

**Field Experience in a
Special Education 12:1:1 Class
at Sherburne-Earlville High School**

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School Profile

Sherburne-Earlville is a rural school district situated in Central New York.

According to the district website, several small communities of approximately 7,700 residents make up the district; the school population is approximately 1,785 students.¹

Farming is the primary industry in the area. Additionally, the district, like the county, has little racial diversity, in that it is predominantly white.

“Kids today come to school with much more baggage,” according to Mr. O who has been teaching in the district for more than two decades. He has noted an increasing trend in single-parent families since he began teaching, as well as an increase in poverty which is widespread in the district. In a recent email correspondence, Mr. O offered this example:

Today I got a new student from another district whose house burned down to the ground last Saturday. They lost everything and are now living with relatives in our district. They have no plans to rebuild, which is an indication that they did not have insurance.

Unfortunately, the result of this as Mr. O has noted, is that students lack concentration, focus and a strong home environment, all of which can help students succeed in school. Parental involvement is often low, especially in attendance at annual meetings to determine a student’s Individualized Education Program (IEP).

While the school district is classified by New York State in N/RC Group 4 (a rural district with high needs relative to district capacity),² the school is currently a

¹ Sherburne-Earlville Central School District. (n.d.). *Sherburne-Earlville Central School District*. Retrieved November 28, 2005, from <http://www.secsd.org>

² The University of the State of New York, The State Education Department. (March 2002). *The New York State School District Report Card for Sherburne-Earlville Central School District: An Overview of*

School in Good Standing. (Previously labeled a School in Need of Improvement, two years of adequate progress enabled the upgrade to the current rating.)³ For the district, this means they are eligible for a great deal of aid. As such, the district is able to finance technological and capital investments; a new wing was recently added to the high school and classrooms throughout the district are technologically up-to-date. In addition to classroom computers, there are dozens of computers in the library available for students.

According to Mr. O, the Special Education department at Sherburne-Earlville has grown in size over the past several decades to become one of the largest departments in the district. The school structures Special Education classroom environments according to several different principles, including inclusion classrooms, push-in teaching and pull-out classes. “Over the years we have gone from ‘one size fits all’ to more individualized education,” Mr. O said in an email. The district puts a great emphasis on finding the right environment for each student, recognizing that not all students will be successful in an inclusive classroom environment. As such, students are enrolled in classes such as Mr. O’s 12:1:1 class. An example of the district’s flexibility in meeting the needs of the Special Education students is the creation of a 15:1:1 Global Studies class which goes at a slower pace than the general Global Studies class. Though it was only implemented last year, six of nine students enrolled in the first class passed the New York State Regents Exam in Global Studies.

Teacher Profile

Mr. O has been teaching High School Special Education in the Sherburne-Earlville school district for 21 years. He earned his Bachelors Degree in Health Sciences

Academic Performance. Retrieved November 30, 2005, from <http://emsc32.nysed.gov/reperd2002/overview/082001040000.pdf>

³ Sherburne-Earlville Central School District.

and Elementary Education Certification from SUNY Brockport and went on to the College of St. Rose in Albany for a Master's Degree in Learning Disabilities, before accepting a teaching position at his high school alma mater. In addition to his teaching responsibilities, Mr. O coaches Modified Football for the district. Finally, for the past thirteen years Mr. O has also taught part-time for the New York State penal system, teaching inmates at a nearby minimum security prison several nights a week.

His wife teaches Physical Education at the Middle-High School, and their four children are enrolled in the district, as well. One of his sons has cerebral palsy and is non-verbal; both Mr. O and his wife are very involved in their son's care. As parents, they are strong advocates of their son, pursuing resources such as a communication board and treatments like Botox to aid or improve his condition. The school district has been very supportive of this, both in its responsibility to the student and also as Mr. and Mrs. O's employer.

Mr. O teaches a 12:1:1 class, covering general subject areas such as Math in Mod 1 and Social Studies in Mod 3. Though these are technically individual classes, the students in the classes are very consistent; many have Mr. O for their classes in the morning before going to BOCES vocational programs in the afternoon. This continuity of the classroom population aids in Mr. O's classroom management strategy of developing a community atmosphere. It is very evident in observing his classes that by demanding respect of the students and similarly treating them with respect; it is possible to foster such a positive environment. Problems that arose amongst the students were dealt with as a resolution among parties. Mr. O fostered the conflict resolution, but ultimately put the pressure on the students to resolve the conflict themselves.

