

Field Study Observation

*A Class Period in 8th Grade Advanced Social Studies at Pacific
Cascade Middle School*



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Winter 2013

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8th Grade Advanced Social Studies: 5th Period with S.K.

5th Period Advanced Social Studies

Sandra Kaplan has devised a rubric to differentiate for gifted learners in the areas of thinking skill mastery, content acquisition, research skills, product development and scholarly behavior. She writes, “Too often the quick assimilation of a single lesson is perceived by teachers and students as sufficient success for



gifted students resulting in premature cessation of the particular investigation or study, as well as acceptance of indicators of success that are too cursory or simplistic” (Kaplan, 2002). As I observed the 8th grade advanced humanities classroom at Pacific Cascade Middle School, taught by veteran teacher S.K., I thought about the ways that he was differentiating in the areas of thinking skills and content acquisition. He was artfully helping students get beyond the simple definitions and required standards, and was helping them make connections to the world they live in.

Basic Information, Technology and Selection for the Program

Pacific Cascade Middle School (PCMS), the school that I currently teach in, is located in the Issaquah School District; and is a public school. The total enrollment of the school is just over 900 students. The class I chose to observe was 8th grade advanced social studies, which is part of the advanced humanities block (combined with advanced language arts). The fifth period class that I chose to

observe had a total of 22 students, with 6 boys and 16 girls. There were 18 Caucasian students, 2 East-Indian students, and 2 Asian students. Since there was only one instructor for this class, there was a 22:1 student-teacher ratio; but the average ratio for humanities classes at PCMS is roughly 30:1; so this class represents an exception, not the rule. Prior to PCMS becoming a middle school, Stan Kasemeier taught 9th grade honors in both English and Social Studies. He is in his 32nd year of teaching, and his knowledge and expertise of advanced humanities is what led me to observing his classroom.

Although students used to have to qualify for the advanced humanities program, this year is the first year that the Issaquah School District has implemented self-selection. If students, and their families, think that they are able to handle the workload and rigor of the class; they are allowed to select advanced humanities. Therefore, it is not technically a “gifted” population, although there are many gifted students in the program.

Pacific Cascade Middle School has access to three computer labs, digital cameras, a TV studio (with a green screen), document cameras, and many teachers have also started using iPads in their classrooms. S.K.’s classroom has five desktop computers in the back of the classroom, and a document camera in the front of the classroom. Looking around his classroom, I noticed that he also has the classroom goals posted, excellent student work posted on the walls, a daily trivia question, and the desks are in rows.

Curriculum

In the Issaquah School District, the scope and sequence for 8th grade social studies includes American history from colonial times to post-Civil War. Students use the text, Call to Freedom, published by Holt, Rinehart, and Winston. 8th graders, at PCMS, also participate in the Junior Achievement curriculum; which focuses on teaching students economic skills that they can use as they move into adulthood. Through the Junior Achievement curriculum, students learn about taxes, the stock market, and balancing a budget. At the end of the unit, 8th graders take a trip to JA Finance Park, where they participate in a real life simulation regarding family and financial planning.

Classroom Observations

When I arrived at S.K.'s 5th period classroom on November 15th, 2013, I was greeted by many familiar faces; since I had taught many of the students in the class when they were 6th graders. There was an agenda under the document camera that stated that students were going to finish their "road to revolution" discussion and work on JA prep.

At the beginning of the period, S.K. started by asking some lower level review questions about the colonies near the beginning of the Revolutionary War era. Students were getting ready to study the events that led up to the Revolutionary War, and S.K. asked them, "What two colonies stand out during this time period?" and "What people stand out during this time period?" During this initial discussion, some students raised their hands and some just called out the answer; but even when some students were calling out answers, all students seemed engaged and on topic. After a basic discussion about the impact the Virginia and Massachusetts colonies had on revolutionary attitudes, S.K. focused the discussion on Patrick Henry and the Sons of Liberty. Initially, when S.K. asked, "Who was Patrick Henry?" very few hands went up. Instead of calling on the few students who did have their hands raised, he asked them to take out their notes; and gave them a good amount of wait time before asking the question again. This increased wait time allowed more students to engage their minds and think about the question being asked.

After this initial discussion, S.K. moved the discussion towards a more controversial topic and asked the student whether or not Patrick Henry and the Sons of Liberty had committed treason. This type of question was definitely moving students beyond basic definitions and helping them think about the deeper issues of what it meant to commit treason - even if today we think of the Sons of Liberty as heroes.

Next, S.K. shifted gears and asked students to get out their definitions of terrorism, which apparently had been assigned as homework the night before. Before he shared his own definition, he asked a few students to share the definitions that they had found. Although some of the definitions differed a little, most of them focused on the Wikipedia definition, which states, "Terrorism is the systematic

use of violence (terror) as a means of coercion for political purposes.” After defining the term “coercion,” students compared and contrasted their differing definitions of terrorism and discussed related questions such as, “What might we use terrorism? Political reasons? Religious reasons?” and “What impact does fear have?” In order to relate the discussion to current events and get students to think about the concept of terrorism within realms of history that has impacted their generation, S.K. had students think about how lives have changed since 9/11 and the impact that terrorism can have on the world. During this part of the discussion, one student asked about Al Qaeda; and S.K. took a moment to explain Al Qaeda and discuss the topic of extremists.

After students agreed on a common definition of terrorism, S.K. refocused them on the topic of the Sons of Liberty and asked them, “Were the Sons of Liberty terrorists?” For a moment, the room was quiet as students began to think about the definition of terrorism in a new context. In order to get students moving and thinking critically about their answers, S.K. asked students create a continuum line representing their thinking. Students who thought that the Sons of Liberty were not terrorists were directed to the far left, and students who thought that they were terrorists were directed to the far right. Students were on the fence could fill in along the line. The majority of students went to or near the left side of the classroom, but a few students found themselves on the right side of the classroom.

During the ensuing discussion, students passionately debated whether or not the Sons of Liberty were terrorists, and brought up issues such as; the importance of perspective and the idea that witnesses of the same event often have different interpretations. S.K. skillfully led a discussion where students occasionally raised their hands, but often did not; however students seemed very engaged in the discussion and able to monitor their involvement so that they were not talking or yelling over each other. Throughout the discussion, S.K. asked higher-level thinking questions to get students to dig even deeper into the issue. Two examples of questions include, “Are you saying that violent tactics are ok if the situation calls for it?” and “Can two people with differing positions both be right at the same time?” Near the end of the discussion, S.K. called on students who had been

quieter during the discussion, and I could tell that this was his strategy to adapt to individual needs and involve students who may be shy.

Evaluation

During the time that I was observing this classroom, there was no formal student evaluation. Students were evaluating their own opinions, however, throughout the debate; and some students changed their opinions throughout or at the end of the discussion.

Self-Appraisal

Gifted students should be answering and discussing questions that deal with higher levels of thinking, or the top three categories of Bloom's Taxonomy (Analysis, Evaluation, Creation). The lesson that I observed dealt with controversial issues and questions without a right or wrong answer. These types of questions require students to defend their position and critique the positions of others. Therefore, this was a highly appropriate task for this 8th grade advanced Social Studies class.

Throughout my endorsement classes at Whitworth, we've discussed the importance of engaging gifted students with problem solving tasks and higher-level thinking questions. Instead of defining "terrorism" for the students, S.K. had the students discuss and create their own definition as a class; based on research they did at home. During my observation, I could not help but admire S.K.'s ability to lead a debate with gifted students and motivate all students to participate.

References

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