

# A Focus on Upper Elementary Teacher Preparation: Developmentally Appropriate Practice and Standards Shaping Our Programs

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This article is a call to action for elementary teacher educators. Our early childhood and middle grades colleagues made a clear case for the importance of focusing on specific developmental characteristics and family and community influences on development during the critical years they represent. A similar case has not been made for the upper elementary grades although students, teachers, teacher candidates, and teacher educators would benefit from a focus targeted to these years. This is especially critical given the changes in students' sense of accomplishment, belonging and engagement during these years and the changes that occur in their learning environments.

In the late 1990s South Carolina uncoupled its longstanding first through eighth grade certification into three developmentally discrete certifications: early childhood (pre-kindergarten through third grade), elementary (second through sixth grade) and middle school (fifth through eighth grade). This decoupling occurred at the instigation of middle school and early childhood advocates; with no advocates for elementary certification, this certification merely filled the gap between early childhood and middle grades. The change in certification levels affected teacher preparation programs in South Carolina, resulting in a need to find resources targeted to more discrete age/grade spans. This was easy for early childhood (Bredenkamp & Copple, 1997; National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2007) and middle grades (Knowles & Brown, 2000; National Middle School Association, 2005; Powell, 2005), but it was difficult to find resources targeted to the upper elementary grades. There were no textbooks or research compilations

targeting the upper elementary grades (especially third through fifth grades), but more surprising, there were no professional organizations, journals or websites specifically targeted the special needs of upper elementary students and teachers. Additionally, although considerable research takes place in upper elementary grades, no special interest groups exist within the American Educational Research Association (2009) to encourage and compile research on the upper elementary grades and no organizations for elementary teacher education faculty or future teachers exist (Finnan 2009a).

It is odd that this obviously important grade span has not spawned advocacy or watchdog organizations. It is especially odd considering the changes that occur between primary and upper elementary grades. Consider the following. High-stakes testing begins in third grade and affects all upper elementary grades. State or district mandated class size reductions typically end at

second or third grade, and many states allocate more funding for early grades and high school than for upper elementary grades. Along with larger class sizes and pressure to perform well on high-stakes tests, there are other changes that affect upper elementary children. For example, the focus of reading switches from learning to read to reading to learn; there is a clearer demarcation between content areas and less emphasis on integrated instruction. Expected to teach all core subjects as well as health, physical education, art, music, computers, upper elementary teachers' content knowledge is often stretched, especially given the "push down" of curriculum from middle school to elementary grades. In addition, students often have a more distant relationship with their teachers, especially if they move between teachers for content. Finally, their parents are often less involved in the classroom and with their homework than in the primary grades (Kennedy, 2005; Finn 2009a; Pace Marshall & Price, 2007; Valli & Buese, 2007). Given all of these changes, shouldn't teacher educators concentrate on helping teachers thrive in this environment and advocate for changes that will improve the educational experience of upper elementary children?

This article provides a framework of developmentally appropriate practice for the upper elementary grades centering on the importance of identity development during these years. Given the nature of the school experience described above and the cognitive, social, and physical changes experienced by 8-to-12-year-old children, this is a critical time to ensure that they are developing a sense that they can accomplish great things, belong in groups in which they are wanted and contributing members, and can engage in challenging and authentic work. The framework is built on three constructs of identity -- accomplishment, belonging, and engagement. Within this framework, the interplay between child development, social and cultural environmental factors, and classroom practices are described. The article relates this framework

to existing standards shaping teacher preparation and professional development, and concludes with a call for teacher educators to lead the effort to be more explicit about best practice for the upper elementary grades.

### **Developmentally Appropriate Practice for Upper Elementary Grades**

The idea of developmentally appropriate practice has a long history in early childhood education (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997) and is at the core of efforts to define best practice in middle grades (Knowles & Brown, 2000; Powell, 2005). Advocates for these age groups argue that teaching must be geared to general patterns in children's cognitive, social, and physical development as well as to their family, cultural, and community context. Obviously, children continue to develop during the upper elementary grades and family, cultural, and community influences remain important. Although considerable variation due to individual, cultural, socio-economic, and geographic differences exists, child development research identifies specific characteristics shared by most 8-to-12-year-olds (Berk, 2003; McDevitt & Ormrod, 2004; Salkind, 2004; Scales, Sesma & Bolstrom, 2004):

As learners they are:

- Concrete thinkers who can classify, serialize, predict, and generalize;
- Logical thinkers who understand conservation and can reverse operations;
- Interested in jokes and language play;
- Increasingly aware of their strengths and weaknesses as learners.

As individuals and members of society they are:

- Interested in taking increased responsibility and desire to please;

- Extremely social and interested in peer relations, especially same-sex;
- Increasingly aware of social, cultural, physical differences;
- Increasingly self-aware and self-critical, and
- Leading more complicated lives outside of school either through engaging in many outside activities and/or assuming care for siblings and household chores.

