Teaching the Whole Child

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When you look at your students, what do you see? Gangly kids who can't get out of their own way? Self-confident adolescents with strong opinions? Budding artists and scientists and politicians?

Yet, when you look at your students, is what you see authentic? Is it what your students are or what they want you to see? Is it what they are or what they hope to be?

It's difficult to truly “know” young adolescents because they seem in a constant state of change. Which is as it should be! They are finding their place in the world, and that place can change from day to day—sometimes minute to minute.

They are not trying to find a sense of security and belonging in your classroom—two needs that Ruby Payne identifies in the lead article this month as vital to learning. No, they are on that quest in at least five or six classrooms, in the cafeteria, in the locker room, on the bus, in the halls, at the dance, on the playing field—and that's just when they are at school.

They have an entirely different life outside the school walls that you may never be privy to.

The authors this month help us understand the importance of knowing—and teaching—the whole child, of taking into consideration each student’s physical, emotional, social, and academic “back story.”

Granted, you may only know what your students let you see, but this issue provides strategies you can use to break down some barriers, let students know you care, and implement instructional strategies that recognize that all students bring their own unique perspectives, backgrounds, and challenges to the classroom.

When I think about middle grade students, I'm reminded of a famous line from the movie, Forrest Gump. Please allow me to take a little license here: “Young adolescents are like a box of chocolates—you never know what you are going to get.”

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by Jack Berckemeyer

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News to Use

Interested in Time Travel?
The annual Listen to a Life Essay Contest gives students a chance to time travel as they learn about the past and find direction for their own future. The contest also helps build critical 21st Century skills. Now in its 13th year, this is a powerful learning experience that changes lives and communities.

Students interview an older adult about his or her life experiences, then submit a 300-word essay about what they learned. All winning essays become part of the Legacy Project’s online Legacy Library.

The grand prize is a new computer. All participants receive a certificate of participation.

This national contest is run by the Legacy Project (www.legacyproject.org), and the nonprofit Generations United in Washington, DC. The contest runs until March 22, 2013.

For more information, check out www.legacyproject.org

Help for Students with Allergies
To improve schools’ access to epinephrine when a person experiences an anaphylactic reaction on campus, Mylan Specialty launched the EpiPen4Schools™ Program.

With a valid prescription and certification, schools can receive four free EpiPen® products, instructions for their use, and a training device to teach proper use.

For more information about the program, visit www.EpiPen4Schools.com

Roads to Reading
The Pathways Within Roads to Reading Initiative donates books to literacy programs in small and rural low-income communities. Learn more about the program and see if your community may qualify.

Visit www.pwirtr.org/annual_donation_prog.html

Kids in the Kitchen
KickinKitchen.TV is a groundbreaking web series and online platform for kids ages 8–15 that focuses on healthy eating and cooking. The musical sitcom series mashes together cooking, comedy, and interactivity, and promotes healthful eating and lifestyles.

Check out the series, produced by KidsCOOK productions, at www.KickinKitchen.TV

Healthy Schools Action Kit
The Coalition for Healthier Schools, coordinated by the Healthy Schools Network, recently released its 2012 Action Kit for Back to School and Beyond to help parents and educators advocate for healthier schools through improved federal, state, and local policies.

The kit includes form letters to Congress as well as checklists for schools to assess their own air quality and learn how to clean in a more environmentally friendly way.

Visit www.healthyschools.org/coalition.html to download the action kit.

Change the World
The Siemens We Can Change the World Challenge teaches students to be good stewards of the environment while learning science through project-based learning. The challenge awards more than $300,000 in scholarships and grants, travel adventures, and more.

The challenge is open to all students in grades 6–8 working in teams of two to four with a team advisor/mentor, who must be a full-time or part-time school employee at a school attended by at least one of the student team members.

Teams select a local environmental issue, research the problem, develop a plan of action, implement the plan, analyze the results, and share the project.

Get started today—the Challenge ends March 5, 2013. Or start planning now for next year’s challenge. Go to www.wecanchange.com/middle-school
Let’s Get Healthy!
Let’s Go!, a program of The Kids CO-OP at the Barbara Bush Children’s Hospital at Maine Medical Center, reinforces the importance of healthy eating and exercise. The foundation of the program is 5210. That means 5 or more fruits or vegetables; 2 hours or less of recreational screen time (computer, videogames, television); 1 hour or more of physical activity; and 0 sugary drinks per day.

The Let’s Go 5210 Middle School-High School Toolkit provides a wealth of information, including posters, activities, and resources to help schools get students, the staff, and the community on board.

Visit [www.letsgo.org](http://www.letsgo.org) and download the toolkit today.

High School-Ready Middle Grades Students
How can you help your students get ready for success in high school? The Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) studied school practices and student achievement in 10 middle grades schools from the Making Middle Grades Work networks and identified 10 best practices that most-improved middle grades schools have implemented in their schools in an effort to graduate more students who are ready for high school, college, and careers.

Download the report, [Improved Middle Grades Schools for Improved High School Readiness: Ten Best Practices in the Middle Grades](http://publications.sreb.org/2012/12V05_MiddleGrades_10_Best_Practices.pdf) from [http://publications.sreb.org](http://publications.sreb.org).

Visionary Perspectives
During the past few years, the Learning First Alliance has asked several best-selling authors to describe their ideas for improving public education.

Find out what these authors and other visionary leaders have to say at [www.learningfirst.org/visionaries#leading](http://www.learningfirst.org/visionaries#leading). For example, Kenneth C. Davis talks about the updated anniversary edition of his book, *Don’t Know Much About History*, the role of history in creating informed citizens, and how to teach history in an engaging way. And education authors Charles Schwahn and Bea McGarvey discuss their book, *Inevitable: Mass Customized Learning*, which outlines a system for altering current outdated practices in schools by utilizing customizing technologies to meet individualized student needs.

Positive Youth Development Resources
The Youth-Nex Conference on Middle Schools, held on the campus of the University of Virginia in October 2012, examined developmental issues of early adolescence, the intersection with educational programming, and best methods to promote effective youth development. Topics included Innovative Training and Science for Middle School Education, Developmentally Informing Curricula and Teaching, Students and Peers as Resources, and Making Middle Schools Centers for Positive Youth Development.

You can watch the videos of the presentations and view the PowerPoint slides at [http://curry.virginia.edu/research/centers/youth-nex/youth-nex-conference-on-middle-schools](http://curry.virginia.edu/research/centers/youth-nex/youth-nex-conference-on-middle-schools).

Cut Classroom Costs
Knowing that teachers spend their own money for school supplies, the National Association for the Exchange of Industrial Resources (NAEIR) has launched a new program that allows teachers to reduce their personal expenses by ordering free classroom merchandise.

Items available include paper, pens, crayons, markers, stickers, and arts and crafts materials.

Teachers pay a membership fee of $19 per year plus shipping and handling. For more information, visit [www.naeir.org](http://www.naeir.org).

All links were live at press time.
Executive Director's Note

Multiple Learning Approaches

This month in Middle Ground, I continue the question from my previous columns: Do you believe? By now I hope you have renewed your focus on This We Believe by dedicating yourself to becoming the best middle grades educator you can be and an active advocate for all young adolescents. This month I will explore multiple learning approaches—one of the 16 research-based characteristics of This We Believe: Keys to Educating Young Adolescents, the Association for Middle Level Education’s vision for successful schools for 10- to 15-year-olds.

By the time you read this column, the holidays will have passed, it will be the second half of the school year, and you are probably integrating all the new technology “gifts” that you and your students received over the holidays. In considering these new devices for learning, don’t forget that young adolescents learn best through engagement and interaction. These new tools will allow you and your students to interact with real-world resources, thereby capitalizing on students’ cultural, experiential, and personal backgrounds.

Technology can allow students to dialogue with teachers and with one another about what to study and how to best study the topics selected. Like varying the forms of group work in your classes, proficiently integrating technology throughout the curriculum can increase student engagement while providing an alternate learning and teaching approach.

“Educators in successful middle level schools use multiple learning and teaching approaches.” What are some teaching and learning approaches used in your school that address the diversity of middle grades students? Do staff members regularly incorporate strategies based on these understandings in their classrooms? Is technology used in instruction throughout the curriculum? Are students provided with multiple opportunities to “present” their learning to others? Are instructional groupings flexible for some part of the school day so students can advance as needed?

Given the developmental characteristics of young adolescents, digital technology is not the only teaching and learning approach that can be successful for middle grades students. However, today’s students learn at the speed of their thumbs and fingers, and as educators, we must acknowledge the importance of using technology. And we are finding it imperative to use multiple approaches in our AMLE conferences, programs, and publications. Some educators prefer to communicate with us through social media networks or choose to use technology before, during, and after a conference or program.

Again, I challenge you to make the 2012–2013 school year the year you renew your focus on This We Believe. If you believe, you will provide multiple learning approaches, especially using technology. More information can be found at www.amle.org/twb.

William D. Waidelich, Executive Director
When Discipline Issues Are Emotional Issues

By Ruby K. Payne

Do any of your students repeatedly misbehave despite the fact that you give consequences time after time? Are any of your students prone to avoiding their work? Sometimes we need to approach these kinds of problems as emotional issues rather than discipline issues.

It’s impossible to talk about behavior and learning without talking about emotion. In fact, all learning is double-coded with emotion codes and cognitive codes, according to Stanley Greenspan and Beryl Benderly in The Growth of the Mind and the Endangered Origins of Intelligence.

Think back to a teacher you had in school whom you didn’t like. Chances are, your dislike for the teacher spilled over into a dislike for the subject the teacher taught. Because you didn’t like the subject, you probably didn’t work to your potential in that class. Because emotion is linked to learning, it’s important to understand it. Emotion is based on safety and belonging. When a student is upset, it is likely because of an issue that is related to safety or belonging or both.

Early Emotional Memories

Prior to the age of 9 or 10, we tend to store our emotional experiences in the amygdala section of the brain. The amygdala has a fascinating memory pattern: It has a long-term memory for the feeling but a short-term memory for the incident. So we may know how we feel about something, like a person or place, but we may not know why we feel that way. Our brain stored the emotion connected to that person or place, but not the incident that prompted the emotion. We remembered how certain people made us feel and tended toward similar patterns of behavior around those people because those patterns were comfortable to us.

Furthermore, research by Mary Ainsworth and John Bowlby suggests that bonding and attachment—two elements of our emotions—affect our interactions with others and our beliefs about ourselves. As described in their 1991 American Psychological article, “An Ethological Approach to Personality Development,” they put a young child and parent in a room and then asked the parent to leave. If the child was content to explore the room without the adult present, the child was considered to have a secure attachment and a secure emotional foundation. If the child stared anxiously at the door, cried for the parent, or wouldn’t explore the room, the child was deemed anxious or avoidant—without a secure emotional foundation.

These styles (secure, anxious, and avoidant) continue to follow many of us throughout school and into adulthood. For example, an emotional attachment affects our willingness to work hard, attitude about making mistakes, willingness to stand up to a bully, or even willingness to participate in class discussions.

Because emotional attachment is different from child to child, it is imperative that schools be safe, inclusive places emotionally.

The Toxic Triangle

Safety and belonging in the middle grades school can become jeopardized by what is sometimes termed the toxic triangle (Figure 1). In middle grades schools, students are beginning the process of adult socialization. They learn their emotional patterns of interaction from the environments both outside and inside the school.

The triangle illustrates the lack of boundaries young adolescents may encounter as they try to find their “place” in schools. This lack of boundaries—a threat to safety and belonging—stems from the fact that the students are learning where they “fit,” and that the place where they “fit” depends on the situation.

Ruby K. Payne is a career educator, author, and founder of aha! Process, Inc. (www.ahaprocess.com). Her efforts to address the needs of under-resourced learners include dozens of publications and other media, as well as training programs that have served hundreds of thousands of educators at all levels. Her most recent book is From Understanding Poverty to Developing Human Capacity.
In middle grades relationships, nobody takes ownership for a specific role at all times. Rather, most students who venture into the triangle assume all three roles eventually. In one setting the student is a bully, in another setting he’s a rescuer, and in a third setting he’s a victim. “He said–She said” is a form of toxic triangle. This toxic triangle is a barrier to students finding a sense of safety and belonging in school. And without that, they don’t learn.

How do we keep the students—and ourselves—out of the triangle? Consider this scenario:

When I was a principal, a father came to me with concerns about his daughter, Kate. He said Kate was being “sexually harassed” by Brandon, a classmate. He wanted me to assure him that Brandon would “never get within speaking distance of Kate again.”

I explained to the father that this was, indeed, a very serious issue. However, according to the law, Kate first was required to tell Brandon that she didn’t like what he was saying and doing in her presence. I asked him what Kate did when Brandon acted that way.

The father told me he didn’t know, so I called Kate to my office and asked her, “When Brandon says those things to you, what do you do?”

Kate said, “I just smile at him.”

Her father was furious.

I explained to Kate that she needed to tell Brandon she didn’t like the way he talked or acted around her. When she responded that she couldn’t do that, her father said, “Yes, you can, and you will.”

I sent Kate back to the classroom and then said to the father, “Your daughter is beautiful. All her life she will have unwanted attention. Don’t you think it would be better if we gave her the skills now, so that when she’s older and you aren’t with her, she can defend herself?”

What the father wanted me to do was to get into the toxic triangle. He had come in to rescue his daughter by bullying me. If I had let him do that, I would have felt like I had to rescue Kate—and then I would have bullied Brandon. Brandon would have felt like a victim and likely would have gone home and told his mother. She probably would have felt the need to rescue Brandon and would have come up to school and bullied me. Then I would have felt like a victim. And on and on and on.

Once a person gets into the triangle, the cycle isn’t easily broken, and the problem isn’t easily solved.

