, this forced us to put all of the students with IEPs for each grade in one class. This was not fair to the general education teacher who had an abnormally high caseload. More importantly, we believe that all of these students should be shared so that other students can gain exposure to and compassion for students with different learning challenges. So basically, we strayed away from the team teaching model and now do the learning center model where we pull out small groups more. This way students with IEPs can be evenly distributed across classes, which is just fairer.”

1. What motivated you to become a special education teacher?

“The kids. I thought I wanted to be a high school teacher and coach sports. After I got my credential, I started subbing and discovered that I actually liked young kids. Back when I was subbing, you could actually sub in special education classes. I realized that I loved these kids even more. We’ve had students that have exited the program which is a success. I want every student to be confident and put the effort that they can into their learning, which motivates me every day.”

1. What has your experience been with parents during early screening and post screening?

“Parents are made aware through SST meetings before testing and evaluations. The plan created in the SST meeting gives permission to evaluate a student which has to be approved by the parent. We then hold an IEP meeting within 60 days of testing and results are shared. Parents are always receptive when children need support and I have never had a parent deny services.”

**Summary of Observation**

Before students came in to Mr. Hazzard’s class, I took note of the layout of the classroom. Mr. Hazzard sat at a semicircle shaped desk with 5 chairs around it for students. Around the room were posters with steps for breathing meditation, steps for favorite place meditation, calming techniques and the school rules. There were sections of the room cornered off where other student aids can work quietly with additional groups of students or students can independently work. There was also a cupboard of games that students could pull from when they finished their work, including chess.

Mr. Hazzard then informed me about the current group of students coming in. The group that I observed on my first day was a group of five fifth grade students. Later in the week I observed a group of four Kindergarten students. It was noted that groups of 5-8 students come in about twice a week to receive support. The group of students I observed on the first day needed assistance with writing. On the white board, there was an example graphic organizer that the students would be using to help construct a narrative essay. He informed me that they worked on informational essays last month. The essays that they work on at the learning center with Mr. Hazzard are additional essays to the ones the students receive in class from their general education teacher. However, he continued to articulate that students can receive help with in class assignments after school at the learning center.

When the students arrived, he began by asking them if they knew what a narrative essay is. One student said that “narrative essays tell you about a place or about your day.” Mr. Hazzard told the student that he is “close” and clarified that it is more specifically, “a story that is true.” He then said to “hold on to that definition” so that they can do a “check in.” He did a check in with the Kindergarten students as well later in the week.

The check in involved Mr. Hazzard asking them, “How are you doing today?” The first fifth grade student said he was “bad” because he “cracked his glasses case.” Another student said “bad” but didn’t elaborate why and looked teary. Mr. Hazzard said he was “sorry to hear that” and hoped he has a good next 45 minutes with him. The third student said “good” because she read to kindergarteners, to which Mr. Hazzard said it is “great to be a giver, especially to younger students,” commending her efforts. The last student said “great” because it was four days until his birthday. After the last student shared, Mr. Hazzard applauded his listening skills by saying, “Today is the fourth day in a row that you have not interrupted your friends and you looked each of your friends in the eye when they were speaking.”

After this check-in, Mr. Hazzard proceeded with a forgiveness quote for mindful meditation. The quote read: “We often must forgive what we cannot understand.” Mr. Hazzard explained this by saying that “we forgive so that our heart can feel better.” One student chimed in and said that “if you don’t forgive someone, it is just as bad as what they did to you.” Once Mr. Hazzard gave them a minute to meditate and become present, he moved back to the original prompt about a narrative essay.

Mr. Hazzard repeated the definition of a narrative essay, saying that “it is a story that is true and has happened to you.” He gave ideas, such as a story about their thanksgiving break or a story about a field trip they have taken. He had them brainstorm an idea by rubbing their ears to calmly think of topic. Students raised their hands when they had a topic and are handed an outline after they shared. One said he wanted to write about when he went to Disneyland, another said she wanted to write about the time she went to big bear and a third said he wanted to write about a trip he made with his family to Escondido in third grade. The last two students seemed to struggle to think of a topic. One of these students clarified and asked if he could do something that he hopes will happen. Mr. Hazzard said, “not this time but next time.” He then provided him with ideas that he knew the student had done, such as going to Legoland, his move to a new apartment, and a new school. This student finally settled on his trip to the Safari Park. However, the last student, who was still teary, remained quiet and didn’t have an idea when asked. Mr. Hazzard gave him one more minute to think while he helped the rest begin their graphic organizers. Music was put on for the students to quietly work and they raised their hands when they needed assistance with ideas or spelling.

The small group with Kindergarten followed the same order of events, except that they were quietly tracing letters instead of writing essays. When these students were done, he allowed them to have free time. He played hang man on the board with a couple of students to work on phonetic awareness and site words. When their time was up, he walked these students back to their general education classroom.

**Lessons Learned**

After completing the interview with Mr. Hazzard and the subsequent observation of his classroom, I gained a greater understanding of what UDL is and how to help all children access the curriculum in a meaningful way.

