

## Studying the Learner

### Part I

On this first field experience, I observed a variety of activities in a fifth grade classroom. I learned that I didn't like looking for what a student does not know. Knowledge doesn't just happen. It occurs through connections and discoveries of how new information fits with previous experience and knowledge. When you learn what a student knows, you have a starting place for the new information, an avenue to introduce it and a way to connect with the student.

Having to look at what a student doesn't know forced me to be a troubleshooter. My student didn't know what to do in the exemplar in math (Appendix A). She tried a novel approach, which she abandoned when time grew short. However, I thought about her quick decision that she needed to use props and realized that this revealed a lot about her as a learner. She needed her problem to be concrete. She lacked a way to organize the information and to even figure out what she needed to know to tackle the problem, but that revealed a place to begin. Since I didn't yet know that she was a good reader I wondered if comprehension difficulties had inhibited her access to the problem. Looking at what she didn't know ended up informing me in this observation. But it required me to go beyond just noticing if she couldn't do a task. It required looking at what she actually did and how she did it and then examining what that might reveal about her as a learner.

The second day was a little easier. I learned that my student is a good decoder, so I could refine my hypothesis of the day before. I also learned about my student's strengths, such as how well she works in small groups and her leadership skills, both of which can be used to support her as a learner.

### Part II, A: Question

I wanted to investigate what strategies students use to help them comprehend information they are reading (or hearing). Duckworth's article offered interesting ways of looking at students for evidence of how they construct meaning. For instance, I thought that I would be able to understand how students work things out by looking at their writing or other artifacts they use to express or explain their understanding. This turned out to be fruitful.

The student I chose approached me first. Because she was curious and friendly I decided to use her to look at my question. Her outgoing personality made me hope that she would be responsive to my questions if I decided to interview her. My student is a 3<sup>rd</sup> grade girl

Will  
be  
used  
to  
look  
at  
the  
student's  
writing  
and  
other  
artifacts

Will  
be  
used  
to  
look  
at  
the  
student's  
writing  
and  
other  
artifacts

whose first language is Spanish. She has never been in the English Language Learners (ELL) program at her school, having demonstrated sufficient verbal language skills on entrance to school in kindergarten. She is the youngest of three daughters, all of whom had the same 3<sup>rd</sup> grade classroom teacher.

## Part II, B: Methods

I used a number of techniques to obtain data from this field experience. The first method I employed was to make a narrative observation. I recorded everything that was going on. The advantage of the narrative <sup>was</sup> ~~what~~ that I could record without trying to draw any conclusions. I didn't notice it at the time, but it was clear from my notes that there was a qualitative difference in her engagement and participation during some subjects.

I also questioned (interviewed) the student. I asked the student to explain to me what she was doing, how she was doing it and why. When I asked questions, I could engage with her and push her to explain to me what she was doing as specifically as she could. If I didn't understand, I would just ask another way, until we were both clear about what she was saying. My purpose in the interview was to try to clarify some understandings about her learning that I was developing. I had a hunch about her strategies and I wanted to see if I could confirm my hunch. In addition, I thought that she would use explanations that made sense to her and that would reveal how she made sense of phenomena.

In addition to the narrative observation and the student interview, I interviewed the teacher. I was really curious about the student's English proficiency and her previous work and wanted teacher input about those areas. I arranged to collect writing samples (Appendix A). I read several students' notebooks in order to have some reference for evaluating her work (peer referencing).

## Part II, C: Data Analysis

I made a hunch about my student based on evidence from three teaching sessions. The first was a math exercise where the students were working as a whole class on using math manipulatives (100's blocks) for double digit addition. They were constructing problems using the blocks and then by combining and trading, they created their answers to the problems (Appendix B). My student did not combine and trade. She used her manipulatives to count, but did not conceptualize the exchange process, where 10 ones are exchanged for one 10. Instead, she used her ones as toys, essentially concealing the concept (place value arrangement of cubes). Although the teacher pressed her to trade when she passed by the student's table, the student never initiated a trade. I was

Very clear sense of your purpose or method

Nice - a "think aloud"

uncertain whether or not the student understood the directions, or if she did not understand place value.

The students next moved to paper and pencil computation. I was curious how my student would connect what she was doing with manipulatives to what the problems looked like on paper. Again, the concept of trading was reinforced. Problem:  $16 + 45 = 61$ . If you add  $5 + 6$  and get 11, what do you do? You trade 10 of the 11 ones for a ten and record the remaining one in the ones column. The ten is recorded above the tens column. The students were given six problems to finish. My student again spent some time on her name, (giving her neighbors a head start), then began writing answers without pause. I watched her eyes and she was copying her neighbor's paper. When the teacher asked for a volunteer to explain the answer to a problem, she raised her hand. The problem was  $35 + 57 = 92$ . When the teacher said, what is the sum of  $5 + 7$ , my student said 2. The teacher prompted her to correct herself, and when she did not, the teacher filled in for the student that it was actually 12, not 2. Because the student copied, she did not have the process in her head. However, she was confident enough to raise her hand to contribute, which makes me wonder about what she can actually do. At this point I remained suspicious that she did not understand place value. However, the next day's math activity made me reconsider.

