Middle School Journal

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Listening to Students
Involving Parents and Community

Role of Humiliation
Social Forces
Improving Communication
Families and Literacy

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As much as educators must pay attention to standards, standards are only one aspect of educating young adolescents. Standards do not a curriculum make. They have to be translated into courses of study, instructional units, individual lesson plans, and finally into adaptations for individual learners, before they can be used to promote successful learning in real, live young adolescents. This translation requires resources supplied by healthy school organizations made available to well-prepared, (com)passionate teachers before learning can take place. The pages of various educational publications, including those contained in Middle School Journal, have devoted much space to these issues in recent years.

However, something is missing. The tableau of learning is incomplete: Where is the discussion of student input? What do students think about what is happening to them in their middle schools? What do they think about the factors that lead to success or failure in school settings? What do they think about the effects of schooling on their own future prospects?

This issue of Middle School Journal focuses its attention on listening to student voices and the closely related issue of parental involvement in the education of young adolescents. In an article with the arresting title “The Under-Appreciated Role of Humiliation in the Middle School,” Nancy Frey and Douglas Fisher (pp. 4–13) discuss student views on the impact of humiliating school experiences resulting from peer interactions, teacher behavior, and structural elements in middle schools. Next, Kathleen Cushman and Laura Rogers (pp. 14–26) provide a nuanced discussion of such issues as acting good, being different, seeking common ground, being treated with respect, including students in the conversation, making fair decisions, being held to agreed upon norms, receiving meaningful rewards, and using behavior correction as teaching moments. Nancy Doda and Trudy Knowles (pp. 26–33) complete our trilogy by allowing students to speak out about quality relationships and quality learning in middle schools.

Fortunately, Middle School Journal is not alone in bringing the views of students to educators and policymakers. Phi Delta Kappa and National Association of Secondary School Principals in collaboration with the Lumina Foundation for Education have published the results of a survey of more than 1,800 middle schoolers nationwide (Bushaw, 2007). Seventh and eighth graders were asked questions to elicit their views on levels of satisfaction, degrees of challenge, and preparation for their futures. Young adolescent views on their current middle school experiences, testing and No Child Left Behind, their middle school teachers and teaching, high school, as well as post-secondary plans are reported in a multilayered array of 112 pages of detail (Markow, Liebman, & Dunbar, 2007). An executive summary well worth checking out is also available online (Phi Delta Kappa, National Association of Secondary School Principals, & KnowHow2GO.org, 2007). The least heard, least understood elements in the educational process—young adolescents—have gained new platforms for their voices in this issue of Middle School Journal, November’s Phi Delta Kappan, and the Phi Delta Kappa Web site.

References
Mission Statement

Middle School Journal leads the way in generating and disseminating the knowledge base of professionals engaged in the education of young adolescents. To that end the Journal publishes vivid descriptions of practice grounded in middle school literature. It also publishes the findings of new research with clearly drawn applications for practice and grounded, conceptual articles related to middle grades policy and practice.

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**January 2008 Volume 39 Number 3**
The Under-Appreciated Role of Humiliation in the Middle School

Nancy Frey & Douglas Fisher

In his book *The World Is Flat*, Friedman (2005) argued that we have under-appreciated the role that humiliation plays in terrorism. He notes that the reaction humans have when they are humiliated is significant and often severe. If it is true, that humiliation plays a role in terrorism, what role might this under-appreciated emotion play in middle school? If terrorists act, in part, based on humiliation, how do middle school students act when they experience this emotion?

To answer these questions, we interviewed 10 middle school teachers and 10 students. We asked them about times they (or their students or peers) were humiliated and what happened. In each case, they were surprised to be asked about this emotion. They said things like “It just happens; you gotta deal with it” and “You know how kids are, they can be mean.” The responses from the teachers and students about the ways that students are humiliated clustered into three major areas: bullying, teacher behavior, and remedial reading. In addition, we searched the ERIC database for documentation about the impact humiliation has on middle school students. In this article, we will begin by discussing the findings from our interviews and surveys, then we will describe the effects of humiliation on middle school learners.

This article reflects the following *This We Believe* characteristics:

- An inviting, supportive, and safe environment — School-wide efforts and policies that foster health, wellness, and safety
- Multifaceted guidance and support services

Types of humiliation

The 10 teachers and 10 students we interviewed worked or attended one of three large urban middle schools in two southwestern states. These schools fit the profile of many schools across America—large (more than 1,000 students), located in major metropolitan communities, with diverse demographic profiles among students and teachers. None of the schools had a formal anti-bullying or character education program. We sought a representative sample of teachers based on experience, gender, and subject area. We chose students who represented different grade levels, genders, and achievement levels. The names of students and teachers are pseudonyms. We conducted individual interviews with each teacher and each student to ensure privacy and promote candor in their disclosures. Based on an analysis of their responses, we identified three themes.

Bullying

**Student voices.** The most common topic raised in the conversation for both teachers and students was bullying. Many students believed that bullying was part of life, something that was unavoidable. It need not be. “Being bullied is neither a ‘part of growing up’ nor a ‘rite of
passage” (Barone, 1997, p. 80). Every student participant recounted a time in which he or she had been bullied or had witnessed it occurring with other students. Marcus, a sixth grader, described an incident that occurred earlier that school year.

There’re these older guys [eighth grade] who think they’re the kings of the school. They talk loud, swear, shove people in the halls. I see them comin’ and I bounce [leave]. My first month at this school, they walked behind me, talkin’ loud about how I was a little faggot. I tried to ignore them, but they knocked my stuff out of my hand.

Marcus’s experience is perhaps the most common type associated with bullying. There was an age and size differential between perpetrators and victim, accompanied by verbal abuse associated with sexual orientation, and some physical contact (Nishina & Juvonen, 2005; Olweus, 1993). This is also consistent with Bjorklund and Pellegrini’s (2000) dominance theory of increased bullying directed at those entering a new social group.

Martha, a seventh grader, described a more subtle kind of bullying.

There’s this girl, and she used to be our friend [named several girls] … but she’s just so weird. What happened to her? We were all friends since second grade, but when she came back to school [entering middle school] she still dressed and talked like such a baby. It’s embarrassing to be around her. So, we stopped talking to her.

Martha described relational bullying, memorably chronicled in a number of studies (Bjoerkqvist, Lagerspetz, & Kaukinen, 1992; Crick, Bigbee, & Howe, 1996; Simmons, 2002). Although Martha did not describe herself as a bully, she exhibited prevalent forms of female aggression: relational bullying and avoidance (Crick, Bigbee, & Howe, 1996). The transition from elementary to middle school appears to play a role as well. Pelligrini and Bartini’s (2000) study of bullying across fifth and sixth grade noted that the move to larger, more impersonal school environments often interfered with the maintenance of peer affiliations.

We also sought students’ perspectives on the reasons bullying exists. Their comments suggest that they accept bullying as a given, a common part of middle school life. “Everyone gets made fun of,” remarked seventh grade student Juan. “If you can’t take it … if you let anyone see it bothers you, you just get it even worse.” Martha echoed this sentiment. “It’s how girls are. One day you’re friends, and the next day you’re not. Better not be caught lookin’ at someone else’s man. That’ll get you quicker than anything.” Beliefs about the normative presence of bullying, verbal taunts, and teasing are prevalent among adolescents, who view these as de facto elements of the secondary school experience (Shakeshaft et al., 1997).

We also asked students about their reactions to being humiliated by their peers. Most described deep levels of shame and responses that could be categorized as either violent or avoidant. Students told us they “snapped,” “pounded his face in,” “blew,” or “got my bitch on” to describe verbal or physical retaliation. In other cases, students described attempts to avoid a situation. Similar to Marcus’s attempts to “bounce” when bullies were spotted, Al, an eighth grader, reported that he did not use certain restrooms or hallways, because he anticipated that his tormentor would be there. Adriana, an eighth grade student, poignantly recounted the following incident.

When I was in seventh, I made up a boyfriend to my friends. It was stupid. … Everyone had a boyfriend and I wanted one, too. I told them I had a boyfriend at [nearby middle school]. When Cindy found out that it wasn’t true, she told everybody. They laughed at me, left notes … told some of the boys. I told my mom I was sick, and I didn’t go to school for two weeks.

Adriana’s avoidance of the situation is a common response to the humiliation resulting from bullying. According to the American Psychological Association and the National Education Association, 7% of eighth graders stay home from school at least once a month to avoid a bullying situation (cited in Vail, 1999). Other middle school students, like Marcus and Al, alter their paths in school to avoid encountering bullies (Wessler, 2003).

Teacher voices. The 10 teachers who participated in this study were conflicted about the role of bullying in middle school. All 10 participants expressed concern over the amount of bullying in their schools (i.e., responding positively to the queries, “Bullying occurs frequently at this school,” and “Bullying negatively impacts the learning of students at this school”). All were aware of the deleterious effects of bullying on both the victims and the perpetrators. Mr. Lee, a seventh and eighth grade mathematics instructor, noted, “We have to worry about the kid who’s doing the bullying as well as the one who’s getting it. Those kids that are bullies now end up in
trouble in school and in life." In addition, 8 of the 10 instructors reported that they “always” responded to incidents of bullying. Mr. Harper, a music teacher, said, “I had it happen last week. I was outside my class [during passing period] and saw a group of bigger students descend on this smaller boy. You could just see this kid brace himself for what was going to happen. It was like slow motion. … I stepped in and made the kids leave him alone.” Five other teachers offered anecdotal reports of their personal responses to bullying incidents, although, in all cases, it was related to the threat of physical harm perpetrated by either boys or girls.

