

## Reflections on Shadowing an Elementary School Special Educator

Despite my cooperating teacher's extensive experience as a special education teacher, this year her classroom does not include students with either an IEP or a 504 plan. As a result, I have had little opportunity to develop an understanding of the interaction and collaboration between the special education and general education staff. The elementary school schedule is a jigsaw of multiple content areas and student and staff groupings. I have been particularly interested in learning how the general education and special education staff coordinate their schedules and instruction, plan assessments, and work together to advance students' social skills and peer relationships.

In shadowing Mrs. Byrd, I was able to get a better feel for the intricate relationship and communication that exists among staff as they work together to serve student needs. I was impressed by the students' seamless transitions as they shifted their attention from the classroom teacher to Mrs. Byrd when she arrived shortly after the start of the day. I appreciated how Mrs. Byrd made instant but relaxed contact with each of these five students as she entered the classroom. She bent down to interact and make eye contact, touched backs, and offered feedback on the work in which each of the children was engaged. Mrs. Byrd immediately began to serve her students by rephrasing the classroom teacher's questions, encouraging student effort, refocusing attention as necessary, and suggesting editing and review. She did not need to confer with the classroom teacher; both individuals had obviously communicated in advance and had an understanding of required tasks and skills.

Later, Mrs. Byrd made a quick shift in her planned instruction when she learned that Katie, a fourth-grade student with autism, was going to be attending a special science demonstration rather than her usual "choice" time. After steering Katie to a pair of seats near the front of the class, Mrs. Byrd worked alongside Katie to assemble a closed circuit and successfully encouraged her to volunteer an answer. In this class as well as the previous class, Mrs. Byrd also assisted general education student with content clarification and with maintaining focus. Following the science presentation, Mrs. Byrd and Katie resumed their regular schedule with one-on-one reading comprehension instruction in the resource room.

Mrs. Byrd explained that she felt it was vital for Katie to attend all possible special demonstrations and events and that she would carve out Katie's mandated IEP time from other segments of the weekly schedule. During this conversation, she was already vetting options for pulling Katie out later that afternoon for an additional fifteen minutes. I was amazed to see Mrs. Byrd's skill in adjusting her daily schedule on the fly and was moved that her flexibility permitted Katie to participate in a valuable group activity. I was also impressed to see Mrs. Byrd squeezing the most out of her own time. For example, she eliminated any downtime by having her computer booted up in advance and on the correct computer file for Katie's reading passage. Then when Katie was occupied with a chocolate reward, Mrs. Byrd stole a few brief minutes to make notes on her laptop.

Over the course of the day, I asked Mrs. Byrd about how social skills groups are structured for her students. She explained that she integrates social skills training into her instruction with all students and has specific social skills groups for some of her younger students. She views social skills as highly important for all students even if they are not

specified in the IEP. However, she feels that student's individual social preferences should be honored and respected especially as they grow older. She pointed out that at some point, children make their own choice about their peer interactions.

After the observation, I have great admiration for Mrs. Byrd, the special education program at my school, and the effective collaboration among all staff. Although my questions about scheduling and social skills were addressed, the shadowing surfaced a new question about the groupings of students. I appreciated the instructional benefits of grouping five special education students together for focused and extensive support from Mrs. Byrd. However, these five students are formally assigned to three different homerooms in the third grade. From an administrative point of view, I do not understand why these students maintain a formal enrollment in other homerooms when in reality they are taking classes for three-quarters of the day with a completely different group of peers and of course a different general education teacher. I wonder if this dual enrollment impacts their social connections and why the reality of their schedule is not represented on their paperwork.

Finally, this observation provided one of those defining magical moments that I am sure to remember for years. In Mrs. Byrd's room, Katie was protesting vigorously about reading a fifth grade level passage. She repeatedly called out that it would be too hard and that she couldn't do it. Mrs. Byrd gently but firmly assured Katie that she would not present her with a passage that was too difficult and that she would indeed be able to read it. After a few moments Katie was persuaded. She turned to the computer, looked at this new, unknown passage, and then ... magic. Katie read with a beautiful tone and inflection, investing her sentences with nuance and emotion. She read on and on, decoding complex foreign names and negotiating intricate sentences. Katie was absolutely masterful. Mrs. Byrd and I briefly met eyes; we were both teary. It was a transformational moment I will not soon forget.

## Group Interview with Learning Specialist

### 1. **What is your role?**

Mrs. Byrd is a learning specialist in learning disability resource. She works with students in the general in the general education setting who have learning disabilities including Autism, OHI, BD, etc. She also does resource teaching in addition to her support in the classroom. She described her job's purpose is to make the general curriculum accessible for all students. She has eleven students currently on her caseload. She collaborates with these students' general education teachers through various co-teaching models. She also pulls students out to work in her resource room when necessary. She believes her pushing into the general education classroom encourages students to stay on grade level with the curriculum, but when she pulls them out to the resource room she brings the curriculum down to their level to meet their needs. An example of this would be when the students stay in the classroom for the reading mini-lesson focusing on visualization. This third grade concept is one they can get from the general education classroom. She will then pull them in the resource room to have them read passages on their level (sometimes first grade level) while practicing the visualization skill they learned in the general education classroom.