**Breaking the Triangle Pattern**

The triangle operates when resources are unequal, when students don’t feel safe, when they don’t have a sense of belonging. Indeed, it’s a daily pattern in most middle schools.

The first step in stopping the triangle is making staff, students, and parents aware of it. Most of them will recognize the pattern immediately. Provide them with some questions they can ask the others involved in the situation as a way to stay out of the toxic triangle.

*Why* questions should usually be avoided because often they’re used to assign blame and they tend to elicit a defensive response. Rather, questions that start with *how, when, where, what,* and *to what extent* generally spark more helpful answers.

Here’s an example of using questions to avoid the triangle.

When my son was in second grade, he came home from school and announced that he was bored. When I asked him, “Whose problem is that?” he told me it was the teacher’s problem. My son was presenting himself as a victim in the hopes that I would go to school and rescue him.

I asked him, “Is the teacher bored?” He said, “No, I am.” So I said, “Then, it isn’t the teacher’s problem. It sounds like it’s your problem. And if it’s your problem, how can you solve it?” My son agreed that it was his own problem and that he needed to solve it.

Had I gone to the school and “bullied” the teacher in order to “rescue” my son who was a “victim,” chances are that a pattern similar to the scenario sketched out in relation to Kate and her father would have ensued. The cycle would continue.

By addressing the emotional issues at the heart of most problems, discipline can be more effective, students will learn more, and school will be a safer place for all learners.
Remember psychologist Abraham Maslow’s Hierarchy of Human Needs? Maslow used the term *hierarchy* because humans address their needs in order from lowest to highest (Figure 1). A deficit at a lower level precludes all but highly motivated, mature humans from focusing on a higher need.

Maslow differentiated between the lower-level *Deficit Needs* and higher-level *Being Needs*. *Deficit Needs* preoccupy us when they are unmet, but drop off the radar screen when satisfied. In contrast, *Being Needs* become a growing focus once we begin to address them; the more we get, the more we want.

Sad to say, many middle grades schools have overemphasized the “achievement” component of Maslow’s fourth level to the point of losing sight of all other adolescent/human needs.

However, three intermediate schools in New Zealand realize that Maslow means middle school and have used his hierarchy to ensure they address all levels of adolescent needs.

- Howick Intermediate School, located in suburban Auckland, serves 800 students, many of Asian ancestry/nationality. The school is rated Decile 7. (Deciles denote socioeconomic status, with Decile 1 indicating the lowest level and Decile 10 the highest.)
- Rutherford Intermediate School, located in Wanganui, enrolls 325 students, about one-third of whom are Maori. This school is Decile 2.
- Whakatane Intermediate School, located on the Bay of Plenty, serves 600 students, about 50% of whom are Maori. This school is Decile 4.

**Physiological Needs: Let’s Get Physical!**

Young adolescents are fascinated with and horrified by their bodies. Fortunately, each of these Kiwi schools helps their students understand—and use—their changing bodies. At Rutherford, students may focus their curriculum in one of several academies, including the Academy of Sport. Whakatane offers 23 different intramural and intermural sports, including surfing. Howick offers dozens of physical activities, including swimming lessons. Each school also offers outdoor education, which addresses all of Maslow’s levels.

Each school serves the full range of young adolescents’ physical and health needs. The late bloomers, less physically inclined, and special needs students all participate in physical education, outdoor education, and intramural sports.
These schools support healthy living with low-fat, low-sugar offerings in their cafeterias and cooking classes. Students carry water bottles so their bodies and brains are properly hydrated. They are kept awake and engaged with active learning—busy hands and busy mouths. And all three schools have flexible, indestructible furniture that fits the myriad shapes, sizes, and energy levels of adolescent bodies.

Each Kiwi school emphasizes healthy decision making across the curriculum. This includes smart decisions about what to eat, a realistic sense of body image, and protection from the sun. And each school uses a whole-staff approach to nurturing and guiding students that ensures that youngsters’ problems are noticed promptly and that intervention by counselors or other specialists is arranged as needed.

Safety and Security: Am I OK Here?

Young adolescents have particular challenges in the area of safety and security, thanks to their uncoordinated bodies and under-construction brains. Healthy decision making and a nurturing environment are systematized at the Kiwi schools with homeroom teachers who are the “good shepherds” in “pastoral care” (“advisory” in the United States).

A primary goal is to help students learn to deal with challenges like peer pressure, conflict, rumors, and media manipulation. The pastoral care teacher becomes the go-to person in the inevitable teen crises: I have the biggest zit in the world; my girlfriend dumped me; I missed my period....

Another way these schools ensure safety is through smaller, more personal groupings of teachers and students—teams, academies, syndicates, whanau (Maori, for extended family)—which operate as a supportive community. Composed of fewer than 100 students, this provides a safe haven where students, teachers, and families get to know each other well. Team teachers are in a position to know when a student needs a pat on the back or to be called on the carpet.

Each of these Kiwi schools “catches ‘em being good,” with regular recognition of good citizenship. Rutherford frames this strategy with Sean Covey’s Seven Habits of Highly Effective Teens. Each school also has graduated levels of intervention, support, and reasonable consequences for inappropriate behavior, with an emphasis on helping the students analyze their actions and learn to make better choices more often.

The sports programs at the schools, combined with their many other clubs and activities, offer students and their families a wonderful array of safe, supervised out-of-school options to counterbalance the risks associated with prolonged unsupervised time.

Love and Belonging—Can I Join In?

Young adolescents long to be part of a group of peers. Nevertheless, polls indicate that the greatest influences on teens are not Paris Hilton, 50 Cent, or sports stars, but parents. Educators at Howick, Whakatane, and Rutherford actively reach out to their parents and communities.

Perhaps the next most important affiliation after the family is one’s cultural or ethnic group. Each Kiwi school provides opportunities to strengthen this connection and to learn about other cultures. Whakatane offers a Maori immersion syndicate with much of the school day focused on the language and culture of New Zealand’s indigenous people. Rutherford and Howick offer Maori curriculum as well; all three provide a veritable United Nations of cultural arts and language opportunities.

Adolescents’ susceptibility to peer influence carries risk, but also the opportunity to make it cool to be a good kid. School uniforms help reduce some of the pressure on Kiwi adolescents to conform to expensive, risqué, or gang-related fashion trends.

Positive relationships are promoted via the pastoral care programs, teaming, and social events, and responsible behavior is promoted with disciplinary policies so harassment and intolerance are prevented.

Teachers at all three schools further capitalize on adolescents’ social nature with peer tutoring and group projects and presentations.

Finally, the other component of this level of the hierarchy must be addressed: love. With adolescents’ hormones saying Yes, and their brains saying What?, it is essential to help them learn about healthy sexuality. These schools’ curricula include discussions about the place of sexuality...
in a fulfilling life and the importance of age-appropriate decisions, safeguards, and consequences. Research clearly has shown that such comprehensive sex education results in onset of sexual activity at a later age and increased use of precautions upon becoming active.

**Esteem and Achievement—What Do I Do Well?**

The practices described here also address esteem and achievement needs—indeed, they are the platform on which achievement is built. Young adolescents want to learn and to improve their abilities in lots of ways, but this must be tied to experiences and interests—stuff we can touch or see or already know something about. So teachers at these Kiwi schools build scaffolds between students and curriculum, with active, student-directed learning.

At Howick and Rutherford, students collaborate with their parents to identify personal strengths and goals to ensure that their program of studies is appropriate; this culminates with student-led conferences. At Whakatane, students learn in multidimensional modes. They explore biotechnology production, fashion design, community service, food technology, electronics, speechmaking, performing arts, technology intensives, and more. There are no idle hands here!

The tremendous variety of co-curricular offerings at each of these schools is right in tune with young adolescents’ sporadic discovery of new interests and abilities. By addressing all of Howard Gardner’s multiple intelligences, the schools ensure that students progress to adulthood with a full-service brain after all the neural pruning of adolescence. The schools provide diverse and challenging opportunities to all young adolescents rather than placing them into perceived “ability groups” based on tests or other fallible measures.

Finally, young adolescents need to develop a realistic, solid sense of self-esteem—to know what they do well, what they need to work on, and to feel that this is okay and possible—a far cry from the mindless, feel good mantra of pop psychology. All three of these Kiwi intermediate schools help students set realistic goals, work hard to attain them, self-assess their progress, and present and use their products.

**Transcendence—What Does It All Mean?**

So what? This phrase is an adolescent mantra, but it reflects their drive to find meaning or purpose, not chronic disinterest. And again, it is crucial to gear education to this level in order to ensure that the adolescent brain solidifies the circuitry needed for a full life.

As the Dalai Lama said, “If you want others to be happy, practice compassion. If you want to be happy, practice compassion.” Educators at Whakatane, Howick, and Rutherford not only treat their students compassionately, they explicitly teach this value. They capitalize on adolescents’ argumentativeness by helping students tackle real-world problems, connecting them with something bigger than themselves. By focusing on moral issues—the So what? (Bloom’s Evaluation level)—the youngsters want and need the knowledge and skills mandated in the curriculum, whether to help the economically disadvantaged, save the whales, or turn an empty lot into a park.

Further connection to values and aesthetics is promoted at each Kiwi school through their myriad literary, visual, and performing arts opportunities. They provide access to Maslow’s peak experience, or transcendence, where one is transported to a euphoric sense of oneness with the beauty of existence and with a H/higher P/power.

Another transcendent aspect of these schools is their support for connection with cultural identity, as described earlier. There is an enormous sense of pride and responsibility when one feels connected to a people, to an iwi (Maori for clan), with a history, a future, and a present. In addition, the study of other languages and cultures helps students connect with other peoples and to see the beauty and universalities in humanity.

Experiences like these become a “positive addiction”—Maslow’s Self-Actualization.

**Whole Students—Holistic Education**

Parents have long known that you ignore youngsters’ deficit needs at your own peril. Tired kids are justifiably unhappy and will not—cannot—pay attention to what you are saying. Scared kids have only safety on their minds. Kids without friends or a group are preoccupied with a gnawing need to belong. Kids who don’t have opportunities to take on exciting, realistic challenges in a supportive environment just won’t try anything. And without a sense of a bigger purpose, we are all doomed to lethargy, substance abuse, and worse.

Educators at these three Kiwi intermediate schools see beyond the myopia of so many schools that try to focus exclusively on Maslow’s Esteem and Achievement level—actually, only Achievement. We’re here to teach the students, not to show them a good time, make them feel good, parent them.

The purposeful, holistic/whole-child education at Howick, Rutherford, and Whakatane intermediate schools, and their constant efforts to improve, are helping to develop the full potential of every young adolescent so that they grow into the kind of adults we would like to have as our doctors, teachers, and neighbors some day.
Social Inclusion: It’s Our Middle School, Too

By Andrea Cahn and Betty Edwards

The film Cipher in the Snow, a true story written in 1964 by teacher/guidance counselor Jean Mizer, tells the story of an ostracized teenager, Cliff, who has no friends and becomes a withdrawn “cipher” or nonentity. (Cipher is the mathematical notation for zero—something without weight, importance, or value.)

One day, Cliff asks to get off the school bus, collapses, and dies in the snow beside the road. Cliff’s math teacher is asked to write the obituary but realizes that hardly anyone recalls the student. When he tries to get a small group together to attend Cliff’s funeral, he can’t find 10 people who knew the student well enough to feel comfortable going. He vows to never let another student in his class feel unimportant and unknown.

We wish we could say that this story could not be written today, but it can. Many students in our schools feel insignificant, disengaged, and without value—especially students with intellectual disabilities.

The 2007 National Study of Youth Attitudes Toward the Inclusion of Students with Intellectual Disabilities found that only 10% of public school students report having a friend with an intellectual disability. The results of the study, published in the Summer 2007 issue of Exceptional Children, also revealed that in general, youth have limited contact with students with intellectual disabilities in their classrooms and school and do not want to interact socially with peers with intellectual disabilities.

A Core Value of Middle Grades Schools

One of the 16 characteristics of a successful middle grades school identified in AMLE’s This We Believe, is “The school environment is inviting, safe, inclusive, and supportive of all…. In such a school, human relationships are paramount.” Further, “Everyone in an inviting school works proactively to eliminate harassment, verbal abuse, bullying, and name-calling. Students and teachers understand that they are part of a community in which differences are respected and celebrated…. Every student—no matter what creed, color, or uniqueness—is a genuine and contributing member of the school community.”

This We Believe also specifies that in order to become fully functioning, self-actualized people, adolescents should

• Respect and value the diverse ways people look, speak, think, and act.
• Develop the interpersonal and social skills needed to learn, work, and play with others harmoniously and confidently.
• Assume responsibility for their own actions and be cognizant of and ready to accept obligations for the welfare of others.
How can we expect students to demonstrate these attributes if we do not provide the opportunities within schools for students to interact with, support, and grow to know and appreciate students of diverse abilities, characteristics, and backgrounds?

**A Social Inclusion Model**

Special Olympics Project UNIFY® is a social inclusion model that was inaugurated under U.S. Department of Education funding in June 2008. It brings together youth with and without intellectual disabilities through sports and related activities, providing them with the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to create and sustain school communities where all young people are agents of change for persons with intellectual disabilities and where school climates promote acceptance, respect, and human dignity.

Project UNIFY, currently in 42 states and involving 2,120 schools, has three core components:

- **Inclusive Sports** provide all students (those with and without intellectual disabilities) opportunities to participate in sports activities alongside one another.

- **Youth Leadership and Advocacy** provide opportunities for all students in the school to take on leadership roles in promoting social initiatives in the school and in the community.

- **Whole-School Awareness and Engagement** provide opportunities for all students in the school to bring attention to respect and inclusion through sustained school-wide activities.

When an inclusive environment is created, a student with disabilities can have a powerful, positive impact on others.

