

Reflections and Observations on Clinical Supervision of Classroom Teachers

Cristy Lambert-Smith

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Upon reading the assignment for this course, I knew I wanted to use these observations to assist the teachers that I supervise in shaping their own professional development. Being a supervisor or teacher of children with autism comes with many rewards but is an area of little but growing expertise. Due to this, it's difficult to find conferences and other forms of professional development specific to the disability. I chose my two candidates because they were both teachers in the autism program I supervise; one teacher is new and struggling and the other is quite seasoned and slated to interview for a position equivalent to mine. The newer of the two candidates, "Ms. B" candidate was selected because I wanted to provide her with the opportunity to discuss her concerns with me openly and have me observe an area where she feels she could use assistance. My intentions are to use the information I gather during the observation to put together a more specific workshop or other professional development activity to assist her growth as an educator of students with autism. The second candidate, "Ms. E", has been a teacher in our program for 5 years and has taught all elementary grade levels and all levels of cognitive ability across those grade levels. For the first three years in the program she taught an academic 3-5 self-contained classroom for students with autism spectrum disorders; during her fourth year she taught self-contained autism grades k-2. Her current classroom has 6 students who are assessed using the Georgia Alternative Assessment and includes a community-based instruction component. All of the students in her classroom are students with autism but they have significant cognitive difficulties and are in grades 3-5. My purpose in selecting Ms. E was two-fold, first and foremost to provide her with the same opportunity I had selected for Ms. B, but also to assess her

ability to effectively work with students on the autism spectrum in accordance with the expectations of the job she had recently applied for. I believe that no matter how seasoned you are as a teacher or teacher of teachers, there is still room for growth and improvement of the skills you possess and utilize within your classroom.

Prior to the pre-conference session with Ms. B, I provided her with a list of things that I planned to discuss and the overall purpose of our conference and my observation. I explained to her in writing my desire to provide as many professional development activities as possible for each teacher in the program and in order to effectively do that, I wanted to give her the opportunity to answer a few questions prior to my observation. The questions I provided were as follows: 1) In what subject area do you feel you have the most difficulty instructing your students? 2) Do you feel this difficulty stems from a lack of understanding of the subject matter on your part, comprehension or other difficulties experienced by your students that occur during the instructional period or from difficulties with the materials and curriculum you have been provided? 3) If you could plan your own professional development learning opportunity, how would it look and what topics would be covered? 4) What do you feel is your predominant teaching style? 5) What types of lesson will you be teaching, i.e., what subject area? 6) What accommodations and modifications can I expect to see you use as you attempt to make the curriculum more accessible for your students? Ms. B prepared her answers and had them ready as requested for our pre-conference. She indicated that she is a visual-kinesthetic learner and suspects that she employs a lot of visual and hands-on techniques as a teacher. She explained that despite its hands-on nature, she finds it quite difficult to instruct her students in the area of earth science. Ms. B stated that she always struggled

with Science as a student and finds that trying to teach a subject that she is not proficient at to a group of students with varying levels of cognitive difficulty proves to be a difficult task. The lesson that she had prepared focused on the concept of classification and discussed the different ways to group rocks according to size, color and texture words. She indicated that she would like to learn more about how to modify laboratory type assignments for her students who often have comprehension difficulties and that she would love to have additional training on how to link the topics she is instructing to prior knowledge so that her students are “primed” and ready to learn when she begins her lesson. Ms. B was excited about the opportunity but nervous and skeptical about my reasons for observing; she seemed to question whether or not I was “on assignment” from the county office or her administrator for this “project”.

Ms. E was provided the same questions as Ms. B and our pre-conference was held over the phone one afternoon after school hours. Ms. E is a confident teacher who recognizes that she is a strong teacher but explained that since the recent changes in the Georgia Alternative Assessment has been announced, she is struggling to find activities to use in order to demonstrate her student’s progress on the grade-level Georgia Performance Standards. Ms. E expressed that she would love to see samples of lessons taught by other teachers in her grade-level who work with students with significant cognitive disabilities. Regarding teaching style, Ms. E stated that she is a hands-on instructor and that she feels it quite necessary to find real-life application for all of the skills she attempts to teach, if for no other reason than it is easier for her students to grasp. She admitted that finding real-life application wasn’t always easy but that it was her “aim” when planning a lesson. Ms. E indicated that she’d like for me to observe a

Language Arts lesson she had planned; the component of the standard she was attempting to address dealt with appropriate responses to conversation and making sure that her students asked questions relative to the topic at hand. Ms. E was most concerned about this component because several of her students have limited verbal ability.