The students in Mr. O's classes are primarily exempt from New York State graduation standards, and instead receive IEP Degrees. As such, they are required to sit for the Regents exams; however the students are not required to pass in order to graduate. Mr. O has a great deal of freedom, therefore, in designing the curriculum. The math class is taught at about a sixth grade level, while the Social Studies class covers the general material from the Global Studies course, however less in depth. A great amount of attention is paid to vocabulary and the process of doing the work. Students are assessed by quizzes and work assignments, however this is much less formal. For example, a great deal of time was spent on maps of the United States and Europe, determining the locations of states and countries. Students were quizzed with what Mr. O judged to be a great deal of success, as many students scored around 80%.

Due to the flexibility of the curriculum which Mr. O teaches, he has a great deal of planning for each class. Often this manifests itself in preparing worksheets and hand-outs for class. With multiple class preparations for several different subjects, it can be a challenge, but the slower pace of the class makes it somewhat easier. Instead of covering the map of the United States in one day, Mr. O split it up and reviewed the material over the course of a week, allowing the students to digest and master the material, but also easing his preparation load.

Even within the 12:1:1 class there is great variability in the ability and learning style of the students. Mr. O teaches still manages to teach to these different students by understanding them. He knows the strengths and weaknesses of each student; when solving word problems as a class, Mr. O will challenge a particular student for the

process, while keeping a more advanced student involved by turning to him for the answer. The key to this is developing an awareness of the students.

Student Profiles

Corey is a student with mild mental retardation. He is very sociable; despite speaking in simple sentences, he is very enthusiastic. Though he is currently enrolled in BOCES for Human and Retail Management, which he has described as “learning about food poisoning,” Corey has expressed a desire to ultimately become a bus driver. While the rest of his classmates sit in the student desks for class, Corey sits at the table in the front of the room. This is “his space,” which Mr. O and the rest of the class respect. In general, the class responds very well to him. Corey is well liked and affectionately called “Moose” by his classmates and Mr. O. While academically Corey is not as advanced as many of his classmates, he still participates and contributes to class and group work, though Mr. O at times has to remind him to stay on task.

Unlike Corey, his classmate Mark is rather withdrawn and had to be prodded by Mr. O to introduce himself. Mark is in BOCES for auto body repair, but will soon be attending Job Corps in Oneonta where he plans to study to be an electrician. It took a lot for Mark to share this information, though; after Mark shared his name, Mr. O tried prodding him by asking what he liked to do in his spare time to which Mark replied, “Sleep.” A classmate also prodded him to share about his girlfriend, but Mark said, “I prefer to keep that to myself.” Academically, Mark seems to be more advanced than many of his classmates. While reviewing assignments as a class, Mark often has a look of boredom on his face as he is able to complete the work faster than most of his classmates.

Mr. O knows this, and in turn often calls on Mark for an answer or to help a slower classmate, thereby keeping him engaged.

Robert seems to be the hub of classroom activity. Prior to a particular class Mark, Robert and James had been on the computers; when Mr. Osborne addressed the group, Robert would answer. He works with heavy machinery and in forestry at BOCES, but has a real passion for engines and building cars. Robert dropped out of school last June but returned in the fall, although he continually claims he is planning on dropping out again soon to return to his previous job working on engines for a local garbage company, “as long as they up [him] to ten dollars an hour.”

According to Mr. O, every so often a student in his 12:1:1 class will drop out of school, but after about a year in the real world they generally will return. With this return often comes a much better attitude, as they now know the importance of at least a high school level education. Mr. O cited Robert as the only student who has returned without that adjustment, but he also said that Robert was only out of school for a month – not long enough in such a situation to see that adjustment. Throughout the course of the two months of visitations to Mr. O’s classroom, Robert continued to indicate that he would drop out of school again, but he still remained in the classroom.

James sits next to Robert and appears to be one of his close friends. While not as reserved as Mark, James was also not as forthcoming as Robert. He is enrolled in the same forestry program at BOCES as Robert and especially likes operating the bulldozers. He works part time at the Colgate Inn as a dishwasher and is very proud of the job. Like Robert, James is an avid hunter and the boys held an avid dialogue about this upcoming season as rifles are being allowed in the county for the first time ever, to the hesitancy of

rural landowners who fear stray bullets. He is one of the average to slower learners in the class, but puts in a consistent effort.

