

Date: 11/11/2005
To: Dr Barry McCombs
Re: Developmental Activities Program
From: Nicolette Winneke Was
CC: Ralph Pruitt

This letter is arriving a lot later than I had hoped it would be, however I have very much wanted to tell you how much I appreciated attending the Developmental Activities Program (DAP) course I went to over the holidays. I wanted to formally thank the School for such a great opportunity for my professional development. I have never learned so much in such a short space of time. Many times when we take courses about teaching they are very theoretical or administrative and it was wonderful to learn techniques that I can truly apply in my classroom for the benefit of my students (and in my home for the benefit of my daughter Hine☺).

For me this program has been like a breath of fresh air. When I first began teaching, I followed the structures and curriculums that were already available as I found my feet in a new profession. As I have studied more about teaching and learned more through experience, I have begun to question why we teach topics in a certain sequence, why we teach them at certain developmental stages, and who makes these decisions and why. While it is certainly not worthwhile to reinvent the wheel, it is certainly worthwhile to think critically about why we teach the things we do and not just sit down and accept that it is the best way. One thing for certain is that given the current amount of information available, it is going to be difficult for our students to memorize all of the facts that are available to them (a number that is steadily increasing), and it is equally difficult for teachers to decide what is and is not valuable information in a constantly changing global society. I believe that science provides an excellent opportunity to learn skills that will allow students to find information as they require it and to develop an ethical conscience so that the decisions they make will have a higher probability of being positive ones.

So often we prepare activities for our students, and we give them grades related to those activities, however rarely do we take a step back and look at whether they have developed the desired thinking structures allowing for their success in the activities.

The mental structures (classes, relations, space, time, number and measurement) that DAP looks at are key to being able to help all of our students achieve the positive results we are looking for, particularly in the field of science where these mental structures are applied so frequently. I think we all know that no one child is like the other as we all develop at different rates. We know this and yet we don't allow our students the liberty of developing at the rate they need to. Instead we try and help them to memorize information when they don't understand it.

With DAP each student works individually allowing us to work out where each individual is and help him/her to improve on his/her own personal scale. The most wonderful aspect of this program is that not only do our students with less developed thinking structures benefit, but so do all of our other students. So often in the classroom we are forced to cater to the ' behind', hopefully challenge the advanced, and have little time available to focus on the majority of our students whom fall in between these two extremes.

The 'sciencing' component of the DAP program is particularly exciting. Science is a little about memorizing facts, but the main part of science is a way of thinking, a way of looking at the world. I am so excited being here at the Colegio Nueva Granada because I have been given the opportunity to do what I think is really science. I have been able to investigate the phenomena of the world with my students through collecting and analyzing data, posing and testing hypothesis, making conclusions and being critical about our own work. It's all wonderful stuff!

Imagine my excitement when I realized that as a school we can do more than this. We can help each child to do this 'science' at their own pace, each child engaged in real science and building logical thinking structures at the same time ... a real recipe for success.

Basically a DAP 'sciencing' laboratory is a space where students are empowered to be responsible for their own learning, allowing them to be absorbed in what they do. One of the basic underlying ideas of the sciencing program is that students develop intellectually at quite different rates, and therefore a grading system that requires students to be at a precise intellectual level at a precise time is not realistic and can often damage the self esteem of young students at such a sensitive age. Sciencing is a highly motivating program and often increases the attention span of even learning challenged individuals as they become engaged in activities they themselves chose. It permits individual and personal involvement with one's own learning at one's own unique level of intellectual development. Therefore, this approach allows in-depth involvement by a wide range of students, from the exceptional student to the gifted to the student with little English or Spanish. All these diverse abilities can be served in a single classroom because the students are treated as individuals.

This year I have an incredible variety of human beings in front of me on a day to day basis. Some of my students have difficulty reading and writing a simple sentence, others challenge me with their incredibly developed minds. Overall, there is a large number of students who are in the learning centre (if I understand correctly a larger proportion than there have been previously). I am very enthusiastic about the possibility of spending my Monday afternoons from 2:05 until 3:30 with many of my students, particularly with those who seem to be struggling in the current science curriculum, applying the Development Activities Program to assess where their logical thinking skills are and enhancing them in any way possible by giving them access to required materials.

While science is not one of the main objectives for school improvement, at this point I would be very interested in presenting an action research project to see if exposure to DAP by students on a regular, weekly basis could achieve results. The main cost involved would be to have the required materials for the program, many of which we already have and others which are inexpensive to purchase.

Obviously the program is not designed this way as it is supposed to be applied in a regular classroom setting with a number of hours set aside purely for its purpose. However, as an investigation it would be interesting to see if some positive results can be gained with the potential of having a more formal introduction of DAP sciencing in the elementary and primary science program in the school.