Brenda Niemeyer, a school counselor whose son, Jared, has Down syndrome, sees the impact of social inclusion. “I've had the privilege of watching my son play a role in changing thinking, perspectives, experiences, and values among his peers and within the community of Project UNIFY. Inclusion removes much of the stigma as you come to know one another, you experience activities together, and gain insights from one another. ‘Typical’ youth recognize that others who may be different aren’t necessarily disabled—they are differently abled…. ‘Typical’ students and their parents learn that all individuals have value, that we each have a responsibility to make our community a better place for each of us. ‘Typical’ students often recognize that tasks they find easy others do not; others have had to learn a sense of commitment, resilience, or strength of character to accomplish or overcome difficulties…. “Learning to communicate with all individuals promotes learning as a group or community task and accomplishment. Inclusion allows differing perspectives to unite and have a voice – together making positive changes for the individuals, the community and yes, the world!”

Samantha Huffman, a former member of Project UNIFY’s Youth Activation Committee, describes the personal impact of social inclusion. “There were times in my life [beginning in my middle school years] where I had trouble finding a group of peers who made me feel accepted and valued for who I was. But that didn’t matter because I had my Special Olympics friends who consistently supported and loved me…. From these friendships I have built, I have learned how incredibly crucial it is for everyone, regardless of ‘creed, color, or uniqueness,’ to have people in their lives who love, accept, and support them for who they are and empower them to become even greater. Everyone needs social inclusion.”

“During Project UNIFY we interact with the people with special needs. It’s cool when you get to know them. And they’d be like ‘well how do you talk to them?’ You just talk to them regularly!”
Establishing a Climate of Inclusion

How can a climate of social inclusion be started in a school? It is not the impossible task we sometimes imagine. John Hooper, a middle grades special education teacher in the Boise (Idaho) School District, has found a formula that works.

John says his challenge has been finding and nurturing authentic opportunities for students to feel part of the school community. “Realizing that there is a continuum of relationships that develop between our special needs students and peers, our goal is to find ways for them to interact on equal ground. Breaking down stereotypes and finding ways for students to engage in activities that foster social inclusion and give all students a chance to succeed is an important step in creating a positive school climate.”

John’s background in physical education and special education drew him to Special Olympics. Through Project UNIFY, he started a club that partnered with the school’s Builders Club, which is sponsored by Kiwanis International. Students in the club are given opportunities to become school and community leaders. “Through our partnership, we helped with various projects, including Rake-Up Boise, March of Dimes, Make a Wish, and retirement home visits. Our students became valued members of the Builders Club team.” They also launched an R-Word campaign; about 70% of the student body signed a pledge not to use the words retard or retarded.

The students also met on Fridays at lunch to play bocce ball. This turned out to be an excellent opportunity to create a socially inclusive activity. “Initially, we would start our game, and slowly students would come over to ask questions, to play with us, or just watch,” John says.

“At various times, we had over 50 students who either tried or played bocce with or alongside us. Throughout the year, I noticed the improved confidence of my special needs students. They seemed more willing to take risks, including taking leadership roles and simply starting conversations with other students.”

While certainly John would be the first to admit that there is more to do, he clearly is making a difference. Change is always challenging, but making a move toward inclusion will always have significant impacts. Evaluations of Project UNIFY implementation in the 2011–2012 school year reflect the following results in middle grades schools:

- Students treat each other with a little more (53%) or a lot more (22%) respect.
- Students without disabilities talk a little more (47%) or a lot more (24%) to students with intellectual disabilities.
- Students with intellectual disabilities participate a little more (51%) or a lot more (25%) in school activities.
- Students use the R-word [retard or retarded] a little (53%) or a lot (22%) less.
- Students bully other students a little (47%) or a lot (24%) less.

Parents and educators of all students can celebrate these results. Sometimes, the simple act of sitting with someone at lunch, playing sports together, or vowing to get to know another student can make a significant difference.

Helping Each Other

The teacher in Cipher in the Snow vowed to ensure that no other student in his class would go unnoticed. We, too, must take a renewed vow to ensure that every student is known, feels valued, and is recognized as a significant part of the school.

There can be a happy ending to this story, and the power lies within the adults and students in every middle school to ensure inclusion, engagement, and acceptance for all. As Jared wisely says, “It is about helping each other, making friends, and having fun.”

For more information about Project Unify, visit www.specialolympics.org/Sections/What_We_Do/Project_Unify/Project_Unify.aspx
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Providing Shelter: Homelessness in the Middle Grades

By Rajni Shankar-Brown

Many young adolescents have carved a permanent place in my heart and serve as daily inspiration for my life’s work, but especially a student named Devin.

I met Devin while teaching language arts at a high poverty, high minority middle school in Charlotte, North Carolina. A few months into the school year, I learned that Devin had spent most of his life homeless.

Sadly, his story is far more common than you may imagine. In her book, *Schooling Homeless Children*, Sharon Quint reminds us, “Across this nation, thousands upon thousands of homeless children are growing up unnurtured, unloved, and uneducated” (p. 7). In fact, according to the National Center on Family Homelessness, more than 1.5 million children experience homelessness in the United States each year.

Young adolescents who are experiencing homelessness face relentless obstacles in school and life; homelessness adversely affects their physical, cognitive, social, and emotional development. In addition, homeless students are frequently socially and educationally marginalized.

I hope this article spurs much-needed conversations about educating homeless young adolescents.

Meeting Devin

Devin was 14 years old. He always wore a stained, ragged, faded-gray hoodie, even on sweltering hot days. The first day I met Devin we began what I now refer to as The Hoodie Battle. Our school’s dress code prohibited students wearing hats in the building and Devin insisted on wearing his hood during class. When I asked Devin to take off his hood, he reacted in one of three ways: 1) Ignored me; 2) Reminded me that my class was not in fact in the building, as my classroom was a single-wide modular trailer; 3) Pulled the tie strings firmer to cover part of his face. The Hoodie Battle was only one of many challenges I encountered with Devin.

Although Devin struggled academically (drastically below grade level in reading and math), he was brilliant in other ways. For example, he had an incredible array of self-expression skills. He was able to intelligently discuss conflicting social forces such as freedom of expression and the school’s stringent dress code. He had an amazing talent for impromptu rapping and beat boxing. He was also a self-taught origami master, able to transform paper into boxes, stars, and clearly identifiable animals.

Connecting with Devin

No matter how much I tried to engage Devin in his learning, he seemed apathetic. He spent most of his time in class staring into space, yawning, or sleeping. One day I asked Devin to remain after class.

During the first week of school, I had given each student a packet of information to take home, review, and have signed by a parent or guardian. Two months later (after constant reminders, failed incentives, and frequent pleading) I had still not received a form from Devin. I had attempted to call his home, but the number was disconnected. I gently asked him, yet again, about the form given during the first week of school. As always, he remained still and speechless. I suspected something was going on, but got little help from the busy administration in getting to the bottom of it.
One morning I stood outside my classroom and greeted my students as was my routine. Devin staggered to the door. “Good morning,” I said with a smile. Instead of ignoring me as usual, he responded. I will never forget his response or the pain in his eyes. He looked at me and said, “I woke up next to a family. A family of nasty rats n’ roaches n’ crud. There’s not a thing good about this morning.” I had no idea what to say. Neither of us said another word about it that morning.

I wondered where Devin was living. I asked the other teachers on my team about Devin’s situation, but they were clueless. He did not have a cumulative file folder and the phone number given to me by the main office was still disconnected.

I decided to leave Devin alone about wearing his hood in class—he had much larger battles in his life.

I always had high expectations for Devin. During the next few days, I tried to help him make connections in the classroom. I worked on improving his reading skills and pushed him academically, even when he acted annoyed or indifferent. I began leaving healthy snacks in his desk like granola bars, cheese cracker packs, and fruit. He would never say anything to me or I to him, but they always disappeared.

The following week, Devin asked if he could talk to me after class. I was stunned, nervous, and most of all, hopeful. After the bell rang, he stayed in his seat. His eyes filled with tears. He told me that I was the first person in his life to truly care about him. I had not given up on him, even when he tried to push me away. He thanked me for the snacks, which along with the free lunch at school was often the only food he ate all day.

He shared that he was living temporarily in an abandoned building with his mother. Previously, he had lived under bridges and on park benches. I learned that his father had died from a drug overdose when Devin was only six years old. He confided in me about the hardships he faced, and about how his mother had struggled since his father passed away.

Teaching Devin

Homeless students like Devin face many barriers to academic success, such as excessive absences, developmental delays, emotional trauma, physical ailments, and lack of appropriate hygiene tools or clothing. Devin eventually shared with me that his hoodie was his most valuable possession, which explained why he wore it every day. The hood made him feel safe.

After I found out that Devin was homeless, my empathy grew. I no longer consider his yawning or sleeping during class disrespectful or rude—he was exhausted. When a student is worried about basic human necessities such as food and shelter, learning about grammar is inherently low on the priority list.

School can be a safe haven or a place of bleakness for young adolescents. Before effective teaching and learning can occur, students must feel safe and secure. The value of educators showing compassion toward students and creating an inviting learning environment, especially at the middle level, is essential.

Although I could not change Devin’s situation, as a teacher I had the opportunity to minimize the negative impact of homelessness in my classroom. I had the opportunity to help Devin build resilience and competency skills. I had the privilege of teaching Devin to believe in himself. I was able to provide shelter for him during the day.

Remembering Devin

I am proud to say that Devin graduated from high school, has a job that provides a stable income, and is currently attending college part-time. Although he was able to break the detrimental cycle of homelessness that daunts so many lives, he still struggles with its traumatic effects.

As I teach middle grades educators and continue my ongoing research in homeless education, Devin remains my guiding light. I learned many valuable lessons while teaching Devin. Today, I continue to embrace hope—hope that the educational needs of homeless young adolescents will be acknowledged and addressed, and schools will provide students living in extreme poverty the shelter they commonly seek or need.

A Call for Action

As middle level educators, we must join together to strengthen our commitment to meeting the needs of diverse 21st century learners, including the growing number of homeless young adolescents in our country. Although homelessness is a global issue, we must begin to address this critical concern in our nation.

We must find ways to provide shelter within our schools for the growing number of young adolescents experiencing homelessness…innocent and incredible students like Devin. ☘
By Merideth Van Namen

When I began teaching, I relied on the other teachers in the school to show me the ropes and help get me acclimated to both the school procedures and the school culture. I vividly recall a conversation among teachers one Tuesday afternoon before our weekly faculty meeting. They were complaining about their students, and seemingly trying to outdo each other with regard to who had the “worst” students. Kendrick didn’t listen. Kiara was lazy and could care less about school. Well, Daryl was a thief and a bully who needed to be in the alternative school. Each teacher claimed to have the most difficult student in the school.

As a new teacher, I was more intrigued by why these students were such problems if they were, indeed, so terrible. I decided then and there that the only way I could become a truly caring and effective teacher was by getting to know my students.

Academic performance in the classroom is important, yet it’s only one dimension of our complex young adolescents. I wanted to understand my students more holistically: academically, socially, and emotionally.

Getting to Know Them Academically

Getting to know my students academically seemed simple enough—I’d pretest them on content they would need to know. I put tremendous effort into developing a dazzling lesson on transitive, intransitive, and auxiliary verbs, including colorful visuals and numerous examples.

At the end of the lesson, I assessed the students, knowing before I even sat down to grade the papers that they all made As. Imagine my distress when only a few made As, most made Cs, and several failed.

What was I doing wrong? Were they even paying attention? Were those ranting teachers correct about students not caring? I was angry at the students for not trying and angry at myself for believing that I could make a difference by putting so much work into teaching them exactly what they needed to know.

Exasperated and exhausted, I called a student to my desk. I chose Roger because I remembered that he kept notes and paid attention during the lesson. I asked him to explain to me why he failed on his verbs assessment. Without even looking at the paper, he said, “I don’t really know how to find the verbs in the sentence. Sometimes I do, but sometimes they have a bunch of words in the verb and I get confused. I really tried on this test, but it was too hard.”

I realized right then what I had done wrong. I had foolishly begun with my sixth grade material rather than ensuring they had mastered the foundational material. I just assumed they knew it!

I started over. I gave them a new pretest the next day on general verbs. I started with the basics and worked up to the sixth grade materials. This gave me a much more accurate depiction of exactly who knew what in each dimension of the skill. I created small learning groups in which students worked on their level and gradually brought them up to where they needed to be with my sixth grade content. This also gave me a chance to take advanced students well beyond the grade-level content.

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I discovered that my students loved to learn, loved to get more personal attention from me, and loved to come to class. They were achieving more and more success, and it paid off tremendously by the end of the academic year.

**Getting to Know Them Socially**

There’s so much more to keeping students motivated than putting on a “horse and pony show” for them. I was exhausted after a day of trying to capture each student’s attention, keeping each student engaged, and meeting each student’s needs.

Well, I had tackled one beast—understanding my students academically—and I knew I could tackle this one as well. I began paying attention to the students at lunch and at recess. I started making note of their preferences in music, food, games, celebrities, TV shows, and sports. I even paid attention to who their friends were, although that seemed to change daily.

When I asked them about their interests and friendships, their eyes lit up. I wanted to incorporate their interests and social lives into my lessons. I began letting them write about topics of their choice instead of dictating topics. I allowed them to partner with friends to work on projects or to study. I incorporated their music into language arts lessons.

These minor changes prompted a rejuvenation in the students’ interest in learning. I was also less exhausted at the end of the day, since now the students were doing more work than I was.

**Getting to Know Them Emotionally**

Knowing students academically is crucial to helping them achieve, and knowing their interests, likes, and dislikes helps me motivate and engage them. However, knowing students emotionally is more complex and requires time and dedication.

First, I made sure my students knew I cared for them. I spoke to them with kindness and empathy. I was a very structured and stern teacher, but I never attacked or spoke in a derogatory manner to any of the students.

