

Child Study: Finding Genius in Middle School

Integrated Seminar

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*“Kids there are all in socially awkward stages, that the drama every day can be frustrating. And girls write things that are someone likes so and so. And then no matter who you are, or what you do, you'll get made fun of for it. Anything, anything in the world you can get made fun offor.”*

Former Middle School student, Annie, during “This American Life” Podcast © 2011 Chicago Public Media & Ira Glass<sup>1</sup>

On Tuesday, October 11, 2016, during an Integrated English Language Arts class, students were listening to a “This American Life” podcast about the middle school experience. It was a double period, meaning that for two school periods the students have the same class. Students were also working on finding significant moments in the podcast that provided evidence supporting the gist. I was working at Table One, which is where Adam<sup>2</sup>, and his good friend Nathan are sitting together, with two other students, Destiny and Chelsea. As they sat in a cluster, I rotated from student to student, working more intensively with Adam and Nathan, who have difficulty staying on task. Both students have Individualized Education Plans, and times require teachers to explicitly model what is necessary. For this reason, I begin to run the bottom of a pencil along the lines of the podcast’s transcript. As he underlined, and placed exclamation points at significant or important moments, I was able to conduct an informal assessment of his comprehension. He was choosing the right moments of the script as significant. Though Adam has difficulty staying on task, he demonstrates exemplary understanding of text. For this reason, as the Special Education Integrated Co-Teacher was leading a discussion regarding finding the gist, I encouraged Adam to raise his hand. I wanted him to feel successful. A few students answered the question in completion. One student mentioned that when kids are developing it can be socially awkward, citing former middle schooler Annie’s statement. Adam’s hand was still raised, and after a minute, he was waving. The teacher acknowledged him, but changed the

<sup>1</sup> All quotes in grey are derived from “This American Life” Podcast, Episode 449: Middle School, which first aired October 28, 2011 © 2011 Chicago Public Media & Ira Glass

<sup>2</sup> All names and have been changed to protect the identity of those observed for the purposes of this study.

question, to, “What does socially awkward mean?” Adam answered, “Well, it’s me.” She smiled, and I laughed. She repeated the question. He repeated, “It’s me.” She then amended the question by asking, “Can you provide a definition?” His response, “Adam.”

This was the most I had witnessed Adam participate in ELA since the start of school.

As we continued to work on comprehending the podcast, I told Adam, “I really like how you are thinking about this, and your process in figuring out the answer.” He leaned over and told me, “Miss, it’s ‘cause I’m actually trying to focus.” He does not use my name. He has trouble remembering names, but is able to recall faces. This may be due to his Attention Hyperactivity Disorder, which may affect working memory. Therefore, Adam may have difficulty recalling both a name and a face at the same time, which is a function of working memory (Hinshaw and Ellison, 2015).

This is Adam, a 13 year-old seventh grader, attending middle school in a low-income and working class neighborhood of North Brooklyn, with over 100,000 residents, and 65% of the population is Hispanic. He lives with his mom, dad, and 11-year-old brother, who is autistic. Adam and 69% of the students at this school identify as Hispanic, 28% are Black, two percent are white, and one percent are Asian. Adam is a fair-looking Hispanic. At times this causes tension. On a Tuesday in December, he is sitting at a lunch table that is separated by race. The Black students are on the left, and the Hispanic students are on the right. Adam tells me that the other students have made him uncomfortable because whenever a problem arises at lunch they always blame him. “They never say it to them,” he exclaims pointing to his best friends Nathan, Ronald, and Eve, who are darker skinned Hispanics. “They blame me because I look white.” One student answers, “No, it’s because you are rude.”

Adam is often blunt and direct when communicating with others. I also acknowledge that

his personal style can be difficult for students and adults to process. He speaks to me about race, even distinguishing for me the difference between a white person dabbing [a gesture incorporated into a dance that involves raising your arm and elbow while dropping your head] versus a Black person. Whereas others may view this as offensive, it demonstrates to me Adam's ease and comfort in communicating about topics such as race. He will also say, "I'm not trying to be offensive." He is aware that his style of communication is not always accepted by others, and works to adapt. This is a visible process where he will begin to speak, then pauses, and continues. His level of self-awareness demonstrates a great level of socio-emotional intelligence.

