

APEEC Final Report

Hana Lone

Texas Woman's University

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Dr. Peggy Lisenbee

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Introduction

The Assessment of Practices in Early Elementary Classrooms, also known as APEEC, was created to evaluate and measure practices within a classroom setting (Hemmeter et al., 2001). Through in-class observations and a subsequent teacher interview, APEEC allows for a comprehensive review of classroom setting, climate, and teaching methods. This assessment can be used to gain insight into the overall effectiveness of a classroom and its impact on the children within it.

In addition to the fifteen hours of in-class observation for the individual child, I conducted APEEC observations and assessments in Ms. Russo's class for a total of five hours. A teacher interview and a child portfolio review were included within this timeframe. Conducting APEEC, in-class observations, a teacher interview, and a student portfolio review allowed me to gain a more comprehensive understanding of Ms. Russo, her classroom, and the child I observed.

Observation of Environment, Group Interaction, and Teaching Practices

From November 15th to November 17th, I spent 5 hours evaluating the criteria provided by APEEC. My assessment was conducted in Ms. Russo's second-grade classroom at Shepard Elementary School. There are 23 students in her class. The standard schedule for Ms. Russo's class begins with the morning announcements followed by a bathroom break, snack time, and brain break. Next, the students have their reading and language arts block from 8:45 AM until 10:30 AM. Within this time frame, the students have an additional bathroom break and brain break. For about 30 minutes until recess, the students watch a video for I&I, or 'Innovation and Inquiry'. The students then clean and pack up for recess and lunch, followed by specials. Specials rotate throughout the week between physical education, art, and music. At 1:00 PM,

students begin the math block starting with their warmup and independent work. At 2:30 PM, the students start cleaning up the room and get their backpacks for 2:45 PM dismissal.

Physical Environment

Based on my observations of the physical environment, Ms. Russo's classroom totaled a score of 24/28. The evaluation demonstrated notable strengths in the availability of child-friendly materials and resources available to all students every day. All necessary materials are at a child's reach for their use, including headphones, supply buckets, whiteboards and markers, a gratitude jar on the whiteboard, and books. All the classroom items are child-sized including chairs, stools, and scoop rockers. Furthermore, while every other aspect of classroom health and safety was in place, it was observed that during clean-up at the end of the day, the students used Clorox wipes to clean their desks. During my assessment, the counselor intervened and made them put the wipes away, expressing her concerns about using products with bleach. The students replied that they always use the wipes for end-of-day cleanup with permission from Ms. Russo. The daily use of Clorox wipes may be an area of concern regarding potential exposure to harmful chemicals, leading to a deduction of one point in that category.

Instructional Context

Concerning the instructional context, Ms. Russo's classroom was rated a total score of 38/42. Various modes of instruction were observed within Ms. Russo's classroom daily including direct instruction, whole group work, independent work, Chromebook activities, and group discussion. She also allocated additional time to support smaller groups as they complete independent work. Moreover, my observations lead me to believe that the incorporation of subjects such as science and social studies tends to be somewhat passive, relying heavily on videos rather than hands-on learning during the I&I block.

Social Context

The social context of Ms. Russo's classroom was given a cumulative score of 36/42.

Children with special needs or accommodations complete the same activities and assignments as their peers. In addition to Ms. Russo's support at the small group table, children are offered accommodations to support their learning such as whiteboards, dry erase markers, and counting sheets. Children within the Individualized Education Program are also given support throughout the day from other team members. A significant deficit, however, was observed in classroom diversity. Only a few diversity-themed books can be found in the class library. Additionally, there are no diversity appreciation posters or decorations in the classroom, and no daily activities centered around diversity appreciation were observed.

Summary

As a result of the cumulative score of all three areas, Ms. Russo's classroom earned a score of 5.5/7 per APEEC criteria. The instructional context received the highest overall score, surpassing the physical and social contexts. However, each category demonstrated both strengths and areas for growth.

Through my assessments, I was able to gain a comprehensive view of each context within the classroom. While the physical context of the classroom had accessible material and furniture, it featured a limited display of multidimensional and colorful completed work. Furthermore, although there were no partitioned sections within the classroom such as an enclosed library area, Ms. Russo's classroom maintained an open and organized layout. Regarding the instructional context, many points were earned due to the variety of instructional methods to support learning within the curriculum. Primary subjects such as mathematics and language arts are covered for substantial blocks of time daily. The subjects of social studies and science rotate within the I&I block but are covered for only 30-minute periods each day. Finally, the social context was observed to support autonomy and decision-making for all children. Family

involvement was also observed within the classroom context through initiatives such as ‘Patriot Dads’ and reading groups led by parent volunteers.

