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## *Why Focus on Upper Elementary Grades and Students?*

*I absolutely adored my fourth-grade teacher, Mrs. B. She was always so full of life, and she seemed excited every day to be with us at school and teaching us everything she knew. Along with being a role model and an adult influence, she was our friend. She was always caring and tuned into our wants and needs. She helped cultivate my love of learning at a very pivotal point in time, when grades and testing started to become a part of our regular lives in school. This period of time is one marked by a plunge in students' excitement and interest level in school and academics, but through Mrs. B's own excitement and interest, along with assignments that were fun and relevant to us, Mrs. B was able to encourage and foster our love of learning.*

*Mrs. B is a big reason why I want to teach. I suppose, if you ask my dad, I've always known I was going to be a teacher, even when I was only in kindergarten and would line my stuffed animals up each afternoon to teach to them. However, now I know why. Not only is it because of a deep-seated passion within me, but it's also because I know it's teachers who can truly make a difference in our children's lives, and therefore can help shape the future.*

—Preservice teacher

This statement is from a young woman with a passion to teach children in the upper elementary grades. The essay she wrote describes why she wants to teach these grades rather than early childhood or middle grades. She describes some of the issues her children will face during these grades (e.g., an increased focus on grades and testing, a drop in motivation) and characteristics of a good upper elementary teacher (i.e., a teacher who knows and cares about her students and also inspires them to learn). She describes a teacher who encouraged students' accomplishments, made them feel like they belonged in the classroom, and engaged them intellectually.

Without saying so explicitly, she describes why these grades are so important in children's lives. She also alludes to why many people fondly remember this time in life. To many people it is a "grace period" between the dependence of early childhood and the stresses of early adolescence. These upper elementary years are characterized by growing physical, academic, and social confidence as well as increased involvement in a wider world. As Borland, Laybourn, Hill, and Brown (1998) concluded:

Middle childhood is a period when children and the other key players in their lives negotiate an increasingly complex and fast-changing world. It is a time of preparation for later life in economic, technological and environmental circumstances which are hard to predict, *but it is also a time to be cherished for its own sake* [italics added]. With the marked physical dependency of early childhood over and the transitions to economic and other forms of autonomy still some way off, it is a time when children, parents and others have to manage a range of tensions and competing principles. (p. 173)

In part because this age span is seen as relatively trouble free, few people target these grades for special attention. When we think about where we should place emphasis in schools across the country, many people suggest improving programs for young children to ensure that all children are ready for school and are able to read, write, and understand basic mathematics to progress in school. Others focus on the special needs of adolescents, students who are at the critical point in their lives when they are making decisions that will affect their future careers and lives.

Both of these stages in children's lives are critical, and special attention should be paid to them. But too often, by focusing on the needs of young children or adolescents, we overlook children in grades that are becoming increasingly challenging and important to children's futures. Third grade begins a phase in children's schooling dominated by the pressure of annual high-stakes testing and accountability, a shift toward acquisition of increasingly demanding academic content, and an expectation that they have mastered basic math and literacy skills. The climate in many schools, especially those serving students who are less likely to perform well on these tests, can be stressful, focusing primarily on a conception of

achievement that emphasizes skills rather than understanding, facts rather than concepts (Finn & Ravitch, 2007; Pace Marshall, & Price, 2007; Perlestein, 2007). Couple this trend with a developmental trajectory that makes children more self-aware and self-critical, and we see motivation and engagement decline in these grades (Scales, Sesma, & Bolstrom, 2004). This does not have to be the case, and many teachers and schools work hard to keep the joy alive in the upper elementary grades.

### Consider . . .

#### Creating a class book to share with substitutes and visitors.

Help substitutes and visitors get to know your class by creating a class book that is shared with them. Give the students responsibility for determining the information that they think people should know. One strategy you can use borrows from a gift a fifth-grade class gave me. Before I visited the class, the teacher asked the students what I should know about them. They created a book titled "So, You Want to Know about a Kid My Age. . . . You Should Ask These Questions, and We'll Tell You Why" with the following topics:

- Who lives at your house?
- How would you describe your life after school?
- Do you like school? Why or why not?
- Do you have any hobbies?
- What activities do you like to do?
- What kind of music do you listen to?
- What games do you play?
- Where do kids your age hang out?
- Have you ever gone on vacation? If so, where did you go?
- What famous celebrities do you RESPECT?