Next, I began to talk with my students as often as I could. I sat with them at lunch and recess and struck up conversations about home and life in general. It never ceased to amaze me how much these students were willing to share with me. I didn’t interrogate them; they felt comfortable and saw me as a safe outlet to discuss the problems they were facing outside the classroom.

I learned that some were raising their siblings while their moms worked and some were struggling with feeling awkward and physically inferior to classmates. I understood why a few fell asleep in class and why some asked to go to the bathroom 10 times a day. It wasn’t because I was boring or because they were trying to escape from the classroom. Outside factors were influencing their ability to focus in the classroom.

I learned from my investigation how much these academic, social, and emotional circumstances influenced my students’ attitudes and behaviors each day they came to class. I also learned something that my fellow colleagues did not know. My students did care. My students did want to learn. My students just needed someone who listened and wanted to get to know them and their needs.
Handing Over the Keys: Giving Students Ownership of Math

By Josh Martin

Change is a constant in life; the field of education is no exception. As a case in point, consider the ongoing debate about the value of homework.

In a typical math classroom, a teacher provides whole-class instruction, an opportunity for guided practice, and then time for independent practice. Generally, the independent practice consists of 15–25 math problems, the majority of which are completed as homework that the teacher grades the next day.

Nearly all educators understand that students learn at different rates, yet they live by the adage "practice makes perfect" and assign large amounts of practice for all students.

What determines how much practice each student needs in order to master a math concept or skill? What role should homework grades have in an overall course grade that represents math competence? The good news is that students want to do challenging, meaningful, relevant work, but they are not willing to do inordinate amounts of this work after they demonstrate mastery.

Students Take the Wheel

I believe students should have control over the amount of individual practice they do and, thereby, self-regulate their learning. Here’s my suggestion:

The teachers assign practice sets that students complete as homework, but the students decide how many to complete based on their ability to self-assess their own learning. Students who feel competent with the math skill after answering 5 questions need do no more than that. Other students may take 25 questions from the practice set to master the same math skill.

The next class period, the teacher selects 5–10 questions from the practice set and formatively assesses the students at the beginning of the class. The results drive that class period’s instruction.

Of course, the system must have checks and balances. For example, some students might choose not to do the practice sets even though they need the practice. Teachers have the option to mandate practice sets based on weekly summative assessments.

The weekly summative assessments are 10–15 questions in length and include questions straight from the practice sets. If a student fails the weekly summative assessment, the teacher might require that student to do practice sets daily so the teacher can diagnose errors in the student’s work. After the teacher deems the student to be back on track by passing weekly summative assessments, the student is once again allowed to self-assess the amount of practice needed.

A Sense of Ownership

This is a radical change in pedagogical practice, especially in mathematics. Such paradigm shifts are often met with strong resistance from teachers. However, by allowing students to self-regulate their learning, educators provide them with a sense of ownership that can have a profound effect on closing the achievement gap of marginal learners, taking relevance and value to a new level.

Josh Martin is the principal at Farmersville Junior High in Farmersville, Texas. E-mail: jmartin@farmersvilleisd.net.
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by Debbie Silver

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Bringing Cultural Relevance to the Science Classroom

By Carla C. Johnson

Middle grades classrooms across the United States are growing increasingly diverse. Despite increased attention to diverse students’ needs, many teachers continue to struggle to help all their students make connections to abstract concepts in their science classrooms.

G. Ladson-Billings, in the March 1995 issue of the American Educational Research Journal, suggests that a culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP) can help diverse students achieve academic success, cultural competence, and a better understanding of the world around them.

CRP focuses on three areas:
1. The teacher’s conceptions about self and others
2. Teacher-structured social relations
3. The teacher’s conceptions about knowledge.

Let’s look at how these three areas can help bring cultural relevance to a middle grades science classroom.

1. The Teacher’s Conceptions About Self and Others.

How teachers view themselves and the world around them shapes how they structure their goals, expectations, and orientations toward instruction.

Teachers who consider themselves lifelong learners stay relevant, attend conferences and professional development opportunities, and see their instruction as constantly evolving to bring real-world experiences and connections into their classroom.

They are connected to the community, partnering with community members who can provide context for science learning and real-world experiences for students, and also contributing to the community through science-based projects such as recycling programs, water-quality studies, and community gardens.

2. Teacher-Structured Social Relations.

Teachers who promote culturally relevant instruction are connected to their students. They build collaborative communities within their own classrooms so students can work together and share responsibility of each other’s learning.

3. The Teacher’s Conceptions About Knowledge.

A CRP teacher believes that knowledge is constantly evolving, as is science instruction. Teachers empower students to ask questions and challenge the status quo. They also scaffold learning experiences and use alternative assessments to give students a variety of ways to demonstrate and express their understandings of science.

Effective CRP Strategies

Science teachers might consider these instructional strategies to begin integrating CRP into the science classroom. The first two strategies work well at the beginning of the year to set a foundation for cultural relevance; the third can be implemented at any time during the school year.

1. Pictures of Science.

Photo narratives help students integrate their background experiences into the learning of science. For the Pictures of Science lesson, provide students with a digital camera or allow them to use the camera on their cellphones. Give them 20–30 minutes to go outside and take pictures of things that represent science to them.

After the initial photo shoot, students narrow their photos down to 10 and download their photos onto a computer and place each one into a PowerPoint slide. Then, they write a few sentences explaining why each picture represents science to them and how the picture and the concept connect to their personal lives.

Students present their slides to the class. The class discussion centers on how students see science through their own individual lenses and how those conceptions differ across households and cultures.

2. Scientist Scavenger Hunt.

This activity builds awareness of science through the lens of role models. Using the Internet, students conduct a scientist scavenger hunt to

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identify five scientists from their own cultural backgrounds. Most grade levels should be able to search through Google and other appropriate web tools to identify their selected scientists.

Students collect information about the scientists, including their discovery or invention, their language and native country, education background, and other interesting facts they may come across.

Students share their information with their classmates and discuss the diversity of backgrounds represented in the collection of scientists.

3. Science at Home. This assignment is focused on making students think about the fact that science is all around them. Students bring in an example of something science-related that is used in their home and discuss the practical use of the item as well as the scientific nature of it. For example, a student might bring in a tortilla press and discuss how levers make the press work.

Doing Is Learning
Teachers who promote a culturally relevant pedagogy have high expectations for all students, believing every student is capable of success. They see students as a source of knowledge rather than seeing themselves as purveyors of knowledge. They use inquiry-based instruction as the knowledge-generator. Helping students master skills, including critical thinking, problem solving, effective communication, cooperation, time management, initiative, and leadership, structures classrooms as student-centered learning environments.

Doing is learning. CRP does not embrace the “right answer” approach. These strategies provide science teachers with a way to begin integrating CRP into their science instruction and help bring a sense of cultural relevance to the classroom.

Quick-Start for Integrating CRP in Science
CRP Area 1: Teacher’s Conceptions of Self and Others
• Hold high expectations for all students to learn science and provide scaffolding support to ensure they are successful.
• Value the experiences, cultures, and backgrounds of students and use these as anchors to tie science curriculum to the real world.
• Seek and use opportunities to connect to the community.
• Integrate more inquiry-based experiences for students.

CRP Area 2: Teacher-Structured Social Relations
• Use bulletin boards and storytelling to build connections between students and to allow students to get to know more about their teacher.
• Build a collaborative classroom through use of assigned student groups with individual identities.
• Model and teach respect and positive classroom interactions. Do not assume students have learned this previously.

CRP Area 3: Teacher’s Conceptions of Knowledge
• Share regularly with your students, new things you have learned and how your conceptions have changed based on new information.
• Bring real-world issues, including social inequalities, into the context of teaching about science.
• Anchor science instruction within the context of solving real-world problems.
ROCK the Test:  
Conquering the State of Anxiety

By Billie Sheesley, John Snyder, and Jeffrey Kuntz

State testing has become the World Series, Super Bowl, March Madness, and Stanley Cup of the education world all rolled into one. As excitement of final victory builds throughout the year, so must the excitement and motivation to do well on state tests.

After attending the Pennsylvania Middle School Association Conference and gathering a few ideas for activities that other districts were doing, we headed home to create our own motivational package. What began as a small, one-day activity for our fourth and fifth graders expanded into a year-long test motivation adventure for all students in grades 4–7.

Our Rock the PSSA (Pennsylvania State System of Assessment) year-long program includes three main school-wide components as well as many smaller, more individualized pieces. The major components of this project include PSSA Bingo Mania, PSSA Spirit Week, and the Rock the PSSA Game Show.

PSSA Bingo Mania

This motivating game is held during the daily televised announcements for a week in November and again in February. Students receive a computer-generated bingo card composed of 24 language arts and math words they may encounter on the PSSA test. A fifth grade teacher provides three daily clues to words found on the bingo cards. If students determine they have the word that matches the clues, they cross it off. If they get a BINGO at any time during the week, they receive a plastic hat to wear as a badge of honor for conquering the vocabulary words. We also hold a Bingo Mania event one evening before testing so entire families can be involved.

PSSA Spirit Week

Prior to the PSSA, we hold a week-long celebration that's filled with special spirit days, announcements, and classroom events. These events help build excitement for the upcoming test. A few of our daily events include:

- Sunglasses Day—We Will Shine on the PSSA
- Crazy Sock Day—We Will Sock It to the PSSA
- Red Day—We Are “Red-dy” for the PSSA
- Animal Prints—We Are Wild About Doing Our Best on the Test
- Hat Day—Hats Off to Learning
- Ocean/Beach Attire—We Are “O-fish-ally” Ready for the Test
- Red and White Day or School Shirt Day

In addition, we ask local celebrities and high school students to tape video announcements that review test-taking strategies and wish our students good luck.

Rock the PSSA Game Show

Our Rock the PSSA Game Show is a combination of the best game shows on television, made up of questions, challenges, games, and test-taking strategy commercials. Students fill out contestant slips, don nametags in the style of “The Price is Right,” and head to the auditorium. Once there, students are called to the front of the room in groups of 10 to answer review questions in a multiple-choice style.

Students who do not answer their initial question correctly are sent back to their seats with the consolation prize of a No. 2 pencil. Students who answer correctly are asked to move onto the stage to take part in a challenge such as Plinko, a hula hoop race, a jump rope contest, a clothes pin drop, or a balloon break.

Students who complete their onstage challenge receive prizes and are called back to the stage for a final challenge. Students who succeed in the final challenge are the winners of a brand new car—a Dollar Store car that is.

Between stage challenges, students chant our test cheer, watch test-taking strategy commercials led by our guidance counselor, and take part in audience participation activities.
Classroom Activities
All teachers teach academic test-taking vocabulary across the board no matter what their content specialty.

Many grade-level teams and individual teachers entice their students to be ready for the test in a variety of ways. Several teachers use the state-released test items to review with their students in a whole-group setting, as homework, or as an intervention. They also help students make test survival kits that include pencils, erasers, tissues, peppermints, chewing gum, stress balls, and highlighters.

Students receive raffle tickets for participating in spirit days and for using good academic strategies during practice activities. Prize drawings are held during the game show the Friday before the testing window opens.

Finally, teachers may use a variety of games to practice test-taking strategies, including a Wii tournament, a We Are Ready for the Test race, and Minute to Win It competitions.

On Test Day
On test days, we distribute special snacks such as animal crackers, peanut butter sandwiches, water, and pretzels courtesy of teachers, the student government, and the PTO. The district offers free breakfasts to all students on several of the testing days.

One teacher takes her students outside after the test to blow bubbles. She says the students have filled in so many bubbles on the test that they should have some fun with them.

A State of Mind
Do we know if our efforts have a direct effect on state test success? We have nothing concrete that speaks to this, but students, teachers, and parents all report that our efforts are not in vain. Students say they enjoy our activities, and participation levels on spirit days are overwhelming. Teachers enjoy the events, as they use the mundane test prep stress to help students become excited. Parents report that their children talk about events held at school and look forward to those that are upcoming.

Our main objective in creating this one-of-a-kind project package is to help our students become and remain excited about something that many often consider a very unexciting task. We want our students to feel as though they are celebrating the pinnacle of a championship season of educational growth when they sit down to fill in that first bubble of our state test. We believe this will be accomplished through our year-long plan of enthusiastic, educational inspiration.
Writing to Learn: Using Poetry in Two Voices

By Lesley Roessing

In his 1985 book *Joyful Noises*, Paul Fleischman compared the life of a queen bee and a worker bee, and poetry in two voices was born. Many teachers since then have taught students to read and write poems in two voices, but not necessarily as a strategy to learn and comprehend content material.

In poetry in two voices, poets write from two perspectives, comparing and contrasting. Things that are similar are written directly across from each other and are read simultaneously; the contrasting details are written on separate lines and read one at a time, in whatever order the author determines is most effective. See Figure 1 for an example.

When students compare and contrast, they use multiple reading and thinking strategies:

- Processing information
- Discriminating
- Analyzing
- Exploring higher-order thinking
- Using a specific thinking structure
- Making decisions
- Making connections among multiple events, people, places, objects, ideas, and concepts.

They also are practicing and learning another reading strategy: text structures of informational text.

The Common Core English Language Arts Standards for Reading Literature and Reading Informational Texts require readers to be able to compare and contrast in multiple ways to demonstrate competence in the areas of Craft and Structure and Integration of Knowledge and Ideas.

After students read a text, it is crucial to bring them back to the text so they can learn. To learn, readers must interact with text and manipulate it and question it. When students compose poems in two voices based on the content they are learning, they are examining and analyzing similarities and differences and going back to the text and reformulating the text into another genre. They are interacting with the text.

Creating Two Voices

The first step in creating poems in two voices is to discern and list the similarities and differences between two entities. For example, when learning about the deer and the lion and their natural relationship, a student made notes about the deer and lion, then created a chart (Figure 2). She converted her information into a Venn-type diagram (Figure 3).

