Observations Write-up

Betsy Damon

ED5270

**Locations of Observations:**

Gilford Middle School

I have substituted for most of the teachers (or at least at every grade) I observed so I had some feel for the teacher’s style before entering the classroom. These observations were completed during the first week of March right after the February vacation. The population runs from 5th grade thru 8th grade.

Plymouth Regional High School

This single observation occurred during my practicum as my mentor was responsible for a study hall block in addition to educational technology courses. This study hall included a mixture of students from all the high school grade levels.

Pleasant Street Elementary School

I made these connections during my practicum, completing many hours of undocumented observations during that time as teachers brought their classes in to use the computer lab or exchange books under the teacher’s direction. I returned after my practicum in the last couple weeks of school to complete the documented observations. This is a K-5 school.

Woodland Heights Elementary School

This is practically a second family to me. I have two kids that have been at the school for 6 and 4 years respectively with the oldest “graduating” in a few days to move on to the middle school. I have worked in the school as a per diem substitute and as a paraprofessional. I currently work in the afterschool program and volunteer in many different capacities. This is an open-concept building housing pre-school through 5th grade with a disproportionate number of behavioral issues and a very high free-lunch eligible population.

**Visibility of Standards:**

Gilford Middle School

I find it interesting that the teachers that act more like guides than authorities are more likely to have information readily available for the students. I do realize that part of this is based on the grade level with 5th grade needing a more teacher-driven environment than 8th grade and specialists. For example: in the 5th grade I observed the standards were posted behind the teacher’s desk while in the 8th grade standards were posted in a general poster on the wall, with handouts available in a folder system readily accessible by students and standards specific to the unit being worked on were posted within the bulletin board pertaining to the unit information.

Plymouth Regional High School

This school works with competencies rather than “standards.” Freshman students are all required to begin their senior portfolio which provides them with a format to document their mastery of those competencies outlined in the template. Additionally, the teacher I worked with included the competencies addressed in her courses on each course webpage.

Pleasant Street Elementary School

At the elementary level, there is less of an emphasis on sharing with students the goals of which standards are being addressed by activities. This is probably based on the fact that they switch between activities several times a day. What was very interesting here was to find that the digital portfolio reflections are largely completed by the teachers with the students putting in their name, level of confidence/enjoyment of the activity being referenced, and a short blurb related to their experience. The students do not really reflect on how the artifact demonstrates the standard being addressed nor do they even remotely understand what standard they are working on. Artifacts may or may not be attached because there is a sense of that being a waste of time as they digital portfolio is scrapped at the end of eighth grade in favor of the high school edition. Students are not given a standard and asked to find work that demonstrates proficiency but instead all students are told which assignments will be used by the entire class. I find the disconnect here a bit disheartening as the students are given skills (creating a digital reflection) without being given the entire context (choosing an artifact for reflecting on). I think this would be a wonderful opportunity for students to begin the process of understanding that learning and education are a means to reach a goal rather than just something to do because you’re in school and the teacher says so. Maybe if students felt more excited about their learning by knowing they would be creating their digital portfolios there may be more enthusiasm for being in school.

Woodland Heights Elementary School

This is also an elementary school where standards are not often posted or directly encountered and being open-concept means there is less wall-space even to have standards posted by teacher desks. I did find that a fourth grade I was in had a wonderful chart to help students “rate their understanding” which I think will help her students to use the terms “I understand” and all its variations more effectively and uniformly across their learning. I also liked the behavior spectrum that one of the first grade teachers had posted where the kids could see how well they were doing or when they needed to turn things around before a call would be going home. One student was very proud to show the principal where his clip was on the spectrum at that moment and the principal in turn had visual proof that the student’s perceived “great day” was mirrored by the teacher’s perception. At this school, I found that “standards” were not specific to content, though those standards are addressed in the lesson planning and professional learning community discussions, but were geared more to the whole student and learning in general. Behavior spectrums and definitions/examples of what it means to understand material/concepts help students learn self-regulation and reflection as skills that benefit the student in and outside of the classroom and throughout life.