The teacher put each question on a separate page, passed each page around the room, and students answered the question. They then talked about each topic, and the teacher summarized the discussion on the back of the sheet. If you create this book for substitutes, include the rules and procedures the substitutes should know, but be sure to include your students in determining what substitutes should know. If the children help create this guide for substitutes, they are more likely to support the substitute when he or she follows the rules and procedures.

## UPPER ELEMENTARY CHILDREN AND GRADE LEVELS

A question may arise as you begin reading this book: Why focus on children in upper elementary grades and not on all of the children in elementary school? This is a legitimate question when we think in terms of school rather than children. However, since my focus is on children in specific grade levels, I find it more useful to narrow the focus. This narrowing is supported by research on child development as well (Collins, 2005). The 8- to 12-year-old age span is typically designated as part of *middle childhood*, the time between early childhood and young adolescence (Berk, 2003; Collins, 1984; McDevitt & Ormrod, 2004). Typically, middle childhood includes children 6 to 12 years old, but research indicates that children who are 6 to 8 differ markedly from 10- to 12-year-old children cognitively, socially, and physically (Collins, 2005). And early childhood research indicates that children up to age 8 should be considered young children (Bredenkamp & Copple, 1997; National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2007). Early childhood advocates question extending the definition of middle childhood to age 6 because it pushes academic and social demands down to young children, diminishing opportunities for developmentally appropriate practice in the primary grades. For this reason I focus primarily on 8- to 12-year-olds and avoid the middle childhood designation.

I use upper elementary children or upper elementary students to limit the focus to third through sixth grade. Because sixth grade is most often in middle school (Stevenson, 2006), fewer examples of it are provided. I do not use the term *tween* that has recently entered the lexicon. Tween refers to an age span from 6 to 15 years and is a Madison Avenue invention used to identify a marketing segment (Lamb & Brown, 2006; Siegel, Coffey & Livingston, 2001). The term also strengthens the image that these students are between stages because *tween* is either an abbreviation of *between* or indicates that they are not quite teens.

I acknowledge limitations in using *upper elementary* as a designation. It is not completely synonymous with the 8- to 12-year age span. Obviously, there are some 7-year-olds in third grade and some 13- and even 14-year-olds in sixth grade. This term works reasonably well in the United States but not in all other countries. Readers outside of the United States will need to translate as necessary. It also ignores the incredible variation in schools structures within the United States. In some schools third grade is considered part of the primary program. In some schools sixth grade is an upper elementary grade; more often it is in middle school. Some middle schools extend down to include fifth grade, and some elementary schools extend to eighth grade. Finally, *upper elementary* assumes a traditional school structure in which children pass from one grade to the next

each year. With those caveats aside, this term is used throughout the book. At times I also refer to these children by their age. When it seems more appropriate, they are referred to as 8-year-olds or as a group, 8- to 12-year-olds.

## **DEFINING UPPER ELEMENTARY TEACHERS: THEIR PRACTICE AND THE PROFESSION**

### **Developmentally Appropriate Practice**

In broad strokes we know that all effective teachers understand and value the students they teach. They know the content students are expected to learn and how to teach so that students want to learn. They know how to assess so that they are sure that students have learned. Effective teachers also know how to establish a classroom environment in which all students flourish and how to work with colleagues to create an effective, welcoming school environment. In addition, they know what it means to be a professional, and they have the dispositions expected of professional teachers. At one level these characteristics of effective teachers hold whether teaching very young children, adolescents, or adults. At another level teaching is an interaction between the students, teachers, and the content taught, and it must change when any of these variables changes. A focus on children in a specific age/grade span has implications for curriculum, instruction, and assessment, and for professional expectations for teachers.

