

**INSPIRATION IN EDUCATION:
AN INTERVIEW WITH A TEACHER/ADMINISTRATOR SUPPORTING STUDENTS
WITH DISABILITIES IN A NON-PUBLIC AGENCY**

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SPED 730: Characteristics, Methods, and Assessment Introduction to Struggling Learners &
Students with High-Incidence Disabilities

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Introduction:

The field of education for students with disabilities is a profoundly impactful and rewarding area that requires dedication, creativity, and resilience. Educators and administrators who work closely with this population serve as advocates and champions, ensuring equitable opportunities and fostering student success. This paper focuses on an interview with Ms. Ashley Dorr, an educator and administrator working in a middle school and high school setting through a Non-Public Agency, which serves a specific demographic of the student population that struggles with behaviors, with many also diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder, and the co-morbidities which come with ASD. Ms. Dorr's career and leadership embody the qualities of an exceptional educator, making her an inspirational figure for aspiring professionals in this field. The insights from her experiences highlight the challenges, strategies, and successes of working with individuals with disabilities and underscore her role as a mentor and advocate for such students.

Background of Ms. Ashley Dorr:

Ms. Ashley Dorr currently serves as a titled Special Education Teacher in a leadership capacity as a Programs Manager for Embrace Learning Institute, that coincides with an administrative role for a Non-Public Agency that collaborates with multiple local school districts in Western Washington, to provide tailored educational support for students with disabilities, including students with autism and co-morbidities that also include behavioral challenges. Her current caseload comprises of 25 students, from whom she drafts IEPs, sets up meetings with their individual team by district, and for whom she works closely with both teachers and behavioral support staff. She also manages several administrative responsibilities, including the implementation of structure which correlates with each student's IEP goals, the creation and

implementation of curriculum when needed, to ensure each student's program is running smoothly and efficiently. With over 15 years of experience in special education, she has worked in various capacities, including as a classroom teacher, behavior interventionist, and program coordinator. Ms. Dorr holds a master's degree in special education and multiple certifications, including in Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) and Assistive Technology.

Ms. Dorr said that from an early age she was inspired to get into education as a career. She taught in the general education setting for her first 6 years, and after those years, "she knew she wanted something more." She stated that she "was always drawn to the students in her classes that had the highest behaviors, and that she always knew she had whatever they needed, and that she could help them." Those were the interactions that prompted her to switch to special education.

Her journey into special education began with a passion for understanding diverse learning needs and advocating for equity. Early in her career, Ms. Dorr encountered a student with significant behavioral challenges who had been underserved in the traditional public school system. Witnessing the student's transformation through individualized interventions solidified her commitment to this field. Today, she continues to lead with a student-centered approach, focusing on empowering her students and fostering inclusive practices.

Defining Success for Students with Disabilities and Behavioral Challenges:

When asked how she defines success for students with disabilities, Ms. Dorr emphasized the importance of holistic growth. "Success isn't just about grades or academic milestones," she explained. "It's about equipping students with the skills they need to navigate life confidently and independently." She recounted a story about a high school student with autism who initially struggled with social interactions. Through targeted social skills training and opportunities to

practice in real-world settings, the student gained the confidence to participate in a school talent show and later secured a part-time job.

For Ms. Dorr, success also involves fostering a sense of belonging. She works tirelessly to ensure that her students feel valued and included, both within their classrooms and the broader school community. She believes that when students are supported socially and emotionally, academic growth naturally follows. She stated that what she finds most rewarding “is seeing the children grow and make progress” while she struggles with the challenge of feeling like she wants to do more for her students but cannot due to circumstances outside of her control (such as home life).

Strategies for Inclusion and Engagement:

Ms. Dorr’s approach to inclusion centers on collaboration and innovation. She works closely with general education teachers, paraprofessionals, and families to create personalized learning plans that address each student’s unique strengths and challenges. “Collaboration is key,” she noted. “It takes a team to build an environment where every student can thrive.” One of her most impactful strategies is the use of assistive technology to bridge learning gaps. She shared an example of a middle school student with dysgraphia who struggled with written assignments. By introducing speech-to-text software and digital graphic organizers, the student was able to express ideas more effectively and participate fully in class activities.

In addition to technology, Ms. Dorr incorporates Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles into her practice. This framework allows her to design lessons that are accessible and engaging for all students, regardless of their abilities. She also places a strong emphasis on building positive relationships, as she believes that trust is the foundation of effective teaching and learning. She ensures that she can meet all of the needs of her students, especially those with

diverse disabilities by getting to know each of her students and “learning what works for them.” Once she understands the needs of her students, she ensures that she is able to teach at their individual level while also accommodating their behavioral needs. She stated that “the most important thing is getting to know each student both academically and behaviorally.”