Verbal abuse did not prompt such swift responses. “I won't put up with profanity, name-calling. If I hear it, I stop it. I write a referral if I have to," stated Ms. Indria, a sixth grade social studies teacher. However, when probed, all 10 teachers stated that they did not get involved in “personal relationships, friendship stuff.” Ms. Indria offered, “Girls just seem to treat each other badly. It’s a part of adolescence. … I certainly remember doing it when I was that age.” Seventh grade science teacher Ms. Anthony echoed a similar response. “I can’t keep up with it. One week they’re friends; the next week they aren’t. Way too much drama. I find that when I have tried to mediate, it ends by consuming too much instructional time.” Four other teachers made statements consistent with the belief that negotiating a verbally, or even physically, abusive landscape was a part of growing up. Physical education teacher Ms. Hartford noted,

> You really have to be careful when you choose to interfere. It [teacher involvement] can really make it worse. The kids will just pick more—“teacher’s pet.” If it looks like the kid is holding his own, I don’t get directly involved. I keep an eye on it.

It is also likely that Ms. Hartford and the other teachers interviewed were not cognizant of their relationships with the aggressors. Elias and Zins (2003) found that bullies often hold high social capital with their teachers and are perceived positively, while victims are often perceived as less likable.

Statements like the one offered by the physical education and science teachers illuminate a commonly held belief among middle school educators—that the ability to “take it” is a necessary rite of adolescent passage. Computer instructor Ms. Andersen evoked her own junior high memories to defend this position.

> Face it, being able to dish it out and take it gets you ready for the real world. What’s that old commercial? “Never let ‘em see you sweat.” Teenagers have to learn that you don’t wear your emotions on your sleeve. People’ll use it against you. I know, I went through it, but I survived. You have to toughen up.

When asked about the role of humiliation in bullying, she replied,

> Yeah, they’re good at humiliating each other. I keep an ear on what’s going on. But I have to say … a lot of times they use it to keep each other in line. In a funny way, they regulate each other’s behavior.

Ms. Anderson’s beliefs are not entirely misplaced. Tapper and Bolton (2005) used wireless recording equipment to analyze bullying interactions among 77 students. They found that direct aggression (without physical violence) often inspired peer support for the aggressor. The reaction of the victim is a factor in whether the bullying will continue. Perry, Williard, and Perry (1990) determined that displays of distress by the victim increased the likelihood that bullying would occur again. “Never let ‘em see you sweat” appears to be accurate.

**Teacher Behavior**

_Student voices._ Students had strong feelings about the use of humiliation by teachers. Nine of the 10 student participants could recount times when a teacher had used sarcasm or humiliation to embarrass a student in front of the class. In some cases it was directed at them, while in others they had witnessed it in their classes.

> We had this one teacher in seventh grade; man, she was rough. She had a nickname for every kid in the class. Like, she called this one girl “Funeral,” because she said she always looked like she was coming from one.

This story, told by Al, is admittedly an extreme example and not typical of the incidences that were shared by students. However, three students told of times when teachers had “busted someone” in front of the entire class for failing a quiz or test, using insulting language. “I don’t know why they do it,” said Gail, a sixth grader. “It’s not like it makes a difference. Who wants to work harder for someone who embarrasses you that way?”

Other students admitted that the use of humiliation might have a positive effect, at least in the short term.
My [seventh grade] math teacher reads everyone’s quiz grades to the whole class. I failed one, and he said, “Spending too much time looking at girls?” It made me kinda mad … but I made sure I didn’t fail another math quiz. (Juan, eighth grade)

Veronica, an eighth grade student, said,

Ms. _______ likes to catch you doing something wrong. Like, we were reading our social studies book out loud and I missed my turn. She goes, “Wake up, Veronica! We’re all waiting,” in this really stupid way she has [imitates a sarcastic tone]. Everyone laughed as though it never happened to them. I don’t let her catch me.

Veronica then used profanity to describe her teacher, evidence of the anger she felt toward this adult and perhaps school in general.

When asked what they thought these teachers hoped to gain with the use of humiliation, their insights were surprising. “They want to be cool, like it’s funny,” remarked sixth grade student Marcus. Seventh grader Harlan responded similarly. “They don’t treat you like little kids. My dad talks the same way. Making fun of kids in the class is just what they do.”

The use of sarcasm and humiliation by teachers has been less well documented in the literature than the prevalence and effects of bullying. It is certainly long understood in the teaching profession, as evidenced by Briggs’s (1928) article on the prevalence of the use of sarcasm by young secondary teachers. Martin’s (1987) study of secondary students’ perspectives on this phenomenon was derived from surveys of more than 20,000 Canadian students. Students reported that the use of sarcasm resulted in dislike for the teacher and even anger toward the teacher. Martin also reported that some students described “anticipatory embarrassment,” the dread associated with the belief that the teacher would humiliate them again. In addition, this created learning problems, including decreased motivation to study and complete homework, increased cutting of classes, and thoughts of dropping out. Turner and associates (2002) studied the classroom learning environments of 65 sixth grade mathematics classrooms to study factors that promoted or reduced help-seeking behaviors and found that the teacher’s classroom discourse, including use of sarcasm, influenced the likelihood that students would seek academic help when needed. Classrooms featuring more negative teacher talk, including sarcasm, were associated with high levels of avoidance in asking for assistance.

**Teacher voices.** Six of the 10 teachers in the study named colleagues who regularly used sarcasm and humiliation with students. Ms. Robertson, a seventh grade language arts teacher, described a colleague as “using words like a knife. He just cuts kids down to size.” Mr. Lee, the math teacher, described an experience when he was a student teacher.

[The master teacher] was just vicious with students. Everything was a big joke, but kind of mean-spirited, you know? He’d single out kids because of a quirk, like they talked funny, or they had a big nose, or they wore clothes that were kind of different. Kids would laugh, but I saw the cringes, too.

Five of the participating teachers discussed the fine line between humor and sarcasm. Ms. Andersen offered,

You have to take into account that they’re really very fragile, in spite of all their bluster. We all remember what it was like. Worried all the time about sticking out. They’re already sensitive to the need for conformity. As teachers, we have to make sure that we don’t make them feel different.

Ms. Hartford noted, “It’s great to keep it light and fun, but not at someone else’s expense.” Sarcasm is typically used for three purposes: to soften a criticism, especially through feigned politeness; to mitigate verbal aggressiveness; or to create humor (Dews & Winner, 1995). However, the use of sarcasm in social discourse assumes an equal relationship between parties. This is never the case in the classroom, where the teacher holds the power in the relationship. Therefore, the student cannot respond with a sarcastic reply without consequences. The use of sarcasm with middle school students is ineffective as well, as evidenced by a study of 13-year-olds by the Harvard Zero Project. They found that 71% of the students studied misinterpreted sarcasm as deception. In other words, the majority had not yet reached a linguistically sophisticated developmental level that would allow them to accurately discern the speaker’s purpose, even when it was accompanied by a gestural cue (Demorest, Meyer, Phelps, Gardner, & Winner, 1984).

**Remedial reading and mathematics**

Bullying and sarcasm are age-old tools of humiliation, but a more recent (and inadvertent) tool is that of the
remedial class created for students who fail to achieve in reading and mathematics. Commonly referred to as “double dosing,” it is the practice of increasing the number of instructional hours spent in remediation, at the expense of electives or core classes such as science and social studies (Cavanaugh, 2006). Though well-intended, our student participants were vocal about the negative effects on the lives of adolescents.

**Student voices.** “Everyone knows who the dumb kids are,” explained Martha, a seventh grade student. All you have to do is look around at who’s not on the wheel [elective class rotation]. They’re all in reading mastery.” At Martha’s school, students who score below a cut point on the state language arts and mathematics examinations are automatically enrolled in another section of instruction. Jessika, an eighth grader, is one of those students. “I hate it. We’re all the stupid kids. Everyone knows it.” Carol, another eighth grade student, described her classmates this way:

> Nobody even tries in my [remedial] reading class. It’s like, if you do, you’re trying to make yourself look better than you really are. No offense, but it’s “acting white.” People just sleep in class. You know, pull their [sweatshirt] hood up. If you look like you’re trying, you’ll catch it from [classmates.]

Marcus and Al are also enrolled in similar classes for mathematics. When asked what others said to them and about them in regard to their participation in these courses, we heard, “retard,” “SPED” [special education], “loser,” “tard,” “spaz,” and “window licker.” These labels are quite troubling for students with disabilities, because they suggest an accepted intolerance for students in need of academic supports.

Slavin’s (1993) review of the literature on remedial classes in middle school found a zero effect size for academic gains. While it is too soon to gauge the long-term effectiveness of double-dosing academic achievement, the voices of middle school students provide a bellwether for assessing the social and emotional repercussions of such practices. In a few short years, these students will have reached an age at which they can voluntarily exit school. There is further evidence that low-achieving students are more likely to use so-called “self-handicapping strategies” such as giving up and refusing to study (Midgely & Urdan, 1995; Turner et al., 2002). In particular, they are more likely to associate with other negative-thinking students. The remediation classroom, it would seem, from Carol’s and Jessika’s comments, is a perfect environment for breeding this sort of attitude toward school and learning.

