

Psychology observation of middle school teaching



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Early Adolescent Psychology in Middle School Teaching for Current Practitioners

Observation Essay

The Paterson Public Schools District where I work is an Abbot School District that was taken over by the State of New Jersey Department of Education (“New jersey school,” 2013). Currently, Teachers and support staff are working without a new contract for over four years. My school has 97% economically disadvantaged family income levels and hence almost every student qualifies for free or highly reduced breakfast and lunch. Unfortunately, there are no after school sports programs or clubs. This lack of funds in the district has also eliminated instrumental music programs virtually district wide. Overall, this has diminished a school identity and created students that crave an output and development of their artistic and athletic talents. These are some of the underlying challenges in reflecting on my observation experience in my actual school environment. I will describe some of the communication styles, social/interpersonal behaviors, topics of discussion, language, attitudes, and clothing and personal styles of the students I observe. Explaining my observations through the lens of Erikson’s Life-Span Development Theory while considering adolescent physical, psychological, and socio-emotional development will be made.

Observations were a bit tricky to schedule, as all observations but one were completed during school instructional hours. I needed the blessing of my Vice Principal, the use of prep time, and a sub to cover for me. Actually most

faculty and staff were helpful and are used to having an observer in their environment. Staff, teachers, and School Safety personnel prepped me on the major players in their respective classes or areas of responsibilities. In addition, most teachers in my building have seen many of the students and their siblings pass from grade to grade and know their strengths, weaknesses, and personalities.

The Breakfast Observation:

This observation took place in the school Cafeteria from 7: 30 until morning assembly at 8: 15 when teachers pick-up their respective homeroom students from the auditorium. Most students walk to school so busing is not a problem for our school. Tables are separated by grade and there is a monitor close by as well as a patrolling safety officer. The school cafeteria staff plays classic R&B music in the background, which I observed a few young third graders humming along. Students line up to get their breakfast and most children devour the cereal and milk. I observed lower grade siblings sitting together while older students sat with their friends. Also observed were a few of the Latino and Middle Eastern students bringing their own ethnic breakfast fare from home to eat and even share with their friends. These students clearly exhibited Erikson's First crisis that they were confident in themselves and their identity and could share this with others (Oswalt, 2014). Also to my surprise was the amount of schoolwork that took place so early in the morning, Students were comparing their homework with their classmates. No foul language observed. The staff mentioned that breakfast is served to loyal and well-behaved students who rarely miss the best part of their day.

Music Class Observation:

This observation took place during my prep period for 45 minutes. I really had to refrain from helping the students tap out basic rhythm examples and only observe from the back of the class. I observed a student cheating and trying to copy answers from another student during a Do Now. Students were disengaged and chatty. One student asked for a Raggaeton rhythm pattern and another male student backed him up and asked the teacher to write an example on the staff on the white board. Students mentioned that they wish music class were less boring and had their music. The same student interjected and mentioned that they liked Rap music and that needed to be represented also! This exchange showed a revisionist Theory of Erikson by which the student tries different identities until he settles on one identity, in his case a Rapper or Raggaetonero (Oswalt, 2014).

The Eighth Grade Math Observation:

The Eight-grade math class lasted two whole periods, 90 minutes in length, and required a substitute to cover my class. I was looking to see the Bilingual Math class in action. A master teacher with close to twenty years in our school runs the class. The Common Core and Accountable Talk require collaborative student work so students were grouped in clusters of three or four to encourage teamwork and discussions. The downside is that they struggled to keep on task. I observed that rarely did they use math words or math vocabulary to describe how they came to a solution. This class had a high number of Spanish speakers who spoke Spanish among themselves. One student confided to me in Spanish that she did not think that the school

cared enough about Spanish speakers. I am not sure if she perceived an ethnic bias but the boys I interviewed did not perceive this (Brown 2011). I observed the girls just chatting about anything else than the class work and lack of a group leader. The challenge of having mixed level language speakers in an inclusive classroom is that many students will be left bewildered. These students tended to wait until the teacher could prompt them through one on one conferencing. I did see evidence of mastery of math facts. The same students tended to raise their hands to answer a question. I immediately could identify the class clown.

The Lunch Observation:

The lunch observation took 45 minutes. The fifth and sixth graders were observed. I guess pizza with French-cut green beans and an orange for lunch was not very popular. Most students passed and had their own packed lunch since our school publishes a monthly school lunch menu; hence, everyone knows what is on the table. Students devoured contraband chips, and the popular Takis. Lots of commotion, but students sit with their class and every table has a monitor. Lunch gets to be very loud at times with the same students joking around while the peer groups settle in.

In summary, having the opportunity to observe my students without the encumbrance of an official duty was refreshing. Actually, observations were enhanced and one could clearly see the many layers of student dynamics present and Erikson's Theories alive. One unifying factor was the distinct Latino Flavor the school has. Middle Eastern students are fully integrated and are secure because of the school district's commitment to their specific

needs. Luckily, I did not see any incident of HIB during my observations and got a good and healthy impression of the students. Even in an economically challenged district as mine, there is a still lot of learning going on.

References

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