After the observations had taken place, I scheduled a time with each candidate to hold their post-conference. I gave myself a few days to reflect upon the things I had observed in their classroom and review the notes I had taken; I found myself to be quite nervous about the post-conference with Ms. B, mainly because of her skepticism. I didn't want to come across as judgmental or arrogant; I only wanted Ms. B to view me as a colleague who was there to assist her in becoming a stronger teacher. With Ms. E, I wasn't the slightest bit nervous as she has received this observation and conferencing as an opportunity and talked freely about her experiences and feelings as a teacher. I decided that the best course of action for these conferences would be to start with pointing out the strategies/techniques that I enjoyed observing and that I felt were strengths for each teacher. It felt deceptive to do this, as if I were "buttering them up" before focusing on their weaknesses. Next I planned to re-state their individual concerns and offer suggestions for improvement in the areas they had pinpointed to be their weaknesses. For Ms. B, I came armed w/ samples of myself during my first year of teaching where I made quite a few mistakes with my students; one more than one clip I found that I had not linked what I was teaching to prior knowledge that I knew my student's possessed. For Ms. E, I spent a great deal of time on the Georgia Standards website and found sample lesson plans; I spoke to a seasoned teacher of students with significant intellectual delays and took her suggestions along with several lesson plans

that I could share. I brought along two type of assistive technology that I use in teacher trainings so that I could show Ms. E how to use them in a conversational situation.

I scheduled both post-conferences on the same day and I visited Ms. B first. I actually found that she seemed less apprehensive than she did during our first conversation and she immediately thanked me for letting her have the opportunity! I began by complimenting Ms. B on her use of visuals during her lesson and also commented on several ways that she attempted to engage her students in the lesson. While she didn't link it to prior knowledge of the same subject area, she did attempt to remind them of an excerpt from a book they had read as a class recently where the main character liked to collect rocks. Ms. B and I watched my video clips and critiqued my performance and we discussed ways that she could aid her student's comprehension. I suggested she follow the lead of Ms. E and find a way to link what she was teaching to real life activities. We worked together to plan the same lesson over; this time her students would be put into groups and they would hunt for rocks that fit into certain classification categories that were already stated for the students. Ms. B had taught her first lesson lecture style and had began by asking her students to provide her with size and texture words to describe a sample rock she had placed in the center of their table. Ms. B was quite receptive to my suggestions and seemed eager to try out the lesson we had written. I had also prepared for her a list of upcoming professional learning activities sponsored by our school system that discussed the curriculum for the grade levels she teaches (middle school) and explored ways to make Science instruction more hands on.

The post-conference with Ms. E was shorter in length and much easier as I had suspected. Ms. E was very open to my suggestions and dismissive of my compliments

and positive observations; she really wanted to get to the heart of her concerns. The two of us reviewed the lesson she had written and compared it to the other Language Arts lessons I had brought as samples. I showed her the communication board and two-way “big-mac” communicator I had brought along and demonstrated how she could teach her students to select the correct picture or device needed to communicate for them when appropriate. For her lowest functioning student we used the communication board and we created picture symbols that asked questions and provided information about lunch. We worked together to come up with how she teach her student to use the communication board to discuss lunch with one of the cafeteria workers. We then moved on to a higher functioning student in her room that was able to talk but had poor speech quality. We programmed the two-way big-mac to say “good morning!” and “how are you?” The student we would use the device with enjoyed conversation but rarely initiated it because others had a hard time understanding what he was saying. We talked about how to motivate her student to use the device and how starting with functional conversation was a prerequisite skill needed to communicate on a higher level. Ms. E and I planned a second meeting so that I could come out and model the use of these communication devices for her students.

In the end I felt that my strategy for conferencing with both candidates was successful and less difficult than I had prepared myself for. I think they both found the exercise to be valuable; it provided me with an opportunity to demonstrate my presence as helper instead of a supervisor! Through this exercise, the most valuable lesson I learned was the importance of providing teachers with an opportunity to discuss their weaknesses in a setting that is nurturing and non-threatening. I found that both

individuals seemed relieved to be able to talk about their concerns without being judged. Over the past couple of years it has been brought to my attention that I have a tendency to come across as direct and sometimes rather authoritative. I think I happened upon that type of interaction with teachers because I am noticeably younger than many of the teachers I work with and I find that I look even younger than I actually am. Although my mother assures me that I'll be thrilled about this predicament someday, I currently find it to be quite stressful. In my 4 years as autism specialist for my school system, I have found that teachers send referrals to my office only to not take me seriously once I offer suggestions in person b/c there is "no way I could have enough experience to tell them how to teach". Because of this I've found that presenting myself with as much confidence and authority as possible at least catches the attention of the teacher or group of teachers that I'm speaking to. This process has shown me that it's possible to speak candidly with teachers and accomplish as much or more of my goals than when I come across as controlling or unemotional. This realization, along with my decision to use myself as a poor example for one of the teachers helped me to see my own growth and find value in the goals I've set and accomplished over the past several years. I remember back to when I was observed and it was quite a stressful process. I found that I was able to provide my teachers with a learning opportunity boost their confidence and still see their strengths and weakness using this type of clinical cycle for teacher evaluation. I plan to continue this activity with all of the teachers I work with and use the information I gather to provide them, and myself, with specific professional learning opportunities that closely targets the needs they've demonstrated during our conferencing and observation.

References

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