The student came in and quickly completed a sheet of double digit problems that were used as a warm up. I watched her work, using her fingers to count. She worked confidently. I was really confused about what she knew. I felt I needed to interview her. During the course of the interview the student expressed a differentiation in her understanding between the two exercises. The manipulatives were perceived as a counting tool. The student did not make the connection between the ones and tens and the arrangement of numbers in a written problem. She understood how to perform the math problem with pencil and paper, without really understanding the concept. She used the manipulatives for counting, but didn't understand their representative purpose.

I had another opportunity to observe the student's learning. The whole class had read a book together and they were divided into small groups of 3 or 4 and given one vignette from the story to dramatize. This was a favorite activity of the students and they were very excited. My student and her two partners read and reread the section they were to perform. They decided what they wanted to dramatize and how they were going to do it. They actually memorized dialogue and my student included actions that she drew from illustrations in the story (a girl peering at a scale as she weighed vegetables in the market). After the preparation time, which was only about 15 minutes, each group performed their play for the class. Kids responded to each group's play saying what they

noticed about the action and how it illuminated the story for them. An example of a constructive comment was, "when the visitors knocked on the door, the woman just started talking to her visitors. It would have helped if she had opened (pretended to open) the door first." This illustrated how well they attended to each performance and showed also that they knew the story. Many of the students memorized lines from the book. Some students had a whole repertoire of lines from the numerous books they had dramatized during the course of the year. I think that for many kids, this is a terrific way of connecting with a story, and making sure they understand it. I was very impressed with this activity, especially since it allowed me to see my student reveal what she comprehended from the story. The fact that she took much of her interpretation from illustrations made me think about her knowledge of vocabulary and other reading comprehension skills. She is obviously a very bright girl. I like how she uses so many strategies during a typical school day. However, I don't think that all of her strategies serve her well (for instance, copying).

Nice detail

How do you know this?

### Reflection

When I interviewed the teacher she described this student as one of her brightest. She said she was a good reader and that she made connections during reading that indicated good comprehension. She said her biggest obstacle at school is a lack of family support. She said the father did not believe that girls need education so there was little support from home for learning and the student rarely did her homework. Because of this, the teacher had decided to assign the student to a mandatory after-school homework session. Because a special school bus runs at 4:10, everyone assigned is able to participate.

I have been concerned for some time about students whose first language is not English. I know that young children can quickly become fairly adept in a second language, but the abilities to decode and speak are not sufficient for the challenges of intermediate school. I know that vocabulary is very important to accessing informational texts. I also know that checking comprehension when vocabulary is limited is a burdensome task. I am very interested in understanding challenges of learning in a second language and how a teacher can support such a learner. I also want to develop strategies for supporting literacy and developing vocabulary for these students.

The question I asked was difficult to observe. How a student constructs understanding is a complex process, only part of which can be observed. Much of what a student is doing is internal. It involves cognitive function that reflects the student's cumulative life experience. I think using the variety of techniques, narrative observation, student interview, teacher interview and work samples, was useful. To fruitfully examine even

you're so right - you're thinking aloud"

was a great strategy so was as a result of these points!!

That's wonderful - what kinds of questions do you have now?

one of the events I observed would require far more knowledge and skill than I have. Each part of my observation provoked more questions than answers! The narrative was useful because it allowed me to record and later look for evidence that could support claims. I saw that the student confidently raised her hand to contribute in the math exercise. However, I thought she had copied. This made me wonder how she would respond. Even though she was unable to provide the teacher with the correct answer, the teacher supported her answer because, (a hunch) the teacher expected the student to present a correct answer and she filled in for her. This is a transactional dynamic. The teacher's positive expectations of the student, the student's confidence and the actual situation all presented information that conflicted with my hunch that the student did not understand place value, but informed me about the relationship between the student and teacher, the teacher's attitude, the student's ability and my hunch. It would be useful to spend more time observing this student and try to understand more fully what she knows and where the gaps are. I would also like to know why she copies when she seems able to do the work. Does she just lack motivation?

(or simply more time provided a student seems to be in place for sure)

Nice!

I discovered that I have a tendency to jump to conclusions. I really noticed that I looked for quick answers to things I observed. For instance, I looked at my 3<sup>rd</sup> grade student as a non-native speaker of English. However, she has spoken English almost as long as she has spoken Spanish. But my perception colored my view of her and I interpreted some of her challenges as being language based and looked for evidence to support that, her use of visual cues, for instance. The fact is, there was not a lot of evidence to support this view of her and only through examination of her literacy skills, specifically an assessment of reading comprehension (which I think are inherently problematic), could I really shine any light on this area.

My caution to myself is to be more of a kid watcher, to suspend judgment, and to let a case build, to look at the data and see what it tells me. I learned a lot during this observation, not the least of which is how much fun it is to be a kid watcher. I am looking forward to my second field experience.

~~Handwritten scribbles~~

~~Handwritten scribbles~~

by you, I'm sure a good deal of background knowledge about students is needed for this project. As a result, your questions, insights, data analysis, and conclusions are clear & compelling.

... general framework of teacher -  
... watching seems to be