To begin with, I gained clarity surrounding the classifications and definitions used in determining if a student has a learning delay. Mr. Hazzard is the Lead Teacher in the resource room at Bobier Elementary school, meaning that he works with students classified as “learning disabled.” A student who has a learning disability shows “delays in achievement in one or more major areas (such as reading or math), attention deficit or high distractibility, difficulty with self-motivated, self-regulated activities, overreliance on teacher and peers for assignments, immature social skills, and/or a disorganized approach to learning” (Slavin, 2017, p.307). As Mr. Hazzard mentioned in the interview, all students who have shown a need for extra support academically and display the characteristics mentioned above, after going through two SST meetings to first try to address their needs solely in the general education classroom, go through the Woodcock Johnson IV battery of tests to determine which area of learning needs extra support. Once they are assessed, an IEP is provided which “describes a student’s problems and delineates a specific course of action to address those problems” (Slavin, 2017, p. 318). Mr. Hazard echoed the importance of an IEP, articulating that a general education teacher must follow what is in a student’s IEP, whether that be “modifications to an assignment, providing preferential seating, or a student needing a peer buddy to support them at different points during the day.” He elaborated that their goal, as special education teachers, is to “help accommodate individual learning differences by providing modifications to assignments and different motivations to learning.” Taking in to account what a student’s needs are and what their goals are, as articulated in their IEP, helps to ensure that all students have access to a learning environment where they can thrive. This is where the connection to UDL came in to play.

UDL, or Universal Design for Learning, is a framework of teaching where “materials and instructional strategies are designed to meet the needs of the broadest possible range of learners” (Slavin, 2017, p.300). UDL allows for “multiple means of letting learners engage with each other and multiple means of motivating students” (Slavin, 2017, p.330). UDL strives to create the “least restrictive environment” for students, mainstreaming students with IEPs into general education classes for majority of their day and pulling these students out for a “special instruction part of the day” (Slavin, 2017, p. 317; Spring, 2016, p. 130-131). Mr. Hazzard, as a resource room teacher, provides the special instruction for small groups of students one to two times a week. As he expressed in his interview, his understanding of UDL is that UDL prefers more push in through team teaching rather than pulling out small groups of students. However, while he said that they try to push in for math, they primarily use the ‘Learning Center Model,” where students are pulled out in small groups, which I observed. His reasoning for pulling students out did seem to align with goals of UDL and the 1975 Education for All Handicapped Children Act, even though he thinks it strays away from pure mainstreaming. He shared that in order to do team teach teaching and push in that they needed to “put all of the students with IEPs for each grade in one class.” He continued to say that “this was not fair to the general education teacher who had an abnormally high caseload. More importantly, we believe that all of these students should be shared so that other students can gain exposure to and compassion for students with different learning challenges.” The 1975 Education for All Handicapped Children Act promotes the integration of students with disabilities into regular classes because it is “hoped that bias against children and adults with disabilities decreases because of the interactions of students with disabilities with other students” (Spring, 2016, p.134). While Mr. Hazzard has strayed away from the team teaching model in favor of the learning center model, it is to better promote this very goal of compassion through exposure, which could be done best by evenly distributing students with IEPs into all classes and then pulling them out for small group instruction for a portion of their day.

While Bobier Elementary school does utilize a resource room where students with learning disabilities are pulled out for small group instruction, you can still see elements of UDL play out in these groups at the resource room. One tenant of UDL that I observed while sitting in on some of Mr. Hazzard’s small group sessions was providing multiple means of motivating students, through hands on projects, cooperative learning and other active learning methods (Slavin, 2017, p.308, 330). Mr. Hazard gave students lots of choice, reaching their internal motivation to complete an assignment. For example, he let each student choose a topic for their essay, only providing suggestions when students could not think of an idea in the time provided. Letting a student choose a topic for an essay or presentation helps the student have more agency over the content and targets their internal motivation, as they are personally invested in the topic. Additionally, during their free time, he let students choose hands on activities that would promote learning in a way that resonated with them. One little boy initiated a game of hang man with another student and Mr. Hazzard. Mr. Hazzard let the boy lead the activity, only stepping in to scaffold extensions of the activity, such as asking the students to use the word they spelled in a sentence. The freedom to choose hands on activities to demonstrate their learning was very apparent in these small groups and led to a motivated, excited and active group of learners.

In addition to providing opportunities for student led, hands-on activities to boost motivation, Mr. Hazzard demonstrated techniques mentioned in our readings about how to engage students with learning disabilities in his quality of feedback. Slavin’s reading mentions that “students with learning disabilities are less likely than other students to be able to work productively for long periods of time with little or no feedback. They do better in situations in which they get frequent feedback on their efforts, particularly feedback about how they have improved or how they have worked hard to achieve something” (Slavin, 2017, p.308). Mr. Hazzard was providing constant feedback to students, such as, “Nice effort and focus,” “You are taking your time tracing your letters,” and “Today is the fourth day in a row that you have not interrupted your friends and you looked each of your friends in the eye when they were speaking.” These bits of feedback kept students on task and boosted their motivation, as they were immediately rewarded with positive feedback for being on task and focused. Mr. Hazzard was always aware of his students’ motivation level and was conscious about his ability to impact their drive and effort, something that is key when you are respecting students’ individual needs.

After observing and interviewing Mr. Hazzard, I was able to gain a greater understanding of students with learning disabilities and how their IEP impacts them, and one way of implementing UDL to reach all students. Through the Learning Center Model that was evident at Bobier, I learned how effective small group instruction is in meeting the needs of all students, as it was a focused time to help certain groups of students in ways that motivated them best. I also gained an understanding of the importance of collaboration between special education teachers and general education teachers, specifically in regard to tracking their students’ progress towards their IEP goals. As Mr. Hazzard stated, he wants “every student to be confident and to put the effort that they can in to their work,” which is a primary goal of UDL and the vision of having all students thrive in their own way.

References

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