Human Development and the School Principal:

Developmentally Appropriate Practices for Students at the Elementary Level

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My teacher license is for 5-12 social studies and virtually all my 10 years of teaching experience has been at the 9-12 high school level. I currently teach social studies in an alternative high school setting (9-12 ALC). When trying to decide whether I should observe a pre-K, elementary, or middle school level classroom, I quickly chose elementary. Pre-K was not appealing to me because I do not think that I could ever see myself working in that environment. I ruled out middle school because I have taught 7th grade US History before and felt that would not be a unique experience. Elementary was the obvious choice because as I thought back on my experiences with elementary education, I realized that outside of visiting my son's Kindergarten classroom, I have not been in an elementary classroom since I was an elementary student. The prospect of visiting an elementary classroom was like visiting a foreign country such as Scotland or Ireland; they speak the same language, but it is a completely different dialect.

My ideal principal job is at the high school level, but I would never turn down the opportunity to be a principal at an elementary school. This was a great learning experience for me, and before the observation I was hoping to learn three things: 1) What are some practical methods for creating a "classroom that opens out to the real world (literally and figuratively)" at this level (Armstrong, 2006, p. 92)? 2) How is a daily schedule for an elementary teacher arranged (i.e., when is math)? 3) How much balance should there be between the teacher directly teaching a concept vs. facilitating learning at this level?

The lesson that I observed was in a first-grade classroom and it just so happened to be the 100th day of school. The teacher is one that I know through my union activities and she is a

former teacher of the year for our district, so I knew I would be observing a wonderful classroom. The lesson is titled "100th Day STEM Challenges". The students would be separated into four different groups with each group being at a structure building station for 20 minutes. One station had the students building a bridge with wood blocks as the base and the platform of the bridge could only be a single sheet of paper. The students had to figure out how to make that piece of paper hold as much weight as possible with only a hint that said "Fold, fold, fold". After creating their bridges, they were instructed to write about what they learned, how much weight their bridge held, and to draw what they did with their piece of paper. The other three stations had students trying to build the tallest structure that they could by stacking cups, using building blocks, and connecting toothpicks and marshmallows. At each of these stations the students were supposed to measure how tall their structures were, write about what they learned, and draw the design of their structures.

Before the observation began, the teacher informed me that the students had previously learned about building structures for strength and height by looking at real world examples of buildings. They had also learned about when the Empire State Building was being constructed and how the architects were in a competition with a neighboring building to build the tallest building. The Empire State Building won by adding the spire at the top. This is a cool connection to the real world with history and architecture. The teacher noted that she hoped her students would remember the spire when they were at the cup stacking station so that they would build their structures as strong at the base as they could before going vertical. This lesson gave me a concrete example of how students can experience the real world in the classroom.

At the elementary level, Armstrong believes that the developmental focus should be on learning how the world works. He contrasts the obliviousness of young children with the

inquisitiveness of elementary age children who have "now become part of a new world that can be constructed, comprehended, and even controlled" (Armstrong, 2006, p. 94). Armstrong believes that learning about reading, writing, and math is appropriate at this age, but one of the developmentally inappropriate practices that Armstrong would classify as fitting in the category of Academic Achievement Discourse is an overemphasis on reading, writing, and math. He notes that in an elementary school in Maryland "the daily hour set aside for science and social studies has been replaced with writing for 2nd and 3rd graders" (p. 97). One of the things I hoped to learn was the daily schedule of an elementary school classroom. The classroom that I observed has a total of 75 minutes for math in the day (50 minutes in the morning and 25 minutes in the afternoon), two hours and 20 minutes for reading spread throughout the day, and just one 50-minute segment for science, social studies, or health. I did not ask the teacher, but I believe that this schedule is not by her choice but based on what the whole 1st grade team teaches. I would contend that Armstrong would say that this schedule is designed based on Academic Achievement Discourse and could result in "students who are struggling with reading…spend[ing] up to half of the entire school day studying reading" (p. 97).

Another practice that Armstrong says is developmentally inappropriate for elementary school students is scripted teaching programs such as Direct Instruction. Direct Instruction creates lessons that emphasize "small incremental progress" (2006, p. 99) and are usually "disconnected from real life" (p. 100). The third thing that I hoped to learn from this experience is how much balance should there be between the teacher directly teaching a concept vs. facilitating learning at this level? I observed that this teacher placed a lot of emphasis on facilitating learning. After the directions were given, the teacher did not tell students any methods or strategies to create taller, stronger structures. Instead, she would ask guiding

questions such as “How does this fold in your paper help your structure?” or “How wide do you think the base of your tower should be?” Asking these questions made the students think about the methods they were using and how to improve them. It created a situation that encouraged critical thinking instead of just giving the answer away.

Armstrong discusses several examples of developmentally appropriate practices for the elementary level (2006). The lesson that I observed did not have any of the in-depth examples from the book present, but I still believe that everything in that lesson was developmentally appropriate for 1st graders. My favorite example that Armstrong examined is the MicroSociety where students study traditional subjects in the morning and create their own minisociety using those skills in the afternoon. It is a great way to bring real world experiences into the classroom that is also very fun.

Observation Feedback

If I were this teacher’s principal, I would tell her that this lesson does a good job of providing a real-world experience for the students in the subjects of engineering and mathematics. The lesson touches on the multiple intelligences and interdisciplinary curriculum that Armstrong references as ways to engage children in authentic interactions with the real world (2006, p. 108). This can be seen in the connections made between the history of the construction of the Empire State Building and the strategies students implemented in constructing their own towers. Assuming that the teacher herself created the daily schedule with a massive emphasis on reading and math, I would suggest that some of the reading curriculum time be reduced to include more time for multiple intelligences curricula and other disciplines. I would also ask if the 20-minute time frame for each station was appropriate or too much time.

Not counting transition time between each station, the students spent 80 minutes on this lesson doing essentially the same thing at three of the four stations just using different materials. I think each of the stations are appropriate, but maybe 20 minutes is too long. Overall, I think that this lesson is very developmentally appropriate and shows clear real-world learning and applications. The students were learning and having fun.

References

Armstrong, T. (2006). *The best schools: How human development research should inform educational practice*. Association for Supervision Curriculum Development.