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# Field Experience Classroom Observation: A Formative Epitome

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During summer school, Ms. A’s class of graduated first and second grade students worked through a unit focused on finding the main ideas of books or passages to improve overall reading comprehension. The group worked on reading skills throughout summer school with a different unifying concept for each week. During the main idea unit, the teacher focused on Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE) Standard 1.1.3.A, “Identify the author’s purpose and type, using grade level text,” and Anchor Descriptor R3.A.1.4. “Identify and explain the main ideas and relevant details.” Despite a the third grade standard, the teacher taught the concepts using second grade level texts. The teacher had students identify the main idea and supporting details in a variety of texts and passages throughout the week and aimed for improved reading comprehension through use of main idea strategies.

In order to assess the students’ learning, Ms. A used a combination of three methods of formative assessment and one diagnostic measure. The instructor implemented the first method, out-of-context question and answer (Q&A), as a pre-assessment on the first day of instruction and as a formative assessment thereafter. The teacher asked the students what they knew about main ideas. Some recalled that the main idea was the most important part of a story. Ms. A also inquired about supporting details, but the students were unfamiliar with the term. The teacher used this information to guide her instruction in the forthcoming lessons. Each day, the instructor checked in with students at the beginning of class to see who knew what the main idea and supporting details were and as the week progressed a larger percentage of students knew the answer before daily instruction began.

The next method of assessment was a more applied and formal assessment where students listened to a story read aloud and subsequently used a graphic organizer to break the story into the main idea and supporting details. Each day a different graphic organizer was used which highlighted finding the main idea, supporting details or both. The papers were handed in at the end of the school day and the teacher used students’ performance on the handouts to guide full group and small group instruction on the following days. Additionally, the teacher grouped students for differentiated instruction partially-based on the mastery level of the concepts.

The final method of assessment involved in-context Q&A where the teacher read with students in small groups and asked them to identify the main idea and supporting details. Here, the teacher provided immediate support for struggling students and helped them apply main idea skills to texts. This practice was repeated at the end of the school day when the whole group reviewed the daily read-aloud noting the main idea and supporting details of that text.

Throughout the implementation of the main idea unit, Ms. A allowed student teachers to assess students with diagnostic probes (DIBELS) in order to determine their reading fluency levels. The teacher used baseline data from these probes to place students into small groups; however, Ms. A did not reconsider group placement based on growth indicated by the probes.

Together the collection of formative assessments provided the teacher with a complete picture of day by day understanding of the main idea concept and use of baseline diagnostic assessment data allowed appropriate placement of students in differentiated small groups; however, a blatant lack of summative assessment indicates an area of concern. Ms. A was able to collect data about how well students understood the present unit and change her instructional methods to meet their needs; however, she could not be certain that her goals for the students were met since there was no ultimate measure of objective competency.

Nonetheless, the instructor provided that summative assessments were not used due to the nature of the academic program. The program occurred in the summer as a complement to the regular school year and was intended to provide extra support to students in need rather than to achieve new goals. With this intention, the lack of summative assessment seems appropriate; however, Ms. A also stated that she did not use summative assessments during the school year as she provided reading support rather than formal instruction to students. In this respect, one must question how goal achievement and objective mastery were assessed at all for students requiring secondary supports in reading skills.

Students assisted by a reading support specialist received appropriately modified instruction which was differentiated to their individual needs. While with the support specialist, the student did not receive summative assessments because the differentiation was considered a support rather than regular instruction. Moreover, in general classroom activities the student received only undifferentiated instruction and was expected to complete summative assessments for the objectives set for the collective class. This contradiction of the student’s educational plans is unacceptable. It is impossible to judge a student’s mastery of goals and objectives developed particularly for that student when the summative assessment aims to test general goals and objectives which may or may not align with that of the student in need of reading support. Furthermore, research shows that there is a definite interaction between use of both formative and summative assessments to provide a full understanding of students’ learning (Biggs, 1998). Clearly, students receiving reading support need to have appropriate summative assessments during some of the instruction relevant to their needs, either during summer school or the standard school year.

Nonetheless, the large amount of formative assessment used by the teacher is optimal. Ms. A gathers data about how the student performs in a large group, small group and independently as well as both written and verbally using the three formative approaches. As such, the data is extremely valid as it removes any error due to shyness, group assistance, difficulty working alone, writing difficulties and social factors by providing a variety of response forms (Mille, Linn, & Gronlund, 2009). Furthermore, the teacher gives thorough verbal instructions about how to answer questions. Often, the teacher will walk through completion of a written assessment with students so that there is little possibility of completion difficulties due to lack of instruction. Undoubtedly, the teacher’s comprehensive and minimally error-ridden formative assessment data set provides the best possible picture of the student’s abilities.

Conversely, the teacher has a strong diagnostic data set available which she could use more effectively to properly differentiate instruction. The instructor should examine probe data at least weekly in order to judge the appropriateness of each student’s small group placement with consideration of their individual reading fluency levels. Being that all students in the program require extra reading support, no specific accommodations or modifications are made for students with special needs. Instead, students are placed in small groups based on diagnostic criteria and instructed according to their academic needs. Ms. A could best place students in small groups by using diagnostic data to update group placements weekly. Nevertheless, this data is used only at baseline for initial group placement.

Ms. A provides a great summer learning experience for students, highlighted in the main idea unit; however, an addition of summative assessments and better used of diagnostic assessment data would yield the best results for the students’ education. Proper summative data could allow for clear objective mastery information while frequent consideration of diagnostic data would provide better differentiation. Despite assessment challenges, students appeared to learn well and progress academically in the summer learning program. Ms. A used formative assessments strongly and is an epitome of proper formative assessment application.

**References**

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