**Teachers’ voices.** We were particularly interested in the views of Mr. Lee and Ms. Robertson, both of whom teach a section of remedial math or reading. “No one wants those classes,” remarked Mr. Lee. “I got it because I’m new here. They stick the new teachers with these classes. Wouldn’t you think that they should be taught by people with lots of experience?” he asked. Mrs. Robertson described her classroom learning environment. “I’m ashamed to say that I dread fourth [period] because of the students. I feel like all the energy gets sucked out of the room, and me. I can’t seem to inspire them, and it affects the way I teach.” When asked to elaborate, she said, “I know I’m stricter, and I feel like I can’t even smile or make a joke. I’m grim, and it makes for a grim period.”

Two other teachers explained that, while they saw the logic in double dosing, they worried about the detrimental effects on their students. Mr. Espinosa, a seventh grade social studies teacher, said,

> We’re organized in houses here [a cohort model]. But every time we excuse students to go to another class, one that’s different from everyone else, it chops away at the concept of a family of students and teachers. I can see the light go right out of their eyes when they have to pass up computer class to go for extra reading or math class.

Ms. Andersen, the computer teacher, expressed concern about the content students were missing. “If I’m not teaching literacy and math, then what am I doing? They’ll just get further behind.”

**The effects of humiliation**

In addition to the ways in which middle school students experience humiliation, we discussed the impact that humiliation has on young adolescents. Both students and teachers identified a number of outcomes from humiliation, including drug and alcohol use, attendance problems, dropping out of school, pregnancy, and suicide. Let us examine the perspectives of teachers and students on each of these issues.

**Drug and alcohol use**

Most educators recognize that experimentation with alcohol and drugs during adolescence is common. The
Youth Risk Behavior Survey (www.cdc.gov/HealthyYouth/yrbs/index.htm) indicated that more than two-thirds of middle school students report ever having had a drink of alcohol and that 26% report ever having used marijuana. However, several students commented on the regular use of drugs and alcohol by students who feel humiliated at school. In the words of Marcus, “I know a kid who drinks every night. He hates school and says they make him feel stupid.” One of the teachers noted that the rate of drug and alcohol use was highest for students who were enrolled in remedial reading classes. Mooney (Mooney & Cole, 2000), a student with a disability who subsequently graduated from an Ivy League college, discussed his use of drugs and alcohol to “turn off the shockers” at school.

**Attendance problems**

Another outcome of humiliation that both students and teachers discussed was poor school attendance. Mr. Harper, the music teacher, put it eloquently—“They vote with their feet”—meaning that students tell us, by their physical presence in school, whether or not it is a comfortable place to be. Again, most educators acknowledge that there are patterns of problematic attendance, such as is typically seen in urban schools. More important, for our purpose here, is the difference of attendance patterns within the school. It is clear from an analysis of attendance patterns—both tardiness and absence—that students are communicating with which teachers they feel comfortable and with which they do not. While there are many reasons for students feeling comfortable with teachers, one reason is the climate that is created in class. Veronica reported, “Lots of us cut class with Mr. ______ because he makes you feel bad when you try to answer.”

**Dropping out**

While calculating an accurate drop-out rate has been exceedingly difficult to do, it is important to note that in many states there is no mechanism for capturing middle school drop-outs. It seems that when the data systems were created, people assumed that middle school students either would not or could not drop out of school. Unfortunately, that is not the reality; middle school students are dropping out. In-grade retention (an indicator of either poor academic performance or poor attendance) is the single strongest school-related predictor of dropping out in middle school (Rumberger, 1995). As Ms. Indria reported, “There are students who just leave us. They don’t find school fulfilling and are ashamed of their performance, and they stop coming. No one really knows where they go.” Turner and associates’ (2002) study on the relationship between classroom climate and help-seeking offers further evidence of the role of humiliation. There is also evidence that the overall school climate—the degree that students feel safe to learn and are not threatened by peers or teachers—is directly related to the drop-out problem (Wehlage, 1991). As Al indicated, “If I had to deal with the crap that Jeremy does, I’d just quit. I wouldn’t come to this place.”

School institutions related to humiliation play a factor as well. According to Goldschmidt and Wang (1999), “Two school policy and practice variables affect the middle school dropout rate significantly: the percentage of students held back one grade, and the percentage of students misbehaving” (p. 728). Here we see the snowballing effects of humiliation. Students retained in grade, attending remedial classes, surrounded by misbehavior (including bullying), with lower rates of attendance and less inclination to seek help from sarcastic teachers appear to be at great risk for dropping out, and humiliation plays a role in each.

**Pregnancy**

Another issue associated with humiliation, identified primarily by the teachers we interviewed, was teenage pregnancy. While less common at the middle school level than at the secondary level, teen pregnancy is still an issue with this age group. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, national data suggests that between six and seven of every 1,000 middle school girls become pregnant (Klien, 2005). While there are a number of theories about the causes of teenage pregnancy, including too much free time, poverty, access to alcohol, and physical maturity, Ms. Hartford had another take on the situation. She said, “In this community, pregnancy is one of the acceptable reasons to leave school. If school is a toxic environment for you, you can get pregnant and leave school. Nobody will question your decision.”

**Suicide**

A final outcome of humiliation identified by the participants was suicide and suicidal thoughts. Public health officials have noted a significant increase in youth suicide—more than 300% since 1950 (Bloch, 1999).
Suicide is now the third leading cause of death for youth ages 10 to 19 (following accidents and homicides) (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2000). While the suicide rate for high school students has remained fairly stable over the past decade, the suicide rate for middle school students (ages 10 through 14), increased more than 100% during the decade of the 1990s (Bloch, 1999). A haunting thought was shared by Adriana, who said, “Everybody I know has thought about suicide, but the one who did it was bothered all the time by other kids and no one did anything.” As Fisher (2005) noted, teachers have to understand the signs and symptoms of suicide and ensure that students feel honored and respected at school. One of the teachers suggested, “I think that they’re under a great deal of pressure to perform. If you add humiliation to that, they don’t see a way out and might consider taking their own life.”

Recommendations for reducing humiliation in middle school

Some of the problems members of our profession discuss about the challenges to achievement in middle school might be explained by students’ experiences with humiliation. When students experience humiliation, as these data suggest they do, a series of negative outcomes can be triggered. We recommend that educators make a commitment to reduce the needless opportunities for humiliation that creep into the daily experiences of their students.

Recommendation #1: Assess the school climate

The first step to reducing humiliation is to recognize that it might, in fact, be present. Schools routinely administer annual school climate surveys, and this can provide an excellent starting point for analysis. For example, the California Healthy Kids Survey contains questions that can shed light on the issue of humiliation. The survey asks respondents to assess the extent to which adults “treat all students fairly” and “listen to what students have to say” and contains several queries about bullying and bullying prevention programs (California Department of Education, 2005).

Recommendation #2: Observe and analyze curricular and instructional interactions

The middle school reform report entitled Breaking Ranks in the Middle (National Association of Secondary School Principals, 2006) strongly recommends heterogeneous grouping of students in small learning communities to improve achievement and personalize learning. This requires schools to abandon outdated ability grouping and tracking, which result in lowered expectations and missed opportunities for rigorous curriculum. Some schools cling to tracking and remedial classes because they do not possess the capacity to differentiate instruction for all learners. Building this capacity is not a matter of scattered inservices, but rather targeted peer coaching, professional development, and administrative accountability. A first step toward realizing this goal is to conduct classroom observations for the purposes of data collection and analysis of needs. The Instructional Practices Inventory developed by the Middle Level Leadership Center is a useful tool for developing a school-wide profile of the instructional practices occurring at the school, including the amount of teacher-led instruction, student-led discussions, and levels of disengagement (www.mllc.org). Classrooms with high levels of student disengagement should be targeted for further analysis to determine contributing factors, especially teacher behaviors and interaction styles.

Teachers struggling with disengagement can participate in the Teacher Expectations and Student Achievement (TESA) professional development program developed by the Los Angeles County Office of Education (www.lacoe.edu/orgs/165/index.cfm). This is a five-month experience that involves peer observations and coaching focused on 15 specific instructional behaviors that increase positive student perceptions about learning. Other teachers who are having difficulty with curriculum design for heterogeneously grouped students can benefit from focused professional development and planning on differentiating instruction at the unit level. A beginning step may include the formation of book study groups using materials such as Differentiation in Practice for Grades 5–9 (Tomlinson & Eidson, 2003). By collecting and sharing data to develop targeted professional development, teachers are able to move beyond “I’ve heard/read this before” to take specific action. This is further reinforced through administrative accountability and ongoing data collection to measure improvement at the curricular and instructional levels.

Recommendation #3: Make an anti-bullying curriculum part of the school culture

Much has been written in the past decade about anti-bullying curricula, especially in the wake of high-
profile school shootings throughout the nation. Many fine programs exist, and the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program is among the most respected (www.clemson.edu/olweus/content.html). The multi-layered design of this program targets school-wide, classroom, and individual interventions for both bullies and victims. However, anti-bullying curricula are only effective if there is long-term commitment. Perhaps the most common mistake is that after a period of enthusiastic introduction and implementation, programs such as these fall to the wayside as other initiatives command attention. A multi-year plan that includes refreshers for existing staff as well as training for teachers new to the school is essential for sustainability. The anti-bullying program should be written into the school’s accountability plan, the new teacher induction program, and as part of the curriculum for each grade level.

Conclusion
The recommendations made are all costly in terms of time, money, and resources. However, the unintended costs of humiliation are much higher for our students. It is time to take another look at the anti-bullying curricula being developed by groups across the country and how they can be sustained for more than one school year. It might also be time to notice our own behaviors and to have hard conversations with our colleagues about appropriate interactions with students—interactions that clearly demonstrate care, honesty, and high expectations. And finally, it may be time to reconsider the ways in which we group students and provide supplemental instructional interventions such that these students do not experience school as telling them they are stupid, incompetent, and not worthy. In doing so, we might just see increases in student achievement as well as youth who are more engaged in their educational experience.