*We look FOR THE SYSTEMS WE ARE IN TO LOVE US, AND THEY ARE INCAPABLE OF DOING THAT. THINGS LIKE LOVE AND CARE WILL NOT COME OUT OF THE SYSTEM. WHERE DO WE GO TO FIND THOSE THINGS? (My personal notes from a June 2016 – Developing Relational and Positive Approaches to Challenging Behavior Course.)*

Adam has had a difficult day. Prior to the afore mentioned lunchroom interaction a student walked up to him and told him he was stupid. He recounted to me, "It's because Matthew sounds intelligent. I don't sound intelligent. I don't know how to sound intelligent." As a teacher, this situation causes me to wonder about two things: (1) What tools does Adam have to negotiate social interactions, and (2) What does intelligence sound like?

Outside of his group of friends, known as the "Randoms," for the seemingly random things they say, Adam needs better skills at negotiating social interactions with peers in and out of the classroom. In a conversation with the Special Education teacher, who is also the school's inclusion facilitator we both agreed that Adam is a diffuse, rather than a linear thinker. His non-sequential thinking style makes it difficult for students to grasp what he is saying. He has already reached highly complicated conclusions before some students have had an opportunity to create mental theses. This appears disjointed, but as adults we recognize the profound thoughts, and thematic connections. In a TEDxQuinnipiacU Talk, Theo Siggelakis describes his brain working

like hyperlinks, and “seemingly *random* [emphasis mine] topics transition fluidly in four clicks.”

Adam and his closest three friends make seemingly random connections but understand one another, holding conversations that they find to be quite humorous, hence the name random.

Secondly, dominant society has made intelligence into something that is purely academic, typecasting students who do not fit into a particular mold. How has the social constructivist model of intelligence and behavior led to a deficit-based mentality about students like Adam?

My response is to tell Adam that he is intelligent, that there are multiple expressions of intelligences. I tell him, that he is not stupid. He answers, “I am stupid.” “Who tells you that?” I tell myself I’m stupid, every day.” In order to teach Adam, I must realize that he needs support in the area of his emotions. He at times feels vulnerable and helpless, and needs to feel safe. Steven Levy, author of *Starting From Scratch: One Classroom Builds Its Own Curriculum* writes,

If children recognize that we have seen their genius, who they really are, they will have the confidence and resilience to take risks in learning. I am convinced that many learning and social difficulties would disappear if we learned to see the genius in each child and then created a learning environment that encourages it to develop (*as cited in* Sousa, and Tomlinson).

In order for my instruction of Adam to be successful I must be cognizant of what his “genius” is; it is also extremely important that I verbalize to Adam that he is intelligent, and can develop different intelligences through effort. Even if he does not yet remember my name, he will remember that I believed in him, and appreciated him as a person.

*This is the time of biggest growth for a human being, aside from infancy. So your bones are growing faster than your muscles, so you can't actually sit still.*

- Linda Perlstein, author of *Not Much, Just Chillin': The Hidden Lives of Middle Schoolers*

Adam is a “typical” teen, he is rapidly transforming into an adult, having grown at least two inches in the past three months. He is healthy in appearance, with full cheeks, dark auburn hair, and wide brown eyes. In my analysis of Adam, I find that his large eyes are representative

of the depth and breadth of the awareness he has about himself, others, and the world. His physical development is marked by the very real phenomena of “growing pains.” He often exhibits signs of restlessness, tapping his pen on his desks, shifting in his seat, moving his legs up and down, or bending them at the knee, and using his knees to play what at times appears to be a game using the desk as an instrument. His evolution into manhood at times manifest in the extreme, or presents as listlessness. In the Integrated ELA Co-Teaching classroom where I most often encounter him, he will say, “I’m tired,” “I’m not comfortable,” “It’s too cold,” or “My lead hurts, and I can’t even think.” He is affected by sudden changes to his environment. He fluently articulates his experience of physical pain, and discomfort, which may be a direct result of his body’s process of physical maturity. Adam’s vocalizations demonstrate intuitiveness, self-awareness, and intelligence.