### 2. **How do you work with the general education teacher to support students with disabilities?**

Mrs. Byrd said a major way she works with general education teachers to support students with disabilities is by providing them the IEP information needed for accommodations. This often involves making an IEP at a glance in the beginning of the year so the teachers are aware of the students with disabilities and any accommodations the teacher needs to be providing. She also shares techniques and approaches for each student and disability. Using this information they work together to plan and construct a behavior program. In addition to behavior management, she takes the grade level curriculum from the general education teacher and modifies tests by reducing the number of problems and/or answers, providing pictures, reading aloud, etc. She also co-teaches in different models in the different general education classrooms.

### 3. **What does the general education teacher need to know to work collaboratively with you to meet the needs of students with disabilities?**

Mrs. Byrd noted that general education teachers have widely divergent knowledge of and acceptance of students with disabilities. She shared her view that general education teachers who have recently graduated from teacher training programs have better knowledge of disabilities than those instructors who completed their teacher training years ago. In addition, she felt that recent graduates had a more welcoming attitude towards special education students and were more willing to team with learning specialists, case managers, and other members of the special education team.

Mrs. Byrd cited behavior management as an area where general education teachers need to heighten their awareness and knowledge. In response to the frequent frustrated query about "why the student is being so bad?" she responds that it is incumbent on teachers to teach students how to behave differently. Mrs. Byrd's consulting role for IEPs affords her an avenue to teach general education teachers

specialized behavior management techniques that have proven effective in addressing disruptive classroom behaviors. Mrs. Byrd believes that general education teachers will be able to implement these strategies successfully if they have empathy and the heart for instructing students with disabilities. She stated that she would prefer that a general teacher not have had any behavior training but be willing to try and to be open to alternative ideas.

Mrs. Byrd noted that general education teachers are often the first to notice learning difficulties. They must ask if these challenges are indications of a learning disability or simply an area of weakness in a content area. If they have concerns, she believes that general education teachers generally do reach out to consult with the special education staff for advice and resources.

**4. How do you work with the families of students with disabilities and how does the general education teacher support these efforts?**

Mrs. Byrd explained that family involvement and perspective varies widely and that this wide range is often apparent at the onset of the eligibility process, beginning with the identification of students. Some families actively advocate for IEPs for their children while others oppose such intervention. For students with an IEP, special educators meet with families at least once a year to review and amend the program. She noted that it was vital to nurture a collaborative relationship with the families of special education students and shared her personal methods of advancing communication. She uses daily logs of student interactions, multiple emails and phone calls throughout the week, and immediate contact when problems arise.

In addition to the necessary communications to relate school struggles and problem solving, Mrs. Byrd stressed that it was important to contact families with positive news. She offered an example of how such a strong communications base can impact an instructional decision, explaining that she had recently reached agreement with parents to let a failed test score stand. The student had refused to work with her parents to prepare for a content area assessment using a study guide. When the student failed the assessment, Mrs. Byrd suggested that she not be allowed a retest as a logical consequence of her lack of preparation. The parents agreed. Without frequent and candid sharing and problem solving between these parents and Mrs. Byrd, she did not believe it would have been possible to reach such an agreement and the student would therefore not have learned the consequences of failing to study for an assessment.

**5. What are some challenges of working with students with disabilities, especially those in the general education classroom?**

Mrs. Byrd confronts a number of challenges when working with the 11 students she manages in the general education classroom. One of her biggest challenges is keeping up with the pace of the general education curriculum. She has made it her personal goal to pull up or keep all of her students on grade level as much as possible in all academic areas, but to achieve this she feels that she always needs just a little more time to go over the curriculum with the students. She believes that her students always would benefit from just a few more lessons or a couple extra days of practice with the curriculum content. Keeping up with the pace of the general education curriculum while also making sure her students do not fall behind grade level is a constant challenge.

Another serious challenge that Mrs. Byrd confronts on a daily basis is managing the behavior of her students. Students with disabilities often have behavior problems as well, since bad behavior is a coping mechanism for many special education students. Mrs. Byrd explained that “the child would rather be bad than dumb,” so bad behavior is a constant challenge in the general education setting. Mrs. Byrd works hard to manage the behavior problems of some of her students through behavior modification plans, and building up their self-confidence so they do not feel different or “dumb,” and thus do not need to compensate through misbehavior.

**6. What are some highlights of working with students with disabilities, especially those in the general education classroom?**

Although working with students who have disabilities can be challenging at times, it is also very rewarding. It’s very evident that Mrs. Byrd loves what she does, and is committed to her students. One of the highlights of working with students with learning disabilities is when they are succeeding in their academic coursework. Given Mrs. Byrd’s goal of keeping all of her students on grade level, she works hard to achieve this, and celebrates with each child when they successfully complete tasks. In fact, on a wall in her classroom, there is a “Look What You Did!” wall, where students display outstanding work that they completed. Mrs. Byrd feels pride when her students succeed, because they understand the content, and maintain or exceeding what is expected of students at that particular grade level.

Perhaps the biggest reward of working with special education students in general education setting, according to Mrs. Byrd, is when the student starts to develop self-confidence. Unfortunately, special education students develop coping strategies to deal with their disabilities because they feel dumb or different. Sometimes these strategies are destructive and can be a real problem in the general education classroom, as well as to the student’s academic growth. However, when the student starts to succeed with the general education curriculum, their confidence soars. Mrs. Byrd said that one of the greatest rewards of her job is seeing her students start to believe in themselves and develop that realization that they aren’t different or dumb. There is no greater joy than seeing that child’s self-confidence soar.

