

Special Education: Interview and Observation

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SPECIAL EDUCATION INTERVIEW

On February 17, 2016, I went to Robert Place Miller Elementary School to complete an interview and observation of their special education department by meeting with two specialists. While organizing materials and questions for that day, I felt that I prepared myself to the best of my ability. As I walked into the school that afternoon, I did not know what to expect and felt a little nervous for what was to come next. After being able to observe and speak with Pam Aadness and Chantell Slaubaugh, my outlook of special education have both changed and stayed the same.

First, I observed Pam Aadness, who showed me around the school to various rooms and wings of the school. While speaking to her, I discovered she was a Special Education teacher at Bismarck High School for 15 years and is currently in her second year at Miller Elementary, mainly working with students with intellectual disabilities. Initially, I began in Pam's classroom where she works with other colleagues to manage the seven students on her case load. Her classroom was dimly lit by multiple lamps to avoid sensory overload to the students in the room. While I was in the room, there was a paraprofessional working to calm down a boy who had ASD by using games on an iPhone. Pam then showed me different tools they utilize throughout their day, such as picture schedules, that help the students plan and organize themselves with minimal stress.

Next, she gave me a tour of one wing of the school, which many of her students came from. I got the opportunity to meet one of her students who had a visual impairment and spoke with him for a while. Then I went the school's sensory room. It is easy to say that this was my favorite room to visit since I was able to see various equipment used to help students calm down when they are overstimulated as well as several students come in to use these machines. Some of the most popular equipment used was an exercise ball, a trampoline, and a swing.

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After I finished the tour of the main special education rooms, I followed Chantell Slaubaugh to her room to observe the work she does with students with learning disabilities. I first sat back and watched her help a second grade boy with his reading and sight words. He was working on four letter words that had the same ending sounds. She would cover up parts of the word or have him fill in the missing letter.

Then she was supposed to have a group of three girls come in to work on math, but she received a call saying two of the girls had to stay in class to finish a project. Chantell took this time to tell me how important scheduling and flexibility is in this career. The third grade girl was working on money problems during their time together. Chantell would write a story problem on the SmartBoard and the student was responsible for solving for the correct amount of change and verbalizing her steps. She then took play money and handed over the change she had just solved for.

Once the little girl had finished the money problems, the bell rang and I were able to sit down and talk to Chantell. I used this time to do the interview and received the following answers to these questions:

1. How has special education changed since you began in the field?

-There has been a greater push for inclusion, or the “push-in model” in this school, and there is more structure.

2. How does a student qualify for services/gain access to your program?

-We have a problem-solving team that is brought in for an intervention. The team has a meeting and discusses if the student needs services. They can refer to various tests and then determine if they qualify for services.

3. What is a favorite tool that students like to use to learn?

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-I love using the iPad! But anything hands-on that they can manipulate, such as dice and cards.

4. **How do you help prepare students for middle and high school?**

-They have transition teachers that allow the students to visit the middle schools so they can ask questions and prepare for the upper levels.

5. **How do the teaching styles differ from a kindergartener to a 5th grader?**

-Kindergarteners work on short activities. These activities get increasing longer the higher the grade, and by 3rd, 4th, and 5th grade they are able to work on things such as whole group instruction, small group mini lessons, and reading stamina.

6. **What is the difference between teaching a student with prior special education experience versus a student who just qualified for services?**

-Students with prior knowledge of special education are a little more comfortable compared to a child that has just qualified. Small groups can be very beneficial to help students that feel discomfort.

7. **Do you have a favorite technique/strategy for helping students learn?**

-It varies for every student. I like hands-on approaches, such as highlighting and different technology (active board).

8. **How do you help parents cope when their child is recommended for special education?**

-For some parents and families you have to slowly help them get through the grieving process. It's important to explain the process, various acronyms, and different techniques that are all incorporated into the plan.

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9. **How do you handle a parent who disagrees with your professional opinion, and assume they know what is best for their child?**

-You have to have parent permission so I just talk to them and explain why it's a good idea.

10. **What is your opinion on inclusion?**

-I think it's very important. It is always a good idea to pay attention to whatever is appropriate for the student's needs (least restrictive environment).

11. **What advice would you give for a first year special education teacher?**

-To not get overwhelmed. There is a lot of paperwork but just plan a little at a time. Don't be nervous for IEP meetings because there are other people on the team who will be able to help you out.

12. **Is there something you would change about the current system in your school?**

-I could really use more time with the students. I spend so much of my time running throughout the school and going between students.

13. **What advice would you give general educators about teaching students with disabilities?**

-Make sure there is a lot of communication with the specialists. It's also good to remember to treat them like any other kid.

14. **What type of summer courses are available?**

-There is Camp Adventure open to all students, and I also offer ESY (extended school year) for students who regress over the summer and can't gain the

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information back or if they are at a critical stage in their education in which they cannot afford to regress at all over the summer.

15. How do you determine which students receive an aide and how much time the student receives with the aide?

-Once a student qualifies for services, I look at the type of disability and determine how much time is appropriate for an aide to be with them.

16. How many students do you have on your case load?

-Pam has a lower case load since she works with students that are intellectually disabled and require more of her time and attention. So Pam has about 10 students on her case load, while I have about 20 students because I can work in shorter sessions that usually last about 20-30 minutes.

17. What are the benefits of working with other professionals?

-They are able to mentor you and push you in the right direction. They have more experience and will be able to share different strategies and a lot of information they have learned that will help you become a better teacher.

18. What are the everyday challenges you face and what do you do to combat them?

-Since I spend a lot of my day running around, I'm not able to use as much technology as I'd like. Instead, I carry a tote around with me that has file folder games and other manipulatives that will interest the students and help them be actively engaged.