

DOMAIN I—DESIGNING INSTRUCTION AND ASSESSMENT TO PROMOTE STUDENT LEARNING

Competency 001 The teacher understands human developmental processes and applies this knowledge to plan instruction and ongoing assessment that motivate students and are responsive to their developmental characteristics and needs.

Skill 1.1 Recognizes that positive and productive environments for middle-level students involve creating a culture of high academic expectations, equity through the learning community, and developmental responsiveness

Academic Expectations

In a document prepared for the Southern Regional Education Board, on “Strategies for Creating a Classroom Culture of High Expectations,” Myra Cloer Reynolds summarized the process necessary to meet the stated objective when she wrote, “Motivation and classroom management skills are essential to creating and sustaining an environment of high expectations and improvement in today’s schools.”

In some school systems, there are very high expectations placed on certain students and little expectation placed on others. Often, the result is predictable: you get exactly what you expect to get. And you seldom get more out of a situation or person than you are willing to put in. A teacher is expected to provide the same standards of excellence in education for all students. This standard cannot be upheld or met unless the teacher has (and conveys) high expectations for all students.

Considerable research has been done, over several decades, regarding student performance. Time and again, a direct correlation has been demonstrated between the teacher’s expectations for a particular student and that student’s academic performance. This may be unintended and subtle but the effects are manifest and measurable. For example, a teacher may not provide the fullest effort on behalf of the student when there are low expectations of success. And the student may “buy into” this evaluation of his or her potential, possibly becoming scholastically further burdened by low self-esteem. Other students, with more self-confidence in their own abilities, might still go along with this “free ride”—willing to do only what is expected of them and unwittingly allowing this disservice to hamper their academic progress.

There are a variety of ways in which a teacher can convey high expectations to students. Much has to do with the attitude of the teacher and positive interactions with the students—clearly stating expectations and reinforcing this at every opportunity.

- Notify the class of your high expectations for their academic success. Let them know that they will be able to acquire all the skills in which you will be instructing them, and you take personal responsibility and pride in their success.
- Speak to the class about the opportunity to support your goals for their success. Let them know that you appreciate having a student approach you with questions, problems or doubts about her or his performance, understanding of classwork or ability to succeed. That sort of help enables you to help them, directly, and helps you succeed as a teacher
- Never lower standards or “dilute” instruction for certain students. It is the teacher's responsibility to ascertain the means to bring the student's academic performance up to standards
- Use all forms of teacher communication with students to reinforce your high expectations for them—as a class, and especially as individuals. What we internalize as individuals, we utilize in group settings

An example of an opportunity to communicate expectations would be when writing comments on exams and papers being returned to individual students. You should provide positive reinforcement regarding the progress the student is making regarding your high expectations for his or her academic achievement. If the work, itself is below expectations—perhaps even substandard—provide positive, constructive comments about what should be done to meet your expectations. Express your confidence in the student's ability to do so. A negative comment, like a negative attitude, is unacceptable on the part of the teacher. The teacher may deem it necessary to speak one-on-one with the student, regarding his or her performance. Remember, however, no student ever feels motivated when reading the words, “see me,” on an exam or assignment.

Developmental Responsiveness

Within the school system, administrators, faculty as a whole, and the individual classroom teacher strive to develop an environment which provides for personalized support of each student's intellectual, physical, emotional, social and ethical development. Members of the faculty and staff are assigned to provide mentoring, advice and advocacy in response to the varying needs of students during their middle level educational experience. Along with in-house professionals who are prepared to meet the developmental requirements of a diverse middle level student population, many school systems provide programs and individuals who reach out to parents and families and the community, on behalf of the students.

Curriculum is developed which is socially significant and relevant to the personal interests of middle level students. Classroom teachers plan, prepare and deliver instructional modules which are directed toward specific issues of middle level childhood development (physical, intellectual, emotional, etc.) and incorporate student participation in all related discussions and activities. Wherever possible, interdisciplinary instructional modules (devised, developed and presented by teachers from different disciplines—each providing his/her own skill sets to achieve comprehensive understanding of the subjects/issues) should be employed to provide the most efficient use of faculty resources and the most effective means of introducing the students to all aspects and skills related to a subject.

Equity

Equity in the learning community addresses the following issues:

- Equal Access
- Equal Treatment
- Equal Opportunity to Learn
- Equal Outcomes

Equal Access requires that there be no impediment (physical, cultural, intellectual, social, economic, etc.) or bias which restricts some students from access which is available to others.

Equal Treatment ensures that no student is valued above or below the others. Physical, intellectual, cultural, economic or other criteria may not be applied in determining how a student is treated. Equally high academic expectations are afforded all students, with the assurance that this objective is achievable and will be supported by the teacher and the educational system.

Equal Opportunity to Learn requires that every student have equal access to all resources, physical and intellectual as well as equal instruction and support from the classroom teacher and staff.