Advocates for early childhood and middle grades education have clearly articulated what they deem appropriate for young children or young adolescents. A similar articulation of developmentally appropriate practice for upper elementary students has not occurred. The early childhood community, through the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), pioneered the idea of developmentally appropriate practice. Their Position Statement on Developmentally Appropriate Practice (ratified in July 1996) calls for all teachers of young children to have

- knowledge of child development and learning that can be used to make general predictions about what is safe, healthy, interesting, achievable, and also challenging to children;
- knowledge of individual children's strengths, interests, and needs and ability to use this knowledge to individualize learning; and
- knowledge of the social and cultural contexts of children's lives and the ability to use this knowledge to make learning relevant, meaningful, and respectful to all children and their families (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997, pp. 8–9).

## 6 The Upper Elementary Years

The National Middle School Association (NMSA) has a number of position statements, including one on appropriate curriculum, instruction, and assessment. In this statement teachers are encouraged to

- establish learner-centered classrooms that encourage and honor student voice;
- develop standards-based curricula that integrate subject area disciplines along with students' concerns and questions;
- design instruction to meet the diverse needs of every student
- measure student progress and development with a variety of; authentic assessments; and
- guide students in discovering their aptitudes and interests (NMSA, 2005).

Examining these position statements, one sees common threads emerge. First, developmentally appropriate practice starts with knowing children who fall into the particular age span. This includes knowing about child development, social and cultural group influences, and individual variation. Second, developmentally appropriate practice involves using this knowledge of students in combination with knowledge of subject area disciplines to guide teaching, engage students, and bring out their interests and voice.

Unlike the definitions of developmentally appropriate practice put forward by early childhood and young adolescent advocates, many of the practices commonly encouraged in upper elementary teaching (e.g., an emphasis on teaching academic content, preparation for high-stakes tests) illustrate a move away from a focus on students in their family and community context toward a focus on students as academic-content learners. Throughout the following chapters, I provide the basis for a framework for upper elementary practice that starts with the children and works toward creating environments in which they can learn necessary knowledge and skills. This framework establishes developmentally appropriate practice as an interplay between actions of students and teachers, characteristics of the classroom environment, and the act of teaching and learning.

- Actions of students in which they
  - are involved in learning
  - cooperate and collaborate
  - are successful and empowered
- Actions of teachers in which they
  - understand students in their family, social, and cultural context
  - serve as learning leaders
- Characteristics of the classroom environment in which
  - there is mutual respect

- diversity is viewed as a strength
- students and the teacher agree on what is considered responsible behavior
- Characteristics of the teaching and learning process in which
  - learning is authentic and relates to students' lives
  - curriculum is integrated
  - instruction occurs through dialogue
  - instruction is inclusive
  - students engage in active knowledge construction
  - learning is made meaningful by focusing on larger concepts
  - connections are made within a subject

### **Professional Support**

Teachers are part of an exciting, dynamic profession, and as professionals, recognize the importance of growing professionally and contributing to the profession. To grow and contribute, we rely on resources from professional organizations, unions, state agencies, districts offices, colleges and universities, our schools, and colleagues. Some teachers are fortunate to have many resources targeted to their specific needs. As Table 1.1 illustrates, early childhood and middle grades teachers have many more targeted professional resources than upper elementary teachers have. They enjoy professional organizations, journals, access to active Web sites, and avenues for advocacy. Upper elementary teachers, in contrast, have to cull information from more generic sources (e.g., organizations, Web sites, and journals for P-12 or P-8 teachers) and adapt resources developed for younger or older children.

The only organization that recognizes the unique challenges and strengths of upper elementary teachers is the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS) with its Middle Childhood/Generalist certificate. The NBPTS was established in 1987 to strengthen teaching by developing standards for accomplished teachers. NBPTS developed five core propositions defining essential characteristics of any accomplished teacher: commitment to students and their learning; knowledge of subject matter and how to teach it to students; managing and monitoring student learning; thinking systematically about practice; and being members of learning communities. The Middle Childhood/Generalist certification adapts the core propositions for teachers of 7- to 12-year-olds (National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, 2001). Teachers who have at least three years of teaching experience are eligible to participate in the lengthy process of compiling a portfolio demonstrating how they meet the exacting standards for those who teach all subjects to students in middle childhood.

