

Supporting and Nurturing Students and Teachers in Grades 3-6

Upper elementary grades are a neglected area of schooling, even as accountability relies on their achievements.

By Christine Finnan

I really could benefit from a professional organization. Some of the magazines focus on younger and others on older students, and I ask, "Where do my kids fit in?" There is a little piece here and there. We get 5th graders reading on a 2nd- or 3rd-grade level, and how do you incorporate that into 5th-grade stuff? You have to take everything and modify it. You ask, "How will I use this, how will I change it?" Even when I'm at a teacher store or a conference, it's all for the little kids. It's not for our kids.

— 5th-grade teacher

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Fifth-grade teachers often express a dilemma I faced as a teacher educator. Unlike early childhood and secondary teachers, very few resources targeted the upper elementary teachers. The paucity of resources became evident to me as I designed a course for preservice teachers that would help them determine if they wanted to teach early childhood, elementary, or middle grades. In selecting readings for each of these levels, I found excellent choices for early childhood and middle level, but nothing targeting the upper elementary grades.

As I joined my future teachers in upper elementary classrooms, I wondered why these important grade levels and fun, energetic, curious, and responsible students were being overlooked. I spent much of the next two years researching and writing a book focused on upper elementary grades and students (Finnan 2009). My initial impression, that few resources are aimed at the upper elementary grades, holds. As Table 1 illustrates, the only support targeted to the upper elementary grade/age span is the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards' (NBPTS) Middle Childhood/Generalist.

The lack of focused attention to these grades is surprising given that these years are pivotal in identifying students who might otherwise drop out of high school, become social isolates or misfits, or disengage from school and other productive activities (Roderick 1993; Scales, Sesma, and Bolstrom 2004). Upper elementary teachers can

■ **CHRISTINE FINNAN** is an associate professor in the Departments of Teacher Education and Sociology and Anthropology at the College of Charleston, Charleston, South Carolina. In addition, she directs *Partners for Acceleration*, a collaborative effort to enhance students' development of accomplishment, belonging, and engagement. She is author of *The Upper Elementary Years: Ensuring Success in Grades 3-6* (Corwin Press, 2009).



Upper elementary teachers can make the difference for students who are teetering between success and failure, acceptance and rejection, and engagement and disengagement.

make the difference for students who are teetering between success and failure, acceptance and rejection, and engagement and disengagement. These teachers understand that part of their responsibility is helping students develop identities as people who are capable of accomplishing challenging goals, who feel they belong in and

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contribute to their social settings, and who are engaged in learning and other important activities. Accomplishment, belonging, and engagement, then, are the critical components of identity development. No teacher can help all students develop positive identities single-handedly, but upper elementary teachers are at a disadvantage because they have had fewer supports than their early childhood and secondary colleagues.

This special section gives voice to educators who are working in meaningful ways to understand the importance of the upper elementary years and the joys

experienced by and issues faced by upper elementary teachers. Each article examines these years and grades through a different lens. It includes discussions of teacher professional identity as defined by the NBPTS, accountability and its impact on upper elementary teaching, effective instruction, assessment, classroom organization, recent research on child development, and children's most important activity—play.

The NBPTS middle childhood/generalist certification provides criteria for professional upper elementary teachers, but how did these criteria come into existence since no organizations lobby for these children? To answer this question, I interviewed **David Mandel and Suzanne Wilson**, who were instrumental in setting the structure for the certification areas and levels. In their joint interview, they reflect on the issues and concerns that surrounded the development of this certification and describe how the knowledge of child development shaped the structure of the generalist certifications.

Since elementary school accountability rests on the performance of upper elementary children, it's surprising that there hasn't been more attention to the needs of these students and teachers. **Lorin Anderson's** article examines the effect of accountability and

high-stakes testing on upper elementary teaching and reaches surprising conclusions. Although policy makers hoped accountability would profoundly change teaching practices for the better, and teachers complain that accountability has changed their practice for the worse, Anderson concludes that accountability has had little effect on key aspects of teaching. He concludes his article with the recommendation that teachers stop worrying about accountability and do what they know is right: engage students actively in learning, emphasize meaningful learning, teach through conversation, and give students time to learn.

