

Development Paper

My site placement is at Willow Run High School in Ypsilanti, Michigan in two different English Language Arts classes: an honors eleventh and a “regular” senior class. As would be expected under Piaget’s Theory of Cognitive Development, the majority of the students in both of these classes would be placed into his last stage: formal operations. These students have demonstrated that their reasoning abilities can be applied to abstract as well as concrete situations. They are able to more easily understand and work through hypothetical situations and can look beyond literal meanings – allowing them to more easily figure out complex reasoning problems and to relate abstract themes and concepts to their own lives. The honors eleventh grade students have demonstrated some of this hypothetical thinking through essays that they have written as part of their ACT preparation program. Most of them were able to put themselves into hypothetical situations and abstractly reason in their writing samples. Because of this advanced stage of cognitive development, it would be possible for students to more easily find broad themes, “big ideas,” and applications to their own lives within the literature that they read.

However, the teacher at this placement seldom takes advantage of this. The eleventh grade curriculum is currently mandated to be a fairly structured program of Michigan Merit Exam preparation. While there may be little room to completely tailor instruction in this class due to this pre-designed curriculum that must be taught, the twelfth grade classroom, which does have a great deal of leeway, also has a predictable and not particularly engaging daily routine as well. The class is currently reading *Shoeless Joe*, the novel that spawned the Kevin Costner movie *Field of Dreams*. At the beginning of every class period, the instructor waits for an indeterminate period of time for his class to be quiet. Once this happens, a five-question quiz on

factual information from the novel (such as the name of the narrator's wife and how many children they have) is given. After the quiz, the students become noisy again and whatever activities were allegedly planned for the day are scrapped and the students must silently read for the remainder of the time. This happens every class period without fail; suggesting that these practices may not be a good fit for this class

One reason for this disconnect between teacher and students may be able to be explained by looking at Kohlberg's Three Levels and Six Stages of Moral Reasoning. While behaving in class and developing a set of concrete morals may not be completely or directly linked, they are, however, related. These high school students are probably moving between stages three and four: from wanting to please those around them (especially authority figures, such as teachers) to understanding that rules are required to govern society. The teacher may be expecting his students to still want to please him, simply because he is the teacher, the authority figure in the room, and his patient waiting for his students to quiet down without ever explicitly asking them to or explaining why they need to reflects this thought. However, his students may no longer wish to please authority. If they see no logic behind why they should remain quiet in class and obey their teacher's every word, then they will not do this. They are no longer seeking to be the "good student" who pleases everyone around them and are developing their own systems of what is right and wrong, good and bad. Though the teacher expects a certain behavior automatically from his students, they are not able to exhibit this behavior since they have never been explicitly asked for it and are no longer on a quest for approval.

Interestingly, this instructor has thought some of his students since the seventh grade. Because of his fairly frequent switching of which grades he teaches from year to year, some of his students have been taught by him in one or more classes in the seventh, ninth, tenth, eleventh,

and/or twelfth grades. Because of this fact, it could be possible that the instructor is relying upon instructional and disciplinary methods that worked on these students when they were in the seventh grade. He may not be taking into consideration the vast developmental disparities between a student who is twelve or thirteen and one who is sixteen, seventeen, or eighteen. In middle school, many students are still in Kohlberg's third stage of moral reasoning when they seek to please authority figures, such as the instructor. If this English Language Arts teacher remembers that his students used to quiet down for him with little additional direction or explanation, he may not realize that his students no longer see following directions to please the teacher as a driving force in their lives and that they now need a different type of motivation to behave in class. He may view his students as merely "acting up" and not realize that they are now in a different developmental stage and need a different form of instruction in order to learn and behave effectively.

This recent revelation that the instructor may be relying on information that he learned about his students when they were in the seventh grade in order to currently teach them in the eleventh and twelfth may also explain why his students are not being optimally engaged in the class instruction. Seventh grade is when most students are just beginning to move into Piaget's formal operations stage, where they are able to reason more abstractly and think about hypothetical situations. Seventh graders may, therefore, require more explicit activities and instruction since they are just beginning to be able to think and reason with less concrete and more abstract ideas. However, as juniors and seniors in high school, many of these students have been in the formal operations stage for several years and their reasoning abilities have been given the time necessary to become more advanced.

These students could greatly benefit from instructional strategies that allow them to more actively engage with the material that they are reading and writing. They are more easily able to delve into the deeper meaning behind texts and talk about the themes and “big ideas” that they encounter throughout their time in the classroom. These students should be more easily able to apply these themes, these abstract ideas, to their own lives and to other texts. There is no longer (if there was ever) a need for only doing factual based quizzes and in-class reading for a one hour long class period. While this may be an easy way to ensure that students are reading the text, it does not engage them on the intellectual or developmental level on which they need and want to be engaged. Whole class discussions about the issues within what they are covering in class could better serve their learning and educational development. These students are cognitively able to understand, discuss, and debate large issues that appear within their readings and within their everyday lives, and discussion and assignments that capitalize on this could better serve their educational and developmental needs.

Theses student’s educational, or cognitive, and their moral development are both linked. Because they are in the formal operations stage their advanced reasoning abilities allow them to better understand the abstract concepts of good and bad and law and order. Understanding what society expects from a person requires a great deal of advanced reasoning capabilities. It is not readily apparent what society as a whole thinks of certain behaviors, thoughts, opinions, and activities. The reactions of society are not as immediately visible and tangible as the reactions of a teacher within the classroom. Students who are still in the concrete operations stage cannot make these inferences about societal expectations because society and its beliefs are not concrete objects that the students can easily view. Students can physically see and hear a teacher’s reaction to their behavior. An upset or disappointed authority figure is a concrete image that a

younger student can more easily see and interpret. It is easier for students in the concrete operations stage to seek to please persons in authority because these persons can explicitly tell the students that what they are doing is right or wrong, at least within that person's eyes. Understanding the concepts of law and order is not as readily possible until students enter the formal operations stage and can grasp these abstract concepts. Cognitive and moral development are both linked in this way and through these two models.

Luckily, the next unit of study in the eleventh grade Language Arts class appears like it may more effectively match where the students are expected to be at under both Piaget's and Kohlberg's developmental models. The students are now reading *The Color Purple* and responding to it in daily journals in a letter format that reflects the style in which the book is written. This allows the students to demonstrate that they read the material without having to take a quiz based on concrete, factual information. They are able to express their thoughts and grapple with the many big issues that the text raises. Because they are more engaged with this unit, they also misbehave less frequently and are not nearly as disruptive as they used to be, although this may not be because they now see law and order and rigid rules within their classroom but because they are simply less bored. Although it is too early in the unit to evaluate how good of a fit it is to the students' developmental level, this new instructional technique appears hopeful for creating a more effective learning environment.