Physically they are:

- Increasingly aware of their own appearance;
- Fine tuning gross and fine motor skills, and
- In or nearing puberty.

These developmental changes, as well as the changes in school and classroom environments described above come at a time when we need to be attentive to challenges to children's identity or self-concept. Although identity development is not at the center of the definition of developmentally appropriate practice for early childhood, it is a critical issue for 8- to 12-year-olds. For children who see themselves as incapable of accomplishment, unwanted socially, or unable to engage in meaningful pursuits, these years begin a negative spiral. For example, academic and social disengagement often begins or accelerates in these years as students become more self-critical and feel pressure to perform to increasingly demanding academic standards (Jalongo, 2007; Scales, Sesma, & Bolstrom, 2004).

Experiences in school have a profound effect on students' identity development, and positive, supportive school and classroom environments nurture students, encouraging them to see themselves as successful and productive members of society. This framework for upper elementary developmentally appropriate practice builds on research on identity (Bandura, 1977; Dweck, 2006; Erikson, 1968; Spindler, 1978; Vygotsky, 1978) and is supported by research on upper elementary children (Adler & Adler, 1998;

Boocock & Scott, 2005; Collins, 1984, 2005; Cooper, Garcia Coll, Bartko, Davis & Chapman, 2005; Coyl, 2009; Dweck, 2007; McDevitt & Ormrod, 2002; Scales, Sesma & Bolstrom, 2004), the literature on best practice in upper elementary classrooms (Cohen, McLaughlin & Talbert, 1993; Darling-Hammond, 1997; Kennedy, 2005; Finnan & Swanson, 2000; Knapp et al, 1995; Newmann et al., 1996;), and analysis of the Middle Childhood Generalist criteria developed by the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, 2001).

Three components of identity -- accomplishment, belonging, and engagement, --are at the center of this conceptualization of developmentally appropriate practice. These components are highlighted because of their importance in supporting upper elementary students' learning while they grapple with important cognitive, social, and physical changes. Students need to believe that they are capable of *accomplishing* important tasks, that they feel like they *belong* within diverse social groups, and that they are capable of *engaging* in challenging and productive activities (Finnan, 2009a).

By focusing on the upper elementary years, it is clear how important these three components of identity are to keeping students on a path to success. During these years, students are beginning to compare themselves to others and they lose the "cognitive conceit" (Scales, Sesma & Bolstrom, 2004, 164) enjoyed by younger children. As they lose the sense that they are good at everything, they may begin to doubt their ability to accomplish academic and social tasks. More complicated peer relations and greater demands for responsible behavior challenge their sense of belonging. Finally, they enjoy active involvement in meaningful work, but many upper elementary students struggle to engage in lessons if they do not believe they will be successful or if they do not see relevance to their lives or interests. Each of these components and the

implications for teachers are addressed in more detail below.

### **Practice Supporting Accomplishment**

Classroom environments with the following features facilitate upper elementary students' sense of accomplishment. In these environments:

- Teachers encourage students to use their prior knowledge and skills during active knowledge construction.
- They provide opportunities for students take personal responsibility for learning and actions.
- Feedback to students reflects individually identified and paced growth and change.
- Students use their strengths and talents for the betterment of self and others.
- Their aspirations drive their current learning and goals.
- Teachers recognize and celebrate learning and growth.

A sense of accomplishment is emphasized because productive and successful people believe that they are capable of significant and meaningful accomplishments in their work, social interactions, and/or physical activities. Because school is such an important component of upper elementary students' lives, academic accomplishments are critically important at this stage in their development. During these years, the demands of school increase and grades and scores on standardized tests take on increased importance. Additionally, upper elementary children typically take pride in mastering social rules, assuming responsibility, and acting with more autonomy. Students who consistently perform below their peers, who struggle to meet expectations for social interaction, or who lack athletic prowess will struggle to develop a sense of accomplishment (Finnan, 2009a). For this reason, it is critical that teachers create classroom environments that encourage students to retain a

belief that they can accomplish even when they struggle. This is not to say that teachers set lower expectations for some students; rather that they should always give students hope and support that they will learn.

### **Practice Supporting Belonging**

Classroom environments with the following characteristics encourage students' sense of belonging.

- Everyone welcomes and respects people who are different (i.e., cultural, economic, gender, language).
- Everyone looks for the strengths in each other.
- Adults and students have the opportunity to know each other and establish caring, trusting relationships.
- Adults and students engage in discourse and interactions that are kind and considerate even when differences of opinion are expressed.
- Everyone displays behavioral self-control.
- Everyone works collaboratively and productively with one another.

