

MA Student X
EDDA 511: Summer 2012
Eastern Mennonite University

Personal Practice Theory Statement
Sample Middle School

Section 1: Context of my Teaching

Sample Middle School is the only middle school serving LocalCity, Virginia, a small suburban town of approximately 21, 000 people. SAMPLEMIDDLESCHOOL has an enrollment of 657 students in grades 6-8. Of these, approximately 84% are white. African-Americans account for approximately 10% of the population, and Latinos make up approximately 6%. More than 60% of the students receive free- or reduced-price lunch, and there are indicators that suggest this number is rising.

I teach two sections of English 6 and one section of Honors English. In my English 6 classes, a third of the 33 students are minorities, and 3 students are learning English. Twenty of those students receive free or reduced-price lunch. 5 have ADHD but none of them has an IEP. Nearly half of my Honors English students have been identified by their elementary schools as being gifted and talented (TAG).

The primary learning needs for students in each of my two sections of English are different. A few students in Honors English have demonstrated a need for an accelerated version of our standard curriculum, while a few others have demonstrated a need to pursue certain parts of the curriculum in a deeper, more personally meaningful way. Similarly, the needs in my English 6 class vary among students. Generally, though, my students who are learning English have shown a need for acquiring cognitive academic language proficiency, and my students from low SES have shown a need for developing their literacy and thinking abstractly.

Section 2: Management Practices**Communication:**

Many educators mistakenly believe that minority families do not value education. Teachers perceive a lack of parental involvement with school officials without thinking that this

might stem from years--or generations--of alienation by that same system. Spradlin & Parsons (2008) remind us that parents' experience in school may have been one of oppression or discrimination. Therefore, they may look at the school with distrust or resistance. Additionally, schools do not always include parents as contributors to their children's schooling. This is what Spradlin & Parsons call "a restricted involvement." There are "barriers to full participation," meaning that minority parents aren't afforded opportunities to participate meaningfully as educational partners.

Nevertheless, we can empower families as essential partners. We can listen to them. We can include parents in school picnics, bowling nights, and writing workshop events, among other things.

And we can use language that is a lot more welcoming.

As an English teacher, I revel in the perfect turn of phrase. I love precise and pretty language. This language, though, can make students and families feel uncomfortable, confused, and even alienated. Family members may be acquiring English or they may be from low SES and therefore may not have not known print-rich environments or multiple registers of language.

So I plan to support any complex language and embed it in a context that is more meaningful to students and families from cultures other than mine. I want my students to feel emotionally safe, and I want their families to feel respected enough to begin working together.

Relationships and Identity:

Knowing what I now know means I need to become a different kind of teacher. I know that so many of my students--especially those from low SES, those learning English, and those from cultures other than mine--need to feel that our classroom is an emotionally safe place.

They need to feel as though it is fine to be(come) who they are. They need to have the stability in place for them to positively form their identity, which is one of the major goals of any good middle school. Therefore, in order to help students, I need to evaluate my own identity (including prejudices, biased practices, and the amount of unacknowledged white male privilege I have exploited) so that I can be responsive to the specific needs of those around me.

Even noticing that need to reevaluate my own identity is a healthy step in becoming a better, more responsive teacher. Armed with this new self-awareness, I can begin to make changes in my classroom. Specifically, I can cultivate resilience, build tolerance, and celebrate diversity (of thought, language, culture, and experience) each day. I can also be more honest and open and available for my students. Knowing that so many of my students need mentoring relationships at school will change my perception of myself from expert to assistant. The exciting part is that all of this can be particularly easy in an English/language arts classroom.

In English, we can select culturally inclusive texts that reflect a multiplicity of experience. We can offer meaningful choices in what students read and study. Also, we can use our structured time for writing to explore ourselves and share the findings with our classroom community. In essence, we can use the parts of school that can be particularly difficult for students of poverty or students learning English (namely literacy and verbal expression), and change them to be more accepting of difference and more inviting for participation.

Section 3: Responsive Instruction

SES Responsive Practice:

There is a tiny revolution in our school built upon the work of Ruby Payne. Her *Framework for Understanding Poverty* (2005), along with the information from her conferences

and workshops, have inspired a group of teachers to reevaluate their instructional methods. These teachers can build upon that work by examining the findings of Neuman (2008). Pollock (2008) advocates using a deep cultural analysis when planning for any kind of responsive instruction, and Sheets (2005) outlines an entire pedagogy for a wide range of diverse learners. Cohen (1998) though, has been the most influential for me personally. Her work on equity in the classroom is inspiring, especially because she shows how a few simple changes can become so empowering.

All of that makes the following a bit difficult to admit: I have underestimated my students of low SES. In fact, I have even blamed them and their families for their difficulties in school. I have often been frustrated when students could not intuit the abstract social nuances of our systems. I have even been angry at students for their lack of background knowledge. I hadn't given much thought to generational poverty and its effects. Reading through some of the research listed above, though, has helped me to better understand students of low SES.

I now know that students of low SES have specific needs, not just financial. For example, they may have emotional, mental, physical, or even spiritual needs (Payne 2005). In the English classroom, these needs present themselves primarily in the form of difficulty with literacy skills, vocabulary, and abstract thinking (Neuman 2008).

With all of those challenges, students may need extra support systems, and now I am finally willing to help create those supports. I know that the so-called "pedagogy of poverty"-- giving directions, monitoring seatwork, assigning and reviewing homework-- that I had previously used does not work and that students of low SES need better teaching, especially "direct instruction in higher thinking skills" (Haberman 2011). I also know that students need

relationships with role models, and assistance in understanding the hidden rules of school (Payne 2005).