He makes very expressive faces, and will move someone’s hand if he deems it too close. His IEP says that he is a, “shy student who rarely initiates conversation with students when collaborating with others in a large group, academic related environment.” My observations of him have led me to believe a little differently. He may present as shy, but I believe he is reserved in interactions if he is not comfortable. He says, “Thank you,” when you speak to him about a serious topic.

*Sarah Koenig: Is this the first time in your life where you felt like you've been sad about something for this long?*

*Leo: I think so, except for maybe when my other cat died, my old cat.*

*Sarah Koenig: And does this feel worse than that?*

*Leo: Yes. I've never had long periods of sadness until now.*

One day in the lunch room I provide Adam with a book, *The Lightning Thief*, that I had promised earlier in the week. I told him about the book, that the main character Percy is a kid

who has tremendous difficulty with school. In an attempt to meet Adam's holistic needs pedagogically, this book may be able to engage him as a struggling informational reader. For example, the character states, "I wondered how she could say that. What was so great about me? A dyslexic, hyperactive boy with a D+ report card, kicked out of school for the sixth time in six years."

Each night for homework, students in ELA are required to choose one of six menu items, answering questions in detail. This is another way of saying writing tasks, which include summarizing, making inferences, personalizing, and making connections or generalizations about a book. Adam is having great difficulty in writing summaries or completing the required task as evidenced by his homework. Specifically, Adam's writing demonstrates that he is experiencing trouble creating simple and compound sentences. Homework checks have also led to the conclusion that he is making up stories; he does not cite an author, or book title. His hand writing is often difficult to decipher. A curricular modification, which will not change the performance criteria, could be the use of a word processor. This would allow him to feel successful and not use his self-described "bad" handwriting as a psychological or physical impediment to participation.

The writing also references his personal life. An ELA IEP goal is that within one year, Adam will be able to write a four paragraph essay, which includes a thesis, evidence, and analysis of the evidence. The stories were vivid, and though they were short demonstrated a depth of socio-emotional cognizance. He wrote about depression, and his family. His September 20<sup>th</sup> journal described that his family was going through a dark period. I asked him about it (and later followed up with the teachers of record). Being that he could not speak as a result of losing his voice he wrote all his answers to my questions down, and would then erase. He ended the

conversation by nudging my hand, and writing, “Thank you,” on a page in his note book and promptly erasing it. His choosing an assignment that fit him, provided evidence that although Adam struggles with sentence structure and organization, writing outside of a prompted assignment provides the opportunity for him to organize his feelings and communicate coherently and creatively.

Adam is adept at description. I believe that students should be assigned homework, yet still provided with agency. Providing him with a book which addresses issues that are very real to middle school students: those of identity, family, spaces, places, acceptance and rejection would potentially allow Adam a point of relation. About a month later he came to me to return the book saying he did not like it; I forgot to take the book back. On a Thursday in December when I asked him about getting my book back, I discovered he still had it in his back pack saying, “I changed my mind, I like it; I’m reading it.” What I find interesting is that though he is reading the book, he does not use it for his writing journal. This book is strictly for pleasure, and not pragmatic. Adam was able to disrupt his own negative schema about writing about books but choosing when to read for informational/classroom requirement purposes versus enjoyment.

As previously stated, when provided with specific prompts he is not always able to engage with the activity at the appropriate grade level. Though it is imperative that he learns the fundamentals of writing structure, he needs to begin to write.

Writing is a multifaceted communication tool used throughout a lifetime in varied situations, personally, academically, and professionally (Graham, Gillespie, & McKeown, 2012; Graham, 2006). In a school setting, students are graded on how well they write; transitioning into the workplace, writing can make a difference when they apply for employment or promotion (Graham, 2008). Generally, one improves at writing by writing (Kent, 2012) (*as cited in*, Kent and Brannen, 2016).

