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Exceptional Learner

Teacher Work Sample 1, 3, 7

Exceptional Learners at Wheatridge Middle School

Wheatridge Middle School is one of two middle schools in the Gardner Edgerton School District. Wheatridge serves a total of 809 students in grades 5th to 8th. The 5th grade wing is structured like an elementary school, while 6th-8th move from class to class according to the typical secondary pattern. There are 59 full time teachers at the school. 77% of students are white, with Hispanics as the next largest ethnic group at 10% of the total school population. Wheatridge takes in students from central Gardner and encompasses a wide range of socioeconomic groups. Just under half of the students qualify for free or reduced lunch programs. In January, Wheatridge became one of only 10 Kansas middle schools to receive the Governor’s Achievement Award, designating Wheatridge among the top 5% of schools in Kansas based on state assessments in reading and math and overall attendance.

Most of the students I worked with were 5th graders with specified learning disabilities and/or ADHD. Learning disabilities cannot be identified by looking at the student’s outward appearance; however, observation of the students in class can reveal a lack of attention, difficulty completing tasks, frustration and low self-esteem, as well as below average academic performance. I also worked with several students with emotional-behavioral disorders and an autistic student. Several teachers and para-educators identified lack of personal responsibility and exaggerated helplessness as a characteristic of students receiving SPED services. The SPED personnel at Wheatridge have a goal to empower students to own their education and maximize their potential rather than allowing the students to be carried along by others. I think that is a great goal for helping students transition into secondary school and beyond.

Most of my efforts were to help students improve the students reading abilities. We tried to engage multiple learning styles throughout each class period by incorporating physical activity, discussion, visual presentations, written and oral responses, individual and group work. The students need should drive the instructional process and assessment plans.

Activating prior skills and knowledge is key in creating an environment where students have an active role in learning. Building on prior background and skills, I choose topics for reading that gave the students opportunity to demonstrate their abilities and at the same time challenging them to think more deeply and critically. For example, I taught a lesson on figurative language based on a fiction passage about a disobedient dog. At the beginning of the lesson, we discussed pets and the responsibilities and challenges of training an animal. This helped raise student motivation for reading, and lower their apprehension level as we approached the text. I also used visuals and graphic organizers as support for students to comprehend and move into higher level thinking.

It is especially important when assessing students with learning disabilities, or any other disability, that the assessments target the specific skills set out in the lesson objectives. For example, my objective was that students would be able to compare and contrast toys used in the past and toys used today. In order to assess the student ability to compare and contrast, I planned several levels of formative assessment during and after my lesson. Students demonstrated their ability on a Venn diagram with words, phrases, and pictures using evidence from the article. Students were also given opportunity to express their ideas orally in a small group context using specific compare and contrast scaffolds to build their argument. Finally, students were given opportunity to write a paragraph in compare and contrast style using all the techniques that they had learned. This allowed each individual to showcase their own ability. Together these three modes of representation provide a picture of where each student is in their ability to compare and contrast two ideas. When checking the student responses, I was not looking at their spelling ability or descriptions, even though these skills are important. The assessment criteria were aligned with the objective of using compare and contrast.

I spent a good portion of my time in practicum assisting students with read aloud accommodations on their state assessments. It was very interesting to see some of the unique accommodations that some students received, including read aloud, frequent breaks, small group and separate location, noise canceling headphones, a para who acted as a scribe. Every student’s needs are different, and the purpose of assessment accommodations is to allow students to demonstrate what they know without being limited by their disability.

My experiences in this course and practicum have helped me to grow so much as a person and as a future teacher. Understanding the characteristics and challenges of different disabilities is the first step toward empathy and effectively meeting student’s needs. When I understand my student, I am better able to teach them using compassionate and constructive strategies and tools. The principles of universal design – providing multiple means of representation, action, and engagement – have significant implications for my future teaching. In the course of this class, I have come to realize more fully how essential it is to allow students flexibility in demonstrating their learning and to make accommodations for different learning styles and abilities. I have learned so much in this course, but I have also become more aware of how much I do not know in regard to specific strategies and resources for the classroom. I hope to continue to grow in my knowledge and practice through reading and professional development in order to provide all of my students with the best education possible.