**Table 1.1** Comparison of Resources for Early Childhood, Upper Elementary, and Middle Grades Teachers

<i>Resource</i>	<i>Early childhood</i>	<i>Upper elementary</i>	<i>Middle grades</i>
Professional organizations for teachers	National Association for the Education of Young Children	None	National Middle School Association
Journals	Eight national journals	No journals specific to upper elementary grades	One national journal
Web sites	<a href="http://www.naeyc.org">http://www.naeyc.org</a>	None	<a href="http://nmsa.org">http://nmsa.org</a>
Focused research on upper elementary education (American Educational Research Association: AERA, 2007)	Two special interest groups	None	One special interest group
National Board for Professional Teaching Standards	Early childhood generalist	Middle childhood generalist	Early adolescence generalist
Advocacy for students	NAEYC	None	NMSA
Clearly articulated developmentally appropriate practice	Yes	No	Yes

## ADVOCATING FOR UPPER ELEMENTARY STUDENTS

The upper elementary years and grades are critical not only in terms of children's future success but also as a time in their lives to be nurtured and enjoyed. I raise a number of issues in this book because, although

**Consider ...****Becoming an advocate for upper elementary grades and students in your school.**

All schools have room for improvement and have issues that people may not have fully recognized. Depending on what is happening in your school, here are some suggestions.

- Join with upper elementary colleagues in your school to take stock of the resources and issues that are unique to the grades you teach.
- Meet together regularly with upper elementary colleagues to share best practices.
- Use meeting times to examine how school and district policies affect you and your students.
- Suggest cross-grade-level meetings to gain a better sense of issues and expectations in the lower grades.
- Observe in other grade levels, especially in early childhood classes, to better understand what your students have experienced and how being in the upper elementary grades is different for your students.
- Volunteer to work with preservice students to provide them good experiences in upper elementary grades.

considerable research exists on this age/grade span, it is not consolidated and used to advocate for students and to support teachers, nor does it appear to shape many of the policies that directly impact children's lives in schools and classrooms. Early childhood advocates use research to support their fight for stimulating and appropriate educational opportunities for all young children. They compile considerable evidence on brain growth (Jensen, 1998), language learning (Hart & Risley, 1995), and stimulating and nurturing learning environments (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997). Middle grades advocates use research on student disengagement and point to high school dropout rates to advocate for educational programs that will keep students engaged (Knowles & Brown, 2000; NMSA, 2007; Powell, 2005). Advocates for special needs children use research to press for the least restrictive environments for exceptional children (CEC, 2007).

Given that upper elementary children are often subjects in research studies (Collins, 2005; Cooper, et al., 2005; Kennedy, 2005; Scales, Sesma, & Bolstrom, 2004), why hasn't this research been compiled and used to advocate for these children? My best explanation for this is that a crisis has not mobilized people in support of upper elementary children. Unlike early childhood organizations that had to fight to formally educate young children, we have always educated 8- to 12-year-olds. Unlike middle grades advocates who fought to change the structure of educational delivery to young adolescents, we have not seriously questioned the structure of upper elementary grades (e.g., the curriculum, student grouping, instructional practices). Unlike parents of special needs children, exceptionalities have not kept most upper elementary children out of school.

When considering issues for upper elementary children, there appears to be a "let sleeping dogs lie" or "if it ain't broke, don't fix it" mentality. We may also have a classic "chicken-and-egg" problem. Educators and parents are less likely to raise questions and concerns related to upper elementary issues because, on the one hand, they have no organizations to turn to and, on the other hand, organizations do not develop because no one articulates common problems or concerns. This is unfortunate because, once organized, groups like NAEYC, NMSA, and the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) continue to advocate for appropriate education for the children they serve, support journals and other publications, provide regional and national conferences, and mobilize members when issues arise.

In the following chapters the issues raised above will be addressed in more depth. The questions that recur throughout this book are the following.

- How do we create a balance between the strengths and needs of upper elementary children while ensuring that they learn the content that will engage and stimulate them and prepare them for future learning?
- How does a clearly articulated definition of developmentally appropriate practice keep an appropriate balance?
- What is involved in creating learning environments in elementary schools and upper elementary classrooms that promote student accomplishment, belonging, and engagement?
- What supports do upper elementary teachers need to develop professionally and to best serve their students?
- How can research be encouraged, compiled, and disseminated to best serve upper elementary students and teachers?
- What policies and practices need to be critically examined to support this balance?