Editor’s Note
1For a comprehensive assessment of middle school programs, procedures, and processes, readers might want to consider using the School Improvement Toolkit, available from National Middle School Association at www.nmsa.org/ProfessionalDevelopment/SchoolImprovementToolkit/tabid/654/Default.aspx

References

**Using Middle School Journal for Professional Development**

To get great ideas for using this article for staff development visit www.nmsa.org and click on “Professional Development” then “Using MSJ for Professional Development,” January 2008 issue.

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Middle School Students Talk About Social Forces in the Classroom

Kathleen Cushman & Laura Rogers

The social world of young adolescents comes into the classroom with them. It can cause kids to sit with blank or glum faces while you present your most fascinating assignments. It can drive them to make inappropriate comments at moments that should elicit serious thought. Although we tend to think of middle schoolers as risk-takers, they do not take risks in classrooms. Instead, they are worrying about where they stand in relation to others.

Adolescence brings with it this new power: One can consider how others think about oneself. This development not only allows for more mature social interactions, but may also produce the intense self-consciousness sometimes referred to as “adolescent egocentrism” (Elkind, 1967). Suddenly, what a child imagines that everyone else is thinking infuses each choice he or she makes in the classroom. At the same time, as Elkind noted, young adolescents do not yet accurately distinguish between their internal imaginary audience and the actual perceptions of their friends. They may swing rapidly from an intense desire for privacy to an equally audacious desire for attention. This tension is just one of many that young adolescents experience, and act out, during this period of rapid physical, cognitive, and psychological change.

The new cognitive competencies of adolescence influence social relationships in myriad ways. Students’ motivation to succeed academically may become overshadowed by their desire to succeed socially. They become more alert to their standing—both in relation to other students and in the eyes of their teachers—and they begin to doubt themselves and the whole enterprise of schooling (Kagan, 1972). Adolescents are now increasingly aware of the evaluative attributes that influence their social standing (intelligence, athletic prowess, courage, musical talent, personal flair, and so on). As they become more socially aware, Kagan speculated in his characteristically understated way, those who are not at the top of the class find that their “motivation for geometry may descend in the hierarchy” of motives (p. 100). He urged schools to consider how their practices may undermine young adolescents just as they are ready to meet new challenges.

Studies consistently prove Kagan right. Adolescents tend to lose confidence in their academic abilities in the transition to middle school and find social activities

This article reflects the following This We Believe characteristics: An inviting, supportive, and safe environment — School-wide efforts and policies that foster health, wellness, and safety — Multifaceted guidance and support services
more interesting and more important than academic endeavors, as Wigfield and Eccles (1994) have shown. Because of the way schools are organized, these authors noted, middle grades teachers are also less likely to know their students well and to trust them. Consequently, they expect less of students and are less likely to create opportunities to listen to them or to offer them choices and opportunities for decision making and social interaction.

Teachers in the middle grades could spend all their time trying to resist these social forces. However, if they can figure out just what concerns their students are dealing with, they might put these currents in their classrooms to good use, rather than working against them. In a single classroom, students in the middle grades will express many points of view reflecting their developmental accomplishments and differences (Kegan, 1982). They tend to be passionate about matters of justice and fairness, and they are acutely sensitive to how their teachers express care for them. They may think about issues of fairness according to a concrete, reciprocal exchange schema, or they may be beginning to shift toward shared social norms and expectations in their assessment of “the right thing to do” (Kohlberg, 1984). In their social relationships, they are learning new strategies for negotiating conflict and agreement. They are becoming adept at reciprocal interactions and cooperation, and they are just learning to collaborate to achieve mutually defined goals (Selman, 1980, 2003). They are seeking opportunities to practice social interactions. In fact, research has consistently shown that when students have the opportunity to collaborate, they are more likely to focus on learning, are more interested in the subject matter, and feel less anxious (Pintrich, Roeser, & DeGroot, 1994; Willis, 2007).

As teachers help students navigate their uncertainties, learners will become more engaged, adventurous, and willing to take risks in their academic experiences. As teachers tune in to the issues of fairness that loom large for students, they are better able to resolve some of the conflicts that keep them from learning. Any subject in the middle grades will be enlivened when you deliberately weave social learning into the curriculum and support students’ engagement with each other (Schmutz, 2006).

At the request of MetLife Foundation, over several months in 2005 we asked students from around the country to describe what might stand in the way of their enthusiastic response to the academic opportunities their teachers set forth for them. After consulting with approximately 20 middle grades teachers working in urban schools who had gathered at a conference on learning in the middle grades, Kathleen Cushman framed 65 questions. The questions centered on academic, social, physical, and emotional matters, probing for issues that young adolescents saw as interfering with a positive school experience and for ways that students thought teachers could help them with such issues.

By calling on the extensive network of the nonprofit organization What Kids Can Do (WKCD), Cushman identified 42 middle grades students in five urban areas, including schools configured as grades K–8, 6–8, and 7–8. Of these students, 38 attended public schools, one went to a parochial school, and three attended independent schools. None came from backgrounds of economic privilege, and 35 were students of color. Most came not via their schools but through youth development settings: a New York City neighborhood organization (two students); a “bridge” program, preparing students for high school (eight Providence students and nine San Francisco students); and an after-school community arts center in Middletown, Connecticut (eight students). Of the 42 students, 15 were new ninth graders from two Indianapolis high schools, interviewed specifically about their recent transition from middle school. Seven were interviewed in the summer after they completed sixth grade, six after they completed seventh grade, seven in the early fall of seventh grade, and three in the early fall of eighth grade.

Interviews took place in small groups of two to eight students, with two or three sessions, each lasting two to three hours. Cushman facilitated these tape-recorded discussions, which were later transcribed in their entirety. As with most collaborators on What Kids Can Do books, students were paid for their time (in this case, $7 per hour). Parents or guardians granted permission for the students to participate and for WKCD to publish their actual first names and photographs in published work resulting from their interviews.

As we pored over their eloquent and sometimes poignant answers to questions about life in the classroom, we heard them making six crucial requests of their teachers:

— Help us find common ground with each other.
— Teach us how to work together in safe, collaborative groups.
— Let us practice working out issues that affect the class.
— Treat us all with the same respect.
— Let us tackle problems that help develop our ideas about what is fair.
— Watch closely what is really going on with us, inside and outside the classroom.

In the following pages, we present the responses of 21 of these students, as they describe what they notice, what they care about, and what their teachers do and do not do that affects how it feels to learn, work, and be in school.

—

What’s going on with us?
Many middle school students are aware of the competing expectations of their teachers and their peers in the classroom. They may feel pulled in different directions at different times.

We don’t want to act too good
Middle school kids do recognize what a good student looks like to the teacher:

The typical good kids stay in a line when the teacher’s walking [with them]. When the teacher’s out of the room, they continue doing their work. They’re full of ideas, they’re always raising their hand instead of just sitting there and waiting for someone to have their hand up.
They do pretty good on their work, and they hand in their homework all the time. –Genesis

But their social norms may make it hard for them to want to adopt that image as their own.

They don’t want to be embarrassed by being goody-goodies in school, and so they try to act up just to get approval from the other kids at school. Sometimes, some kids will go through physical torture, like getting in fights at school, just to fit in with the other kids. It makes no sense at all. –Daquan

When you ask boys and girls to work with each other in class or help each other out, they may be uncomfortably aware that other kids will start pairing them up romantically.

In my fourth period class, this girl was sitting a couple of seats behind me. She was in my third period pre-algebra class too, and she came up and started asking me did I remember what we had for homework. So, she sat down, and I started telling her so she could write it down. Her friends, they were calling her, and she was like, “Wait a minute, wait a minute.” After, they started yelling things: “Oh, you like him.” And she was like, “No, I don’t! I’m just asking him what the homework was.” And they said, “You don’t have to hide it,” and all this other stuff. It made me feel, like, nervous and embarrassed. –Denue

They are often very confused, themselves, about their motives when they interact with the opposite sex.

I think it’s different with girls and boys. Girls sometimes get, like, harassed, or people make judgments about them. Because, I don’t know, boys just can’t control their hormones or something. So, they make fun of girls, and they start saying inappropriate stuff. Maybe it’s because they like the girl. They just like picking on people. And the girls might not like what they hear, but they might not want to go to anyone, because they might not feel safe. –Kenson

They are counting on teachers to know—even if they do not know—when they need help. The way a teacher reacts can send a clear message about what is considered sexual harassment and what is simply exploring how to interact socially.

The girls, they’re always bothering the boys, and the boys are always bothering the girls, and the teacher knows that it’s just for fun. But one kid, he was bothering this girl. I saw the teacher knew that she didn’t like it, so he told the boy to stop it. –Jason
Being different hurts
In the middle school years, students’ appearances and capabilities vary even more widely than at other ages. Young adolescents are painfully aware of this.

There’s this girl at my school, and nobody likes her because she smells like she takes a shower once upon a Christmas. The teachers can’t make you be friends with her or any other person. You choose who you want to be friends with. You wouldn’t want to be caught hanging around that person, because they would think you took a shower once upon a Christmas. –Daquan

I’m not saying I’m perfect or anything, but sometimes kids like to hate on people, and I’m one person to hate on—I stutter. –Eric Q.

Students with limited English or students with disabilities face additional hurdles to being included.