Next, she created a poem in two voices—that of a deer and that of a lion (Figure 4).

When she wrote the poem, she turned the facts into a narrative and added a possible conclusion to the natural order of the two mammals: the lion, as a carnivore, might just be a predator that kills and eats the deer. Of course, some additional facts, such as speed and body size and proximity of habitats, would strengthen this supposition, causing the author to conduct more research to supplement the few facts that the short article she read had provided.

Composing the poem allowed or even caused the author to think about the two points of view and their symbiotic relationship. The poem brought her back to the text multiple times to find details and, as she manipulated and synthesized the information, she learned it and expanded her personal understanding. In other words, the author made the concept her own.

Across the Curriculum

In a social studies and language arts class, students read *Waiting for the Rain*, Sheila Gordon’s novel about two boys growing up under apartheid in South Africa. Frikkie is white...
and his uncle owns the farm where Tengo’s uncle is the “boss-boy.” At first Tengo accepts this order of roles, as do the adults around him, until he begins his education and realizes that this is not the way it has to be. The novel ends in 1986, still years away from the official end of apartheid, when Frikkie, now a soldier, and Tengo, one of the students protesting for a better education, meet.

Students were asked to compare Tengo and Frikkie, an assignment to compel students to look at both sides of the issues, the conflicting points of view of two boys who were raised under this system of separateness. Rather than stereotyping their roles, the students needed to look at each as individuals and to understand that Frikkie and Tengo were both victims of apartheid.

Through the format of poetry in two voices, the students were prompted to truly examine the characters, their backgrounds, their experiences, their educations, their hopes and dreams; to ascertain how it might be possible for the two boys—and, with an end to apartheid, the two races—to work together.

In math, students can compare/contrast types of angles, geometric shapes, and algebraic formulae. In a poem in multiple voices about triangles, students compare a right triangle and an equilateral triangle, and then add the voices of isosceles, scalene, acute, and obtuse triangles as they are studied.

Students in a science class could read any of the articles on Pluto’s demotion to dwarf planet status and analyze and determine whether Pluto is actually more like a dwarf planet or a “true” planet and, therefore, should or should not have been reclassified. The poem in two voices could compare Pluto and another dwarf planet such as Ceres or dwarf planets in general.

In comparing and contrasting through “voices,” one deduction students make is that no two things are completely alike or different, and that conclusions can be formulated about these similarities and differences.

Just Add Writing

Poems are a means to add writing in all content areas. An added advantage is that the poetry is even more effective when read aloud, literally, by two voices, thus adding speaking and listening skills to reading and writing across the curriculum. These poems can be as simple as the “Deer and Lion” example or as complex as the poem about Tengo and Frikkie. In both cases, the writer is comparing and contrasting, returning to the text, reviewing content, deciding what facts to include, and making connections, as well as writing in a new genre. Teachers can also assess what students have noticed in their readings and what they may have missed and how content has been interpreted or misinterpreted.

Poetry in two voices is a creative, fun, and effective writing-to-learn strategy that leads to deeper comprehension across the curriculum.

### Figure 2 Student List of Similarities and Differences

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Differences</th>
<th>Differences</th>
<th>Similarities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>DEER</td>
<td>LION</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mammal</td>
<td>mammal</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>wild</td>
<td>wild</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>antlers</td>
<td>manes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>forests</td>
<td>habitat</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>herd</td>
<td>pride</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>herbivore</td>
<td>carnivore</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Figure 3 Venn Diagram of Similarities and Differences

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DEER</th>
<th>CATEGORIES</th>
<th>LION</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>mammal</td>
<td>Type of animal</td>
<td>mammal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>wild</td>
<td></td>
<td>wild</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>antlers</td>
<td>physical appearance</td>
<td>manes</td>
</tr>
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<td>forests</td>
<td>habitat</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>herd</td>
<td>travel in groups</td>
<td>pride</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>herbivore</td>
<td>diet</td>
<td>carnivore</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Figure 4 Poem in Two Voices

**The Lion**

I am a mammal, wild.
Our males have manes.
I roam the plains,
Seeking food and shelter.
I travel in a group called a Pride.

**The Deer**

I am an herbivore;
I nibble on vegetation.

(From Lesley Roessing’s book, The Write to Read: Response Journals That Increase Comprehension.)
By Matthew Ohlson

Thousands of children in our nation’s schools, especially those who are poor or minorities, face challenges in academics, health, and support from home. Those challenges are intensified for children who are being raised in single-parent homes. Studies show that with caring adults as role models, these students are more likely to develop into successful adults.

At the University of Florida, we developed a K–20 leadership mentoring program that introduces college students to educational leadership while addressing the academic and social needs of at-risk K–12 students. CAMP (Collegiate Achievement Mentoring Program) Gator gives collegiate student leaders and student athletes from a variety of academic majors an opportunity to participate in comprehensive educational leadership training and serve as leadership mentors to middle grades students. These college student leaders have the opportunity to enhance their leadership skills, mentor a child in those leadership skills, make a difference in their community, and feel first-hand the influence one person can have in the field of education.

Welcome to Camp

CAMP Gator is a weekly academic course at the University of Florida that focuses on leadership and mentoring, and incorporates service and real-world learning. Student leaders, nominated by a faculty member or coach, have the opportunity to enroll for two consecutive semesters, thus increasing the effectiveness of the mentoring relationship.

At the K–12 level, classroom teachers and school administrators select students who they feel could benefit from the mentoring process. At the middle grades level, students who are underachieving academically and those who are having social issues, including misbehavior and isolation, are targeted for participation.

Leadership Training. Before the mentoring process begins, the college students complete a comprehensive three-session training program. Various professionals, including collegiate student leaders and athletes, serve as leadership mentors to middle grades students through CAMP Gator.

Matthew Ohlson, is the founder and instructor of the CAMP Gator Program and serves on the instructional leadership team at the Florida Virtual School E-mail: mohlson@ufl.edu

Collegiate student leaders and athletes serve as leadership mentors to middle grades students through CAMP Gator.
including experts in the fields of literacy, special education, public speaking, and bilingual education, help prepare the college students to meet the challenges that may arise throughout the mentoring process.

The collegiate students also participate in comprehensive leadership training. The foundations of this leadership curriculum include the 7 Habits of Highly Effective People by Steven Covey, Good to Great by Jim Collins, and Leading Change by John Kotter.

The leadership curriculum includes a focus on:
1. Personal mission and vision
2. Goal planning
3. Service leadership
4. Financial planning
5. Public speaking
6. Traits of effective leadership
7. Leading positive change.

To enrich the leadership training, we include a variety of guest speakers from the academic and business worlds to address topics such as public speaking, the power of having a vision for one's future, the traits of effective leadership, and personal financial success.

These are all the areas around which the collegiate leaders will focus their attention during their mentoring sessions.

Leadership Mentoring. The 90-minute mentoring sessions between the college and K–12 students takes place each week during the 16-week semester at the K–12 schools. The activities are intended to go beyond merely talking and sharing and instead focus on a comprehensive leadership curriculum and engaged activities.

The collegiate students teach the middle grades students Sean Covey’s 7 Habits of Highly Effective Teens. Together, they complete their mission statements, participate in group role-playing activities, and work on leadership development plans.

They introduce college life to the at-risk middle grades students. The goal is to demonstrate that higher education is attainable if they believe in their own ability and work hard to get there.

The middle grades students attend campus sporting events, have meals with their mentors, and even go to classes on campus, all in an effort to introduce them to the possibilities of higher education.

The Results Are In

We hope to make a difference in the lives of all the students involved. Many of the collegiate mentors, especially the student athletes, had never considered themselves to be leaders in the community or able to have a wide-ranging impact off the playing field. Others were hesitant public speakers or unsure of their goals or plans after college. Yet, their exit interviews demonstrate increased confidence in public speaking, in their abilities as leaders, and in their own future successes.

The K–12 students also benefit from their leadership training and mentoring relationships. Of the student mentees who participated in the pilot semester of the program, during a nine-week grading period data showed:
- 18% increase in attendance
- 21% increase in grade point average
- 78% decrease in suspensions.

All parents who were surveyed recommended the program; one even went so far as to say that one of CAMP Gator events was the “best day of her child’s life.” Teachers also shared the following sentiments about the students who participated in the program:
- She has a much better attitude in class.
- She has been acting much happier and her energy level seems higher.
- He is starting to develop better work habits.
- She is starting to realize the importance of school responsibilities.
- He’s shown much more confidence. He was getting lost but this program got him connected to something.

Matthew Ohlson, founder and instructor of CAMP Gator at the University of Florida, enjoys seeing the smiles on campers’ faces.

Looking Forward

CAMP Gator is expanding to other universities and school districts throughout the country as a low-cost method of increasing student achievement. We are working with various schools to showcase how alumni, retirees, teachers, and staff can serve as mentors. We are even exploring virtual mentoring.

We envision the Collegiate Achievement Mentoring Program model becoming an exemplar of the ways in which leadership mentoring can enhance academic excellence, K–12 school/university partnerships, and opportunities for student empowerment.
Working Together Through the Darkness

By Hillary Coffman and Melanie W. Greene

“Turn your flashlights on!”

With that command from adventure guide Grace Fortune, a group of courageous young adolescents and their intrepid teachers peered cautiously into the darkness. We were about to enter a cave in eastern Tennessee and knew not what to expect! We did know that the purpose of the adventure was to push us beyond our comfort zones and to ultimately develop our teambuilding skills.

The eighth graders at Mabel School in Zionville, North Carolina, were participating in an elective class designed by Mountain Alliance, a local organization that provides youth with the opportunity to develop leadership and teamwork skills through hands-on learning. This organization created an exploratory class entitled Project Venture and delivered it to our students.

During the class, the students learned how to care for others, how to respect the feelings of their peers, how to stay optimistic in difficult situations, how to be team leaders and players, and how to communicate effectively with others. Grace had taught these concepts through hands-on activities such as ropes and obstacle courses. The culminating event was a caving activity!

Working Together

Grace informed us that this spelunking adventure would require communication, problem-solving, and teambuilding skills to navigate the course—all skills we had worked on during the class. Our goal was to get to the inner room of the cave, to stop and debrief, and then to journey back to daylight.

So, here we were! We were about to enter a cave and test these skills.

First, Grace and the other leaders from Mountain Alliance described the dangers we would be facing when we stepped into the cave. They explained the equipment we would be using, such as the helmets and headlamps, and more important, talked about the importance of communication while we were in the cave. As you can imagine, we all had to duck and dodge boulders, stalagmites, and stalactites. As the first person in the line, Grace informed the next person to “duck” or “dodge” and that person would pass the word along, starting a telephone game.

But the communication became more than passing instructions along from one student to the next. Students began talking to one another about a puddle or a slippery rock or what might lie ahead. On many occasions, students would not proceed until their follower made it past an obstacle. In one area, the rocks were so slippery and steep that the students couldn’t cross without a helping hand from the person in front.

The deeper we went into the cave, the smaller the cracks and spaces became, but we had to keep crawling! It was quite a test of the skills we had acquired. One of the students summarized it perfectly: “I liked that when certain parts got hard, everyone would help each other along the way; no one got left behind and that getting muddy was showing that you’re not afraid to try.”

Prior to this exploratory class, many of these students had formed cliques and could be exclusive, making others feel isolated and lonely. Typical class discussions on the feelings of others had not changed their behaviors until now. In this cave, the cliques disappeared as the darkness enveloped us.

Recognizing Accomplishment

After an hour of spelunking, we reached the heart of the cave, covered in mud. We teachers could see the look of accomplishment on students’ faces when they arrived at the huge inner room. They had achieved their goal. Grace asked us to sit down on the rock and reflect on our experience thus far. We all turned out our headlamps and sat in complete darkness while we considered our journey into the cave. One student shared: “Being in the cave without any light at all was very surreal. Everything was blocked out and it was just me, my thoughts, and the darkness.”

After the reflection time, Pace, a cave leader, found a small hole that led to a huge room below the rock. We asked the students to figure out the best way to get into the hole, and more importantly, the best way to get out. The group came up with a great idea of lowering and raising each student into the hole to experience the new room. The idea worked like a charm and everyone made it out unscathed.

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Melanie W. Greene is a professor in the middle grades program at Appalachian State University in Boone, North Carolina. E-mail greenemw@appstate.edu
Finishing Strong

Of course, once you go into a cave, you have to get out. So we headed back out to the light and land. Along the way, the communication, guidance, and helping hands never stopped. Students gave directions and guidance to their peers to make their caving trip more enjoyable and less muddy, if that was possible. When we finally saw light, the leaders and teachers saw smiles spread across each student’s face.

The students were excited to have reached a goal many thought was unattainable. With mud covering us from head to toe, we chowed down on sandwiches and chips and talked about the best part of spelunking.

The debriefing about our experience was very valuable. As teachers, this experience is something we will never forget. The students practiced 21st-century skills they can use throughout their education and beyond. They now know the value of critical thinking, problem solving, communication, and collaboration.

Students will remember the experience by the small details and especially the person who gave a helping hand or a word of encouragement. Pace shared, “The outdoor experience allowed the students to not only build their teamwork, trust, peer-support, and leadership skills it also pushed the comfort zone of many students. The students were able to incorporate educational skills and build their knowledge in the classroom with hands-on learning.”

Without teamwork we wouldn’t have made it through the cave!

Prize of a Lifetime

The darkness allowed the students to realize just how strong they truly were. From this adventure students learned that

• They can accomplish great things with teamwork and collaboration.
• Their minds are stronger than their bodies.
• A helping hand can get them through hard times.
• Encouragement can help someone complete a task and bring oneself a sense of accomplishment and confidence.
• Good leaders practice critical thinking and problem solving skills.
• Communication is a key to reaching their goals.