Equal Outcomes requires that instruction and evaluation are structured to ensure all students acquire the skills being taught.

While equal treatment and equal access for all individuals is mandated under various state and federal statutes, not every issue has necessarily been considered and addressed. There can be difficulties with interpretation of these statutes. There may be inconsistencies between the letter of the law and the intent of the law. Significant differences in the implementation and conduct of policy and procedure within institutions can also hamper the effectiveness of the laws and the intent with which these statutes were created.

Equity may not be fully achieved if practices are instituted or changed, superficially, only to comply with statutory regulations rather than internalized and embraced by the entire learning community as an opportunity to improve the educational system.

In an educational environment, from the classroom throughout the entire school system, there should be no such impediments to achieving equity. The primary responsibility of the educator is to ensure that all aspects of the educational process, and all information necessary to master specified skills, are readily accessible to all students. There should be no conflict between laws mandating equity and educational philosophy. Policies, practices and procedures instituted to comply with (or surpass the requirements of) these laws support our educational objectives. By creating, internalizing and practicing the values of an academic culture with high expectations for all students and inclusion of all students in every aspect of the educational process, we provide for equity in education and fulfill our primary responsibility as educators.

Skill 1.2 Knows the rationale for appropriate middle-level education and how middle-level schools are structured to address the characteristics and needs of young adolescents

Middle-level education and the school systems which provide it, were conceived and developed specifically as a unique middle tier of education that would bridge the gap between elementary and secondary education and focus on meeting the academic and personal needs of the students in this category. Proponents and advocates for a middle school system had claimed that the existing junior high school system had failed to realize its philosophy because it simply imitated the senior high school's subject orientation, departmentalized teaching, reliance on lecture methods, sophisticated social activities, and competitive interscholastic sports. Arguing that younger children and early adolescents need more acceptance and less competition, these advocates offered alternative practices. In her publication, "Practitioner's Monograph, No. 9," professional educator, Sara Lake enumerated these alternative practices as,

- a more intimate, personal environment created by team organization and teacher advisor programs;
- interdisciplinary instruction;
- varied learning strategies to accommodate adolescent curiosity and restlessness;
- exploratory and elective programs to help expand students' horizons;
- appropriately designed co-curricular programs. Where grade organization is not as important as program quality.

Skill 1.3 Knows the typical stages of cognitive, social, physical, and emotional development of middle-level students.

The teacher has a broad knowledge and thorough understanding of the development that typically occurs during the students' current period of life. More importantly, the teacher understands how children learn best during each period of development. The most important premise of child development is that all domains of development (physical, social, and academic) are integrated. Development in each dimension is influenced by the other dimensions. Moreover, today's educator must also have a knowledge of exceptionalities and how these exceptionalities effect all domains of a child's development.

Physical Development

It is important for the teacher to be aware of the physical stage of development and how the child's physical growth and development affect the child's learning. Factors determined by the physical stage of development include: ability to sit and attend, the need for activity, the relationship between physical skills and self-esteem, and the degree to which physical involvement in an activity (as opposed to being able to understand an abstract concept) affects learning.

Cognitive (Academic) Development

Children go through patterns of learning beginning with pre-operational thought processes and move to concrete operational thoughts. Eventually they begin to acquire the mental ability to think about and solve problems in their head because they can manipulate objects symbolically. Children of most ages can use symbols such as words and numbers to represent objects and relations, but they need concrete reference points. It is essential children be encouraged to use and develop the thinking skills that they possess in solving problems that interest them. The content of the curriculum must be relevant, engaging, and meaningful to the students.

Social Development

Children progress through a variety of social stages beginning with an awareness of peers but a lack of concern for their presence. Young children engage in "parallel" activities playing alongside their peers without directly interacting with one another. During the primary years, children develop an intense interest in peers. They establish productive, positive social, and working relationships with one another. This stage of social growth continues to increase in importance throughout the child's school years including intermediate, middle school, and high school years. It is necessary for the teacher to recognize the importance of developing positive peer group relationships and to provide opportunities and support for cooperative small group projects that not only develop cognitive ability but promote peer interaction. The ability to work and relate effectively with peers is of major importance and contributes greatly to the child's sense of competence.

In order to develop this sense of competence, children need to be successful in acquiring the knowledge and skills recognized by our culture as important, especially those skills which promote academic achievement.

Skill 1.4 Recognizes the wide range of individual developmental differences that characterizes middle-level students and the implications of this developmental variation for instructional planning.

Knowledge of age-appropriate expectations is fundamental to the teacher's positive relationship with students and effective instructional strategies. Equally important is the knowledge of what is individually appropriate for the specific children in a classroom. Developmentally oriented teachers approach classroom groups and individual students with a respect for their emerging capabilities. Developmentalists recognize that kids grow in common patterns, but at different rates which usually cannot be accelerated by adult pressure or input. Developmentally oriented teachers know that variance in the school performance of different children often results from differences in their general growth. With the establishment of inclusionary classes throughout the schools, it is vital for all teachers to know the characteristics of students' exceptionalities and their implications on learning.