**Classroom environment:**

Gilford Middle School

At this level, students don’t have one classroom but 4+ per day and there is a real sense of a team rather than individual groups of students. Even though each class of a subject may complete the same projects, each classroom is a different subject and each has a different identity. Most of these classrooms were exhibiting student work related to the topic at hand or previously studied. One of my favorite bulletin boards was in the 6th grade math class where all students were given a series of directions (draw two parallel lines, draw a circle, draw a triangle, etc.). Each drawing is unique and demonstrates student understanding of geometry and math concepts (parallel, line, circle, etc) while showcasing the individual since no two drawings, from identical directions, were identical. Student representations of meaningful vocabulary were present in most classrooms and guides to help students understand their own abilities related mastery of concepts and standards were more visible as the students rose in grade level. It was heartening to see that the “DO NOW” concept was still alive and flourishing in these classrooms several years after intial introduction. Differences in technology, especially smart board use, between Gilford Middle School and Woodland Heights Elementary School is apparent as more wall space is dedicated to white boards with the smart board being a less widely used apparatus than at the elementary level. Because classes are moving in and out fairly regularly, there is not “morning message” here as there would be at Woodland Heights Elementary School, replaced by a more regimented “do now” list of directions to be followed.

Plymouth Regional High School

Study hall for 75 teenagers in a cafeteria is not the ideal setting. Luckily almost half will come to study hall with a library pass and will leave for the entire block. Upon entering the teacher is met by a onslaught of eager teens needing library passes signed so they may leave. Having signed themselves in for attendance and then signed out of the room, that signature is the only thing holding them in that room. So the numbers dwindle but even then the size of the cafeteria is not adequate for students to disperse to reduce socialization because the custodian is trying to clean as much of the cafeteria as possible by putting up almost half the tables and while using time wisely is a great concept, I felt that having him run around the room on multiple passes on him mini-Zamboni-type cleaning machine detracted from the silent studious atmosphere needed.

Pleasant Street Elementary School

This school has regular classrooms and each one is like a separate country. Teachers rule their domain and other staff members understand and honor those idiosyncrasies, such as, not entering the classroom when class is in session or placing communication in the teacher mailbox not on the teacher’s desk. It is clear that individual differences are celebrated and even grade-wide units create very different learning demonstrations. Students can see that other classes have different ways of doing the same thing but they don’t have to opportunity to interact with and experience first hand those differences.

Woodland Heights Elementary School

Open-concept makes for a unique classroom environment. You do not have full control over something as simple as the amount of light in your room or the noise level even. Wall space is at a premium and often bulletin boards are in hallways or on back sides of shelving units visible when outside the immediate classroom only. Another constraint caused by open-concept is that you need to monitor your own noise level so as not to disturb other classrooms. This model works great when teachers are collaborating and doing whole pod (or each but every class) activities that may have an increased noise and/or energy level. Very often teachers work together in the planning of lessons/activities and have very similar outcomes so student work displays from different classes within a grade are often eerily similar. Open-concept works well for students that do not mind being one of the herd and that are not challenged by distractions and are able to block out noise, sounds, and other stimuli. Unfortunately, at this school, there is a great percentage of students with behavioral issues (as witnessed by the increased paraprofessional staffing than that of other district elementary schools) and those students when overwhelmed by the environment can often cause distractions to their class/pod mates as well as interrupting classroom instruction and requiring additional personnel to be deployed in the classroom. The fourth grade was taking a math non-negotiables test and while observing one classroom, a student from another classroom was starting to lose control and began intermittent shrieking. This class startled at first and turned towards the sound but then assured themselves that it was just “HIM” and went back to work with most becoming less distracted as the outbursts went on. My real concern would be for those students whose abilities were affected, with not only their next year math placement at stake but also their sense of accomplishment. Teachers can benefit from the open-concept model when dealing with difficult students because there are others who can hear what is going on and make a call or cast a watchful eye on the rest of the class if the teacher is needed to physically remove a student from a classroom for safety reasons. In one of the 1st grade classes I was observing, the teacher completed a read aloud while watching a difficult student who was being monitored by his paraprofessional. Once the story was complete, she declared that they had earned a movement break and proceeded to start a preselected “Just Dance” Youtube video and then went to help remove the troubled student. At the same time, a neighbor teacher whose class was completing independent work was able to leave the teacher assistant monitoring her class while she moved in and presented herself as a safe adult in control so the rest of the class was able to securely take part in the movement break to be rejoined as if nothing had happened by their own teacher minutes later. So while there might be a case made for the negative effect of the open-concept on challenged students, there is also the positive community created for caregivers (like teachers and paraprofessionals) and the majority of students in their classes.