There’s this girl at my school, she speaks French. So it’s like, people actually think she’s stupid in a way—the students use her as a clown. They go, “What? Can you say that again?” The teachers, I think they notice it, but they feel they can’t control the kids. –Amelia

I can’t read, and that’s not my fault. God made me the way he wanted to make me. Did I ask God to do that? I don’t think people should pick on me just because I can’t read. They come up to me, and they be like, “Read this word for me, I can’t read it.” I’ll be like, “You know I can’t read, can you get out of my face please?” They’ll be like, “Too bad. I forgot you stupid, and you in that retarded class.” And I be getting mad, and I want to punch them and stuff. –Amanda

It is all too easy for students to maintain a connection to their friends by ostracizing someone who is different. Still, kids do not necessarily want to be heartless. Even when they do not speak out about someone’s exclusion, they often sympathize.

I don’t think it matters, just the way somebody smells or something. The way they smell doesn’t mean the kind of person they are. Maybe you could tell them, in a respectful way, “Maybe you should try showering more.” Maybe you should try to be their friend. –Javier

Help us find common ground
Over the course of a year, a teacher will have plenty of opportunities to help middle grades students grow in confidence and reach out to others in positive ways. Students want to know how to find common ground, without sacrificing their own individuality and emerging style. School provides a context in which they can learn about themselves and their classmates, accepting and respecting their strengths and differences.

Faced with the disparities among students, teachers can offer them ways to bridge their differences and discover what each has to offer.

Teachers can try to find out what the kids have in common, discuss what they have in common, use that to get closer to each other as friends. –Daquan

As teachers get a clearer picture of what is going on among students socially, they will find opportunities to help their students safely connect to each other.

People think about themselves that they’re too fat, too thin, too stupid, and they think that people are going to notice whatever they’re insecure about. I think that it’s just in their mind. I think people should just think positive about themselves, not think in a negative way, and that might help them a little. –Daniel

It’s good to see how you have something in common with a lot of other kids. Maybe, you all tell about an embarrassing moment, and then you’re recognizing that everybody has gone through an embarrassing moment. Or a fear most kids might have. And afterwards, you’re, “Oh, that happened to me once.” –Genesis

At the beginning of this year, the teachers made all of us act silly in front of each other. When we’re playing games, we’re all acting silly and everyone is laughing at each other. You can see other people doing it—not just one person. We played the game “Zip, Zap.” One person stands in the middle and says, “zip.” The person he says “zip” to has to duck, and the two people shoot each other and say “zap.” And we all start laughing if we duck, or if we miss it and get in the middle. –Javier

Having broken the ice, kids will keep up the process on their own.
This year, I met this kid, and we were talking about baseball, about the Yankees and the Red Sox, and another kid jumped in and started saying how the Red Sox were going to win. And then we started arguing and playing and from that moment on, we always hung out. –Denue

In organizing academic work for your class, you can also encourage these connections to develop.

Instead of just having kids do individual work, do more group activities. Because in my room, there’s only some people who talk to some people. There are, like, groups. Everybody grew up together, but still, we don’t talk to each other as much as you would think, [even though] we’ve known each other for years. –Kenson

There’s only a small amount a teacher can do, because it’s really up to the kids. But if there’s a project, she could try to pair up people who really don’t talk to each other, don’t respect each other. And they could actually learn to become friends and respect each other, knowing they’re both being their selves in a way they both can relate to. –Javier

As teachers get a clearer picture of what is going on among students socially, they will find opportunities to help their students safely connect to each other in new and important ways. Just as students are sorting out the ways they want to behave, teachers will be sorting what kind of responses to make to them.

**We care that you’re fair**

In matters of their behavior, middle school students often hold a different perspective about what is fair than their teacher does. You can show students that they have an important part in working things out fairly. As a start, you might ask for their thoughts on what is desirable in the classroom, perhaps with questions like these:

— What does it look like when a student shows respect for another student?
— What does it look like when a teacher shows respect for a student?
— What does it look like when a student shows respect for a teacher?
— What can other people do to make it feel safe to speak up when you disagree with another student in class?
— What makes it feel safe to say you don’t know the answer?

— What can other people do to make it safe to speak up when you do know the answer?

**Make us part of the conversation**

Many teachers of the middle grades start the year by establishing norms of behavior on which everyone agrees. Having students collaborate in setting the expectations can be a powerful process.

The third week, our teacher decided to let the kids make up their own rules that we would follow by ourselves. It’s the whole seventh-grade contract, we did it together as a community, because we didn’t want the same old school rules that we had last year. Right now, it’s working good. We each get a contract with the rules, to make sure we’re following them. We judge ourselves every day, and we are honest; if we really know that we didn’t do well, we put a “no.” If we do something bad, it comes back on the person who messed up. If we are following it, we put down a “yes” or a check. On Friday, at advisory, they check it. –Jessica

But not all kids will be ready at once to start putting the group’s needs before their individual desires. Simply creating classroom norms, as Jessica notes, does not guarantee compliance. As behavior issues come up, you will need to keep referring back to the classroom norms.

My history teacher this year in eighth grade, she said some kids were eating in her class. She was like, “Oh, every time somebody breaks the rule, I’m going to refer back to the rules that’s on the wall.” She kept running down the list, the rules, and then kids stopped. –Kenson

Even when kids want to cooperate in meeting the needs of the class, they may find it difficult to do so. Their attention naturally goes to other things going on around them, and when the teacher is talking to the whole group, they may not hear you.

Our teacher tells everybody but me and my friend when our class has to leave from lunch for upstairs. So, we get in trouble when we get back to class, and then we have to walk upstairs every day with her. I try to say, “How come you don’t tell us?” –Katelin

Students want to work with you to find solutions to recurring problems, and they often have ideas that are worth considering. When you agree to try out the things they suggest, you also set the stage for future collaborative problem solving.
When one person goes to the bathroom, then more people will want to go. After a while, when you ask the teacher, she’s going to say “no,”’ cause she thinks that you’re going to be playing around. And then it will happen to someone who really needs to go to the bathroom. They should just say, “Everyone go at once and come back.” –Edward

Fairness issues also show up in the academic context. For example, if you ignore what students have to say in class, they feel dismissed.

My teacher will get us interested in a topic, and we’ll all be raising our hands and wanting to say something about it. But he only picks on two people to say something, and then he goes into a different thing. I usually call out, because I’m dying to get this comment out, and then the teacher’s like, “You’re supposed to raise your hand.” How am I supposed to raise my hand, if you’re not picking me at all? I feel like he doesn’t really care what we have to say. He just wants to get over with the day. –Genesis

Setting norms together for classroom discourse creates a process that kids can trust when they want their voices heard (See Figure 1 for an exercise that can help a teacher better understand students’ ideas of fairness).

They could write names on the board and go in that order. I was in English class, and I had my hand up for 30 minutes, after the teacher told me I was next. She was picking other kids, and then she looked straight at me and just picked somebody else. –Javier

For class discussions, we have a ball you throw to someone, and nobody talks if they don’t have the ball. It keeps everybody quiet, because you don’t want anybody talking when you have the ball. –Amelia

Treat us all with the same respect
Students are more likely to trust a teacher to be fair if he or she knows who individual students are and what matters most to them.

Many times, the kids who behave good in school, teachers don’t know them that much. You have to do something bad so the teachers will know your name—so the teachers will think you’re somebody. –Amelia

On the other hand, nobody likes it when the teacher picks someone out for special treatment.

Figure 1 What’s fair from a student’s standpoint?
An exercise for teachers

Students in the middle grades vary widely in their ideas about fairness and social responsibility. Some kids still see a dilemma solely from their own point of view. Others have begun to balance competing claims and perspectives. Still others have reached the point where they appeal to a social norm to decide what’s fair to all.

At any point in the school year, you can gain insight into the spectrum of how students in your class think about fairness by presenting a dilemma for them to discuss, then noticing what kinds of answers students give and how they share their ideas about working out agreements.

You can use dilemmas that emerge directly from your class experiences, like this one on eating in the classroom:

— Should we allow eating in the classroom?
— If we do, and some students do not clean up after themselves, what should we do:
  • Suspend the privilege of eating?
  • Ask the whole class to clean up their mess?
— Who is responsible for keeping the class clean—students, teacher, or janitors?

You might also use dilemmas from your curriculum. For example, you could present choices made by historical or scientific figures, or by fictional characters, in order to achieve a goal or outcome that had negative consequences for someone else. Ask students:

— What decision was made?
— Was it fair? To whom was it fair?
— Who might have thought it wasn’t fair? What other decision could that person have made? Would it have been more fair? To whom? Why?

For every action students suggest, make sure to ask them to explain clearly why it seems fair to them. Make clear to them that no one right answer exists, and encourage them to share their opinions, even when they disagree with others.

At the end of the discussion, ask students to help you summarize the discussion:

What things does the class agree about?

What things does the class disagree about?

After such a discussion, a teacher might reflect on what it reveals about how individual students think about fairness. Answering the questions below could help you later, when other issues of fairness come up in class.

Which students took an individual point of view and had trouble thinking about fairness from multiple perspectives?

Which students thought of fairness in terms of a tit-for-tat reciprocity of benefits and injuries?

Which students appealed to social norms of leadership, generosity, responsibility, promises made or broken, group loyalties?

Now think about the students as a group. Which reasons seemed to sway the class more than others?
Students will draw their own conclusions as to how fair a teacher is.