The effective teacher is cognizant of students' individual learning styles and human growth and development theory and applies these principles in the selection and implementation of appropriate instructional activities. In regards to the identification and implementation of appropriate learning activities, effective teachers select and implement instructional activities consistent with principles of human growth and development theory.

Learning activities selected for younger students (below age eight) should focus on short time frames in highly simplified form. The nature of the activity and the content in which the activity is presented affects the approach that the students will take in processing the information. Younger children tend to process information at a slower rate than older children (age eight and older).

On the other hand, when selecting and implementing learning activities for older children, teachers should focus on more complex ideas as older students are capable of understanding more complex instructional activities. Moreover, effective teachers maintain a clear understanding of the developmental appropriateness of activities selected for providing educational instructions to students and select and present these activities in a manner consistent with the level of readiness of his/her students.

The effective teacher takes care to select appropriate activities and classroom situations in which learning is optimized. The classroom teacher should manipulate instructional activities and classroom conditions in a manner that enhances group and individual learning opportunities.

For example, the classroom teacher can organize group learning activities in which students are placed in a situation in which cooperation, sharing ideas, and discussion occurs. Cooperative learning activities can assist students in learning to collaborate and share personal and cultural ideas and values in a classroom learning environment.

The effective teacher selects learning activities based on specific learning objectives. Ideally, teachers should not plan activities that fail to augment the specific objectives of the lesson. Learning activities should be planned with a learning objective in mind. Objective driven learning activities tend to serve as a tool to reinforce the teacher's lesson presentation. Additionally, selected learning objectives should be consistent with state and district educational goals that focus on National educational goals (Goals 2000) and the specific strengths and weaknesses of individual students assigned to the teacher's class.

The effective teacher plans his/her learning activities to introduce them in a meaningful instructional sequence. Teachers should combine instructional activities as to reinforce information by providing students with relevant learning experiences through instructional activities.

If an educational program is child-centered, then it will surely address the abilities and needs of the students because it will take its cues from students' interests, concerns, and questions. Making an educational program child-centered involves building on the natural curiosity children bring to school, and asking children what they want to learn.

Teachers help students to identify their own questions, puzzles, and goals, and then structure for them widening circles of experience and investigation of those topics. Teachers manage to infuse all the skills, knowledge, and concepts that society mandates into a child-driven curriculum. This does not mean passive teachers who respond only to students' explicit cues. Teachers also draw on their understanding of children's developmentally characteristic needs and enthusiasms to design experiences that lead children into areas they might not choose, but that they do enjoy and that engage them. Teachers also bring their own interests and enthusiasms into the classroom to share and to act as a motivational means of guiding children.

Implementing such a child-centered curriculum is the result of very careful and deliberate planning. Planning serves as a means of organizing instruction and influences classroom teaching. Well thought-out planning includes specifying behavioral objectives, specifying students' entry behavior (knowledge and skills), selecting and sequencing learning activities so as to move students from entry behavior to objective, and evaluating the outcomes of instruction in order to improve planning.

Planning for instructional activities entails identification or selection of the activities the teacher and students will engage in during a period of instruction.

Planning is a multifaceted activity which includes the following considerations: the determination of the order in which activities will be completed; the specification of the component parts of an activity, including their order; the materials to be used for each part, and the particular roles of the teacher and students; decisions about the amount of time to be spent on a given activity and the number of activities to be completed during a period of instruction; judgment of the appropriateness of an activity for a particular situation; and specifications of the organization of the class for the activity.

Attention to learner needs during planning is foremost and includes identification of that which the students already know or need to know; the matching of learner needs with instructional elements such as content, materials, activities, and goals; and the determination of whether or not students have performed at an acceptable level, following instruction.

Skill 1.5 Demonstrates an understanding of physical changes associated with later childhood and adolescence and ways in which these changes impact development in other domains (i.e., cognitive, social, emotional)

Students at the middle level are continually undergoing physical and emotional changes and development. No matter how well we might try to prepare them for this, they have no point of reference within their own life experiences. Everything that is occurring to them is new and unfamiliar to these students, and often makes them uncomfortable about themselves and in the company of others. Often these physical, hormonal and emotional changes will occur in spurts, moving some ahead of their peers, in general, and leaving some behind. In most cases, the individual feels different and often is treated as different by his or her peers. The student may feel socially awkward, and this may be reflected in schoolwork and especially in classroom participation. The teacher must be sensitive to the issues of a developing child and aware of the impact this may have on student learning, classroom decorum and the cohesion among classmates which the teacher is trying to foster.