A way to elicit participation is to allow him to keep a personal writing journal, and

continue to deepen his critical thinking skills. Constructing content within Adam's zone of proximal development will allow him to feel successful and may have the ripple effect of increasing confidence, which may increase classroom participation. Adam is teaching me how to be purposeful in my thinking and practice of helping students build the most important attitude that can be formed, which educational philosopher John Dewey described as the desire to go on learning (1938).

*But your brain, your gray matter-- during the middle school years, what happens in your early stages of puberty is this fast overproduction of brain cells and connections, far more than you actually need. And only some of them are going to survive puberty. This growth in your frontal cortex, it peaks at 11 for girls and 12 for boys. And then what happens is the cells just fight it out for survival. And the ones that last are the ones you exercise more.*

-Linda Perlstein

As I undertake this professional inquiry, I ask the question, "How can I use information about Adam's sensory difficulties to improve instruction," to center my practice as a teacher. Observations have led me to believe that in order to help Adam make strides and take responsibility for his own learning, I must employ the dynamics of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. What drives a student's motivation? What gets a student engaged? On November 11<sup>th</sup>, students participated in a class trip to the Morgan Library. Starting in September, once a week, students have been working on what is being called, "The Morgan Library Book Project," during their Integrated 7th grade ELA class. Their class has been selected, or agreed to participate in a city-wide year-long challenge of creating children's books. Students are required to create textual and illustrative context.

At the start of our tour, the guide Ben was speaking to students in the museum atrium. All students were seated on the floor. Adam was sitting cross-legged to the left of the guide. His head was down most of the time, with a red-hooded sweatshirt pulled over his face. As Ben

describes the history of the building we are occupying, students look around. In comparison, Adam appears disinterested. Later, as students explore JP Morgan's study, Adam sits on the floor and does not look up.

Following or tracking a speaker provides critical visual cues, allowing teachers to informally assess students' attention. I know that Adam is cognizant of what is happening during class, because awareness is one of his strengths. Over time, I have learned that Adam is frequently paying attention, yet may not be readily engaged by the material. He will make statements including "I can't focus," yet display behavior that contradicts those assertions. For example, in ELA class he will pop up with an answer after his head has been down on his desk. Adam's "apparent" interest evolved during our class trip, peaking when the group was in the library's East Room. During that time, Ben introduced the Silk Road, Marco Polo, and how colors come from bugs. Adam suddenly sat up, having previously been slouching, not tracking Ben while he was speaking to the circle of students. He goes from sitting in a cross-legged style to leaning forward on his knees. He appears excited; He exclaims loudly, and reaches out for the objects. In that moment I witnessed Adam's engagement with the topic at hand. In *Enhancing Student Learning in Middle School*, Martha Casas describes engagement as, "...the intertwining of both behavior *and* human emotions such as enthusiasm, interest, and satisfaction (2010). Motivation is different in that it is connected to habits of behavior such as persistence and effort (Casas, 2010).

This instance provides pertinent information about how Adam learns. Instruction must be made tangible. In a similar case, during an English class, as I explained the concept of appositives to him during a 1:1 interaction he told me, "Why couldn't they explain it like you did, so that I could understand?" That occurrence served as a hint to me regarding his mode of

thinking and learning. I explained appositives using metaphors, painting a picture, which portrayed meaning. In the article, *Learning from Objects: A Future for 21st Century Urban Arts Education*, the author states that it is important to connect learners' bodies with their minds (Lasky, 2009).

