

Running Head: FIELD EXPERIENCE

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MR Field Experience

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EDTE 634: Teaching Students with Mental Retardation

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On February 9th, 2009, we, Daniel Bell and Ron Lucena, visited a self-contained, 4th & 5th grade MR classroom at Emery Tech Elementary School at 1720 1st Street, N.E., Washington, DC 20002, 202-576-6034. Our visit began at 8:45am and we left the classroom at about 10am. Emery Tech is a public elementary school serving several hundred Washington, DC students. The students of Emery are predominately African-American. Services at Emery include special education resource teachers and aides, a psychologist, speech therapy, occupational therapy, and a variety of after school programs.

The classroom that we observed was headed by Mrs. Bell. Mrs. Bell also had an aide, Mrs. Patton. Mrs. Bell's 4th & 5th grade classroom contained 12 total students, though only 8 were present during our observation. 3 of these students were girls, 5 were boys, all African-American. The students were all functioning on different levels of MR. The class was wonderfully well behaved, respectful, and enthusiastic. Though several of the students were apparently easily distracted and had attention issues, we witnessed no behavioral issues.

Mrs. Bell's classroom was very comfortable and vibrant, and very conducive to learning. Mrs. Bell's desk was off to one corner of the room, leaving space for small groups of student's desks and a carpeted area. There were bookshelves filled with relevant books, games, and multitudes of manipulatives for the students such as flash cards and craft materials. The walls were adorned with all sorts of appropriate posters referencing reading, writing, math, sciences, etc. There were also student lockers in the room, computer stations, and a closed circuit television.

Mrs. Bell was incredibly friendly, engaged, funny, “with-it,” and observant. She was also quite organized, having binders of curriculum and lesson plans to present to us. She took the initiative to introduce us to the class before they got started on their lesson, which definitely helped limit our distraction factor. Even though Mrs. Bell’s demeanor was usually light, she also gave off an undeniable air of firmness and power. She was not to be trifled with and was an apparent master of re-direction and classroom momentum. While we observed, Mrs. Bell made sure there was never a moment of dead time or an awkward, chaotic transition. Mrs. Bell ran her classroom like a well-oiled clock; all parts appeared to work together in a seamless pattern.

The lessons we observed were short and fast-paced, obviously to keep the students’ focus on point. Lessons included saying and spelling the date, reciting a poem, speaking kind words about someone in front of the classroom, small reading groups to study months, days of the week, and seasons, and the elements of storytelling.

The student we focused our observation on, Jacob (name changed), was one of the most obviously distracted students in the class. He was very fidgety and often focused on us instead of Mrs. Bell. Jacob was a smaller child, a 4th grader, African American, with an overbite. He often had to be called on and prompted several times before giving an answer to questions such as how to spell Monday or giving an example of plot during the story elements lesson. Early on, Jacob was one of the only students to not raise his hand when Mrs. Bell would ask questions (most of his classmates did so eagerly), but he did eventually start raising his hand more often just before we left the class. When not fixated on us, Jacob often appeared somewhat unengaged and a bit ‘zoned-out,’ requiring frequent re-direction.

Mrs. Bell was always on top of Jacob's short attention, though, and was very good about engaging him during group activities. From our interview with Mrs. Bell, we learned that her educational philosophy revolves around Harry Wong's *The First Days of School's* theories of positive and high expectations for all of her students, having an established and tested classroom management plan, and lesson mastery. As for the theoretical implications of her teaching approaches for educating diverse children with MR, Mrs. Bell sets high expectations for learning regardless of her students' classification and/or disability. She truly believes that all MR students can and will learn given the proper positive and supportive environment. She believes that routine, repetition, and consistency are key to her students' learning. Mrs. Bell also discussed that the practical applications of her instructional approaches for MR students include simple, repetitive, and differentiated instruction that utilizes interactive, hands on, visual lessons like poetry, music, drama, and games. Mrs. Bell also noted that all of her lessons are standard-based and that she finds ways to gather and present data so that lesson mastery can be achieved.

Mrs. Bell's strongest point was her complete confidence and seamless management of her classroom. She was obviously very experienced and truly someone to learn from. Her only observed weak point was when she briefly retired to her desk during a group work session where only Mrs. Patton, the aide, was observing the students' progress. We felt that Mrs. Bell was a true professional and a very effective teacher. We were astonished by the classroom management and how well it influenced the positive behavior of the students. The students' enthusiasm and excitement for the lessons was also wonderful to see. Even though, as Beirne-Smith, et al. (2006) points out, there is an

educational concern that students with MR in a self-contained class may not benefit to the greatest degree being segregated from their non-disabled peers, these students seemed to be learning at their own level and the fact that they were excited and engaged all morning was something many other teachers can only wish for. We did not have any substantial recommendations or suggestions of how Mrs. Bell could better run her classroom from what we saw, with the minor exception of her desk-time, which she may have better used staying engaged with the students. What we would recommend, however, is that Mrs. Bell stay reflective and hopefully contribute her methods to educational research so that other educators could benefit from her skills and experience.

References

Beirne-Smith, M., Kim, S. H., & Patton, J. R. (2006). *Mental retardation: An introduction to intellectual disabilities*. New Jersey: Pearson Education, Ltd.

Wong, H. K. & Wong, R. T. (2004). *The first days of school: How to be an effective teacher*. Harry K. Wong Publications.