The teacher of students in later childhood and early adolescence should have a broad knowledge and understanding of the phases of development which typically occur during this stage of life. And the teacher must be aware of how receptive children are to specific methods of instruction and learning during each period of development. A significant premise in the study of child development holds that all domains of development (physical, social, and academic) are integrated. Development in each dimension is influenced by the others. Equally important to the teacher's understanding of the process is the knowledge that developmental advances within the domains occur neither simultaneously nor parallel to one another, necessarily.

It is important for the teacher to be aware of the physical stages of development and how changes to the child's physical attributes (which include internal developments, increased muscle capacity, improved coordination hormonal imbalances, awakening sex drive and other attributes as well as obvious growth) affect the child's ability to learn.

Factors determined by the physical stage of development include: ability to sit and attend, the need for activity, the relationship between physical coordination and self-esteem, and the degree to which physical involvement in an activity (as opposed to being able to understand an abstract concept) affects learning and the child's sense of achievement.

Early adolescence is characterized by dramatic physical changes moving the individual from childhood toward physical maturity. Early, prepubescent changes are noted with the appearance of secondary sexual characteristics. Girls experience a concurrent rapid growth in height which occurs between the ages of about 9.5 and 14.5 years, peaking somewhere around 12 years of age. Boys experience a concurrent rapid growth in height which occurs between the ages of about 10.5 to 11 and 16 to 18, peaking around age 14.

The sudden and rapid physical changes that young adolescents experience typically cause this period of development to be one of self-consciousness, sensitivity and concern over one's own body changes, and excruciating comparisons between oneself and peers. Because physical changes may not occur in a smooth, regular schedule, adolescents may go through stages of awkwardness, both in terms of appearance and physical mobility and coordination.

The impact of these physical changes on individual students is to make them more self-aware, more self-conscious and more self-absorbed. Constant comparison with peers developing at different rates will cause many individuals to feel inadequate or inferior, at least at times. While remaining sensitive to the genuine, emotional response of early adolescents to changes they cannot control and do not fully comprehend, the teacher will find it necessary to be more proactive in bringing students out of themselves and becoming interactive participants in the classroom, learning experience.

Skill 1.6 Recognizes challenges for students during later childhood and early adolescence (e.g., self-image, physical appearance, eating disorders, feelings of rebelliousness) and effective ways to help students address these challenges

Helping students to develop healthy self-images and self-worth are integral to the learning and development experiences. Learning for students who are experiencing negative self-image and peer isolation is not necessarily the top priority, when students are feeling bullied or negated in the school community. When a student is attending school from a homeless shelter or is lost in the middle of a parent's divorce or feeling a need to conform to fit into a certain student group, the student is being compromised and may be unable to effectively navigate the educational process or engage in the required academic expectations towards graduation or promotion to the next grade level or subject core level.

Most schools will offer health classes that address teen issues around sexuality, self-image, peer pressure, nutrition, wellness, gang activity, drug engagement and a variety of other relevant teen experiences. Students are required to take a health class as a core class requirement and graduation requirement, so the incentive from the District and school's standpoint is that students are exposed to issues that directly affect them. The fact that one health class is not enough to effectively appreciate the multiplicity of issues that could create a psychological or physiological trauma for a teenager is lost in today's era of school budgets and financial issues that provide the minimum educational experience for students, but loses the student in the process.

Some schools have contracted with outside agencies to develop collaborative partnerships to bring in after school tutorial classes; gender and cultural specific groupings where students can deal authentically with integration of cultural and ethnic experiences and lifestyles. Drug intervention programs and speakers on gang issues have created dynamic opportunities for school communities to bring the "undiscussable" issues to the forefront and alleviate fears that are rampant in schools that are afraid to say "No to Drugs and Gangs." Both students and teachers must be taught about the world of teenagers and understand the social, psychological and learning implications that underscore the process of academic acquisition for societies most vulnerable citizens.

Skill 1.7 Understands that student involvement in risky behaviors (e.g., drug and alcohol use, gang involvement) impacts development and learning

In middle-level students, decision making skills are often deficient. This, often coupled with erroneous messages from the media, the community and even the family, can make at-risk behavior appear attractive, acceptable and desirable. As young people mature and are put in a position of making more choices, independent of adult advice or supervision, they will be faced with making choices regarding involvement in "at-risk" behaviors (e.g., smoking, drug and alcohol use, sexual activity, gang involvement).

While young people are often self-conscious and perceive deficits in themselves when compared to their peers, they also want to be accepted by their peers. And some adolescents (and even pre-adolescents) will deliberately adopt certain behaviors as a statement to their peers that they are "special." In practice, this can range from acting-out, or mild, antisocial behavior, to the adoption of at-risk behaviors which can impede physical, emotional and intellectual development, restrict appropriate social development, impair judgment and functionality, and possibly impair health or even become life-threatening.