

Field Study Observation

A Day at Open Window School



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Open Window School: For Gifted Kids Who Love to Learn

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Michael Piechowski has written extensively on the emotional development of gifted children, and describes intensity as one of the most noticeable traits of gifted and talented youth. He “delineates five dimensions of psychological life... psychomotor, sensual, intellectual, imaginal, and emotional... [and]



encourages educators to view intense manifestations of these elements as ‘normal’ traits of gifted students, and to use them to further their development and learning rather than viewing them as pathological and in need of ‘fixing’” (Piechowski, 2002). As I walked the halls and visited classrooms at Open Window School, I was able to see educators and administrators put Piechowski’s thoughts into action. Working with gifted students who are intense and overexcitable can be challenging, but Open Window School is able to tap into their intensity and passion. It was refreshing to see a school work with the strengths of their students to develop their potential and challenge them to accomplish tasks that many would deem unlikely with children of their age. The Open Window School pamphlet states that, “Our students are actively engaged in the vital process of discovering themselves, their potential and the world around them.” This school not only provides academic rigor for their students but provides support for their social and emotional development. I had lunch with the two counselors at Open Window, and they reviewed how they work with students with overexcitabilities. They outlined a five

step process that includes: helping students manage their own emotions, connecting through relationship, helping students manage the five dimensions of their psychological life, learning to process through questions, and then learning different life skills (communication, stress management, and empathy). The mission of Open Window School is to “nurture and challenge students of high intellectual ability and inspire them to new levels of academic excellence, creativity and personal accomplishment in a diverse and changing world.” My experience at and observations of Open Window school gave me a new understanding of how we should be approaching gifted children and the kind of education we can offer them.

Basic Information, Technology and Selection for the Program

Open Window School is located in Bellevue, Washington; is accredited by the Pacific Northwest Association of Independent Schools and has a total enrollment of 315 students. Although the school does not have families self-identify regarding race or ethnicity, they did provide me with some demographic data. At the school, there are 156 boys and 158 girls. The majority of families live in the Bellevue area and 17% of families receive financial aide. The private school has a lower school (K-4) and a middle school (5-8), with two classes/sections per grade level. In Kindergarten and 1st grade class sizes are limited to 18 students, and in all other grades, the class size is limited to 20 students. There are full-time instructional assistants in every lower school class, and many of the middle school classes also employ instructional assistants as well; giving each classroom extra adult support to meet the needs of each individual student. Additionally, a “tutorial” period is built into the school’s schedule. During tutorial, students can visit any teacher they want to get extra support from, meet with groups to prepare group projects, or just find a space to finish work on their own or read.

At Open Window School, students have exceptional resources and facilities at their disposal to support the work being done in the classroom and prepare students for the technological future. Each student is issued a laptop, and both Macs and PCs are used throughout the school. In the technology classroom, students have access to robotics equipment, Macs, a green screen and exceptionally

fast Wifi connection that allows students to integrate video, art, creativity, math, science and technology seamlessly. Science classrooms are equipped with high school-level equipment, allowing older students to experiment with chemistry and heat in ways that many middle schools are not able to.

For students to be accepted to Open Window School, they are subjected to a rigorous admissions process that includes formal and informal identification measures. According to the Open Window School website, applicants are considered based on: indications of high intellectual ability, advanced achievement in academic skills, independent thinking skills, appropriate maturity, positive social skills, and individual talents and interests. Additionally, applicants must have IQ and/or achievement testing. Applicants must have IQ results at the 95th percentile or above, and 5th - 8th grade applicants must also have SSAT/ISEE test scores. Some of the assessments that have been used by applicants to Open Window School include, the Wechsler Intelligence Test, the Stanford-Binet, and the Woodcock-Johnson III. After the application is received, prospective students also must attend a scheduled visitation. Applicants in grades K-2 visit in small peer groups for 2 hours with teachers from the school. Older students, visit for a morning while school is in session during which they will have an opportunity to demonstrate their abilities and social skills.

Teachers, administrators and the school programs all undergo evaluation systems in order to continue improving on the education of the students there. Based on discussions with administrators, teachers develop goals based on 21st century skills. The goal setting process varies a little bit year by year, but teachers always have a pre-observation, an observation, and a post-observation. The school program is required to be evaluated by the Pacific Northwest Association of Independent Schools every eight years. Delegates from the Association observe and research the school program over the course of 4-5 days and make suggestions for improvement.

Curriculum

At Open Window School, a variety of curricular models and differentiation strategies are employed to create a program that meets the needs of all students. In

math, students use the enVision Math Exemplars programs until 5th grade. At the middle school level, math students are placed in mixed-level groups depending on their ability in math. In math, students are able to work at their own speed and skill level. The principal of the school, B.M., told me that they are also working on helping their highly advanced math students explore topics at a deeper level rather than just race through the math books (and be done with the entire math curriculum by 6th grade).