If upper elementary children learn best in classrooms that encourage their sense of accomplishment, belonging, and engagement, how do teachers do this? Four articles in this issue provide examples. **Stanley Pogrow** advocates that teachers, es-

TABLE 1.
Professional Supports for Early Childhood, Upper Elementary, and Middle Grades Teachers

Resource	Early childhood	Upper elementary	Middle grades
Professional organizations for teachers	National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC)	None	National Middle School Association (NMSA)
Journals	Eight national journals	No journals specific to upper elementary grades	One national journal
Web sites	www.naeyc.org	None	www.nmsa.org
National Board for Professional Teaching Standards	Early Childhood Generalist (3- to 8-year-olds)	Middle Childhood Generalist (7- to 12-year-olds)	Early Adolescence Generalist (11- to 15-year-olds)
Advocacy for students	NAEYC	None	NMSA

Source: Finnan, Christine. *The Upper Elementary Years: Ensuring Success in Grades 3-6*. Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Corwin Press, 2009, 8.

pecially those teaching children growing up in poverty, actively engage students in meaningful learning so that they see learning as a way to increase understanding. He stresses that this is especially important for students in 4th through 6th grades. He offers what he describes as a “counterintuitive” proposal to focus on developing students’ thinking skills and allowing them to gain and demonstrate knowledge through “outrageous” teaching.

Rick Stiggins encourages teachers to use assessment to build students’ sense of self-efficacy. He contends that teachers can use assessment *for* learning, providing a road map for children to chart their success. In this way, students know what success looks like and that it is within reach. Stiggins contends that students will be willing to take risks to achieve success if they are guided toward it through supportive assessment.

Steve Reifman, a 3rd-grade teacher in Santa Monica, California, takes a very child-centered look at how to make upper elementary classrooms joyous learning environments. He contends that we need to build on students’ energy, enthusiasm, and interest in learning. As he describes it, teaching upper elementary students is about guiding and getting out of the way. In this environment, conventional ideas about rewards and punishments detract from upper elementary students’ innate desire to please and to be successful.

Reading is a special problem in the upper elementary grades. Schools and districts turn to expensive programs and interventions to address the needs of struggling upper elementary readers, often with little or no success. **Anne Gutshall** describes a very “low-tech” approach to motivating struggling readers — sitting side-by-side with a buddy and reading. Gutshall and a team of preservice teachers have been reading with 4th graders at a high-poverty, 100% black, rural school in South Carolina for two years, and the results are impressive. Not only do the 4th graders improve their oral language skills, but they teach preservice teachers that crossing cultural and class lines to read together can be fun and rewarding.

If our goal is to help students develop a positive identity and a belief that they can meet challenges, belong in social settings, and be engaged, what do we need to know about students developmentally? What trends and behaviors are affecting their development? **Diana Coyl** presents a concise summary of key aspects of development during the upper elementary years. She also highlights such issues as obesity, heightened body awareness, media, and technology that have grown in importance in recent years.

Most of us have fond memories of life during the upper elementary years in large part because we were masterful in our play.

Doris Bergen and Doris Pronin Fromberg present a compelling argument for the need to encourage children’s spontaneous play during the upper elementary years. As learning expectations grow and schools feel accountability pressure, many cut back or eliminate opportunities for spontaneous play. Bergen and Fromberg not only advocate for more time for play, but they offer suggestions for teachers on how to encourage play.

This section’s focus on upper elementary years offers a challenge to teachers, other educators, and parents to think more specifically about the joys

and challenges of upper elementary children. As one 3rd-grade teacher said, these children are “active, have lots of energy, are curious, excited about learning, starting to create a self-identity; they are aware of what they are good at and where their challenges are, especially by the end of 3rd” (Finnan 2009). The challenge for upper elementary teachers is to tap into this energy and curiosity and help children build a positive identity so that they retain the characteristics we love about children this age. The remaining question is: Can they do this without support? **K**

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