Spelunking challenges students to step into the darkness and see what they can accomplish together!
Spotlight on Character Education

Watching Learners GLO: Character Education at Work

By Sandy Cameli

Ask any middle grades student what character means and you’ll receive a variety of responses: “We discussed elements of character in English last week” or “Our eighth grade class used historical characters in their Civil War podcast presentations” or “Mrs. Akana thinks Jeremy is quite a character.”

However, when the question of character education came up in a recent conversation with seventh graders, I was met with blank stares and shrugged shoulders. After hearing a summarized explanation of moral traits, collaborative activities, and personal integrity, one young man raised his hand and said, “Oh, you mean the GLOs! It means to take care of yourself, take care of each other, and take care of the place you’re at, for all the right reasons.”

His schoolmates made the connection, and a follow-up comment by a classmate reinforced their understanding: “Basically, you know you’re on the right track when you’re GLO-ing!”

In the State of Hawaii, public schools complement the standards-based curriculum with character education programming based on work habits, behavior, and interpersonal skills. The character education general learner outcomes (GLOs) address six focus areas and enable students to develop foundational skills between kindergarten and the twelfth grade. At the middle level, GLOs are not only addressed during advisory, but also integrated through content and elective classes.

A Framework for Character

At Konawaena Middle School (KMS) in Kealakekua, Hawaii, the GLOs are not only the basis for advisory, they also are the framework for student portfolios.

In 2001, after receiving a recommendation from an accrediting agency to develop a system of collecting and analyzing the effectiveness of character-based skills, the faculty and staff of KMS decided to adopt student portfolios as a measurement tool for assessing the application of character skills and their impact on student achievement.

Unlike content-specific or work-sample collections, the student portfolios at KMS include sections for advisory, interdisciplinary projects, and reflections. They are divided into the six GLOs:
1. Self-directed Learner
2. Community Contributor
3. Complex Thinker
4. Effective Communicator
5. Quality Producer
6. Effective & Ethical User of Technology

As students spend the year collecting evidence for each GLO to place in the respective portfolio sections, they also reflect on connections between the items they select and their application to associated life skills.

Through the years, students and staff have immersed themselves in learning, practicing, and demonstrating proficiencies of each GLO.

• Advisory classes help learners set goals through the use of student planners as an example of self-directedness.
• Social studies classes provide project-based opportunities for students to build community contributor skills.
• Science fair projects coupled with math integration allow students to share complex thinking competencies.

Sandy Cameli teaches yearbook, journalism, student leadership, study skills, and advisory classes at Konawaena Middle School in Kealakekua, Hawaii. E-mail: scamelis@aol.com
• Research projects connected to simulations and volunteerism offer students the chance to be effective communicators as they present work to community panels.

• Assignments and work samples throughout the portfolios show quality producer characteristics by way of drafts, revisions, and final products.

• Becoming an effective and ethical user of technology is confirmed by website reviews, multimedia creations, and publishing opportunities.

In addition to implementing portfolio assessment, the format of conferencing has transitioned from dialogs between teachers and parents to student-led conferences that allow middle grades learners to talk among themselves, and with teachers and family members.

During these biannual conferences, students share portfolios aligned with the GLOs and discuss strengths, weaknesses, and goals set for the following semester or year. In addition, students coached by their advisory teachers focus on achievements linked to the character traits as evidenced by their work samples, rather than simply concentrating on letter grades or test scores.

Commitment to Character Education
For the past decade, KMS has maintained its commitment to supporting character education through consistent advisory lessons, student portfolios, and student-led conferencing. And, although academic accountability pressures aim to decrease emphasis on current programming, a recent review of students’ understanding of the GLOs, through a statewide school quality survey showed that KMS exceeded the overall average of all public middle schools by nearly 19%.

Although the data from the state affirms what most KMS teachers already know, anecdotal information and experiences speak volumes about the school’s long-standing practices. Prior to implementing portfolios and student-led conferences, a rough estimate of family involvement in conferences ranged between 65% and 75% attendance. However, once GLOs became the focal point for discussions and review of evidence, along with facilitation of conferencing by students, parent and guardian attendance rose to nearly 90%.

Konawaena Middle School is not unique in providing students with learner-centered opportunities, nor is the faculty or staff any more dedicated than their colleagues state- and nationwide. However, the community has embraced the practices that promote self-direction and opportunities for learners to build self-confidence, communication, and purpose. What better way for a school to measure success than through the brightness of their GLO-ing students!
Connecting Character, International Service Learning, and Curriculum

By Dean J. Fusto

Character development, if not kept at the forefront of a school’s community, runs the risk of becoming a tangential fragment of a larger school curriculum. The same can be said of service-learning projects that are nothing more than a graduation requirement. If these programs are to have positive effects on students, students must have time to process, reflect, and practice the lessons learned about character and service.

There is a natural, often overlooked, connection among service-learning experiences, character education initiatives, curriculum, and school culture. The Bement School’s ninth grade residency program in the Dominican Republic distinguishes itself as one that perfectly weaves together curriculum, character, and service.

Historical Context

In 1996, when I working as a language and culture teacher at Northfield Mount Hermon School in Massachusetts, a colleague asked if I’d be interested in leading a small group of committed students for a three-month community service trek to San Cristobal in the Dominican Republic. I jumped at the chance.

While there, I was charged with teaching Caribbean culture classes and helping my students attain internships in various social service agencies such as elementary schools, orphanages, clinics, and hospitals.

My students were radically transformed by their time in the Dominican Republic, but it was my own experience that forever altered my pedagogical philosophies and the ways in which I approached character development in my students.

Now, some 18 years later, I understand the enduring lessons of that initial trip and have drawn upon those lessons to design several character education and leadership programs that are grounded in international service-learning experiences.

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In two decades of doing this work, I have led more than 300 students and adults to live and work in orphanages throughout the Dominican Republic. I have witnessed their personal growth through the stories they tell, the reflections they offer, the obstacles they overcome, and the post-trip lives they choose to lead.

Why Bother?
More and more schools are including service learning in their curriculum. Why?
First, an increasing number of secondary schools and universities are looking beyond standardized test scores as important criteria in admitting students. A recent analysis of admissions applications to several secondary schools in New England indicated that although 50% of the ratings for an applicant were related to academics, the other 50% were focused on character.
Second, as social problems like poverty and crime continue to make national headlines, more teachers see the value of developing leadership and problem-solving skills in students.
Third, many teachers believe that a positive experience with service learning can affect students’ self-concept and help them discover who they are and what they offer the world.

Planting the Seeds
Prior to our annual trip to the Dominican Republic, we work extensively with our ninth grade students to prepare for the experience of living in an orphanage for a week. Our students learn about the unique aspects of Caribbean Spanish through mini-lessons. We work with them to build a modest knowledge base about the colorful culture, diverse geography, and rich history of the Dominican Republic.
Students sponsor several fundraisers to support the trip and the projects we do at the orphanage. They also coordinate drives to collect clothing, children’s shoes, toys, and medical supplies.

The In-Country Experience
How do we focus on character development through the trip? We begin by setting the following educational goals.
First, we expect our ninth grade students to live and work in an actual orphanage. During their time in the country, they do not have access to any comforts other than what the orphans have. This means they leave all technology at home. We all commit to being unplugged from our gadgets in order to plug into life’s circuitry.
Second, we expect students to reflect openly, honestly, and publicly about their daily experiences and observations. Our students learn that they are at their best when they are facing hardship. To illustrate, our students have identified the following challenges that the trip poses:
- **Language/Culture**—Most of our students do not speak Spanish nor have they spent time in a culture different from their own. After they arrive in the country, they are immersed in a world that feels very different from their home.
- **Physical Comfort**—While at the orphanage, our students experience life without the physical comforts of home. They don’t have constant access to electricity and running water. There are no air conditioners to cool the humid temperatures. Instead of a private room, they live in dorm-style rooms with 10–12 of their classmates. The cramped conditions force compromise and sacrifice.
- **Poverty**—Students inevitably grapple with poverty on many levels. They observe it at a visceral and experiential level that helps them develop empathy and curiosity about the human condition.
- **Self-Discovery**—Considerable emphasis is placed on serving children at the orphanage. We teach literacy skills, work on projects that the orphanage has asked us to take on, and spend time simply playing with kids. The work we do is balanced by the intellectual and emotional demands we place on our students to engage in self-reflection and introspection.

The Post-Trip Experience
To build on the lessons and experiences of our time in the orphanage, we continue to challenge our students to find ways to stay connected to the children they befriended. There are wonderful stories of Bement alumni who have returned to the orphanage for four or five consecutive years. Bement families have helped to staff and sustain a small library on the orphanage grounds. Finally, we find ways for the voices of our returning students to be heard. They prepare presentations for peers and students in grades K–8. They produce short films, videos, and blogs to reach out and share their experiences with the wider community.
Ultimately, we hope our students, by virtue of this experience, have started to learn how empathy, service, compassion, and resilience all form the mosaic of their character.
Teams in Action

Learning in the Living Lab

By David Auerbach and Heather Oliver

Someone asked members of our science department, “How can you teach life science without having life in the classroom?” We responded with The Living Laboratory. Our vision was to create a program that was student-centered and promoted the study of life throughout school. We also wanted to foster in our students the notion that we should respect living things and appreciate all creatures large and small. The Living Laboratory does all that and more.

The Living Laboratory is a multi-faceted, experiential life science program designed for seventh grade students at Cardigan Mountain School, an all-boys junior boarding school in New Hampshire. The program encompasses many curricular areas and reinforces our students’ sense of responsibility and pride while helping them learn about plant and animal life.

Cardigan has more than 55 animals and almost 400 gallons of fresh- and salt-water aquariums. We maintain permits from the State of New Hampshire to keep a few local aquatic and terrestrial animals in our classrooms as well.

Having terrariums in the classroom is not a new idea; however, the scope and scale of this project gives it a new and unique twist. We use the terrariums as departure points for writing assignments and to engage students in math-related activities such as setting up, maintaining, and collecting data about each of their “little worlds.” We have replaced dissections with a larger, more robust program that promotes life in the laboratory and maintains student interest throughout the school year.

Creating the World

During the first week of school, the boys are given a tour of The Living Laboratory and learn how friendly and playful each animal is and how much care and maintenance each requires. Each boy then fills out a form requesting an animal and describes why he is interested in that particular one. The teachers then pair up the boys with their animals.

Working in teams of two, our students set up and maintain mini-ecosystems that may contain plants, mammals, insects, fish, crustaceans, reptiles, or amphibians. We even have a parrot! Each student maintains the ecosystem, prepares documents describing the living organisms and their living requirements, and logs data about their ecosystem’s environment on a daily basis.

Student-designed experiments help the boys understand the needs of their animals and give them an opportunity to study environmental variables including food, shelter, plants, substrates, and light. Students link the cognitive and affective domains through authentic tasks and realistic problems associated with maintaining the terrariums and nurturing the animals within.

It is exciting to see students mature in their attitudes toward the animals throughout the year. The boys grow close to their animals and are willing to get their hands dirty to keep them happy and safe. In the beginning, some were squeamish about touching their animals or the crickets and worms. Now, however, watching the boys handle a scorpion or seeing a tarantula walk up a student’s arm has become a common sight. We are also pleased to see the boys interact with visitors or their peers. Their knowledge and ability to convey information about the animals is gratifying.

We typically teach bioethics in our life science classes through the use of case studies. Bioethics is no longer a series of printed lessons that are part of a unit to be taught, but a daily concern for the students as they recognize how important it is to treat their animals with respect.

Stewardship of the environment is another area where the benefit of the program is apparent. Although the boys are taking care of a mini-ecosystem, they now see the big picture—they get it. For example, when the leopard gecko was looking a little thin, the students pondered causes and possibilities to reverse the trend. Ultimately, they rebuilt the habitat and the gecko responded and grew fat and sassy once again. This experience fueled much discussion...
about the environment and man’s intervention, which led to lessons about introduced species and invasive plants that are included in our Issues and Life Science curriculum.

**Nuts and Bolts**

The Living Laboratory concept can work in any classroom. Because Cardigan is a boarding school, we are able to be more vigilant about taking care of the plants and animals on weekends, holidays and long vacations. In regular schools, terrariums can be left with automatic lighting and an ample food and water supply for weekends or holidays. Portable terrariums can be taken home by students or other teachers during longer breaks.

We chose Zoo Med Laboratories for all of our supplies, including the products necessary to create and maintain individual mini-ecosystems from desert environments to lush jungles with water features. Terrarium costs vary according to accessories; a well-equipped model could run as high as $150. Although many outlets sell reptiles and other animals, we have taken students on a number of field trips to the New England Reptile Expo. The animals sold there are generally “farm-raised” and healthy. Many of the lizards we have purchased at the Expo cost $10 or less and are still going strong after three years. The excitement of meeting breeders makes these field trips very popular among our students.

The animals we keep eat crickets as the main part of their diet. Crickets can be purchased at the local pet store for about $1–$2 per dozen, but because of the large number of animals we keep, we purchase them by the thousands from a farm in Louisiana and have them shipped to us.

Taking The Living Laboratory idea from the drawing board to a fully operational project took two years with funding from many different sources. We were lucky to secure an Unsung Hero award from ING Financial. The $2,000 prize was matched with funds from our science department budget, enabling us to turn our science hallway into a space filled with life. Zoo Med Laboratories provided a discount for our initial purchase of 15 NT-4 terrariums, lights, heaters, substrates and other supporting materials.

Toyota Motors USA and the National Science Teachers Association supported a turtle study and water quality-monitoring project on our campus with a Tapestry grant for $10,000. Working with our local pet store, Plymouth Pet and Aquarium, we set up a 150-gallon turtle tank and lake display and made it the focal point of our Living Laboratory. Ongoing funding comes from our department budget and other sources. ExxonMobil, Wal-Mart and Target have supported our efforts for the past three years. We have also received funding from Pets in the Classroom to help us purchase food and other supplies.

