Psychology Applied Essay, Research Paper

The Classroom

I was placed in an eighth grade English class that is an inclusion classroom. Inclusion classrooms are general education classrooms that include children with special needs. These classrooms typically have one subject oriented teacher and one special education teacher. The classroom I was assigned to had an English teacher (Mrs. V.) and a Special Education teacher (Mrs. S.). The English teacher gave the day to day assignments and instructed the class, while the Special Education teacher acted as a resource teacher for all of the students. There were three different classes held during the school day and each class contained it s own culture, norms and rules. The classes are scheduled for two periods and have five-minute breaks in between each class. The school uses skills testing to place the student in a particular class setting that is closest to the student s ability. The schedule of the classes is as follows:

Class #1 Periods 1 and 2 Inclusion class

Class #2 Periods 4 and 6 Inclusion class

Class #3 Periods 7 and 8 Not an inclusion class

The school racial makeup is approximately 60% Caucasian, 20% African American, and 18% Latino American. The first two classes have a higher concentration of African and Latino Americans, while the third class is closer to the school ratios.

Application of Stage Theories of Development

There are several different stage theories in use today. Erikson s theory of psychosocial development, Piaget s theory of cognitive development and the theories of moral development presented by Piaget, Kohlberg and Gilligan; allow for a greater understanding of why the students behave and learn in a particular manner.

According to Erikson s theory, students in the middle school years are experiencing a transition from Erikson s industry vs. inferiority stage to his identity vs. role confusion. This can be seen in all three of the English classes, however it is most visible in Class #3. The students in Class #3 show a greater concern towards their appearance, with all of the students utilizing good hygiene, freshly laundered clothes and conformity to the other student s style. They appear to have a smoother transition, showing signs of emerging identities during discussion and projects while continuing to have some sense of industry or recognition of the relationship between performance and praise. Examples of their discussion include inquiries into the reasoning behind drug use after reading Go Ask Alice, a book about a teenagers drug abuse and the consequences that followed. The discussion amongst the students in Class #3 varied between their own reactions and what they might do in the same situation; and realistic suggestions on what Alice might have done differently. Class #1 and Class #2 had a harder time individualizing the discussion, allowing Mrs. V. to bring up the salient points and then giving safe answers to the questions. Class #1 and Class #2 also had a wider variety of students in transition, with several showing difficulty in the transition. An example of this would be the student (without special needs) who wore his pants inside out, was disruptive in class, did not participate in classroom discussion, and did not seem to understand the purpose of industry or have the ability to obtain appropriate attention. In applying Erikson s theory, it might be said that the student has not successfully conquered the industry vs. inferiority stage and is now struggling with the identity stage, instead forming a negative identity. Using the knowledge of Erikson s theory of psychosocial development, the student could be given tasks that the teacher knew the student was capable of achieving. This would allow the student to begin to see the relationship between successful completion and positive attention. The student could be encouraged to focus on his own abilities versus comparing the student to others, which could cause inferiority. Helping the student experience a sense of industry will allow the student to begin to focus on his own sense of identity without feeling inferior or negative.

In Piaget s theory of moral realism vs. moral relativism, moral relativism looks at intent while moral realism looks at facts. According to Piaget s theory the students in all of Mrs. V. s English classes should be using moral relativism (or moral cooperation). Many of the students show a belief that rules are mutual agreements instead of laws given to them by those in authority. However a few of the students would still be classified as exhibiting moral realism (or morality of constraint). Several of the students in Class #1 could not understand why they were reprimanded for talking in class (the talk centered around plans for after school) and other students were not reprimanded (their conversation was about the assignment).

The application of these theories can help the teacher know how the students reason and why they behave and learn in a particular way. For example, students who have difficulty understanding moral relativism might have a better understanding after discussion that involve making moral decisions. Mrs. V. s discussion of decision-making based on Go Ask Alice would be one way to help the students begin to understand moral relativism. In one section of Go Ask Alice, Alice is placed in a situation where she must decide how to stay away from the kids who abuse drugs. Mrs. V. had the class make decisions for Alice based on some of the scenarios from the book, allowing the students to practice decision making while examining other students responses and comparing it to their own. This will help the students see the effect of decision making, as well as give the student practice in making decisions.

Application of Behavioral and Social Learning Theories

The most popular behavioral theory is B.F. Skinners operant conditioning. The theory suggests that a voluntary response is weakened or strengthened by the consequences that follow. The basic idea behind operant conditioning is that all behaviors are a result of certain consequences and that the consequences determine whether the behavior is repeated. If the consequence is unpleasant or adverse, the behavior will appear less, if the consequence is pleasant or desirable the behavior will occur more. The eighth grade teachers use operant conditioning during the eighth grade lunch. When the students enter the cafeteria, they are expected to sit down at a table and talk quietly. Those students who accomplish this are allowed to get in line for lunch. Those students who do not are required to wait. As a further condition, those students who display good behavior during the morning are allowed to eat outside on nice weather days. The students like to eat outside and strive to earn this privilege. This is an example of positive reinforcement. During this same time, students who have neglected to appear for detentions are sat at a table by the principle. They are not allowed to have lunch with their friends. This would be an example of Skinner s time-out principle. This technique works well for the lunchroom; it establishes firm expectations of behavior and insures the student knows the consequences of not exhibiting that behavior.

Bandura s social learning theory is similar to Skinner s operant conditioning in that it recognizes the use of punishment and reward. However, Bandura differs in the use of observation as a form of learning and lessons the importance of reinforcement as the only means of changing behavior. The techniques used by Mrs. V. involve a combination of the theories. While I observed the use of Skinner s operant conditioning, I also observed the application of Bandura s social learning theory. I noticed that the use of Skinner s theory is kept to situations where time is limited and the class needs to stay structured in order to complete the tasks at hand. Mrs. V. seems to prefer Bandura s theory in other situations and uses it more frequently than operant conditioning. Examples of social learning in the classroom would be at the beginning of class and the students are having a difficult time settling down. Those students who are quiet and ready to begin are given allowed to assist Mrs. V. with different tasks, or they are allowed to go to the pillow area (an area next to the desks with pillows on the floor) for the class. Mrs. V. will generally ignore the students who are not ready for class, and begin to teach the lesson. It generally does not take long for the entire class to be quiet and ready to begin the day s lesson. This approach is also less disruptive because Mrs. V. is not taking time away from the students who are ready to begin.

Conclusion

Psychology is an important aspect of teaching. A good teacher must not only master the academics, but also master the ability to adjust their teaching style in accordance with the individual student. An important factor in accomplishing this is the ability to apply psychology to the classroom and the individual student. For example, Mrs. V. was having problems with a particular student and also noticed a decrease in hygiene (i.e. body odor, dirty clothes), ill fitting clothes, sleeping in class, and staying away from friends. The student was not completing assignments and being very disruptive in class. Mrs. V. was concerned there was a problem in the student s home life that was preventing the student from learning (Maslow s hierarchy theory). Rather than discipline the student and write her off, Mrs. V. referred the student to the social worker asking that the student s home life be looked at for possible needs. The social worker was able to refer the family to various agencies and the student s appearance and performance increased. Mrs. V. s ability to recognize the problem and know the effect of the problem on learning allowed her to help the student learn. This is what teaching is all about.