My math teacher, it’s like he’s trying to please the kids that are bad. There’s this girl, she doesn’t do any of her work, but he lets her get out of the class at any time. He’s afraid of getting cussed. But the good kids, he doesn’t let them. It’s like he’s punishing them for being good. –Amelia

Middle school students also have a sharp eye for teachers who respond to students on the basis of race, ethnicity, or socioeconomic status.

Teachers should treat all students the same, no matter what color they are or how they do in school. But some teachers treat black students different. At my school, they say a whole bunch of bad stuff about us. And, when a student goes to tell the principal, the principal believes the teacher over the student, if it’s someone who doesn’t do that well in school. –Tatzi

Listening well to any such complaints and talking openly with the group about issues of bias and privilege can help us unearth and address entrenched attitudes that hold back students from the conviction that they can learn and taking advantage of the opportunity to do so.

Hold us to the norms we agreed on
When a teacher needs to make the call about what is fair, it helps to refer back to the behavior norms the class earlier helped to shape. If students also have had input into the consequences when someone departs from those agreements, teacher decisions are less likely to seem arbitrary or unfair to them.

Students appreciate it when teachers find humor in their breaches of good conduct, even as they correct them.

When people swear, I’ve heard my gym teacher say, “Do you kiss your mother with that mouth?” People laugh, but it makes people understand how they’re acting. –Kenson

Many issues of fairness require balancing the rights of the individual with the rights of the group. Students pointed out certain key areas in which this particularly matters to them.

Guard our right to a fair decision
Whether students are acting within the limits or outside them, everyone is closely watching how teachers respond.

Students may easily—and sometimes accurately—conclude that teachers discriminate against kids based on their race and ethnicity.

I had this person in my honors classes, he was the only African-American in our class, and he was really funny, he was a nice person to be around. But he jumped around a lot, I guess, and you could kind of tell that these two teachers hated him. When he raised his hand, they would ignore him. I would say that they were disrespecting him because of his race. I think it was a factor. –Daniel

I think my teacher was racist of black people. The whole year she was mean to me, wasn’t letting me go to the bathroom. When everybody else asked, she would give them a pass: “Be right back.” But if I asked: “No! You can’t go!” How’s that sound? –Katelin

Today at lunch, a white boy was sitting at a table where he wasn’t supposed to, ’cause we are supposed to sit with our class. And, he said that black people are ignorant. We told the vice principal, and he came over and said, “Just leave it alone.” If it was us, he would have said what he says to everybody: “Pick up your tray and come to the office.” –Thea

Itai’s teacher made it clear to the class that all students mattered to her equally, even though her reactions to them might vary from time to time.

She cared about everyone. And she didn’t stereotype; she always said that she wouldn’t be biased towards anyone. When she was grading a test, she would always cover up the names and just mark what they didn’t get, because she felt that if she wasn’t proud of that student that day, maybe she would give them a lower mark. –Itai

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Guard our right to a fair decision
Whether students are acting within the limits or outside them, everyone is closely watching how teachers respond.

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They’re trying to say, “The whole class has to take the punishment, because we’re all in this together.” Well, for me, it’s not fair. –Genesis

On the other hand, they may not know exactly what’s fair when a teacher does not know who is responsible for the unacceptable behavior.

I guess, obviously, then we all gonna have detention or something like that. But they should ask, or people should tell them, or something. Don’t punish the whole class. But if you have to, I guess you’re gonna have to do what you gotta do. –Thea

Cleaning up after other people. In the world of young children, people only have to clean up their own messes. Many middle schoolers may not yet see a shared responsibility to maintain the space their group uses for learning.

If we made the mess, or we didn’t, my Spanish teacher makes us pick up papers before we leave his class. He makes you clean the spot that you are sitting at. So, if someone threw a paper next to your desk, or if anyone threw a paper at your desk, you’ll end up cleaning up. I don’t think that’s fair. We didn’t put it there. –Amelia

I think that the teacher should make kids clean after every period. It’s their mess that they made. Nobody else should be responsible for cleaning it up. If you come into that classroom, and you share that seat, the teacher might think that you made the mess. –Denue

As teachers create opportunities for students to collaborate in the classroom, they will learn the value of teamwork. With time and practice, their role in the group will start to matter more to them, and this will extend to how they see themselves in the larger school community.

Coming to class on time. Tardiness also challenges teachers to help kids see themselves as members of a group in which their presence matters. Conventional consequences like detention can have some effect, but they reinforce students’ perceptions that being late is a personal issue, not a group one.

I’m not saying you have to threaten kids for them to show up on time for school. But my teacher gave me a detention because I was late three times. And that showed me. I didn’t want another detention. I just showed up on time every day. –Javier

I think they should give us more time to get to class. Sometimes kids have to use the bathroom, and they don’t get out by the time they’re supposed to be there. And most teachers don’t take excuses. You’re trying to explain to them, and they’re like: “I don’t care. You’re late for my class, you get a detention.” –Genesis

Motivating students to show up on time for what is going to happen in class tends to work much better in preventing tardiness.

Teachers should do something good at the beginning of class to make kids want to come early. My teacher does the boring stuff first, and then he gives kids time to relax. So, most kids don’t really care when they come late, and when you give them detention, they don’t really care either. [In another class], at the beginning of class, we did this game to warm us up, like, if you answer some question, you get a prize. So, kids came, because you wouldn’t want to miss the beginning of class. –Amelia

Here again, many teachers find that humor works well. Javier and Amelia describe an effective song-and-dance ritual, used at their summer program whenever someone arrives late to the morning meeting.

They just stop the whole lesson and start singing: “Pop, pop, fizz, fizz, pop, pop, fizz, fizz. Check him out, check-check him out. Check him out, check-check him out.” And then—say I was late—I would have to say, “My name is Alex.” And then they would say, “And that’s no lie, check.” And I would go, “Pop, pop, fizz, fizz,” and they say, “Mm-mmm, how sweet it is.” It works—you don’t want to show up late, because people are going to make you do that dance. Because it is a little embarrassing to shake your booty or something. It doesn’t feel really bad, it’s better than that, but it’s something that you don’t want to get. And it’s good, because the teachers get it too, if they’re late. It happens a lot. –Javier

It’s like they’re laughing with you, but they’re laughing at you, too. And some people don’t want to do it, so they just come early so they don’t have to do the dance. –Amelia

Amelia and Javier’s teachers have established this playful embarrassment as a norm of classroom life, which helps students consciously experience a kind of physical metaphor for the disruption they cause to the group when they show up late. Other activities might bring them along to a point where they identify even more with the group’s needs and priorities.
We were separated into groups of, like, sixteen, called “families.” We didn’t do things individually, we did it together as a family, and the families got into competition, like chair-building. When we get into stuff together and we compete, even if you don’t like a person, you have to cheer them on, because they’re in the family. And if they lose, that means your family loses. —Amelia

As more students develop attitudes like this, teachers can eventually turn problems like tardiness into something that the whole class can discuss and work on together.

I think [talking about the problem] is better with the whole class. It can get chaotic, but if you really want this to happen, then it will work out. Because we realized how bad we’ve been, and we found the problem, and so we really try to work to become a better class. —Carmela

**Reward our efforts with things we really want**

The gold stars and stickers of elementary school no longer will motivate middle schoolers. Instead, they want gestures and items that fit with their new, more social sense of self. That might mean actual activities, but it also could come across in little signals that the teacher regards students with increased respect.

I don’t think we should get candy. Candy kind of makes the situation worse, ‘cause you end up getting hyper. [A good reward is] that the teacher will ease up on you, give you more chances, or respect you more. —Gabe

A better reward is giving us funner activities, like playing games or academic activities that are fun. —Carmela

Giving students a choice can feel like a reward, as they feel they are earning a teacher’s respect.

I think they should take a survey first, to see what would be a good reward if we finished all our work on time. Maybe some people don’t want to do something that other people do, so teachers could switch off, and change it after a certain time. I really like reading, so sometimes I wish we could take a break from school, and we would have time at school where we could just read. Or, if you didn’t like reading, you could do something else. —Itai

**Help us learn as you correct our behavior**

Students do not want to change their behavior when teachers humiliate them in front of others. If they feel a teacher’s disappointment too keenly, they are likely to withdraw or retaliate.

My science/math teacher always embarrasses kids, in a way. Like, if you forgot your math book, or if your homework is overdue for this amount of time, she’ll announce it to the whole class, instead of just telling you privately. I don’t think they should do that. It kind of makes me feel embarrassed, I just want to go away and crawl into a hole or something. —Gabe

Teachers should know, like, when somebody’s having a bad day. They sit there and yell at us, and we’re going to flip out on them. [One teacher] kept telling me to do this, do that, ’cause I was behind in work. And I was trying to do my work as fast as I can, but I don’t write that fast. So, I kept going “Whooo! Hufff!” and sucking my teeth and stuff, just to get on her nerves. She was sitting there saying, like, “Amanda, be quiet, Amanda, stop.” I got mad, and I just got up and left. [It would have helped me if she would] talk to me about it—like, just let me sit there for a little bit, in the classroom, and be me. —Amanda

If teachers let them save face by addressing the matter in a private conversation, students are much more likely to shift toward a more positive action.

The way in which teachers impose consequences can make the difference in whether or not students learn from their mistakes. They need both adult insight and adult firmness.

A lot of times teachers are, like, “Don’t make these mistakes.” But the reason why I am how I am right now is because I learned from my own mistakes. We’re going to learn from the consequences, whether it’s a time out for a five-year-old or, like, suspension for a 13-year-old. I think it’s necessary for kids, especially our age—not too much, but a little bit, so we know not to do them. —Alma

And when teachers call home, students still want them to be on their side, even when the call is about a problem with their behavior.