Project support is also hands-on. During the construction phase, Cardigan’s maintenance department played a major role in making The Living Laboratory a reality. Cardigan’s electrician ran the circuitry for lighting and outlets while our carpenter built the cabinets, counters and lighting valance. Members of the science department installed and finished the display; attaching supports, staining, and finally sealing all of the exposed surfaces.

The staff at Plymouth Pet and Aquarium provides a constant source of expertise for both our terrestrial and aquatic critters. We are careful to support our local businesses by balancing the online purchases with those made in-person. Many people continue to support this program with their time and energy.

Our Living Laboratory program embraces many of the characteristics of effective middle grades education. The program immerses students in an age-appropriate learning environment that stimulates their sense of pride and accomplishment. Their enthusiasm generates positive attitudes and feelings toward life among our entire student body.

As educators, we love to see our boys characterize themselves as science students, or better yet, scientists. We are empowering them by giving them opportunities to communicate and collaborate with their peers and share their work with others. We believe that the experiential nature of The Living Laboratory makes the program an authentic learning tool that provides our students with a safe, practical, and meaningful science experience.

Students are empowered to be more than science students. They see themselves as scientists.

Students learn about and appreciate living creatures up close and personal.
Teaching in the Middle

It’s About Time

By Rick Wormeli

Faced with increased class sizes, diverse students, expanding curriculum, ongoing professional training, and dwindling resources, we wonder: When are we supposed to do all that is asked of us? We’re conscientious people who want to do right by our students and our profession, but to be effective we need that rare commodity: time.

Let’s explore the time issue in two directions: Finding time to meet the needs of students, and finding time to plan and prepare for teaching students. Both are important; one can’t be done without the other.

Time to Meet Students’ Learning Needs

Many secondary schools have 40 students in a classroom built for 28. Often those classes last 45 minutes or less. An individual student is lucky to get 5 minutes of undivided teacher attention, yet many of our students need considerably longer one-on-one and small-group time in order to be successful. So much goes unlearned because we adhered to conventional notions of time for learning!

If we’re going to really teach students, we have to transcend accepted classroom boundaries.

Here are some ways to extend students’ learning beyond the classroom experience:

**Early-Back Programs.** Students who struggle with math, reading, or writing report to school four weeks early in the fall. Their days run from 9 a.m. to 12 p.m. During their half-day sessions, students review material from the previous year and learn material for the new year. When the real first day of school begins, they are already acclimated to school, confident, and, “firing all thrusters.” This is much more productive than their usual state of mind: overwhelmed and falling farther behind with each passing day.

**Audio and Video Podcasting of Daily Lessons.** With today’s technology and most students’ access to technology, this is easier than ever and very helpful. Usually 5–20 minutes long, posted podcasts can be reviewed by parents trying to help their children with homework or by students reviewing the algorithm, content, and skills for themselves. As a student, I appreciate being able to go through a lesson a second time when I struggle with content.

**One Assignment for Two Classes.** Sometimes students have such a huge snowball of content to learn and work to do, it’s overwhelming—they give up. In these cases, let’s combine efforts by letting a student incorporate content and skills from one subject into the work of another subject. It’s actually a lot easier than people think, and it often results in surprisingly creative and substantive projects that increase student engagement. Consider:

- Evidence of skills in probability and statistics woven into an expository essay about a new lottery or casino coming to the state
- Graphic design skills incorporated into lab drawings
- HTML/web design skills used to create a media presentation on viruses and what constitutes living things
- A musical parody (with proper music terms and dynamics) of math properties.

Interdisciplinary techniques work well, remember?

**“Fan Out” Message to All Faculty.** If a student finishes 10 minutes or more early in one class, we invite colleagues to send him to us for extra support. We have materials ready for him to use no matter when he comes, and we leave notes on our classroom doors if he shows up while we’re in the washroom or cafeteria: “Wait here, Jeremy. Yes, you’re being watched. Don’t bother looking for the camera. It’s micro-technology; you’ll never see it. I’ll be back in 90 seconds.”

**Online Tutorials.** This field has exploded in the past few years and is worth investigating. It includes all forms of distance learning, including Skype. Many websites are already set up with explanations of content we teach, such as Schooltube.com, Teachertube.com, Teachingchannel.org, and Khanacademy.org.

Of course, each online explanation must be vetted for accuracy and appropriateness before we promote them to students, but using such sites creates flexibility because students can refer to them 24/7.

**Volunteer Adults in the Classroom.** Some parents and retirees like to stay active in local schools and this can be a meaningful experience for them and for students. Every Tuesday, Thursday, and Friday, for example, Mr. Hooper can sit next to David from 10:45 a.m. to 11:55 a.m. to answer

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Rick Wormeli is a teacher, consultant, and writer living in Herndon, Virginia. His newly released book, The Collected Writings (so far) of Rick Wormeli: Crazy Good Stuff I Learned about Teaching, is available from AMLE at www.amle.org. E-mail: rwormeli@cox.net
his questions, keep him focused, and provide descriptive feedback on his work. Not only does this help David’s new learning, it keeps him from falling behind.

**Alternative Assignments/Assessments.** We can shorten a lot of our assignments. Consider asking students to do one page of excellent writing on a topic rather than three pages of throwing everything into the mix, hoping something will stick with the teacher. Five problems done well can be more useful than doing 35.

Consider “banking” portions of tests when asking students to re-do tests and assessments. If a test is compartmentalized into sub-sections, students need only re-do the portions they struggled with, not all of them. If the test is large and interwoven, of course, they do the entire test again.

**Finding Time for Planning and Preparation**

Most of us want to differentiate instruction, incorporate the latest teaching techniques and tools, order supplies, return parent phone calls, sponsor afterschool clubs/sports/arts, unpack standards, catch up on professional reading, participate in PLCs, keep up with the pacing guide, grade papers, get some exercise, and create wonderful multimedia presentations to engage students every day. Then reality interrupts, and we spend our time lowering our expectations, wondering if airline ticket agents at Chicago O’Hare have easier jobs.

Here are some suggestions for finding time to plan and do more of the things we’d like to do in teaching:

**Divide and Conquer.** We can divide the units of study for the year among our subject-like colleagues. Each one of us designs multiple instructional and assessment options for the unit plus a list of great online resources so we all don’t have to reinvent the wheel.

**Prioritize Standards as “Power” or Primary Standards.**

We have curriculum overload and we can’t do justice to all our standards, so let’s decide which ones create the most leverage in students’ lives—the power standards. Then, we can place these large “boulders” into our schedule and spend our time and students’ efforts primarily on those concepts, weaving the other standards in and around them as we can. Some will read this and say, “But they’re all important,” and my response is, “No, they’re not.”

**Use Parents/Volunteers.** Parents feel distanced from schools when their children reach middle and high school, but they don’t need to be. Use parents to do anything that is not confidential, such as record-keeping, collating, fundraising, creating/maintaining bulletin boards/centers/libraries/supplies/cages/sites, coordinating fieldtrips, photocopying, setting up labs, lining the soccer field, and cleaning/fixing/returning equipment.

**Read.** It sounds weird to say we need to find time to read about how to save time, but it’s true. Those of us who carve time into the day for professional reading and contemplation are more efficient and effective in the classroom. And an added bonus: We get excited about what we’re doing and the things that stress us don’t seem so threatening. It has even greater impact when we talk about what we’ve been reading with colleagues. I am much more efficient and effective in teaching because of the ideas I’ve stolen from others. Go for it!

**Participate in Online Communities.** Post the question, “I need 5 creative vocabulary ideas for my force and motion unit. Any ideas?” or, “Does anyone know a good source for science probes?” and you’ll get multiple suggestions within hours. Read about one teacher’s use of six-word memoirs to get amazing insights from students about historical figures, musical composers, or math symbols, and you have your summarization method for tomorrow’s class. Join a 50-minute Webinar on how to increase text complexity for the Common Core, or how to create a Prezi for your unit on Machu Picchu. These are intensely useful professional development vehicles for busy teachers.

**Establish a Faculty Portfolio of Ideas.** Every time we photocopy something for classroom or professional use, we can make one extra copy and insert it into the appropriate hanging file in the plastic crate next to the photocopier. When others are looking for ideas for their own lessons, they can look through these files, pull out and photocopy what they want, and replace it for the next person.

At the end of the year, these readings, worksheets, tests, puzzles, project directions, assignments, etc. can be placed into a binder and accessed in the professional library of the school for years to come. Of course, we can also provide space on the school’s Intranet for teachers to post articles, reflections, and teaching tips that can be accessed from classrooms or home while planning.

**Cultivate Personal/Professional Creativity.** I’ve written about this in a previous column, but I can’t emphasize it enough. Many times one or more doors are closed to us as we work with students or try to find time to get tasks done, and because we’re not practiced in thinking divergently, we see only a tedious plow through hardened muck as our only way forward. Take a few moments to build personal creativity, combining and re-combining tasks and ideas, to see if there is a more efficient, time-saving route.

In one of his speeches, President Kennedy said that we must use time as a tool, not a crutch. I would add, “... or an excuse.” Time is the rarest mineral ore to teachers: so appreciated when given or discovered. Let’s get good at its mining. This means we open possibilities heretofore untouched. We can turn schools into places of real learning and teaching – it’s time we did.
By Brenda A. Dyck

Master teachers know, as Robert Burns said, “the best laid schemes of mice and men often go awry” when the unexpected enters the classroom. These unexpected events can range from an innocuous fire drill or an impromptu assembly to major catastrophic events that have rocked the country: the Space Shuttle Challenger explosion (1986), the Oklahoma City bombing (1995), the Columbine school massacre (1999), the terrorist attacks of September 11 (2001) and the Sandy Hook Elementary School tragedy (2012).

At times like these, teachers are often called upon to abandon their teaching plans and follow their intuition, leaving curriculum aside and focusing on the needs of humanity. One of the first things that enters a teacher’s mind during these times is “What do I do now?” and “How can I help my students process what has just happened?”

I’m always amazed to hear (after the fact) how some teachers are able to turn the unexpected into a learning event that settles student concerns while introducing important learning truths that students will remember for the rest of their lives.

The resources below will help teachers who are in the midst of an unexpected disturbance, address the fears of their students and use the best of the web to unravel the event in ways that will facilitate long-term learning in their students. If we do this well, our students may well go on to become the solution to the problem.

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America’s Teachers: A Strength Exposed
Written after the 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center, this article reveals the heroic acts of America’s teachers. It was true then and it was true in Newtown, Connecticut, on December 14, 2012.

[www.educationworld.com/a_issues/issues343.shtml](http://www.educationworld.com/a_issues/issues343.shtml)

Helping Children Cope With Traumatic Events
Because schools are considered a safe, stable place, parents and children often turn to schools and educators during a crisis. This list of resources is designed to help teachers, students, and parents respond to trauma.


10 Ways to Talk to Students About Sensitive Issues in the News
When teachers feel ill-equipped to discuss disturbing or sensitive news topics, they may avoid them. That’s not always the best strategy. This blog from the New York Times offers educators 10 ways to provide constructive approaches to these topics.


Explaining and Coping with School Violence
This list of resources from the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, was collected to help families and educators explain and comfort children after the school tragedy in Connecticut.


How To Help Children Cope
Save the Children opened a child friendly space in a Newtown, Connecticut, middle school after the tragedy there to give local children a safe place to play and express themselves while their parents sought counseling and support. Their focus is on helping parents help their children cope with the tragedy, but their advice is relevant to educators as well.

[www.savethechildren.org/cope](http://www.savethechildren.org/cope)

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All links were live at press time.
Teaching About Controversial or Difficult Issues

The Morningside Center for Teaching Social Responsibility is an organization dedicated to social and emotional learning. The center shares these resources to help educators teach about controversial, hot-button, or difficult issues.

www.morningsidecenter.org/teachable-moment/lessons/teaching-about-controversial-or-difficult-issues

Addressing Tragedies in the Classroom

Grief counselor Jackie Gerstein suggests that, “If education is about preparing students to be active and contributing citizens, then world events shouldn’t be shut out of the classroom.” In this article, she shares activities to promote comfort and healing, such as sharing circles, sympathy cards, and acts of kindness.

http://usergeneratededucation.wordpress.com/2012/12/16/addressing-sandy-hooks-and-other-tragedies-in-the-classroom

Helping Children Cope

This article from Education World was published in 2001 in response to the September 11 tragedy, but its insight and strategies are as relevant today as they were then.

www.educationworld.com/a_curr/curr369.shtml

Larry Ferlazzo’s Best Resources on Talking With Children About Tragedies

Education blogger Larry Ferlazzo compiled a vast number of resources immediately after the Sandy Hook shooting in Connecticut to help teachers talk with their students about tragedies.

http://larryferlazzo.edublogs.org/2012/12/14/the-best-resources-on-talking-with-children-about-tragedies

News Sites for Kids

The Connected Classroom website profiles an eclectic variety of news-related sites and tools students can use to learn about and better understand what’s going on in the world around them.

https://theconnectedclassroom.wikispaces.com/News

Pulling Together

As President Barack Obama said at the Sandy Hook Interfaith Prayer Vigil on December 16, 2012, as a nation, our most important job is to give our children “what they need to become self-reliant and capable and resilient, ready to face the world without fear.”

However, he says, “It comes as a shock at a certain point where you realize, no matter how much you love these kids, you can’t do it by yourself. That this job of keeping our children safe, and teaching them well, is something we can only do together, with the help of friends and neighbors, the help of a community, and the help of a nation. And in that way, we come to realize that we bear a responsibility for every child because we’re counting on everybody else to help look after ours; that we’re all parents; that they’re all our children.”

coming in April

Engaging Middle Grades Students

Flipping the Classroom

Using Cell Phones for Learning

The Importance of Effort

spotlight on: School-Parent Partnerships
Mark of Leadership

Feels Like Home

By Tom Burton

In 2005, I joined more than 7,000 middle grades educators at the National Middle School Association Conference in Philadelphia. The amazing keynote address was by Erin Gruwell, the teacher who inspired the movie, Freedom Writers.