*This is what the research shows, that in middle school, you listen to peers more than you listen to anybody else.*

-Ira Glass

Adam is also at times motivated by competition. Following the October 27<sup>th</sup> parent teacher conferences, which was attended by Adam's best friend Nathan, there was a noticeable increase in the quality of the work Nathan completed. Every weekday that I was present in the classroom, Nathan would ask, "Ms. St. Jean, is my work getting better?" He would be visibly disappointed if he received back homework having not achieved the highest possible score. At this time, students were also learning about high school requirements, and many were exhibiting anxiety about the high school admissions process. Nathan was seated directly next to Adam, until Nathan told me "Miss, it may be helpful if we are separated." He went on to explain that they would both complete better work apart. I reported this to the Special Educator and ELA content teacher. Seats were rearranged in November, and Adam and Nathan were moved to two different clusters positioned diagonally to Ms. Dream's desk. As Nathan, began to participate more, I noticed that Adam began to withdraw. Adam became less interested in participating. I would catch him watching Nathan ask for help. Adam is competitive, and did not want to be left behind. Taking his cues from his friend, he too began to try harder when completing homework.

I read about what was occurring at PERTS, a Stanford University Center that applies research in education. I began to write in student notebooks that I 100% believed and knew they could do better work. I began to reinforce that verbally. In recently speaking to the Special

Educator we both noticed that his work has improved. During a Socratic Seminar on gender variance Adam was able to articulate that generational differences in ideas exist, which is something that his peers were unable to express. As teachers we can continue to reinforce his progress. One suggestion is to mention Adam at a grade team meeting, and recommend that we all begin practicing verbal reinforcement of positive academic behaviors in our classrooms. If this is implemented across the 7<sup>th</sup> grade team he may experience further success.

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– Linda Perlstein

Students like Adam demonstrate the critical importance of experience. In order to care for Adam, I must account for his ADHD specific needs. He cannot be included if an acknowledgement of his disability is excluded from the educational process. A well drafted Individualized Education Plan exists to be a help, not a hindrance. During the October Parent-Teacher Conference I found out that Adam was given the choice of whether or not to take his medication. Every morning his mother leaves it out, and every morning he does not take it. It appears he does not like the mental, physical, or emotional effects of the drugs, and would rather be without them. Instead of pathologizing, the other teachers and myself can be thoughtful in our approach. We can collaborate with Adam, and his family in integrating supports that are not medicinal. Adam's difficulty with using prompts, and staying on task are a result of neurological difference, this means we must find other approaches. As he cannot always expect 1:1 assistance, it may be helpful to teach him explicitly how to self-monitor. One-to-one check-ins are helpful when they are relevant to writing tasks, to ask questions outlined within the ELA lesson plans including, “What makes you say that? Where in the text did you find that? What text evidence

supports that idea? Why is that true?"

One method of self-monitoring includes the use of pre-established signals such as a post-it note placed on a desk. This allows for a silent interaction that would not call attention to Adam, and allows him to initiate tasks, developing the discipline he will need outside of the middle school classroom. This scaffold can be lessened over time as Adam demonstrates increased stamina in the executive functions of task initiation and completion.

In assisting Adam with self-monitoring, his technological strengths may provide a process by which educators can help decrease the cognitive load of tasks such as spelling. The fragmentation between grammar and high-order ideas make for a frustrating on-demand writing experience, as demonstrated through "Do Now" activities, and in-class essays. His IEP states that he "struggles with using proper punctuation and using correct capitalization in his writing." Classwork abruptly ends as Adam struggles with spelling. While he likes to write creatively, this cognitively demanding aspect of the work leads to decreased effort. If assistive technology is embedded into his instructional practice, as an adaptation, he may be willing to do more. Adam is very adept at playing video games. His mother has stated that at home he will play for hours with his dad. Acquiring an electronic pocket dictionary may help Adam with spelling because it is changing the way he is interfacing with academic activity. This is because this type of adaptive technology is unobtrusive, mediating his academic and emotional exchange, by allowing Adam to develop a "facility and confidence with vocabulary (Cunningham, 2009, p. 185)," and hopefully realize that spelling should not be equated with intelligence.

Adam is helping me to continue to formulate my teaching philosophy and answer the question "What can I do today that is best for my students?" In middle school students change rapidly, and continue in the development of multiple intelligences. Adam is a genius, and the

development of “genius” is not spontaneous, it is a process. It may also be a process that is painful as the “growing pains” experienced by some during puberty. Since growth is continuous, every day teachers can work to help students become better versions of themselves, by respecting the place that they are in, and seeing potential.

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