Brett, meanwhile, is a quieter boy who doesn't seem to fit well into the prominent friendship of Mark-Robert-James. Brett is, according to Osborne, a recent transfer from a district about an hour away and is additionally in remission from leukemia. Unlike the others, he is not attending a BOCES program as he still tires easily, but rather goes home where he likes to work at his computer on video games and audio editing. His mother, a nurse at Community Memorial Hospital, has her pilot's license and Brett really enjoys flying with her. When asked a few simple questions, Brett became really flustered; he seems to need time to fully process his thoughts and answers. In the academic setting, he needs reassurance. He came in for extra help during Mr. O's prep period, nervously chewing the earpiece of his glasses when questioned, but quickly displayed knowledge of the material and he had even calculated the correct answer.

These brief descriptions only profile five of the students in Mr. O's class, however they were prominent in much of my observation. This is not to say that other members of the class were not as outspoken or carefully observed, however the first class I attended was in the middle of an assembly, so only these five boys were present. We spent much of the Mod on introductions, so at subsequent observations I was familiar with their backgrounds and academic styles.

Physical Classroom

Mr. O's classroom is arranged to both foster a community relationship and to be functional, as it is a high school classroom used by two teachers throughout the day.

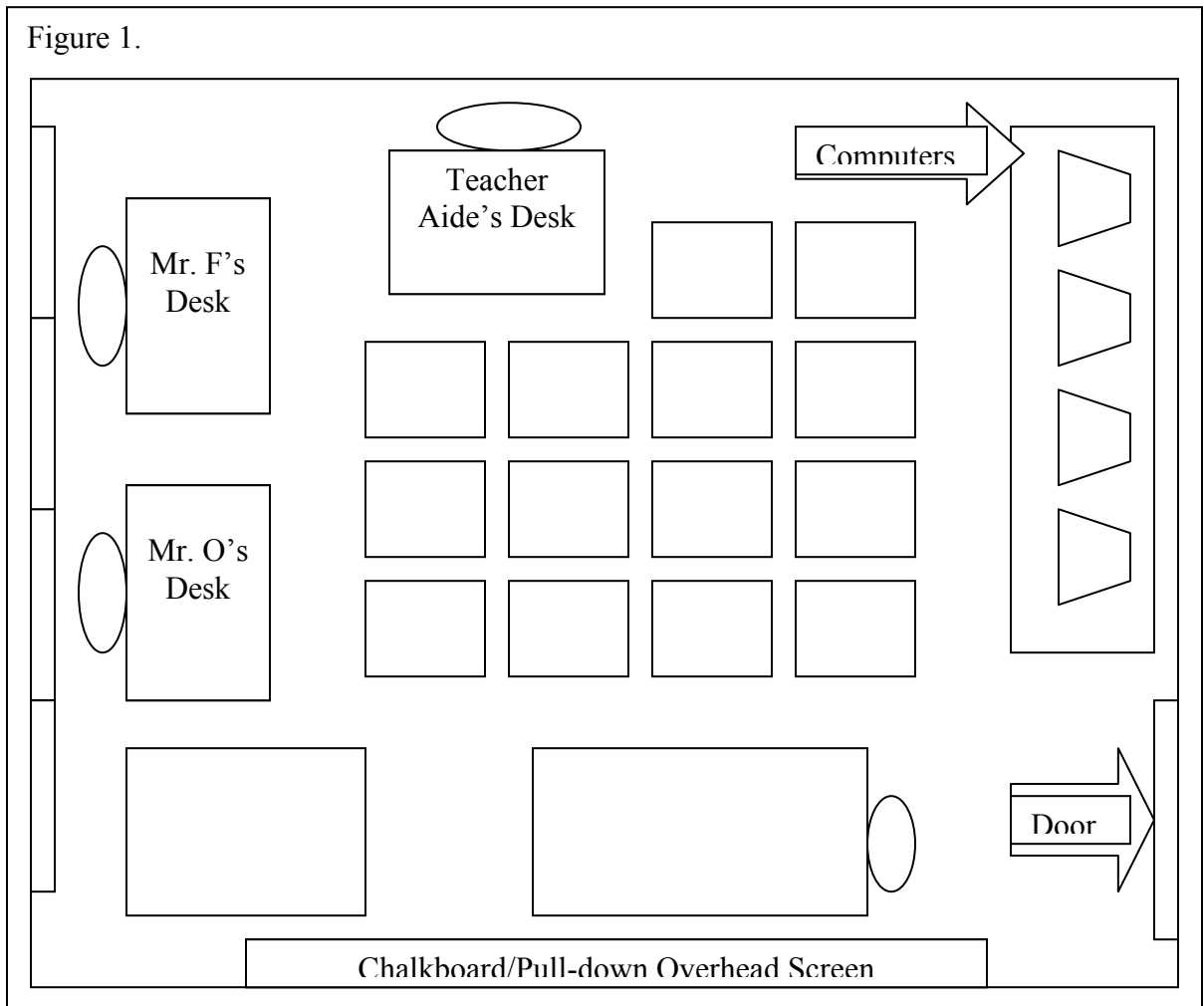
Therefore, it must be able to meet the needs of Mr. O and Mr. F and their different classes.