In Language Arts, students use Junior Great Books to enhance their critical reading skills and utilize the 6+1 Trait Writing Writer's Workshop to teach writing skills. Social Studies classrooms use History Alive to make their classes engaging, interactive and activity-oriented. Additionally, starting in 4th grade, students have overnight experiences that are interdisciplinary (although there is a huge emphasis on science content) and range from trips to the North Cascade Institute, to the Salish Sea Expeditions to Costa Rica. Open Window School believes in giving gifted and talented students the opportunity to experience diverse cultures, explore different careers, and meet people outside of the classroom; which provides a deeply rich educational experience for their students. A brief conversation with students there reveals them to be well-spoken, polite, and knowledgeable.

Part of the curriculum at Open Window School includes their social-emotional skills. The school employs the Responsive Classroom model, positive discipline and Second Step to help their students be emotionally aware, mindful and cooperative.

Classroom Observations

When I arrived at Open Window School on November 8th, 2013, I was greeted by the principal who began my visit with a tour around the school. We started with the kindergarten classrooms, and then worked our way up to the middle school. She introduced me to many of the teachers and staff members at the school, who all invited me back to see what their students were doing later in the day. After the school tour, she left me on my own to return to any of the classrooms that I wanted to observe.

6th Grade Humanities

The first classroom that I observed was M.P.'s 6th grade humanities classroom. Students were studying ancient Egypt, and were working on creating a physical and virtual museum. As part of their project, they were making 3D maps of Egypt out of a salted-flour mixture. Although messy, students were engaged in their research and creations. The project required students to not only make a map of Egypt, but to also include environmental and historical features of the area. They also had to become curator's of the "artifacts" on the map, which required them to explain what the artifact was and why it was important to the Egyptian peoples back then and to historians today. As part of their unit on ancient Egypt, students had also started the mummification process of apples and hot dogs; which allowed them to explore the connection between science and social studies. After going over initial announcements at the beginning of the period, students immediately went to work on their projects and were clearly engaged in their research and creations. In class, students were working with partners, independently and in larger groups; depending on what stage of the project they were on. Most were self-motivated and focused. The small class size (18 students) allowed students the space to spread out, and many had their laptops out beside their maps, so they could research new information as they worked on the 3D aspect of their project.

8th Grade Humanities

The second classroom I observed was 8th grade humanities, where I had the pleasure of seeing students take part in an Enlightenment Salon. The 12 students in the class had been researching the Enlightenment, and they had been assigned to take on the persona of one famous enlightened thinker from the time period. After initial announcements and directions, students were split up into two groups of 6 where they would work to understand the enlightened thinkers that their classmates had spent time researching. Each student, in each group, spent time introducing themselves (as their famous persona) and answering questions that the rest of the group had about their attitude, thoughts, and actions. Many of the students were prepared with costumes, props and masks to further enhance the experience. While students were speaking, other students in their group took notes. I was

amazed by the depth of their questions, and by their ability to answer higher-level thinking questions about their assigned persona.

5th Grade Humanities

Although student presentations didn't allow me to witness too much direct teaching in the 5th grade humanities classroom I visited, watching some of the student presentations allowed me a unique opportunity to see the final product of what the students had been working on. In this class, students had finished their personal narratives; and their final project was to create a photo story to present their narrative to the class. The teacher had decided to use Photo Story, which is a new technology where students can input pictures, video and audio to create a visual story to share with others. I was amazed by one girls' narrative regarding her love of writing. The passion in her voice mixed with the chosen music made tears come to my eyes. Although the technology didn't work perfectly for every presentation (trouble with audio, wrong saved versions, etc.), the teacher handled it professionally and the students had an amazing discussion about what happens when we experiment with new technology and how they could help others students with the lessons they had learned from the assignment.

6th Grade Math

Although I spent much of my afternoon observing the middle school humanities classes, I was also interested in seeing how other subjects were handled at Open Window School. The math class that I observed had 9 students in it, with the support of one teacher and one instructional assistant. Five students worked with the main teacher, and four students worked with the instructional assistant; who mostly just monitored them while they worked on more advanced math material. In math, students mostly worked independently; but asked each other and the teacher questions if they needed support. During my observation, the teacher was working mainly with one student who needed extra instruction in the topic of the lesson. It was clear that the teacher utilized inquiry-based instruction and focused on having the students figure out the answers as much as they could. I often hear him say, "That's something you're going to have to work out."

Because of the nature of the content, differentiation strategies were much more apparent in the math classroom than in the humanities classrooms that I observed. Students were able to work at their own speed on material that was at their challenge level. One student, who I inferred was twice-exceptional, used a computer to work on his math; and only called the teacher over when he needed his answers checked. The “Differentiation at Open Window School” document on the school website states, “In a differentiated classroom, students work at the pace most suited to their abilities and learning profiles. Small, flexible instruction groupings (by ability, interest, readiness, temperament, etc.) create an appropriate match between student and instruction.” In this math class, I was clearly able to observe this type of flexible instruction.