Upper elementary students' sense that they are welcome and contributing members of society is also evolving during these years, and classrooms are important environments for fostering a positive sense of belonging. Where young children's sense of belonging is challenged as they learn to fit into a school environment, upper elementary children's sense of belonging is challenged as they negotiate more complex peer relations, accommodate a growing awareness of differences, and learn in classrooms with less focus on nurturing. Given their growing autonomy and involvement in extracurricular activities, they are learning to belong in multiple settings, some more inviting than others (Finnan, 2009a).

## **Practice Supporting Engagement**

Classroom environments also shape students' sense of engagement. In supportive classrooms:

- Learning is clearly connected to the outside world.
- Learning focuses on concepts and relationships within and across subjects.
- Children learn through dialogue, exchange of diverse ideas, and careful listening in a social context.
- They are encouraged to ask questions; they engage in inquiry and solve problems.
- Learning in these classrooms is engrossing; students become so engaged in what they are doing that they do not want to stop.
- These classrooms provide strategies and role models to help students continue to learn inside and outside the classroom.

The upper elementary years are a critical point when children determine if they are capable of and desire to be active participants in learning and in society. Increasingly, data point to these years as a pivotal time for struggling or socially marginal students. Especially during fourth – sixth grade, many of these students disengage and begin the downward spiral toward dropping out (Jalongo, 2007; Scales, Sesma & Bolstrom, 2004). They no longer have the confidence of young children that they are good at everything, and the demands of school, home, and even extracurricular activities mount. Positive learning environments are critical in maintaining students' belief in themselves as intellectually, socially and physically engaged.

### **Do Our Professional Standards Support Developmentally Appropriate Practice?**

Professional standards defining effective experienced elementary teachers already exist and were useful in developing the above framework for upper elementary developmentally appropriate practice. The National Board for

Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS) provides criteria that define highly effective upper elementary teachers. To acquire Middle Childhood/Generalist certification teachers must demonstrate effectiveness in relation to 11 standards. These standards are grounded in research on child development (Finnan, 2009b) and compliment the framework presented above.

Standards also guide the focus and structure of elementary teacher preparation programs. Where the NBPTS standards grew out of a concern that exceptional generalists understand the developmental and contextual influences on the children they teach, the standards guiding elementary teacher preparation programs developed within an organization with a broad mission to serve children from birth to adolescence (Association for Childhood Education International, 2007). The Association for Childhood Education International (ACEI) approves elementary programs for the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE), the largest teacher preparation accrediting organization in the United States. It is unclear how ACEI became NCATE's approval organization for elementary programs; unlike its early childhood and middle grades peer organizations (National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) and the National Middle School Association (NMSA), ACEI is not an advocacy organization for elementary teachers and students. In fact, it is often associated with early childhood because it began as an advocacy organization for the kindergarten movement in the late 1800s. Few practicing upper elementary teachers are ACEI members.

ACEI's five standards define acceptable elementary programs. The standards include: 1) understanding the learner; 2) knowing content and being able to teach in seven areas of content in elementary curriculum (reading, writing and oral language; science; mathematics; social studies; the arts; health, and physical

education); 3) instructing for integration and application, adaptation to diverse learners, encouragement of critical thinking and problem solving, active engagement, and communication and collaboration; assessing for instruction, and 5) exhibiting professionalism through professional growth, reflection and evaluation, and collaboration with families, colleagues, and community agencies (Association for Childhood Education International, 2007).

The standards recognize the importance of knowing the child, but reviews of elementary program tend to fall heavily on evidence that elementary candidates demonstrate knowledge of and ability to teach the seven distinct content areas (Standard 2). Given the press of time and resource limitations, elementary programs often emphasize teaching of content over knowledge of students, their families, and their communities. This is less true for early childhood and middle grades program accreditation. The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) reviews early childhood programs, and the National Middle School Association (NMSA) reviews middle grades programs. In both cases, these organizations advocate for a balanced focus on knowing students, family/community, content, and professional obligations. These organizations are also active advocates for young children and young adolescents and provide professional resources (e.g., journals, conferences, websites) for teachers. Their attention to the specific developmental characteristics and issues of their student populations is reflected in the focus of their standards.

Advocates for upper elementary children and teachers can learn lessons from our early childhood and middle grades colleagues on how to use professional standards to ensure developmentally appropriate practice. Because NAEYC and NMSA work closely with teachers in the field, advocate for young children and young adolescents, and approve teacher preparation programs, their influence is felt from the time

candidates begin their training through the time, as experienced teachers, they seek National Board certification. In addition, these organizations not only shape professional standards affecting preparation programs, but they offer collegial networks for teacher educators and pre-professional networks for teacher candidates.

This paper is a call to action for elementary teacher educators. Our early childhood and middle grades colleagues already made a clear case for the importance of focusing on specific developmental characteristics and family and community influences on development during the critical years they represent. A similar case has not been made for the upper elementary grades although students, teachers, teacher candidates, and teacher educators would all benefit from a focus targeted to these years. This is especially critical given the changes in students' sense of accomplishment, belonging and engagement during these years and the changes that occur in their learning environments.

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