The fourteen student desks are arranged in rows facing the front of the classroom; Mr. O and Mr. F's desks are to the side of the room facing the student desks and the Teacher Aide's desk is situated behind the student desks. On the wall opposite the teacher desks is a bank of four computers. A blackboard and pull-down overhead screen faces the students and a table is located in front of the student desks, as well.

The walls are simply adorned with typical educational posters such as the writing process and other factual information, as well as a few inspirational posters. These are primarily on the bulletin board above the computer bank and on the back wall of the classroom. These wall adornments create a positive atmosphere; however they seem to serve a decorative function similar to that of artwork in hotel rooms. Beyond this, however, they do not seem to substantially contribute to the educational process.

The classroom is very technologically equipped. In addition to the bank of four classroom computers, both Mr. F and Mr. O have personal laptops. An advanced projection system is also installed in the classroom. On a table to the side of the chalkboard is an elmo multi-use projection device that allows the teacher to project a book or worksheet from the table onto the screen. Mr. O often used this to teach math, solving problems from the worksheet so that the students could easily follow along. Additionally, it is possible to hook a computer to the Elmo, projecting a website or other computer document onto the screen. I shared pictures from Washington, D.C. with the class using this machine. Other classroom resources include class sets of calculators, atlases, textbooks and magnifying glasses.

While the layout of the classroom appears at first sight to be rather rigid and traditional, Mr. O's teaching philosophy enhances and develops the atmosphere through the layout. There is no assigned seating in the classroom; students are instead encouraged to sit where they feel comfortable. Corey, for instance, feels most comfortable not at a desk, but rather sitting at the table in the front of the room. Additionally, while the desks are arranged in rows, the students often push them together, as Mr. O encourages small group work.



Connections

The observation experience in Mr. O's classroom at Sherburne-Earlville offered a visible example of much of what has been taught in this Special Education course. Most obviously, the discussion about inclusion classrooms is particularly relevant. Mr. O's classroom is not inclusionary by any means; it is in stark contrast to what we had discussed as potentially an ideal classroom environment for Special Education students. Mr. O's class is composed of students who would not succeed in an inclusion classroom. For them, the least restrictive environment is in a 12:1:1 class.

Additionally, the experience in Mr. O's classroom illustrated the methods of teaching Special Education students that we learned in class. Namely, Mr. O exhibited the importance of not only teaching the material, but teaching the students how to learn the material. Several Social Studies classes were spent labeling maps, which the students were then responsible for labeling in a quiz. Instead of simply indicating a state and offering its name, Mr. O and the class would devise strategies for remembering them. A student, for example, immediately associated Kentucky with "Kentucky Fried Chicken," to which Mr. O suggested that the state looked like a drumstick. By teaching the students these devices, he was able to improve their performance on the quiz.

Finally, among other points, the class really illustrated the social ramifications of being labeled for Special Education. Indeed, the students in the class seem to form an exclusive peer group; part of this may be the atmosphere that Mr. O has fostered, but in addition, the students spend at least half of the day together in the same classes. They are intimately involved with each other's lives. Beyond this peer group, however, they struggle more as people easily dismiss them. Therefore the importance of their peer group goes beyond the amount of exposure the students have to one another. Instead, it becomes

a survival tool. In the hallways between classes and during free periods, the students from Mr. O's class spend time together; they know and accept one another which can be more satisfying than dealing with the potential rejection of other schoolmates.

