

Personal Practice Theory Statement for Teaching Diverse Learners in My Classroom at

Sample Elementary School

MA Candidate #2

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Eastern Mennonite University

Context of My Teaching

School and Community Profile. I am a Math Enrichment Specialist in a small town school. My population is more like what you would find in an urban environment. The major employment in the area is agriculture and poultry processing plants. This draws many immigrant families. There is an abundance of low income housing in my school district. 85% of the students at my school qualify for free or reduced lunch. About 30% of our students hear Spanish spoken in the home. 25% are African American.

Classroom Profile. I work with the students who have the highest math ability at my school. A representative class of mine, my fifth graders, has 13 students. 9 are Low SES. 3 are African American, 3 are Hispanic. 3 are Gifted and Talented, according to my definition; they are not recognized as such by the school district. 4 have ADHD, and 2 of those have an Emotional Disability. The 3 who are Hispanic were all served by the ESL teacher in the past, they have tested out of receiving services but still have significant weaknesses when comprehending and writing academic language.

Although these students have the highest math ability at my school, I can only work with them just above grade level. While the school district would like me to be teaching them 6th grade math, I often find myself teaching them 3rd and 4th grade math because they were not taught well in those grades or they did not have the foundational skills necessary to learn that content. So I teach them 5th grade math with more mental math, number sense, and problem solving activities than they would get in the regular 5th grade classroom.

Management Practices

Communication. The work my group did on African American culture helped me see that my communication with the students' families had been hindered by my ignorance about their culture, specifically role sharing. I was annoyed when parents did not come to conferences, but sent someone else instead. Even though I learned many things from that exercise, I have much more to learn. I need to go back and read the selections on other cultures. My families are so diverse, and many are of mixed cultures, so I can not now fall into the trap of believing that I know all about them just because I read a few articles. Listening to their perspective and goals and listening to students' explanations of their choices in life will be more important than the information in the articles. I will know more of *what* to listen for: what adults are responsible for them, what their families' goals for them are, what traditions their families celebrate, what character traits their families honor.

Relationships and identity. As a specialist who sees my students for one hour per school day, it is hard for me to build relationships and foster positive identification in them. My main contribution in the past has been to talk about their futures and how what they learn in math class can help them. I talk about middle school opportunities, the choices they will make in high school, and the many ways the state of Virginia will help them pursue a college education if they work hard and invest themselves in their schoolwork.

This course and involvement with Responsive Classroom training at Wenonah have inspired me to find time outside the classroom to build relationships. I have been

assigned this year to provide supervision in the large stairwell that third through fifth graders climb each morning to the upper classrooms. In the past I would have approached this as being the “stairway police”, making sure students didn’t run or push past each other. I decided instead to use this as a relationship building time, starting with learning the students’ names. The Hispanic and African American names at my school are very tricky for me, but as I learn them and see the pleasure on the students’ faces that they are recognized, I have come to enjoy both the challenge and the relationships I’m building. I play music each morning (more discussion of this below) and use this to have mini-conversations with students as they climb the stairs. “This morning’s song is ‘Walking on Sunshine’, Daquanne! What would that look like?” “Student X, this song is called ‘Mexicali Rag’? Have you ever heard Mexican ragtime music before?” The response to my new practice has been overwhelmingly positive, both with students and the parents who occasionally join them. I see the students as individuals by using their name and they see me as an individual because of the music I select.

One continuing interaction I trace directly to this course is with a boy who I suspect has Asperger’s Syndrome. He is new to our school, having been in foster care for many years and now living at home with his mother. He is fascinated by whether I use my Macbook or my smartphone to play the music each morning, and how those devices interface with the speaker system. I have used his interest to have an extended conversation each day. I let him sit down and examine the clock on iTunes as it counts down the seconds left in the song. Behaviors like this would have irritated me and mystified me before. Now I enjoy the pleasure he gets out of them. As he joins me on the

landing, I have encouraged him to help me identify other students by name, since I know he needs practice with his social interactions.

Responsive Instruction For Students Who are Low SES

Brief Literature Review. The Center for Public Education summarized the research that identified high-performing, high-poverty schools (2007). In the context of creating a culture of high expectations and producing resilience in students, they found that teachers building close, respectful, strong, and supportive relationships with students was vital (Haberman, 1999; Borman & Rachuba 2001).

Examination of My Current Practices. I have often found building relationships difficult with my older students (5th grade) in public school. We have vastly different family backgrounds, cultures, SES level, and expectations of life. I sincerely admire my students who are seeking to escape from generational poverty and would like to use math as a way to do that, but without a trusting relationship between us, I can not always get them to see the value of the work I am asking them to do. In the past I used my high expectations to guide them, I referred often to their futures and how their hard work now and my insistence on quality will help them. Some students rose to the challenge, but others resisted either the work or the higher level thinking necessary to make true progress.

Proposed Practices. I now understand students in poverty need many affective skills built up in them before they can function at the highest level of their ability (Haberman, 2011). I need to help them build perseverance and belief. It is hard to build perseverance without hope. Since I read Jensen's description (2009) of a teacher using upbeat, positive music in the classroom to build hope in his students and forge better

relationships with them, I have wanted to explore how that could help me connect to my students. You defined giving hope as a “strength based approach” (2012). Music is definitely a strength with my students. Not only do they enjoy it, they are very physically and vocally responsive to it. Culturally, music is much more a part of their lives than it has ever been of mine.

