

Daniel Bell

Observation/Site Visit with Reflection #1

2/19/08

EDTE 629: Teaching Students with LD or ED

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The School

The Chelsea School. 711 Pershing Drive, Silver Spring, MD, 20910. 301-585-1430. Chelsea is a middle and high school for students with language-based learning disabilities. Its main focus is to teach literacy and its mission is to prepare its students for college or vocational school.

The Teacher

Alexandra O'Brien, Math Teacher. This is Ali's (for short) 5th year teaching. She teaches both middle and upper division math classes.

The Class/Students

The class I observed was an Algebraic Concepts course. I observed this class for two days on Wednesday, February 13, 2008 and again on Thursday, February 14, 2008. There were four 9th grade, African-American, LD boys in the class, though one was absent on the first day. The students all appeared to be at different levels of LD (definitely some ADHD in here), though they seemed to be around the same level of math skills.

Environment

The school is generally a warm, welcoming environment. The buildings are quite old, however, and were once a nunnery, so some of the classrooms and hallways were never meant to be for educational use, which gives the school a bit of an unorthodox air.

The classroom where I observed was a prime example of this: it was small and was probably used as a storeroom or something of the like several decades ago, which currently gives it a kind of sterile feeling. However, Ali did very well in making it into an inviting, engaging classroom. There was a large chalkboard to the rear of the room where the objectives, agendas, and missed work were listed, and a large whiteboard to the front of the room where Ali conducted her lesson. A smaller whiteboard hung beside the large one, which was solely a homework board (very organized and clear!).

There was an abundance of math-related posters, pictures, charts, graphs, student work, and a large bookshelf loaded with math books, reference guides, teaching guides, and math board games and puzzles.

Lastly, there were three folding-like tables laid out in a semi-circle facing the whiteboard, which Ali sat in the middle of, close to and engaged with the students, instead of behind her desk, which was at the back of the room.

The Lesson

Initiated on the first day I observed, and continuing the next day, was a lesson regarding codes. What the students were doing was learning how to create a code to send a secret message to someone and how to decipher another's code. The end result of the lesson was to create posters to place around the school with a secret message that only those who knew the code could understand.

On both days, Ali, initiated the lesson with math journal warm ups where she had a code on the board (and a key to the code) and they had to decipher it. On both days, the warm up pretty much led right into the lesson. On the first day, once the warm up was done and the journals had been rotated around the room to make sure the codes had been deciphered correctly, the students had to create a code themselves that they would later

use to code a secret message that they wanted to send someone. The rest of class this day was spent on this. There wasn't any homework this day.

On the second day, they students' warm up consisted of making a shopping list where the last letter of each item spelled out "Algebra Rocks." Once this was completed, the students had to complete two worksheets about coding. On one sheet they had to decipher a coded message and the other they had to code a given message. The homework they had on this day was to continue working on creating their own code and deciding on what secret message that they wanted to send to someone in code.

Observations/Notes

Ali was very engaged with the students. She was always in close proximity to the class and she joked and laughed with them. However, she also immediately called them on any inappropriate language and behavior as soon as they'd get off track, which they mostly responded to well.

The students were also pretty engaged with one another – the warm up helped that. The warm up was also good for LD because it worked with literacy skills. Decoding is a big part of day-to-day life for many LD students.

Ali utilized the board well to visualize the directions that she also gave to them orally. She seemed very accomplished and confident in adhering to different learning styles.

As soon as Ali realized that the kids weren't getting the point of the lesson, she pretty well attempted to make the lesson relevant to the students. She wanted them to use their code with their friends so no one else could know what they were talking about and she also gave a global context by explaining that codes are often used during wars.

I actually found out why one of my students was using a code to write in my own class.

On the second day more than the first, the kids talked a lot and distracted one another. Ali had to work harder the second day to redirect the students and keep them on task. On the second day, the student who was absent the first day was present this day, but he was the most quiet out of the bunch, so either the kids still didn't quite grasp the lesson or they were bored of it. I think I saw a mixture of these aspects in all the kids.

I noticed that the students were allowed to eat in class, which on one hand was good for a couple of the kids because it kept their fidgeting down to a minimum, but it was also the source of distraction to others trying to steal the food and such.

On the second day, the students seemed to respond better to the worksheets (it got really quiet at this point) than the more open lesson the previous day where they had to create their own code. It seems that they work better with structured work instead of creative, open-ended work.

Lastly, Ali has Fibromyalgia and was thus mostly confined to her chair (on wheels) or her cane when she stood up (she's only 27). She used her chair well, though, to navigate between students to check on them and provide assistance.

Criticisms

I noticed that a little too much time was given for each agenda item without a specific time limit that the kids could respond to. They would sometimes sit and play with their

pencils or otherwise get off track and not get reigned in enough. Ali responded more to when they were openly disruptive, but less so when they would quietly not do their work.

Unless I missed the initial introduction of the coding lesson on a previous day (which I may have, though I didn't appear to because the kids didn't seem to have any prior knowledge about it), it seemed that Ali threw them into the idea of using code without much introduction. It took a couple of the kids until the second day to really get a grasp on what the point of what they were doing was.

Suggestions

I completely understand, due to her disease, why Ali had to stay seated much of the time, but I would suggest for any other LD teacher to be constantly walking around and checking the students work so that they couldn't feign working (which some of Ali's students seemed to be doing occasionally).

There was a lot of individual written work and much of it was creative, but, especially since these kids were learning differenced and some most likely ADHD, I would have them perhaps get up to deliver a secret coded message to a classmate and maybe even to students in another class (especially since this was Valentine's Day; perfect chance for one of these boys to come clean with his crush!). I also would have had them show the class the code they came up with on the board just so they could get up, move around, and do something a bit more tactile and make the lesson more kinetic – and leave less room for distraction.

Though I'm not a constant supporter of SQ3R/KWL, I think it would have been a good idea to introduce this lesson with some of these techniques so the kids would understand the point and where the lesson was headed from the get go, instead of having to try and give it a context halfway through the lesson; by that point, some of the kids had tuned out.

What I Learned

LD students need constant engagement and consistent, clear work to accomplish. The kids were most engaged when they knew exactly what was expected of them and the steps involved in accomplishing that. They were most lost and unengaged when they had an unclear amount of time allotted to them to complete a vague task (and that vagueness is definitely relative because one student got it right away). I also see that performing these tasks really needs to be individualized to the LD student, because they all come at the same work from very different styles of learning. Structure and clear directions/steps seem to be the key.