Teaching Vignette

On my last day with the class I helped Mr. O prepare the Social Studies lesson during Mod 2, before co-teaching it in Mod 3. The lesson for the day was to identify and label the Southern/Eastern half of Europe, a total of approximately 20 countries. Ethnic and national tensions in the region have led to shifting borders and countries over the past decade that Mr. O has taught the lesson. In order to teach the most up-to-date material, we thus had to locate accurate maps online (the classroom atlases were outdated) large enough for the students to read and understand. I began with the CIA website which offers CIA Factbook about every country and a subsequent variety of maps, working to restructure and update the assignment. Several Google searches later I had found two accurate maps, a blank one and a resource map the students could use to locate the countries. I also updated the list of countries the students were responsible for that day.

During Mod 3, Mr. O had me read the word bank of countries out loud so the students could hear pronunciations and then encouraged them to work in small groups to identify the different countries. We then floated amongst the ten students, offering help where needed. Mark worked consistently and independently, completing the map before most of his classmates. In the meantime, Robert and James collaborated. They were often distracted and took the independent work atmosphere as an opportunity to carry on a social conversation; however they did manage to finish the work by the end of the class period. Robert and James also asked for help frequently, as they had trouble locating

some of the smaller nations on the reference map. Upon locating a country in question, they would then continue their conversation, often inviting other students and Mr. O and myself into the conversation as well.

Mr. O and I continued to float around the room, helping students with their maps. Many couldn't understand why the nations were so small or why borders had moved; to relate it into parlay they understood, I briefly explained nationalist tensions by illustrating the subsequent violence. They were able to attach to that answer and better understand the lesson.

After helping the students label their maps for approximately 20 minutes, it was nearly the end of the Mod. Most of the students had finished or were only missing a few countries. I walked past Brett's desk, though, and he was significantly behind the others. My presence, though, only seemed to fluster him more. He had asked a few questions throughout the work period, though not nearly as many as the rest of the students. As a result, his map was far less complete.

This vignette illustrates several points. First of all, it really is a great indicator of the different learning styles in action. Secondly, the vignette suggests the difficulty in planning a lesson; it took me an entire Mod to prepare for the class as finding accurate maps was a challenge. Lastly, this story emphasizes the importance of understanding a student's learning style. Mr. O, for example, knows that Brett is easily flustered and thus modifies his approach. My sense of the students was not nearly as developed, but I was still able to determine how to explain answers to the different students.

Reflections

The observation experience in Mr. O's class was an incredible experience. It is difficult to sum up all of the conclusions I have drawn from it, however two of the most important ones are as follows: the classroom atmosphere is crucial to a successful classroom and dedication to the students and the job is absolutely necessary as well.

Mr. O did a truly excellent job at fostering a very positive atmosphere. Almost unknowingly, the classroom seems to operate on the basis of respect alone. Certainly there were conflicts, however these were short-lived. Additionally, the entire class became very intertwined and concerned with the welfare of one another. On my last day of observation Corey was not in Social Studies class during Mod 3 and the others were legitimately concerned. The support for one another is present and it is a huge boon to the classroom setting.

The second conclusion is that the role of the Special Education teacher is multifaceted. Mr. O has become more than just a teacher to these students. In the absence of widespread parental involvement, he is also a key advocate of his students. When an incident sprung up involving the suspension of a student in his class, Mr. O advocated for the protection of the student's rights. Additionally, as Robert continues to contemplate dropping out of high school, Mr. O has continued to counsel him on the decision. He has continued to urge Robert to graduate and earn a diploma, stressing the importance of a high school degree. I believe that it is in part to Mr. O's efforts and classroom environment that Robert came back to school and has remained thus far.

My vastly impactful realization is that the ability of the students is not limited by a learning disability. The students might be slower at math skills or take longer to understand historical trends, but many are still extremely articulate on subjects of interest

to them. Robert and James, for example, could talk about engines and hunting for hours, emphasizing the most salient points of recent debate on the topics. It is thus necessary to find ways to engage these students who might otherwise tune out very easily. Relating the material to their passions can be highly successful. On the converse side, it is important not to limit these students. It is highly probable that a student like Brett is being underestimated simply because he lacks confidence in himself. To allow him to achieve his full potential, he needs to be drawn out and encouraged. It is important to strike that balance between the two extremes.

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