
Preface

In an ideal world, teachers would be teaching children. They would figure out who these kids are, how they like to learn, what they are really like as people. They would capitalize on the kids' interests and strengths instead of delivering content the same way to all students based on the teachers' guide. They would accept any reasonable answer from students that might take them in a different direction.

—National Board-certified teacher,
Middle Childhood/Generalist

PURPOSE AND AUDIENCE

This teacher summarizes the essence of this book: Upper elementary teachers need encouragement and support in finding the balance between teaching children and teaching the content we want them to learn. Because accountability for student learning has been the focus of districts, states, and the federal government, the scale has tipped heavily toward a concern about teaching content. I am not proposing that teachers abandon their responsibility for facilitating student learning of academic content; this is critically important. However, I am suggesting that too much emphasis on skills acquisition and students' standing on benchmark or high-stakes tests makes it difficult to create school and classroom environments that allow students to develop a sense of accomplishment, to experience belonging, and community, and to be intellectually, socially, and physically engaged as learners. Most teachers choose to teach upper elementary grades primarily because they enjoy children in this age span and believe that they can make a difference in their lives. This book encourages teachers to keep these ideals alive and work with others in their school to find a better balance between teaching students as whole and complex people and teaching the content that we want them to know and be able to use.

All teachers struggle to keep an appropriate balance between concern about learners and concern about what they learn, but it is especially problematic for upper elementary teachers (i.e., those who teach third through sixth grade) because these teachers have so few supports targeted specifically toward them. In addition, policies and practices—in particular, high-stakes testing and accountability—start in these grades, resulting in more scrutiny of upper elementary teachers’ practices. Ask yourself the following questions:

- Do you sometimes wonder if, in the quest for making adequate yearly progress (AYP) and moving students from one achievement band to another, we lose sight of developmentally appropriate teaching for the students whose test scores become so important?
- Are you supported professionally as an upper elementary teacher (e.g., through specialized journals and books, conferences, and networks)?
- Do you ever look at the resources and programs available to young children and to adolescents and wonder why so few resources are targeted toward meeting the specific needs of upper elementary children?

These questions are at the heart of this book. By examining the developmental characteristics of upper elementary children (8- to 12-year-olds), the characteristics of schools and classrooms, and the teaching and learning process, this book proposes a balance that lets teachers’ knowledge of students work to achieve the goal of increased academic accomplishment. Through voices of teachers, children, and administrators; examples from actual classrooms; and examination of current research, the book presents an argument that

- children would benefit from a clear definition of developmentally appropriate practice for the upper elementary grades;
- upper elementary teachers would benefit from targeted professional supports (e.g., professional organizations, journals, networks, conferences); and
- children and teachers would benefit from focusing, consolidating, and disseminating research and best practice and from a critical examination of current policies and practices affecting upper elementary students.

This book is written primarily for people teaching third through sixth grade. It will resonate with veteran teachers by both confirming and calling into question accepted practices and policies. For new and prospective teachers, it provides ideas, resources, and discussion of issues they face or anticipate. Although not its primary audience, principals, district office

personnel, policymakers, and teacher education faculty are an important audience because they are in a position to provide or advocate for the increased professional resources, policy examination, and research called for in the following pages. Parents are also likely to find the book useful, given the description of upper elementary child development and insights into upper elementary students' life in schools and classrooms. Given its focus on children, it places teaching and learning in the context of the complex lives of 8- to 12-year-olds, a context we too often forget in the press for improving academic achievement.

I hope that this book inspires teachers to use existing resources while pressing for targeted networking and professional development opportunities. It is also my goal that administrators see the importance of examining the specific needs of these grades and for teacher education faculty and policymakers to conduct, consolidate, and disseminate relevant research and to use that research to revise and make policy. Most important, it should stimulate increased discussion about creating learning environments for upper elementary children that balance child development and academic achievement. It advocates for environments that

- encourage children to experience authentic accomplishment by mastering what they otherwise thought unattainable;
- support their sense of belonging as people who are cared for and who care for others; and
- engage students academically, socially, and physically.

BACKGROUND

The idea to write this book grew out of my personal frustration. I have taught future teachers at the College of Charleston in Charleston, South Carolina, for many years, and it finally dawned on me that an important group of students and teachers has been overlooked. This group has been overlooked in terms of advocacy. In South Carolina I saw how the lack of advocacy for upper elementary students and teachers stands in stark contrast to the effectiveness of lobbyists for specific early childhood and middle grades teacher certification requirements and for targeted services for young children and young adolescents. This age and grade span also benefits from few targeted academic resources. In preparing to teach preservice courses, I searched in vain for readings about upper elementary grades that parallel those available about early childhood and middle grades (Bredekamp & Kopple, 1997; Driscoll & Nagel, 2005; Knowles & Brown, 2000; Powell, 2005; Warner & Sower, 2005). Finally, no organization defines best practice for upper elementary grades. The organizations that do so for early childhood and middle grades ensure that teachers are prepared to balance knowledge of students and content. A formal

discussion of how best to teach 8- to 12-year-olds either has not occurred or has not been disseminated widely.

ORGANIZATION OF THE BOOK

The organization of this book reflects its primary emphasis: It balances knowledge of students and their lives with knowledge of their learning environments and the teaching and learning process. Chapter 1 clarifies the need for a focus on upper elementary students and grades and identifies key issues that are developed in subsequent chapters. Chapters 2 through 4 examine all aspects of upper elementary student development, focusing on development as learners, members of society, and physical beings. These chapters explore general developmental trends of all 8- to 12-year-olds (Chapter 2), general trends by group affiliation (Chapter 3), and individual differences across all children (Chapter 4). Chapters 5 through 7 examine environments in which children develop, working from the assumption that children flourish in environments that develop their sense of accomplishment, belonging, and engagement. Chapter 5 explores influences outside of school, and Chapters 6 and 7 shift the focus to schools (Chapter 6) and classrooms (Chapter 7). Chapter 8 targets the primary classroom purpose, teaching and learning, examining the influence of teaching and assessment on students' growing sense of accomplishment, belonging, and engagement. Chapter 9 serves as a call to action. It proposes a framework for upper elementary developmentally appropriate practice, calls for targeted supports for upper elementary teacher professionalism, and advocates for a concerted examination of research and policy to best meet the needs of upper elementary children.

DATA SOURCES AND COLLECTION

The data for this book draw from many sources, including a review of the literature, interviews with teachers, observations in classrooms, informal conversations with children, student essays, future teacher essays, and conversations with colleagues. Largely, the book is shaped by my experiences working with schools and future teachers and as a parent. I spent twenty years working with a major school reform model, Accelerated Schools plus (see www.acceleratedschools.net). This involvement gave me access to schools across the country that are committed to improving students' lives; I have taught hundreds of future teachers in a variety of teacher education courses, and I raised two daughters who reminded me of the joy of this time in our lives.

The most enjoyable part of gathering information for this book has been talking directly with teachers, students, parents, future teachers, and

colleagues, as well as in observing classrooms across the country. In several schools students wrote to writing prompts that had been developed by students in a fifth-grade class. These prompts (What makes you special? Why do you like to go to school? What makes a teacher fun?) provide much of the student voice in this book. I also collected data from future teachers by asking them to share their memories of being in upper elementary grades and their reasons for wanting to teach upper elementary children. Finally, every chance I had, I talked with friends who either are teachers or have children this age; I interviewed National Board Certified Teachers and people who have been involved in educational policy development at the state and national levels. Foremost, I have been an avid “kid-watcher” and question-asker.