Above all though, I now know that students—all students, of course, but especially those from generational poverty—need insistence, support, and high expectations (Payne 2005). They need encouragement in their development even more than they need help with classroom procedures. That means I cannot continue to underestimate my students of low SES.

It also means that I must begin to use a deeper cultural analysis, as Pollock (2008) suggests. I have to look at all of my students on a continuum of diversity. Therefore, even though I now know that students from generational poverty may share certain behaviors, I cannot look at all of them through the same lens.

What I can do is offer them choices in the engagement and expression of their learning; I can provide them with a wide scope of literacy resources that acknowledge and celebrate their culture; and most importantly, I can give them authentic affirmation. Now that I am beginning to understand my students of low SES, I can help them achieve.

Specifically, I can change my teaching in the culturally responsive ways that Sheets (2005) recommends. I can change the texts that I use so that they include multiple perspectives and are “meaningful to the experiences of our students” and “turn children back to their families for information.” I can “provide opportunities for inclusive peer relationships,” and I can “use collaborative activities more than structured, competitive cooperative learning.” Additionally, when I do ask students to participate in cooperative learning, I can make sure that those experiences are equitable, as Cohen (1998) suggests. I can allow for multiple abilities and build competence in students who may not have the cultural capital that their middle-class peers have.

So now that I understand their needs, I can begin helping students of low SES learn not only how to read and write better, but to more fully believe that they can succeed in a system that at times can seem overwhelmingly daunting.

Gifted:

In 1993, the USDOE's Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI) defined giftedness without really using the word *gifted*. Instead, not unlike Gagne (1985), they focused on talent when defining giftedness as "the potential for performing at remarkably high levels of accomplishment when compared with others of their age, experience, or environment."

Similarly, the Javits Act, which helps fund programs that seek to include students from underrepresented demographics in gifted programs, refers to high "performance capability," another term for talent. It would seem, then, that giftedness refers to a potential for high ability to perform successfully. Nevertheless, each state uses its own definition of giftedness, and researchers, teachers, and parents each seem to have a different opinion. In fact, there often seems as though there are as many ways of labeling giftedness as there are gifted children. So it is often difficult to make generalizations about gifted and talented programs.

There are a few certainties, however, and they are striking. Nationwide, TAG enrollment does not reflect the diversity of our society. Neither does the enrollment at SAMPLEMIDDLESCHOOL. Last year, only 3 of the 25 students in Honors English 6 were not white. This year, only 4 out of 39 students in Honors English 6 are not white. It is beginning to seem as though the programs that we offer at our middle school reflect distorted notions of talent and potential. Specifically, it is starting to look like we believe that the potential to perform at extraordinarily high levels is not an ability that is equally distributed among races and cultures.

That embarrasses me. In fact, I think it is shameful, and I would like to change it by finding ways of making our TAG program more equitable.

Perhaps our school uses biased assessment tools; perhaps we look for exclusive traits of giftedness; and perhaps we develop potential in a culturally limited way. Whatever the reason, the effect is seeming more certain each year: We may be especially failing our gifted students who live in poverty, our gifted students from minority cultures, and our gifted students who are learning English. We know that traits of giftedness appear across races and cultures.

Nevertheless, there are often barriers to developing that innate potential. Olszewski-Kubilius (2003) notes that “Gifted students can be disadvantaged for a variety of reasons,” chief among them being poverty (p. 307). If gifted students are living in poverty, we may be missing them when we test for recommendation into our TAG program.

Our assessment tools rely heavily on verbal ability and a wide base of background knowledge. It also includes complex (and potentially intimidating) paperwork for parents to complete. Many of our parents who speak a language other than English are unable to advocate for their children. So too are those from low SES who may not have experience in the registers of language that those questionnaires require. Additionally, those families may feel unwelcomed into the programs we offer. To compound matters, we generally test students in elementary school using a few assessment tools, and by the time those students reach middle school, we track those who are identified as gifted into our accelerated classes. According to Spradlin & Parsons (2008), this kind of tracking isolates students along lines of race or SES. In essence, it determines which children get which experiences.

The change for our school, therefore, needs to be a change in how and where we look for gifts, talents, and potential. Specifically, our TAG program should look for broader assessment

tools for enrollment. Passow and Frasier (1996) suggest that “Wide nets should be thrown to increase the power of...predictions [for potential], erring on the side of over-inclusion rather than exclusion, especially at the early stages of selection” (NP). Simply by looking for talent, we may find it, and when we find it among students from low SES, we should help them develop it.

Kitano (2003) finds that “gifted students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds would benefit from qualitatively different services designed to meet their unique needs” (p. 301).

Those services may be so different from our current one-size-fits-all approach (which relies on the myth of meritocracy) that they may need to be unique for each student. In fact, Olszewski-Kubilius (2003) recommends constructing “individual programs of support--ones that meet the specific needs of the family or child” (page 307). If we are willing to believe that differentiated instruction works for all students, then this approach may be the best logical conclusion for our underrepresented students.

Finally, Sheets (2005) reminds us that children have an endless capacity for resilience. Nevertheless, there are barriers to the expression of that ability (language acquisition, poverty, etc.). In effect, resilience does not occur on its own. But we can cultivate it. I believe that how we educate students can be every bit as important as the genetic predisposition they may have for success in school. The next step in my teaching, and in my teacher-action research, would be to begin assessing which traits of giftedness I would like to see in all of my students and to begin identifying ways in which I can foster the development of those traits.

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