**Classroom management:**

Gilford Middle School

Students who refused to participate were sent from the classroom to the office as were any who were behaving incorrectly. There were few of these during all my time observing in the school. I do wonder if it is due to a different composition of student needs, systems setup and followed in earlier grades, or simply just a fluke. I believe much of the difference is that this community has a very different socio-economic makeup though that could just mean that disadvantaged students are not spread evenly among districts and more affluent communities benefit from a smaller number of “problem” students while the less affluent communities become the magnet for these type of problems given that financially challenged families cannot easily escape the harness of deprivation and escape to greener pastures.

Plymouth Regional High School

Classroom management of study hall was more an exercise in getting through the time with the fewest disruptions possible. Though we did have one incident where two students were sent to the office and while the administrator was conducting a fact-finding with the teacher in the hallway, one student felt it was fine for him to get up and go over to socialize during a silent study. When the teacher began to return, the student took a short cut OVER a table and was noticed by the teacher and he joined his compatriots in the office. These breaches of behavior resulted in assigned seats in the cafeteria during study hall with no socializing (or talking) at all. Not pleasant but necessary to maintain control for the last few weeks of school.

Pleasant Street Elementary School

Many of the teachers employ verbal call/repeat cues to gain student attention and compliance. Students know what is expected of them and they are reminded if they are falling short of those expectations. Social issues occurring in the classroom (frenemies) become the topic of the morning meeting and the teacher elicits a classroom pact to not have “frenemies” or “boy/girlfriends” in this class.

Woodland Heights Elementary School

Younger grades do much more with verbal call/repeat cues or using song to signal transitions. This school has embraced “Responsive Classroom” with many teachers attending trainings last summer and many more attending in the next few months. I observed a fourth grade classroom taking a non-negotiables math test. The teacher was almost constantly moving around monitoring student progress and anxiety levels, giving a reassuring pat on the back or “you can do it-just do your best”, or helping read the problem or answer questions. Several students had moments of extreme frustration but with reassurance, they were able to pull things together and complete their test with a sense of accomplishment.

**Questioning Skills:**

Gilford Middle School

In the 6th grade math class that I observed, the teacher was reinforcing using geometric formulas during the lesson. She began with reviewing the strategy for solving problems (FSSL – formula, substitute, solve, label) and then the relevant formulas that would be used. These formulas were then written by the students on the tops of their papers for reference. After refreshing this information in their short-term memory, they opened the textbooks and prepared their papers for the work ahead (putting heading on paper, determining which problems they would be doing.) The teacher then used tangrams or shapes to help demonstrate how the formulas work (and show proof) and how you can get from one that you know to another that you may have forgotten. The class then proceeded to the first 4 together making sure that one of each kind was done together so they had an example to refer back to when completing the rest. This teacher used a lot of student interaction during this process:

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Teacher question | Student response | What is written on board after exchange |
| What is our first step in our process? | Write the formula |  |
| What are we looking for? | Area | a |
| What do we write now? | Equals | a = |
| What is the first part of the formula? | ½ | a = ½ |
| Next comes? | Base | a = ½ b |
| And finally? | Height | a = ½ bh |
| What is our next step in our process? | Substitute | a = ½ bh |
| What can we substitute first? | Height is 33 | a = ½ b(33) |
| What can we substitute next? | Base is 84 | a = ½ (84)(33) |
| What is the next step in our process? | Solve | a = ½ (84)(33) |
| What should we do first? | ½ of 84 equals 42 | a = (42)(33) |
| And that leaves 42x33 – Before we finish solving this problem can someone tell me what the final step in our process is? | Label | a = (42)(33) |
| What label should we use? | cm2 | a = (42)(33) cm2 |
| I want everyone to finish the problem making sure you include your label and then raise your hand to have your answer checked. | | |

After answers are checked students circulate to check the rest of the row or student behind them. While this process did take a fair amount of time, it also involved over half the class and had opportunities for students of every level to participate. This procedure was followed for the other 3 problems that were done together as a class. Through this process, the teacher was providing the opportunity for students to practice the skills and steps needed for success on each problem and also for solving mathematical equations in general.

In the 5th grade math class, the teacher guided students in creating an interactive journal entry related to division of decimals. Students were expected to independently get journals out, gather materials, glue in the printed information, return materials, and begin reading the new information. After everyone had completed these steps, the teacher had all students follow along and repeat the steps of the process for each element of the problem. Steps were divide to get digit for dividend, multiply digit by divisor and subtract from quotient, take 2 seconds to make sure that the remainder is less than the divisor (if not go back and change the digit in the dividend and redo the process) before bringing down the next digit from the quotient. The teacher was stressing two points during the operations: making reasonable estimates of the dividend parts and taking 2 seconds between digits to check that the estimate was correct. Once they went through the first example as a class, there were other problems to try and as students finished they would have their worked checked and then would help others. Not helping others after you finish is considered a refusal to work and incurs consequences such as being written up and sent out of the room. This peer checking serves multiple purposes: teacher can see how many kids have finished the work, students get some moving around time with a purpose, and students have something to focus on while they wait for everyone to finish. I was impressed that this teacher recognized that the last students to finish had not left their seats during the activity and she offered them the opportunity to get up and move around before everyone returned to the next problem.

