Supervising and Coaching Special Education Teachers

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My mentor principal read through this list of questions that I had for my SPED teacher, Ms. Dorsey, and was unimpressed by the questions. She thought that I could go deeper in my thinking as to what I want to ask Ms. Dorsey to ensure that the teacher is ready for the observation and that she is ready to be observed.

My principal mentor agrees with the thought process that “a servant leader is a servant first (Crippen, 2010).” This means that in order to fairly evaluate Ms. Dorsey, I have to ensure that Ms. Dorsey has all of the tools she needs to be successful during the evaluation and beyond. Nevertheless, this first starts with considering the kinds of questions I would ask Ms. Dorsey and the advice/feedback I would give her in response to her answers.

I believe the author when she said, “In these days, it is doubtful that any child may reasonably be expected to succeed in life if he is denied the opportunity of an education (Frost, 2011).” This statement means that if we want our children to become successful adults, we must ensure that they receive a complete and comprehensive education. I interpret this to mean that education is the key to success for our children and our future. The author understands that all children need a good education in order to succeed in life.

In addition to questions about the lesson, I might ask a special education teacher the following questions: (1) How many literacy grade levels are represented in your class; (2) How often do you expose your students to grade-level materials and how do they respond to the exposure; (3) How do you group your students during instructional time to ensure peer to peer interactions are fair; and, (4) what are the typical accommodations that you make daily for students in your class?

During a pre-conference, I would expect to hear the following responses from a first-year teacher: (1) I have students who range from X level to Y level across the literacy spectrum. (2) I expose them to grade-level material at least four times per week to ensure that they do not fall behind their same-aged peers. (3) I group my students homogeneously based on their reading levels so that as we work through independent reading, they can assist each other.

From a veteran teacher and during their post-conference, I would expect to hear the following results: (1) I have students who range from elementary levels through 1-2 grade levels below their current grade. (2) I expose them to the grade-level curriculum at least two days per week because we do much remediation that needs to occur before a proper investigation of the curriculum can take place. (3) I group my students homogenously because I want them to be able to rely on each other to complete assignments after instruction has taken place. (4) Typical accommodations do not exist in this class. I differentiate as needed using a variety of strategies depending on the assignment and comprehension level of the students present that day.

To identify the teacher’s plan to differentiate the instruction, I may ask the teacher if the group seating is based on comprehension levels or literacy levels? From there, I would expect a novice teacher to know immediately and be able to quote which strategy was used to create the seating chart. I would then warn the teacher that sometimes, sitting low performing students together can work against the classroom dynamic she is trying to achieve. I would also caution that sometimes, breaking the higher-performing student groups apart and using them as “unofficial teachers’ assistants.”

I would ask the teacher to describe areas of understanding where her students struggle. After listing 2-3 areas, I would then ask the teacher how she plans to address these areas. A beginning teacher would struggle with generating this list. While a proficient teacher can list areas immediately, I would expect the proficient teacher to list a selection of engagement strategies and instructional strategies to be used during the class. This list is what I would use to coach the beginning teacher because it was made by someone who has been in their shoes before and could easily guide the teacher down the right path. I would also caution the novice teacher to be realistic about the struggles her students may have so she can help them overcome their obstacles.

To ascertain the understanding of students’ prior knowledge, I would ask the teacher to produce the historical data used to formulate the lesson selection. A beginning teacher would have that information right there, ready for inspection. A proficient teacher would reference test scores and IEP goals from the years before the student was in the class. Coaching the beginning teacher would include a review of possible sources of data that can be used to ascertain prior knowledge.

I would ask both teachers the same question to ascertain their classroom management plan: Which classroom management strategies do you use in your classroom daily? I expect a proficient teacher to name 2-3 strategies such as direct questioning, proximity, shuffling seats, calling home, forcing disruptive students to participate in a class, or make them a class leader. A proficient teacher would understand those engagement strategies, instructional strategies, and management strategies all work together to create a learning environment.

I would expect a beginning teacher to list between 6 and 10 strategies that are employed daily. I also expect a beginning teacher to rely heavily on strategies from well-known teacher preparation and education programs across the country because they are too ashamed to admit that they are struggling with their students. I say this because beginning teachers are just finding their way and honing their management style. References

Crippen, C. (2010). Inclusive Education: A Servant-Leadership Perspective. *Education Canada*, *45*(4). Retrieved from <https://www.edcan.ca/wp-content/uploads/EdCan-2005-v45-n4-Crippen.pdf>

Frost, L. A., & Kersten, T. (2011). The Role of the Elementary Principal in the Instructional Leadership of Special Education. *International Journal of Educational Leadership Preparation*, *6*(2). Retrieved from <http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ973829.pdf>