

Creating a multi-age constructivist magnet school: The challenges, travails, and successes – Part I

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[Editor's Note: This article is the first of a series of articles describing the development, operation, and successes of an entirely new elementary school devoted to the implementation of standards-based constructivist practices for education. Its guiding statements are closely aligned with the objectives of *JPACTe*.]

Abstract

The Ronald Reagan Elementary School opened in September 2005 as a multi-age constructivist magnet school. This article describes how the school was first conceptualized and brought into existence. Subsequent articles will describe the school's successes in its first years of operation.

The Idea

I am the principal of Ronald Reagan Elementary School, one of the public schools in the Lake Elsinore Unified School District located in rapidly-growing Riverside County in southern California. Our school opened its doors in September 2005 to 416 students with 18 teachers, all with prior experience at teachers in our school district.

The concept for our school came from a conversation I had a year earlier with one of the teachers at my previous school. He said, "Wouldn't it be great if the whole school could be a multi-age/constructivist magnet." Of course I agreed, but I thought of all the obstacles that would prevent such a thing from taking place (typical administrator response). My first skeptical thought came from the perspective that magnet schools typically focus on a subject area, e.g., visual and performing arts, science, technology, etc. His idea centered the magnet on an instructional model. I wasn't sure enough parents would find that attractive for their children.

My contribution to the conversation was, “What if we were to include the education department of California State University at San Marcos (CSUSM) in this magnet concept?” We already had a positive relationship with CSUSM because of many student teacher placements and a shared philosophy. I felt the “university connection” was an essential ingredient to our standing in the larger educational community. I also felt it would be the primary reason why parents would be attracted to this type of a magnet school concept. It turns out I was wrong, and that realization will be shared later.

The Proposal

I wrote a proposal and shared it with the Assistant Superintendent of Educational Services. She had me attend the superintendent’s cabinet meeting the following day to share my proposal. After responding to a variety of questions, the Superintendent endorsed the proposal and said to go forward with the planning.

That same afternoon I shared the idea with all the teachers at a staff meeting. The “non-constructivist” teachers were quite upset because they knew it meant they would have to relocate to another school. Several weeks later the superintendent suggested I open the new school and take my constructivist teachers with me. After analyzing the situation for several days, I realized it was the best way to make this idea become a reality.

The University

I spoke with the Dean of Education for the university about developing a partnership, whereby university professors would conduct education classes on our campus, and then have the student teachers assigned to our classes. The idea was readily received because they were actually hoping to find a school site to do just that. The fact that both institutions would share the same educational philosophy was a bonus for both.

School Board Approval

My fifteen-minute planned presentation to the school board regarding the multi-age/constructivist magnet concept ended up lasting 40 minutes. One school board member, a quiet law professor (an oxymoron but nevertheless true) with 16 years on the board, interrupted me by stating, "Finally someone's thinking outside the box. This is the way I've conducted my law class for years. You have my complete support." It was a welcomed surprise.

At the end of my presentation the board president, a retired police officer, asked multiple questions with regard to the multi-age configuration. His daughter had been in a "combination class" in the past and he could not imagine a school designed to have every class like that. It was clear that he was opposed to the idea.

During the following week the board president visited my previous school to see for himself how such a configuration and approach could benefit students. To his credit, he observed and listened to two constructivist teachers with multi-age classrooms and became a believer as a result. At the next board meeting the decision to support my proposal was unanimous.

Teacher Acquisition

I would never have pursued doing this if it weren't for the confidence I had in acquiring the right teachers to implement such a concept. Twelve of the eighteen teachers came from my previous school. They were a known quantity. The other six positions were filled from thirty-three interested teachers from other schools in the district. I did not expect all of them (even among the twelve) to be experts in multi-age and constructivist philosophies, but I did need to feel that at minimum they had a natural inclination toward those philosophies. In essence, I had to determine if they were learner centered or teacher centered in how they conducted a classroom. After many hours of doing interviews, I visited the classrooms of all the transfer candidates I was considering.

Leadership Team

Four of the teachers stood out as exhibiting solid foundational understanding of multi-age and constructivist philosophies. I consulted with them throughout the entire process. These veteran teachers had experience not only as teachers, but as former administrators. They were obvious choices to be mentors for the other teachers and to serve on the leadership team.

Parent Meetings

I began conducting night meetings with parents to advertise our program. I shared all the beneficial elements of multi-age, constructivism, and the university partnership. I had some parents from the past also attend to give testimonials of how their children benefited from the multi-age/constructivist classes we had established years ago. Some of the students themselves shared their positive experiences.

The events were well attended, and the parents were very interested. There were only a small handful of naysayers. Much to my surprise, the concept of having more adults in the classroom to work with students because of the student teachers was not what appealed most to parents. It was the multi-age/constructivist philosophy that grabbed their interest. Either I was beginning to provide better explanations about our educational philosophy, or just the repetition of hearing it so many times from me over the years, the parents seemed to truly understand what I was talking about, and they wanted it for their children.

Pre-Opening Staff Development

The leadership team searched the Internet for staff development opportunities. They discovered the Institute for Learning Centered Education's annual Constructivist Design Conference in Canton, New York. Three of them attended the conference in July 2005. They worked with Jack Drury and Bruce Bonney of

Leading Edge, who were facilitators at the conference. They also worked closely with Don Mesibov, Pat Flynn, and Paul Vermette, all from the Institute for Learner-Centered Education,

Upon their return to California the three teachers provided a two-day inservice to the other fifteen teachers in early August. It was a great start to get us all on the same page.

Guiding Statements

The following statements reflect the understandings, vision, and mission of the Ronald Reagan Elementary School. While these statements were not made explicit until later (and will be revisited annually), they represent the faculty and staff consensus with which the school opened in September 2005.

Consensus Understanding of Constructivism

Constructivism is a theory of learning that informs the organization and practice of our school. As a theory, it uses the best research available on how people learn. The following are highlighted characteristics of the way we work with students and staff.

People learn best when:

- They connect new information to prior knowledge.
- They use higher level thinking skills such as analysis, synthesis, and evaluation.
- They are actively engaged.
- They take responsibility for their own learning.
- They can articulate what they learned and how they learned it.

Belief Statements

As constructivists at Ronald Reagan Elementary School we believe:

- Students deserve adults who will enhance their sense of wonderment, not diminish it.
- Each student is unique and has an individual learning style.
- Student engagement fosters learning and positive behavior.
- Learners make meaning of new ideas based on prior understanding.

- Learners understand—not just remember—when engaged by curiosity, exploration, discovery, and other learners.
- Learners need opportunities to demonstrate understanding.
- Students will develop expectations of themselves: academically, socially and morally.
- Our school promotes an atmosphere where diversity, physical and emotional safety, positive self image and respect are valued.
- Learning is a collaborative effort among community, family and school.
- All members of the learning community benefit from unity in purpose.

Vision Statement

Students will have the expectation to be active participants in a community of learners and they will look forward to each day of school. To accomplish this we will change the educational culture in America from one that is teacher-centered to one that is student centered, from one where the teacher imparts all the information to one where students have to think and construct meaning, from one where students are taught to remember things for a test to one where students must demonstrate their understanding.

Mission Statement

Our students will construct a meaningful education, thus producing a positive difference in their lives, as well as improving the world! The mission of our learning community is to collaboratively transform education by providing a constructivist setting. This setting respects, values and appreciates the individuality of each learner, and creates a sense of wonderment each day.

Part II

In the next issue I will share what transpired after the school opened.