In the 6th grade Science class the questioning was quite different. There were many more yes/no or one right answer questions so students were not as engaged. He did do a pair/share activity but the preparation seemed to leave the students still a bit unsure about what they were supposed to do or what the answers were supposed to be. After the more mundane basic information was provided, students were invited to participate in a periodic table game where they would identify the element and atomic weight when given the elemental symbol. There was little sense of teams and everyone just wanted to it to be their turn all the time. I sensed some disorganization as the teacher was looking at the chart to pick the symbols which took time away from the game and added to the distraction of the students. I used this lesson as a model in my lesson plans and modified it in a way that I felt would engage and excite the students to pay attention and participate.

In the World Languages classes, I felt that a cloze study guide might have been more beneficial than just having students take notes since many of the place names had unfamiliar spellings and students got lost along the way. It might also serve as a kind of itinerary of their tour of the country since they would be following along with the study guide and be able to see where they had been and where they had left to go. Being an introduction course and in the first couple meeting of the session, questioning was very vague and used to guide writing related to the video. Questions included: Where would you like to visit in France? What would you like to do from the video? Followed by the direction to write at least one paragraph about your answer and why you chose what you did.

Plymouth Regional High School

Any questioning that occurred during this observation were generally behavior management type questions such as students wanting to leave for various reasons or the teacher asking particular students to recite what the expectations of study hall behavior were.

Pleasant Street Elementary School

The big questioning this day was in the 2nd grade classroom during their morning meeting as the issue of “frenemies” came up. The teacher began the discussion by asking one of the students who was using the phrase to define the word and share the context where she had learned it. It was then pointed out that the definition was not accurate and that the phrase did not encourage positive interactions and that it would be better to leave that word alone and simply focus on having friends and being positive with others.

I did witness a take-home reading sharing session and found that a sharing guide might make this a more useful exercise. Students shared the title of their book and some things about it but they were a bit choppy with their information. Being that it is the end of the year, I would think that this sharing would be better developed than what I witnessed. My sharing guide would include reminders to pick one picture to share, one or two facts to share, and what you want to learn more about so the students were not paging back and forth through the book trying to share everything. Also, each book had more than one person reading/sharing it so it was difficult if one person had already shared a lot about the book as there were fewer interesting things to share then.

Woodland Heights Elementary School

At Woodland Heights Elementary School, many of the activities did not involve direct questioning that I could observe and comment on, though in one 1st grade classroom, they did have a story related to the science unit – Plants – that they were studying and then the teacher did have the students name the parts of the plants and then help label a picture the teacher drew referencing the nonfiction story they had just listened too. This built the foundation for them to independently cut/glue the labels to the picture of the parts of the plants which they then were able to color before returning to circle for a fiction story related to the plants topic. Much of the teacher’s questioning outside of that particular frame of time revolved around trying to get difficult students to take ownership of their actions and consequences in an effort to avoid having them removed from the room.

**Conclusion:**

Throughout my time in education, I have become sharply aware of the fact my ideas of what would work in a situation are no more correct than those being tried by every teacher in the trenches. The important thing is to take the opportunities to network with others and try to have someone record you during teaching so you can observe yourself to see where you can make changes and where things are working especially well. Students are not robots or inanimate objects and every plan will not work equally well for every student or even every time for the same student so it is important to be aware of the environmental factors within your control and also understand the influence of factors outside your control. The best advice is to just do what feels the best for you and your students but never think that nothing can be added or changed to make things work better. I did not address planning and preparation in particular but I know that my observations would have been immensely different had I done them at the start of school before routines were put in place and firmly imbedded in the student behaviors. I witnessed assessments being taken with early completers confidently moving to the next assignment because they had been taught what to do throughout the year and watching classes moving through centers and math games was proof that teachers had been planning and preparing their students as independent learners. I have made many pages of notes of things that I liked and want to replicate in my own classroom as well as things I want to remember not to do ever! Hopefully, someday I will have a college student observe me in action and find it to be an inspiring experience.