Follow-up Teacher Interview

I interviewed Ms. Russo on November 30th from 12:00 PM until 12:30 PM at Shepard Elementary School in her classroom. Ms. Russo is from southern Florida and was influenced by her father, who served as both a teacher and a coach. Taking inspiration from her father, Ms. Russo pursued a bachelor’s degree in elementary education at Florida State University with a minor in psychology. Ms. Russo has served as both a teacher and a coach for eight years but has only been teaching in Texas for two years. In Florida, she taught many different grade levels including 3rd and 4th grade, and served as a team leader for many years before moving to Texas.

My strategy for conducting the interview involved an informal and unstructured approach. To do this, I utilized the application ‘Otter’ to record and transcribe our conversation. Through this interview, I sought to gain more insight about Ms. Russo’s background and teaching philosophy as well as to address the remaining interview questions from the APEEC criteria. To prepare for the interview, I created a set of guiding questions on Google Docs. I asked Ms. Russo about her upbringing, degrees earned, and years of teaching experience. Concerning APEEC, I asked questions about classroom displays, first aid and safety measures, inclusion of fine arts, topics related to diversity, IEP objectives, working with the educational team, parent involvement, and conferences. I also included questions regarding Ms. Russo’s teaching philosophy, as well as her strengths and weaknesses as a teacher.

Based on my interview with Ms. Russo, I was able to gain a more in-depth perspective of her essence as both an individual and an educator. Ms. Russo’s teaching philosophy is aligned with her values as a coach and former athlete, stressing the importance of teamwork for success.

This idea of a team extends to her relationship with parents as well, as she expects them to play an active role in helping their child towards achievement.

The interview with Ms. Russo also provided additional context for the APEEC observations. For instance, her explanation of her strengths and weaknesses provided insight into potential reasons for the occasional tension in the observed teacher-child discourse. Ms. Russo described that managing a challenging classroom, which includes eight children with learning deficits or special needs, can often be a source of frustration for her. She said that she tends to take the emotional baggage of work home with her and that she is actively looking for more effective classroom management strategies. However, Ms. Russo emphasized her continuous commitment to showing each child that they are loved, valued, and supported beyond the mere school day.

Regarding the observed lack of diversity within the curriculum, Ms. Russo clarified that she starts the school year discussing diversity concerning culture, socioeconomic status, home lives, and so on. She explained that lessons featuring diversity are not extensively integrated within the curriculum, but that she addresses it naturally as topics come up in conversation or while reading. If I could ask one more question, I would ask Ms. Russo what she would change, if anything, regarding the curriculum implementation or the structure of her classroom.

Furthermore, an issue that arose during the interview was that my recording and transcription were cut off halfway through. In the future, I may opt to use voice memos while taking handwritten notes instead. Nonetheless, this interview provided clarification regarding my APEEC assessment and scoring, offering me a more well-rounded perspective of Ms. Russo and her classroom. This demonstrated to me the benefits of utilizing both classroom assessments, such as APEEC, and teacher interviews to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the classroom.

Portfolio Review

The student portfolio for Plano ISD is used for the overall progress monitoring of each student throughout the year, following TEKS criteria. The portfolios and student data are available through Edugence. Second-grade portfolios contain data from three main progress monitoring tools: MAP math, MAP reading, mCLASS, and reading Running Records. Ms. Russo also collects data through unit assessments, small group instruction, and other classroom assignments to determine their overall academic level in her classroom.

Social-emotional and communication development is accounted for within the portfolio through the Citizenship and Work Habits section. This section includes sub-categories such as: listening attentively, following directions, exhibiting self-control, and working cooperatively with others. This portion of the portfolio provides insight into the daily social behaviors of each student. In this area, Ian's strengths included completing work on time, following directions, and using materials appropriately.

Other elements of a child's progress regarding physical development, social-emotional development, language and communication development, and cognitive development are not specifically documented in the Edugence Portfolio. Ms. Russo explained that each child's physical development is tracked by the school nurse, while other areas are primarily assessed and monitored through informal observations in the classroom. This includes how students interact with their peers, their teachers, and other staff members, as well as how they handle adversity. Some students, such as Ian, are on a Student Support Plan which allows for extra evaluation in these areas. Moreover, cognition is not explicitly noted in the portfolio. I believe this is because there is not one way to categorize cognition, rather, it is assessed through many different areas of informal and formal assessment.