7th Grade Humanities

The most intriguing classroom that I had the opportunity to observe was the 7th grade humanities classroom. When I came in for the observation, students were in the middle of a “time out.” One of the students explained that a time out was used by the teacher when students felt they had a lot on their plate and needed a time out. A “time out” meant that students could receive 100% for anything that they completed during that period, unless they chose to opt-out of the time out. The teacher said that, contrary to popular belief, many students chose to opt out because they wanted to get the grade/score that they deserved and get feedback on their work. During the observation, students were working on whatever they needed to work on. Many students were working on vocabulary, which was differentiated based on the students appropriate challenge level. Students were able to work independently on vocabulary as quickly or slowly as they wanted through individual work books. During the vocabulary quizzes, students were able to exchange a “coupon” for the definition of one word that they didn’t know; which seemed to come in handy during the analogies portion of the quizzes.

Throughout my observation, this teacher had her students come up to me and explain a variety of projects and systems that were used in her classroom. Students didn’t hesitate to explain what they did, why it was important, and what they learned from it. Students talked about their African Ethnography project, journal writing requirements, African Virtual Museum project, and the synergy jar;

which was used to encourage rich, deep thinking in the classroom. This teacher clearly valued inquiry-based instruction, and she was constantly motivating her students to solve their own problems. One student even answered, “I’ll do what I think is best.”

Activities, Strategies, and Evaluation

Throughout my day at Open Window School, I was able to observe a variety of examples of higher-level thinking demonstrated during different lessons and activities. Although I’m sure there is some direct instruction and work at basic levels of thinking, most of the work I saw students doing required them to apply, analyze, create, and evaluate. In humanities, students were analyzing historical individuals from the past and creating monologues that were read to the rest of the class. They had to understand their individual at a relatively deep level to answer questions from their classmates regarding the beliefs and values of their individual. In 6th grade, students were having analyze “why” questions about ancient Egypt, which forced them to make judgements and analyze the culture. Although I’m not sure which class the students were preparing for, I also happened to observe two students preparing for a future presentation during the school’s tutorial. Students had memorized the poem “Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night” by Dylan Thomas, and had added motion that physically expressed the meaning of the poem. I was amazed by their ability to grasp the meaning of the poem and express the meaning in such a kinesthetic way.

Since many gifted students develop asynchronously, Open Window School does have many students who may be underachieving or struggling in a certain skill or subject area; even if they excel in other academic areas. Although formal 504 plans are not used, counselors at the school work closely with underachieving, twice exceptional, and thrice exceptional students to set up an action plan and work toward their goals. Some students are assigned to attend particular tutorial sessions with teachers that they need extra support from, and the counselors said that they work directly with other students on developing more appropriate social and emotional skills.

During my observation at Open Window School, I didn't have the opportunity to see very much evaluation in the classes that I visited. One math class was in the middle of a unit exam, but most of the other classes were presenting projects or having a work period. In the 5th grade humanities class, however, students were sharing photo stories with their classmates, and peer evaluation was employed by the teacher after each presentation. She asked for one strength of the presentation and one area for growth. In another classroom, students were evaluating their own vocabulary packets using an answer key.

Self-Appraisal

Winebrenner (2012) writes, "So what do gifted students need in order to learn? They need two crucial things: *compacting* and *differentiation*" (6). Open Window School is clearly offering a multitude of options to differentiate for their students, and are also compacting and allowing students who have achieved mastery in a certain area to work independently on more appropriate leveled work. The activities that I observed in each classroom included higher-level thinking skills, creative options, differentiation, opportunities for students to work on social and emotional skills as well.

At the school I teach at, students begin learning Spanish in the 8th grade. At Open Window School, students begin learning Spanish in the elementary grades, and by the time they reach 8th grade, they are working at the equivalent of Spanish 2 or 3 at most public high schools. These gifted students are able to learn the language much quicker than their non-gifted peers, and benefit greatly from this program. The Enlightenment Salon, that I observed the 8th grade humanities classroom, is also an excellent example of an activity that is appropriate for the gifted students at this school. It was clear that the students understood their personas, the time period, and had the maturity to participate in the activity without a lot of monitoring by the teacher.

Throughout my Gifted and Talented specialty endorsement through Whitworth, I've read about identification strategies, researched differentiation strategies, and tried to incorporate compacting and differentiation into my own classroom. It was remarkable to visit a school that is utilizing so much of the best

practices that I have been learning about school-wide. At the 2012 NAGC convention, that I had the opportunity to attend last year, many of the speakers emphasized the importance of creativity in the classroom. With the exception of math (which I did not get to observe very much), all of the classrooms at Open Window School were encouraging their students to think outside the box, solve their own problems, and participate in highly creative activities. They are clearly educating our world's future inventors, political leaders, and business CEO's.

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