I’ve noticed that the only reason teachers ever call parents are to tell them their kids are in trouble. And how does that help? I’m sick of it. It’s horrible. Yeah, well, “Your child, I found out that he or she stole from my classroom,” or something. But it doesn’t help. They should say, “I think maybe your kid might be experiencing some issues and that’s why maybe they’re failing their work. Is there anything...?” And they should recommend things to help. Like, maybe recommend a tutor, you know. Actually, like, involve yourself in the child’s life, not just in the child’s education. —Alma
Know everything, see everything
As middle schoolers experience the confusing pushes and pulls of their daily social interactions, they want and need a teacher’s presence and watchful eyes. Students are continually exploring the boundary between what adults see and hear and what they do not.

When the teacher’s not watching, then the kids curse at each other or throw things. And then the teacher finds out about it, but she don’t know who to blame, so she just blame everybody. So, then everybody get in trouble. The people who did not do it should not get in trouble, but that’s how people are. But I tell on people, ‘cause I’m not getting in trouble for what I did not do. –Thea

The teacher should know that, like, when her back is turned, kids are making faces about her or talking about her, or stuff like that. And then when they turn back around, we start acting like we wasn’t doin’ nothin’. I’ve done it myself sometimes. And I got caught, but then I said I didn’t do it, but the teacher knew I did it, cause she seen me. –Tatzi

School is a complicated social world for kids, and they want you to recognize its different aspects.

[My friend] found this wallet in the gym and stole it, kind of. And, I guess my teacher loves her still, but she found out how bad my friend really acts. She doesn’t see the masks anymore. She’s more aware. I’m thankful that there’s a teacher like that. But not a lot of teachers are like that. –Carmela

Teachers think that some people are star students, they’re the best, they’re really smart, they’re just great. They don’t know that outside of their classroom, they’re swearing, doing other stuff that the teachers think are inappropriate. In my class, there was this one kid who was always smart, well behaved, and then outside the classroom, he was always swearing and doing bad stuff. I think they should know more about that. –Daniel

They need you to help them sort out the many pressures that may interfere with their focus in the classroom.

In my class we’ve been going through so much trouble ‘cause of peer pressure. We started to have class discussions about problems and about things we see each other doing that we don’t like to see each other doing. Even if it takes time off math, this is really important, because teachers are the people who teach the students how to be when they grow up. The children are the future. We don’t want our leaders in the future to be hypocrites. We don’t want them to be confused. And, if we do have leaders like that, think about how the followers will be! –Carmela

Students know that a teacher’s presence in informal moments is just as important as his or her classroom role. If a teacher knows them already, students count on him to understand and perhaps to help them through some difficult moments in the halls or on the playground.

I just wish that there was a teacher during passing period that would stand outside and watch the hallway, ‘cause at my school there’s a lot of fights. — Edward

Kids ask to use the bathroom, and they don’t really go to the bathroom, they wander around the hallway. —Katelin

The teachers should try to interact a little bit with the students, like during recess, even though the students may not like it. Teachers should really observe. Because it really helps. People are getting really touchy at my school, and sometimes people cover up for people so they can make out. And a lot of the boys are really also, like, perverts there. They touch girls, and the girls, well, they’re so used to it that they don’t do anything about it. And everyone swears now. It’s like a habit. After every single frickin’ word, they swear. And it’s very annoying. –Carmela

As teachers notice the dynamics among kids outside the classroom, they will not only be keeping students safe from harm, they will also be responding to students’ need to have adults see what is really going on with them in their groups.

Bullies don’t pick on people bigger than them, they just pick on shrimpy little kids. You can see that they can’t do anything back to the bullies. I feel like I should try to stand up for them, but then, if I do, then the bullies might beat me up. There could be, like, a line of bullies, and they try to chase you or beat you up, and you have to try to run away from them. I just walk away, and if I see a teacher or something, tell them. —Edward

Sometimes it’s good for the teachers to step in, sometimes it’s not. If a kid gets scared of something—if he’s, like, down, and you see him getting bullied—and then he walks over to, like, a group or a teacher, then the teacher might know that he’s getting bullied. Most of the kids...
Jessica is not alone in feeling relieved and grateful. Teachers who hear what students say about the social obstacles that keep them from learning will find a world of effective ideas to address those issues. Along the way, they are likely to see students relax and blossom in the classroom, developing the social habits that support their academic skills and understanding.

Author Note
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References


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Several years ago, we began collecting free-write responses from young adolescents, who responded to the question: “What should middle school teachers know about middle school students?” To date, we have collected and analyzed approximately 2,700 unedited responses from young adolescents who attend middle schools in diverse communities across North America. We have found their responses to be perceptive, honest, and wise. The above words of one eighth grade student may surprise you as much as they did us, initially. Some have dismissed them as an anomaly of brilliance and maturity. While this particular quote demonstrates verbal fluency and sophisticated understandings, we discovered that the majority of letters we received contained similarly profound insights, reflecting the remarkable capacity of young adolescents to describe themselves and their school worlds. Embedded in their messages are critical insights about the nature of schooling these young people experience, the kind of schooling they wish they had, and glimpses of their struggles, hopes, fears, and even dreams. After completing this study, we felt compelled to share our findings and wonder how middle level schooling might be improved if we regularly went directly to our young people and took seriously what they have to say.

Why ask the kids?
There are many philosophical and pedagogical reasons why embracing student voice matters in our school and classroom improvement efforts. Constructivists have long argued that unless we know what matters to our learners, we have little chance of engaging them. Indeed, it makes sense to ask students to tell us about themselves and their school experiences if we are to create learning experiences that work better for the young people we serve.

We believe, too, that it is vital to ask young people to have a voice, because, regardless of age, they are citizens in our democracy and ought to have a say in what happens in their schools. Beane, (2005) who has written extensively on democratic schooling and curriculum integration, said it this way:

In a democracy, the principle of human dignity insists that people have a say in decisions that affect them and that

This article reflects the following This We Believe characteristics: An inviting, supportive, and safe environment — Students and teachers engaged in active learning — Curriculum that is relevant, challenging, integrative, and exploratory
their say counts for something. For this reason, probably no idea is more widely associated with democratic classrooms than the involvement of young people in making decisions about what and how things are done. (Beane, 2005, p. 19)

Finally, knowing what students regard to be important rests at the heart of their learning. Learning takes place only if and when a learner chooses to participate in that process (Caine & Caine, 1997). Moreover, learning demands more than participation. It assumes that students have made an emotional and psychological investment in the learning experience. We cannot expect to facilitate high levels of such investment when we fail to partner with young people in shaping what and how they learn.

The nature of this study
The small-scale study reported here is intended to add narrative depth and clarity to our understanding of what young adolescents think, feel, and experience as young people and as middle school students. While meeting the developmental needs of middle school children has always been fundamental to the middle school concept (Nesin & Brazee, 2005), there are very few studies to date that actually include student voice in defining what “developmental” means for those who live it.

We asked teachers in approximately 30 different middle level schools to solicit written responses to our key question and to send them to us unedited. We asked that these be done in school, so as to ensure the responses were raw. We received responses from students in sixth through eighth grade in rural, urban, and suburban middle schools across the United States and from Ontario and Alberta, Canada. The question was intentionally framed to help students to consider the broader nature of middle school and middle school students and to avoid gathering personal student stories. Some of the letters had to be discarded, as they appeared to have been generated as a five-paragraph essay assignment and were thus refined in ways that may have altered the student’s original intent.

We then read all letters and created a coding system associated with emerging themes and noted patterns. All letters were cycled through at least two rounds of coding, in which we highlighted passages that reflected the emerging themes. Most letters contained thoughts and concerns on several themes. By the close of the analysis, we had identified several subthemes, all of which we clustered under two broad areas: quality learning and quality relationships.

What young adolescents want us to know about them
Young adolescents crammed lifetimes into single paragraphs, dealing with everything from pimples to power and from peers to politics. Here, we will attempt to share with you what students have told us and what we think these findings mean for those seeking to improve middle grades education.

Quality relationships
Above all, it was abundantly clear that young adolescents long for healthy and rewarding relationships with their teachers and with their peers. Most hope that they will find school relationships to be characterized by compassion, respect, personalization, fellowship, and friendship. For most, such relationships are the exception rather than the norm.

It seems that we have yet to dismantle the hormones with feet image.
A dominant theme in the letters was the desire to have positive relationships with teachers who were seen as helpful, kind, happy, encouraging, patient, respectful, and non-judgmental. Students observed that they needed teachers who truly knew them as people and as students, genuinely enjoyed them, and were committed to working with them to make success happen. Many reported that being less well known contributed to the problems they faced in school. Students do not feel that they are steadily treated as whole people with whole lives. Moreover, students repeatedly urged teachers to know them as unique people and as unique students. In spite of the egocentric label assigned to most young teens, they were as concerned for others as for themselves. They lobbied for less anonymity and more personalization:

I feel teachers don’t really get to know the real you. They spend all their time telling you what to expect that they don’t even take the time to know your personality. ... Most teachers seem as though they don’t care a thing about if you do well in school. They teach you the information you need to know then if you have questions they say look over your notes and you’ll find the answer. Obviously I looked over my notes already and I still don’t know so in that way they are of no help. Some teacher’s care but others just don’t. I love teachers that care about everyone equally. Those are rare so when you get them treasure the moment. Only kidding, not all teachers are bad; there are some really great teachers.