When I left the conference, I re-read her book, The Freedom Writers Diary, and was inspired to start a program similar to Gruwell’s in which she inspired her inner city Los Angeles students to confront their day-to-day struggles by writing in diaries.

Seven years later, I have yet to start the program I envisioned. Perhaps more pointedly, I lost sight of the lessons of the book and my desire to have our Leadership Council journal some of their middle school battles. The reality of being a leader in education is that we often have more good ideas than time to execute them.

Gruwell’s students and message, however, keep popping into my consciousness. Three days before I started writing this article, I happened on a video clip entitled I Am Home, which featured three of Gruwell’s students. The last student left an indelible mark on my soul.

The student described the day he found out he and his family were being evicted. Filled with guilt, he blamed himself in part. Why had he asked for so much for Christmas? He did not want to get off the school bus the first day of school as a homeless 14-year-old student. However, he did. The video clip ends with the young man driving home the importance of a caring teacher:

“Mrs. Gruwell, my crazy teacher from last year, is the only person that made me think of hope…. I began to feel better. …I walk into the room and feel as though all the problems in life are not so important anymore. I am home.”

This description of the power of good teachers and effective schools made me reflect on my own journey through education. With tears in my eyes, I began to think about all the wonderful teachers who taught me, whom I taught with, and with whom I currently work. All of these professionals demonstrate an intense desire to give students a sense of belonging. As I reflect on the power of their conviction, I am reminded of six powerful ways great middle grades educators ensure that students feel like they are “home” when they are at school.

Welcome Them

School is home for many of our students. As educators, it is up to us to ensure we make our students feel special each day. Sometimes it is difficult to give a cheerful welcome to our students if we are having a bad day. Yet when we welcome students, we also begin to feel our own mood elevate. Welcoming students to class serves as a positive feedback loop. It tells our students they are “home,” and it reminds us why we teach.

Set High Expectations

Most teachers become teachers because they are idealistic. We want to reach each student and facilitate miraculous transformations, but we worry about overwhelming them with high expectations.

Although many middle grades students do not feel capable of success at school, that is not a reason to lower our expectations. We must give them the tools to meet those expectations.

Love Them When They Are Unlovable

One of my favorite books about young adolescents is Love Me When I’m Most Unlovable, by Robert Ricken (available from AMLE). Middle grades students are not always lovable, but on another level, many of our students think that they are not worthy of being loved. To me, this is the most disturbing part of adolescence.

Adolescents are wonderfully creative, unbelievably capable of learning, and filled with boundless energy. Yet many students have a poor self-image that focuses on the negatives they associate with their personalities.

By showing them love, we can help turn their negative self-image into a positive one. Two of my three children are middle grades students. On many days their behaviors make them difficult to love. But it’s when they are most unlovable that they need the most love, caring, and guidance.

Tom Burton is director of administrative services for Cuyahoga Heights Schools in Ohio. E-mail: tburton@cuyhts.org
Don’t Accept Excuses
The students in Erin Gruwell’s original class of Freedom Writers had every excuse to fail. Erin described students who had seen unspeakable violence, lived in abject poverty, and had no hope of ever getting out of their situation. Yet she didn’t accept any excuses. In a December 3 CNN article, Gruwell wrote about Maria, one of her students who witnessed her first murder at age 5. Gruwell described her goal: “I was determined to get her to record her story in the hopes that maybe she could rewrite her own ending” (http://schoolsofthought.blogs.cnn.com/2012/12/03/my-view-inspiring-students-to-put-their-stories-on-the-record/).

While Maria was filled with excuses to fail, Gruwell did everything she could to show her that she could succeed. She worked tirelessly to find resources so Maria and the other students could see that, despite the excuses, the students could overcome their situations and be successful in school and life.

Many times, we are not aware of all of the excuses a student may have to fail. It is our job to learn what they are and then counteract them. One important way to do this is to get parents and caregivers involved in their student’s education as a way to learn more about our students. As we learn more about our students, we learn more about their excuses.

Eliminate the Confusion
One of our main goals as middle grades educators is to provide clarity. Adolescents are confused about the changes in their bodies, the way their brains work, and the mixed signals that our society sends them. One place we can eliminate their confusion is at school.

Students should walk in each day knowing what our expectations are and that those expectations will remain consistent. Learning objectives must be clear, and they should relate to students’ lives.

Be Compassionate
Young adolescents are constantly judged by others—or at least believe they are. Everything is judged: the new haircut, the new pimple, the choice of clothing, and the decisions they make. Seldom are they on the receiving end of compassion. When they are on the receiving end of compassion, students who are faced with unbelievable difficulties can be empowered to overcome those difficulties.

Each student is different. One might be motivated by hearing a personal anecdote about an older student who overcame a similar problem. Another student might appreciate an opportunity to vent or turn in an assignment a day late. No matter what the situation, the student is valued, and when given time, is able to move on.

Feels Like Home
Our students face many obstacles. Some come to our classrooms without a practical grasp of English, with a disabling condition, with difficult home lives, or with a score of other issues that might impact their school life. When we provide love, support, compassion, high expectations, and clarity, we help them overcome those obstacles.

Erin Gruwell gave students tools to overcome the obstacles they faced in their lives. How will you empower your students? Even more important, how will you make sure that when your students walk into your classroom, office, school building, they feel “at home?”

Middle Ground eMarketplace
a directory of the advertisers in this issue and their websites

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www.realworldmath.nctm.org
Beyond The Five-Paragraph Essay
by Kimberly Hill Campbell and Kristi Latimer. 2012. $22.50.

Language Arts and English teachers who need permission to retire the five-paragraph essay should read this text immediately—a student’s future is at stake.

The authors, Kimberly Hill and Kristi Latimer, have a wealth of experience teaching Language Arts and English to middle school, high school, and college students. They begin by debunking the myths that have served in defense of the infamous “five-paragraph essay.”

Hill and Latimer first address the myth that the five-paragraph theme is an actual “form” of writing. In fact, the authors found that this formulaic essay doesn’t exist beyond the school walls. Unfortunately, misinformed students perceive the formula as the hallmark of academic writing and as a result believe writing is about sentence placement rather than about thinking and discovering.

The first chapter of this text should be required reading for every middle grades and high school English teacher. The remaining chapters of the book provide details on how to create classrooms that educate and encourage writing that is thoughtful, lively, personal, and organized. Hill and Latimer have written a book that supports putting the heart and style back into writing. They provide realistic strategies that support students in becoming engaged skillful writers.

The appendices include graphic organizers such as bookmarks for tracking plot and themes, student surveys, and anticipation guides.

Understandably, many teachers have been teaching the five-paragraph essay for so long that they may not be sure what to teach instead. This text solves that problem. So, if you’re a teacher wanting to retreat from this long-standing writing formula, Beyond the Five-Paragraph Essay is a must-have.

Review by Lisa J. Lucas, an assistant professor at West Chester University in Pennsylvania and an educational leadership coach and consultant.

Teaching Boys Who Struggle in School: Strategies that Turn Underachievers into Successful Learners
by Kathleen Palmer Cleveland. 2011. 233 pp. $27.95. ASCD. www.ascd.org/books

Kathleen Palmer Cleveland addresses rising concerns about the academic achievement of boys in her book Teaching Boys Who Struggle in School: Strategies that Turn Underachievers into Successful Learners. It is a highly recommended read for all teachers who are seeking new strategies to affect male students’ success in their classrooms.

Cleveland presents findings from four extensive studies about how boys learn and incorporates a discussion of the influences of learning styles and social influences. One of the leading influences on adolescent males is what Cleveland refers to as “the boy code,” which reflects the expectations society places on males and that ultimately affect their learning. For example, boys are supposed to act like heroes, hide their emotions, fight instead of talk, refrain from being perceived as smart, and not enjoy reading or writing.

Based on her research, she created the Pathways to Re-Engagement to help teachers increase achievement levels for boys in and out of school: 1) support; 2) guide; 3) reinforce; 4) adjust; 5) ignite; and 6) empower. In her discussion of each pathway, Cleveland includes access points and tools to explain the process and how to apply it in the classroom. Teacher anecdotes illustrate the pathways.

The major goals of the Pathways to Re-Engagement include replacing boys’ negative attitudes about learning with positive ones, reconnecting boys with learning, encouraging boys to believe in themselves as learners, rebuilding boys’ lives and learning skills that lead to success, and reducing unproductive and distracting behaviors.

The Pathways to Re-Engagement is meant to be used as a flexible model across all grade levels and content areas. The framework provides educators with suggestions for organizing and incorporating new ideas that are relevant to their students’ needs.

Although Cleveland’s pathways have implications for young adolescent male learners, her recommendations have significant relevance for females as well.

Review by Stephanie Perkins, graduate student, and Melanie W. Greene, professor, at Appalachian State University in Boone, North Carolina.
In this edition of *Teaching Reading in the Content Areas*, the authors give a nod to current issues that impact content area literacy in today’s classrooms. They establish the relevance of content area literacy instruction, noting not only that reading proficiency is in a state of decline, but that a definition of reading proficiency itself has changed in many ways: new technological literacies force readers to navigate text in different ways; diverse student learners, including an increasing number of English Language Learners, have distinct needs; and the Common Core State Standards have significantly changed the literacy landscape.

The authors’ response to these changing needs? A reconceptualization of the dynamics that affect content area literacy instruction. The authors transfer their focus from content area *reading* to content area *literacy*, a shift that emphasizes essential literacy skills as a vital part of a particular academic discipline.

The authors examine the three “interlocking gears of disciplinary literacy”—knowledge, strategies, and goals and dispositions—in such a way that readers can understand the distinctions between each, along with the dynamic transaction that occurs when the three work together cohesively. They also establish guidelines and practices that produce a literacy-rich environment.

Then, they provide readers with multiple instructional strategies to use in their classrooms, along with a checklist indicating when to position the instructional technique. The detailed descriptions applied to each instructional strategy ensure that readers can implement them carefully and appropriately.

Not only does the text combine theory and practice in a non-intimidating way, but it helps content area teachers redefine their role from reading teachers to literacy advocates. This is a text that I am pleased to add to my own shelf.

*Research*

**Young People and Online Activity**

Concerned about what their children are doing online, parents are taking steps to observe, discuss, and check up on their “online teens” activity, according to a new survey by the Pew Research Center’s Internet & American Life Project. According to the survey of 802 parents and their children, ages 12–17:

- 81% of parents of online teens say they are concerned about how much information advertisers can learn about their child’s online behavior.
- 72% of parents are concerned about how their child interacts online with people they do not know.
- 69% of parents are concerned about how their child’s online activity might affect their future academic or employment opportunities.
- 69% of parents are concerned about how their child manages his or her reputation online.

With regard to young adolescents in particular, 63% of parents of children ages 12–13 say they are “very” concerned about their child’s interactions with people they do not know online and 57% say they are “very” concerned about how their child manages his or her reputation online.

Parents are taking action.

- 59% of the parents whose teens use social networking sites have talked with their child because they were concerned about something posted to their profile or account.
- 39% of the parents whose teens use social networking sites have helped their child set up privacy settings for a site.

For more information, visit [http://pewinternet.org/Reports/2012/Teens-and-Privacy.aspx](http://pewinternet.org/Reports/2012/Teens-and-Privacy.aspx)
“Schools are blocking the very media that young people are using to express themselves and communicate with others. It’s also one of the ways people learn and is the virtual gathering place for today’s social activists. Schools that block social media today are no different than schools that blocked political speech during the sixties.”

“Really, the meat of the sandwich is middle school, and if we can make kids more successful at this level they’ll have those foundational skills and be prepared for higher level work in high school.”
— Timothy Hise, principal at Ann Richards Middle School in East Dallas, Texas. KERA News, October 4, 2012.

“There is no formula for quantifying compassion, creativity, intellectual curiosity or any number of other traits that make a group of teachers motivate one another and inspire greatness in their students. Principals must be empowered to use everything they know about their faculty—including student achievement data—to determine which teachers they will retain, promote or, when necessary, let go. This is how every successful enterprise functions.”

“Are we raising a group of children who will become the first generation of nursing home residents who sit together but never speak to one other? It’s possible they may be way too busy downloading apps to talk to their grandchildren. Of course, by then, there may not be apps. Or grandchildren. Because they really don’t interact.”

“I have worked for more than two decades with parents and schools, and am perplexed that we tiptoe around a sure route to closing this gap: high expectations. Too many schools simply do not expect much from their students.”

“…Just as we need to scaffold students’ academic understanding, we also need to scaffold their non-academic growth. We shouldn’t, for example, ignore students’ fear of presenting in class. We should validate their fear and help them overcome it.”

“It’s unethical to provide a robust digital learning program in school for kids who don’t have access in their bedrooms and family rooms. As schools begin to integrate mobile devices and social media into education, the out-of-school equity issues have to be considered. Education leaders need to understand equity is not only access to devices, but access to the networks that allow people to get information.”
— Michael Searson, the president of the Society for Information Technology and Teacher Education. “Schools Are using Social Networking to Involve Parents,” Education Week, November 27, 2012.

“Education shouldn’t be so hard. School children shouldn’t fear for their safety. They shouldn’t have to worry about being hungry. Schools should not have to choose between arts and sports, or after-school activities and summer schools to balance their budgets. Teachers should not be isolated in their classrooms and forced to teach to a test. Young people should not complete their education saddled with debt. But too often, this is the reality in America today. To change these realities we must rise above the partisan politics – we have to set aside the tired debates pitting reformers against unions—and we have to discard the ugly and divisive rhetoric of blame, and become much more self-reflective.”
— U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, October 2, 2012.
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