Challenges and Solutions:

Like many educators in special education, Ms. Dorr faces significant challenges in her role. One of the most persistent issues is the lack of resources and funding for specialized programs. “It can be frustrating to see the potential in a student but not have the tools or personnel to fully support them,” she admitted. To address this, she has become adept at seeking grants and partnerships to secure additional resources for her students.

Another challenge is managing the emotional toll of working with students who face complex and often heartbreaking circumstances. Ms. Dorr copes by focusing on the progress her students make, no matter how small, and by leaning on a network of supportive colleagues. She also practices self-care, including mindfulness and regular professional development, to maintain her resilience and enthusiasm.

She stated that “a typical day incorporates overseeing each program at multiple locations, and she does so by working closely with the teaching assistants (classroom teachers) and behavior support staff.” This is necessary “to ensure each program is running efficiently, and she is in frequent communication with various school districts and families constantly, while also spending a large amount of time planning for various activities and ensuring logistics at each site are running smoothly.”

She balances the need for individualized instruction with maintaining group learning experiences by “finding students who can work together, and then she creates rotations that work for each student group.” She further added that “knowing that you will never sit down helps.” She recognizes that the delegation of work is imperative to success, and that “working in special education requires a team.”

Advice for Aspiring Educators:

When asked what advice she would give to those entering the field, Ms. Dorr emphasized the importance of adaptability and a growth mindset. “Every day is different, and every student is unique. Be prepared to learn as much from your students as they learn from you,” she said. She also encouraged aspiring educators to seek out mentors and to never stop seeking new knowledge. “This field is constantly evolving, and staying informed is essential for providing the best support possible.”

Ms. Dorr highlighted the value of empathy and patience, noting that progress often takes time. “Celebrate the small victories,” she advised. “Sometimes, it’s the tiniest steps that lead to the biggest breakthroughs.”

Impact on the Author

On October 15, 2024, I retired from teaching. After 6-years of teaching in public schools, in multiple districts, beginning in a paraeducator role, most of which was in special education and EBD, moving on to general education and then focusing solely on special education before leaving the career field, I found too many failures and a lack of support from administrators and an us vs them mentality that existed between educators and administrators, that soured my vision for my students and impacted every possible avenue of success for them. I found Embrace

Learning Institute by a twist of fate and found a renewed drive to pursue my passion for working with students struggling with academics due to behaviors and disabilities. My interview with Ms. Dorr has been profoundly inspiring and has reinforced my commitment to pursuing a career in special education. Her dedication to her students and her innovative approaches to teaching have provided me with a clear vision of the kind of educator and leader I aspire to be. I look forward to my upcoming practicum under her supervision.

One of the most impactful lessons I learned from Ms. Dorr is the importance of seeing each student as an individual with unique potential. Her ability to tailor her strategies to meet diverse needs has encouraged me to prioritize creativity and flexibility in my future practice. I am particularly inspired by her use of assistive technology and UDL principles, which I plan to incorporate into my own teaching.

Ms. Dorr's leadership as an administrator has also left a lasting impression on me. Her emphasis on collaboration and her efforts to build a supportive team environment align with my own values. I hope to emulate her ability to inspire and empower others, both students and colleagues, in my future career.

Conclusion

Ms. Ashley Dorr's work as an educator and administrator exemplifies the transformative power of special education. Her commitment to fostering inclusion, her innovative teaching strategies, and her resilience in the face of challenges make her a true inspiration. Through her leadership, she has not only changed the lives of countless students with disabilities but also set a standard of excellence for those who aspire to follow in her footsteps.

This interview has deepened my understanding of the complexities and rewards of working with individuals with disabilities. It has also reinforced my belief in the importance of

mentorship and continuous growth. As I move forward in my journey as an educator, I will carry with me the lessons and inspiration gained from Ms. Dorr's example, striving to create the same positive impact she has achieved in her career.

Interview Questions:

1. Can you describe your current role and responsibilities as a special education teacher?

- My current role is titled Special Education Teacher and Programs Manager for Embrace Learning Institute, which is an NPA in Washington State. In my role, I have 25 students on my caseload. I draft IEPs for each student, set up meetings, and work closely with teachers and behavior support staff. I also have various administrative responsibilities here at ELI. In my role, I provide structure and work in relation to IEP goals, help plan coursework when needed and help to ensure each child's program is running smoothly and efficiently.