The portfolio primarily focuses on academic content related to reading, writing, and mathematics. In the reading sections of the portfolio, the three beginning standards that are

assessed pertain to developing and sustaining foundational skills. Although this does not include print awareness, letter knowledge, or vocabulary, it does include decoding words and identifying high-frequency words. According to the data from the beginning-of-year evaluations, Ian is reading at a level I. His reading skills were generally scored as ‘adequate’ indicating that skills such as comprehension and independent reading are slightly below grade level. In areas such as decoding, phonics, foundational skills, high-frequency words, and multisyllabic words, however, Ian has demonstrated mastery.

The mathematics area of the portfolio is aligned with the Texas TEKS that fall under the categories of Number and Operations, Algebraic Reasoning, Geometry and Measurement, and Data Analysis. Based on this section, I was able to see Ian’s complete mastery of the Math section of his portfolio. Moreover, areas related to science and social studies skills are found in the Innovation and Inquiry (I&I) section of the portfolio which includes eight subcategories. For example, one area within this section of the portfolio aims to assess whether children can formulate questions and seek answers related to organisms, objects, people, and their contributions. These subcategories are taught throughout the year, but Ian has demonstrated mastery of every area covered so far.

The end of the portfolio contains data related to the children’s special classes such as art, music, and physical education. While the specials teachers are expected to include their input on how the child is doing in these areas, the boxes were empty. Based on my assumptions, these areas might not be completed due to individual teachers’ failure to keep their portfolios updated. Additional information on Ian’s performance in these extracurricular activities may have provided valuable insight into his development in other areas: such as creativity, teamwork, and discipline.

According to my assessment of Ian’s portfolio, he is excelling in topics related to mathematics, science, and social studies. There is room for improvement towards mastery,

however, in subjects such as reading and writing. Based on the data from the Citizenship and Work Habits section, there is also an opportunity for Ian's growth as it relates to self-control and listening attentively.

Conclusion

While conducting my APEEC observations and assessments, the main challenge I encountered was student interruption. As I am a frequent substitute in Ms. Russo's classroom, the students often perceive me as another teacher. Another challenge was the recording cutting off during my teacher interview, which I later resolved. Nonetheless, due to the large amount of time spent in Ms. Russo's class, conducting the APEEC observation and assessment was overarchingly seamless.

Applying APEEC to Ms. Russo's classroom has heightened my awareness of the many intricate aspects that comprise student learning experiences. The physical learning environment, for instance, must be thoughtfully and flexibly constructed by educators to provide necessary support for each unique group of students. According to Jensen & McConchie (2020), three main sensory components influence attention, problem-solving, and memory in the classroom: sight, sound, and touch. Understanding how these aspects impact the central nervous system may lead to a better understanding of the existence of common classroom behaviors, such as overstimulation and lack of focus. Moreover, intentional desk arrangements and the availability of comfortable areas or stimulus shelters, for example, may create more effective spaces for children like Ian to focus, learn, and self-regulate.

Additionally, the APEEC criteria allowed me to evaluate the instructional and social contexts as they support or hinder the growing child. Assessing areas within each category, from instructional methods to diversity appreciation, allowed me to gain a comprehensive understanding of how Ms. Russo actively shapes learning experiences within her classroom. A

challenge uncovered through my observations and mentioned by Ms. Russo during the interview was teacher-child interaction. Teacher warmth, control, body language, and interaction patterns, for example, through both instructional and social discourse impact the receptiveness of children (Borich, 2014). Teacher behaviors such as scolding or screaming may trigger student negativity and rebellion, significantly influencing their desire to learn and participate in classroom activities (Miller, 2023). While they are evaluated separately, the instructional and social contexts are interconnected and can become a demotivating factor if not carefully attended to.

The portfolio review offered concrete data which resembled the findings of my previous observations and assessments. Additionally, it provided specific details related to subcategory milestones for many subjects: reading, writing, mathematics, science, and social studies. The portfolio allowed me to understand Ian's achievement level in various categories at the beginning of the school year. Using the portfolio to track development throughout the school year offers valuable and comprehensive insight for educators to monitor student progress and achievement. Accordingly, portfolios may be especially beneficial when providing information to parents regarding their child's strengths and areas for improvement.

Classroom observations and assessments serve as useful tools for educators to better understand themselves, their classroom structure, and their students. Through observation and assessment, educators can recognize what is working for their students and what is not, allowing them to better support positive development in the classroom. Such intel can also provide data for educators to track progress throughout the year, as well as a basis for recommendations or interventions. As stated by Friedman et al., (2022, p. 28) "development and learning are dynamic processes that reflect the complex interplay between a child's biological characteristics and the environment, each shaping the others as well as future patterns of growth". The information provided through student and classroom observations and assessments is crucial for cultivating enriching, supportive environments for children to flourish and learn.

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