My practice this year has been to play music in the hallway to greet students in the morning. I have selected music with positive messages. I started the year with the Olympic Theme, and as the stirring music filled the hallway, I announced to all the students that they were now entering “the stadium of learning.” The next day we had “Let’s Get Ready to Rumble”, familiar to them from their football games. I’ve played “Walking On Sunshine”, “Firework”, “Ain’t No Stopping Us Now”, and also instrumental Mexicali and bluegrass music. While this practice has been greeted warmly by all the students, I specifically target it at my fifth graders. One of them, Student X, is an African American student who is especially talented at dance. He stops on the landing each day, listens to a few bars of the song, then makes up a custom dance move. It has become a routine for his classmates to stop too, wait for this performance, and join in. This has greatly increased Student x’s social status, his feeling of belonging, and his contentment with being at our school. Four hours later, when he enters my classroom, he will often still refer to the song. Recently Student X and three of his friends entered my classroom together at 12:15, smiling and saying how happy they were to be in school. I asked why this was. The response was “I guess it started with the music on the landing this morning. It just put us in a good mood.” I have let my fifth grade students know I

will accept song suggestions from them, with the emphasis on songs that fill them with hope and make them want to push themselves to fulfill their goals.

Last year Student X was an angry young man who had moved from school to school. He was defensive and resistant to my attempts to help him as a math teacher. This year he is eager to have harder work assigned to him, he asks me questions when he doesn't understand, and he trusts me enough to tell me with tears in his eyes, "My mom wants me to go to college so I can have choices she doesn't have." I believe changing my practice to incorporate positive music led to this difference.

Responsive Teaching for Students Who Are English Language Learners

Brief Literature Reivew. The research you shared with us greatly impacted how I thought about my ELLs. The concept of CALP explained a lot about why my very bright, hard-working, no longer receiving ESL services students were still struggling with math word problems and explanations. I have to focus on comprehensible input, as that is the only way they will progress in language acquisition. (Gitsaki, 2007). Students need to be able to attempt speaking (and writing) academically in supportive, non-stressful situations (Herrell & Jordan, 2008). Word walls, words on the board they can use, putting academic vocabulary on their assignments so they can access it all help lower the stress and focus on the thinking. Teachers need to plan language objectives and provide opportunities for English interaction, supporting language development that is appropriate for their acquisition stage.

Examination of My Current Practices. For the three years I have worked with ELL students, they have been a mystery to me. I taught them in English the best I knew how, and they had to sink or swim. I never looked up their WIDA scores. I encouraged

students who had higher language skills to assist those with lesser language skills, but did no other intervention. I didn't simplify wordy assignments or think at all about how I wrote directions or what word problems I chose. I noticed repeatedly the difficulty ELLs had with interpreting word problems and writing explanations, but often thought they just hadn't read carefully enough. I remediated these issues one at a time, doing nothing to change my practice to address these weaknesses. I thought I did a great job teaching math vocabulary to all my students. But even though I built background knowledge, put each problem we discussed as a class into context, and incorporated realia or pictures or manipulatives, I still didn't see a great rise in student achievement on word problems from my ELLs. I also did not require enough writing of my students.

Proposed Practices. All of my students need help acquiring academic language, and especially using it in written explanations. I have already implemented some practice changes. I have looked up all my students' WIDA reports and analyzed how they scored in the sub-categories. I found that their math comprehension and vocabulary scores were between 50 and 75% even though they had been officially been released from the program. Their math writing scores were even lower. This gave me specific motivation to help them use math vocabulary in their sentences. I write specific words on the board they need to incorporate in their explanations. I plan to have exit slips and test questions where extra points will be given for correct usage of math language, with suggested words printed on the page. I show them one sentence with the correct vocabulary, and one without, so they see that the math words help them say much more in fewer words. For example, they can replace "*You can not divide 64 by 7 without getting a remainder because you can't multiply 7 by any number and get exactly 64*" with "*64 can not be*

*evenly divided by 7 because 64 is not a **multiple** of 7.*” I posted new vocabulary posters from VDOE that use graphic organizers, symbols, and models linked to SOL words and concepts. I encourage my ESL learners to come read test questions to me out loud, and then rephrase them in their own words so they can check whether they understand what the question is asking. If students get a word problem or written response wrong, I call them up and ask them to tell me about their thinking. This leads to either a re-wording of the question or a change in instruction to support understanding that type of question or how to handle a specific language barrier. A recent question (see Figure 1) asked students to use a simple 4 line chart and determine whether the population had increased or decreased *since* 1980. I was puzzled that some students, including my ESL students, chose decreasing. When I asked why, they said they associated the word “decreasing” with “lowest”, and they thought the question was asking them if the population *in* 1980 was the highest or lowest. It was the lowest, so they put “decreasing”. This brought about instruction in the word “since”, and the difference between charts that compare numbers at one point in time and charts that show change over time.

These interactions with students about what they are having a hard time expressing and why they are misunderstanding word problems are fascinating to me, now that I understand more about their long process of acquiring academic English. The SIOP Model and on-line resources for teaching ELLs will help me help them in this process, and I will feel satisfied that I am building in them a skill that will improve their academic performance for years to come.

The chart shows the population of Idaho every ten years since 1980. Use the chart to answer questions 12–14.

PERSONAL PRACTICE THEORY STATEMENT

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Year	Population
2010	1,567,572
2000	1,293,953
1990	1,006,749
1980	943,935

13. Has the population of Idaho been increasing since 1980 or decreasing?

Figure 1. An example of a problem that caused incorrect responses due to language confusion with ELLs in a math word problem.

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