2. What inspired you to pursue a career in special education, and how did you arrive at your current position?

- Ever since I was young, I knew I wanted to get into education. I taught in the general education setting for my first 6 years, and after those years, I knew I wanted something more. I was always drawn to the kiddos in my classes that had the highest behaviors. I just always knew I had whatever they needed, and I knew I could help. So, I made the switch to special education, and this is where I see myself for the long haul.

3. What do you find most rewarding and most challenging about your work?

- What I find most rewarding is seeing the children grow and make progress. The most challenging piece is feeling like you want to do more for a kiddo, but you cannot due to outside school circumstances.

4. How do you ensure that you meet the needs of all your learners, especially those with diverse disabilities?

- I get to know each of my students and learn what works for them. From there, I make sure I am teaching to their level and their behavioral needs. The most important thing I do is truly get to know what each child needs academically and/or behaviorally.

5. What does a typical day look like for you in your classroom or program?

- A typical day is overseeing each program. I do this by working closely with the TA's and behavior support staff. To ensure each program is running efficiently, I am in frequent communication with various school districts and families. I also spend time planning for various activities and ensuring logistics at each site are running smoothly.

6. What is your teaching philosophy when it comes to supporting students with disabilities?

- My teaching philosophy when it comes to supporting students with disabilities is simply to learn to understand each kiddo. I want to know anything and everything I can to create a program

that will work for each student individually. I am also very big on relationships. I learn to trust and love each student as I would hope they would do that for me. Building positive and impactful relationships is the most important piece to teaching, in my opinion.

7. How do you balance the need for individualized instruction with maintaining group learning experiences?

- Learning and finding students who can work together, and then create rotations has worked best for me. Also, knowing that you will never sit down helps. Delegating work is also something that is needed. Working in special education requires a team.

8. What specific instructional strategies have you found to be most effective for students with significant learning challenges?

- active learning, drills, engaging students in any way I can, and 1:1 learning

9. How do you incorporate Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles into your teaching?

- I learn each of my students' strengths and weaknesses, I teach in a variety of ways, offer choices of how my students would like to answer various topics, I engage with them like typical human beings- I am kind and supportive, and I use a lot of expression.

10. How do you ensure that students feel valued and included in the school community?

- By loving them and showing them every day that I not only care about them, but that I show up for them. I interact with them, play their games, talk about their interests, and I simply listen and learn from them.

11. What are some behavioral strategies you use to support students with challenging behaviors?

- Behavioral strategies I use include remaining calm and showing zero emotion during moments with challenging behaviors, use positive phrases (do this, show me this), refrain from using words like stop or don't, and I use verbal de-escalation techniques. Listening and understanding works.

12. Can you share an example of a particularly effective intervention or program you've implemented?

- Rotation stations and independent folders work to match current levels. Meeting and working with students individually or in a very small group setting works best. Also, removing them from their current environment. If there is another space to use that is unknown or unnatural to the student, I try that. An example would be going outside.

13. How do you collect and use data to guide your instructional and behavioral practices?

- I collect data using running documents for IEP goal work. There is daily, weekly, and monthly data taken on behavior and academics. Each goal is assessed individually and meticulously.

14. How do you teach and reinforce social-emotional skills for students with disabilities?

- Connecting with students is important. They need to know and trust that you hear them and understand them. When I teach SEL, I first teach its importance.

15. How do you adapt your instructional materials and methods for students with significant communication or sensory needs?

- Change the assignment to match their levels. I read more, I speak more, they listen, provide different objects for sensory to match lesson

16. How do you collaborate with general education teachers to support inclusion?

- I collaborate with general education teachers as much as possible. This could be done on their breaks, before and after school, and during various meetings. I learn from each teacher and see how I can support them as well. Again, building strong relationships, because we are all on the same team- wanting to see the success of the student.

17. What is your approach to working with related service providers (e.g., speech therapists, occupational therapists)?

- Again, reaching them whenever and however that works for them. I communicate with everyone and offer my services and time as a support.

18. How do you build strong, trusting relationships with parents or caregivers?

- I build trusting relationships by engaging with them and showing them that I care about their child.

19. How do you handle disagreements with colleagues, parents, or administrators about a student's program or needs?

- Talking it out and learning why they are feeling the way they are feeling. I also ask questions and learn how I can be better in various situations.

20. What strategies do you use to stay informed about the latest research, tools, and best practices in special education?

- I follow helpful sites online, I use professional development opportunities, talk with staff and friends in the related field, and research about best practices and what works best in this field.