This finding has emerged elsewhere, including in the California Institute for Education in Transformation study (Poplin & Weeres, 1992), in which student interviews revealed that they believed teachers cared about them if they laughed with them, trusted them, were honest, affectionate, and recognized them as individuals (Poole, 1984; Powell, 1993). One student response captures this finding:

The key to being a good teacher is to know the kids. You have to know every single one and have a relationship with every single one. I think that one thing that really allows me to work hard is knowing that my teacher knows where I am in life at that moment. If they don’t know me, I will tend not to work as hard for them.

In some schools, students repeatedly asked that teachers not yell at them, which leads us to speculate about the norms that guide teacher-student relationships in those schools. In other schools, the requests centered on teachers having more respectful images of adolescents that do not label them as immature, crazy, or “hormones with feet.”

What middle school teachers don’t get about their students is that we don’t like being treated like two year olds. We like to be treated like we are in the middle because that’s where we are—we are between children and teenagers. It embarrasses us when we are handled like kids.

Respectful treatment, however, was ultimately linked to descriptions of teachers who honored students as human beings with human vulnerabilities and struggles and with lives outside of school.

It might be nice for them to know that we are living human beings, we have feelings and we are people. Sometimes teachers think of you just as a student not a person, so they push you over your limits and sometimes they might talk to you a little louder than they usually do if it is taking you a long time to answer a problem or you don’t understand. We are people too! We are not perfect. We can’t do everything perfectly the first time. If teachers understand this, it might make us feel more comfortable and we might do better in school.

Peer relationships, like relationships with teachers, were identified as a desirable, yet often threatening, force in shaping the kind of psychological climate students experience. Young adolescents want teachers to be far savvier about the social dynamics they encounter. As one student explained:
I think every middle school teacher should know, or try to understand, the social whirlwind of statuses that form and so quickly harden with every student in their place. What may seem, to a teacher, a classroom full of students peacefully working, may be exactly the opposite to a student. It becomes a room full of pitfalls, danger signs, and safe havens situated carefully in familiar territory. Every student, throughout the day, moves cautiously on “safe” paths from room to room. They will not read in another level (or) territory. They will not mix; everyone knows their place. Only a teacher or a student from a higher level will cause them to mix.

The separation between boys and girls is even more pronounced. Boys have territory separate from girls, and their own divisions in that. Boys and girls will absolutely not mix, except in the rare groups of girls and boys that are friends; these groups are either absolute highest status, or the very bottom. Every student, boy or girl has their place, their territory, their paths, the people they can stay with on their level. I think middle school teachers should know and try to understand this code of the students. This network of statuses and levels is ever present in middle schools. While some students may not be directly aware of it, they always have a subconscious understanding of where they fit. This is very important for middle school teachers to know.

As a consequence of such unfriendly, unequal, or even hostile peer relationships, many students felt stressed and anxious in school. There were several hundred letters that specifically called for teachers to attend to the uncomfortable tensions that competitive peer relationships produced, including the bullying and harassment that young adolescents experience in school. Young adolescents do not just want friendly peer relationships, they want respectful, collaborative, and equitable relationships. They want to feel psychologically safe, they want others to also feel safe, and they are seeking adult assistance in securing such safety. In the current educational milieu, with heightened attention to student achievement as measured by standardized tests, many middle level schools are choosing to devote less rather than more time to the affective dimension of school life. Packaged anti-bullying programs are not what these middle schoolers are asking for. Instead, they are asking for the quality of human exchange in schools and classrooms to be more democratic, humane, and respectful.

Middle school teachers should know that the kids in middle school are very stressed. From classes to social status to expectations the school can be a very strenuous place. A lot of kids worry about popularity. The way other kids act towards others can be very harsh on someone’s self-esteem. That will affect the quality of the work the kids do. … Also the expectations people have may also be stressful. The kids have to live up to the expectations of parents, teachers, and even peers.

Quality learning

Students expressed considerable awareness of teachers’ beliefs about students and their perceived capacity to learn. According to the students represented here, teachers too often underestimate or overestimate the capacities of young adolescents, and, at times, use the perils of puberty to dismiss student disengagement. As one student explained: “Not all of us are stuck on the other sex. … We are still interested in learning.”

This is an enormously important message. Teacher expectations of students play a powerful role in student learning and achievement (Lipman, 1998). In middle schools, it seems clear from this data, that we have yet to dismantle the “hormones with feet” image of the young adolescent learner. As middle school educators endeavor to advance student learning and achievement and offer equally engaging learning to all young people, they will need to redefine the capacity of this age group, recognizing that puberty does not necessarily place young adolescent learners at intellectual peril (Jackson & Davis, 2000).

While students did not see themselves as intellectually compromised as a result of development, they did acknowledge their development as an important factor, influencing how they best learn. Many implored teachers to apply developmental understandings in their lesson planning and design. One student pleaded with teachers to not lecture at length:

Teachers, teachers, teachers, when will they learn. I have the attention span of a raisin. I need to be kept busy with things that are fun. Teachers need to find out what interests kids and what stuff they like to do. So for a less whiny, annoyed, and temperamental class, make it fun.

The majority of the student letters declared classroom learning in need of some additional related improvements. They wanted classroom experiences to reveal reasons why what they were learning mattered in
The world. Moreover, they wanted to be actively engaged, doing what real learners do—researching, writing, analyzing, presenting, collaborating, thinking, and so on. While some wished for fun, they often added that they were not trying to escape learning but believed it could be both substantive and fun at the same time.

Eighth graders need a special form of teaching. We could never learn about a subject by reading a textbook. We need it explained and compared to life. It would help if the learning was fun.

They also know what does not constitute quality learning:

The teachers should know that everyone hates to do worksheets from the book. Mrs. S. has done lots of hands-on projects, which I love. Of course students will get bored if everyday we come into class and the teacher says, “Get your social studies books out and these other five worksheets.” Well of course the students will be getting zeroes because they are bored of doing the same thing everyday.

As we studied more intently the responses related to quality learning, we concluded that most young adolescents are eager for us to respect their diverse ways of knowing and doing and incorporate this principle into lessons. They call for differentiation but with supreme attention to difference as an asset rather than a deficit:

I think that all the middle school teachers should know how each individual student learns. They should know how they learn and change the way they teach around all different methods. Sometimes they need to see it drawn out, sometimes they need scrap paper to write out the numbers and sometimes they can do it in their head in 10 seconds. We all learn different and we need different teaching.

Another student pointed out the need to have teachers acknowledge that all students are capable of success:

I think that every teacher should know that every seventh grade student is smart in one subject or another. You may not be great at spelling or science but I bet you’re pretty smart in another area. I’ve learned that no one is dull or unintelligent. We all flourish in one way or another.

Students want teachers to value every child’s capacity to learn. One student makes it clear that it is not enough to consider different learning styles. She is asking that teachers embrace and respect the many and varied aspirations students have:

I think one of the most important things they should understand is that every single student has their own hopes and dreams. For some it may be to be on the honor roll all through high school, go to Harvard, and grow up to be a very “successful” person. For others, it may just be not to flunk out of high school. You need to embrace everyone’s wants. That doesn’t mean that you should give more attention to those with higher hopes. Just work with each one and encourage them to do their best.

Just as other researchers have discovered (Corbett & Wilson, 1997; Richards & Combs, 1992), students are motivated by teachers who care enough to teach concepts and content using diverse ways of knowing. What our data adds is that students also want an inclusive classroom, where meeting diverse needs does not leave any student feeling less than any other student. This intense concern for the welfare of their peers was found throughout the student letters and implies that students observe inequities in how their peers are treated frequently enough to warrant their concern.

While many letters dealt with decency and equity in relationships and with the understanding of learning differences, there was much left unsaid. In our total database, very few letters addressed curriculum. This did not surprise us, as in the history of the middle school movement, even the professional community has avoided the curriculum discussion (Dickinson, 2001). The closest students ventured to critiquing curriculum was in their all-out attack on homework, targeting volume of work as one major area of concern. Few had considered curriculum relevance or meaning as a malleable attribute of schooling. Many seem to take for granted that curriculum was destined to be largely irrelevant. Others emphasized getting good grades or completing assignments as learning, never considering the worth of what they were compelled to do. Hence, they focused on making school less uncomfortable rather than making learning meaningful.

**Out-of-the-ordinary responses**

We did uncover some exceptions. A cluster of letters was so stunningly different that we were compelled to trace them back to their home schools. We found that these students were in unique middle school settings, where their teachers deliberately worked to create democratic
environments—where students shared power in developing and planning the curriculum and learning experiences.

A second analysis of this cluster of letters led us to investigate more fully just how these responses were so different. The length and depth of the responses was our first clue that something special was occurring in the school lives of these young people. Why did these students seem more invested to respond with care than those in the norm? Why were their remarks more about voice, choice, and curriculum?

Though we have more questions than answers regarding these letters, we did learn that these middle grades settings, noted for having highly evolved teams that employ democratic classroom practices, resulted in students who valued and expected mutual respect from their teachers and peers. These students, like the one quoted at the start of this article, had, in fact, higher expectations for teacher-student mutuality:

The primary thing that teachers should know about their students is the attitude to address them in … letting the students do things on their own or in groups with minimal interference from the teacher is also preferred; unless (help) is asked for. This gives the students a sense of independence, and can build self-confidence. In conclusion, teachers should know just how far to get involved with students. If the teacher does this, they will be respected, admired and remembered by their students.

Another wrote:

Each one of us has good ideas and it is very helpful if you just talk with us and get them out. For instance, here we have conferences with our teachers every other week. It is very helpful. We get to express our feeling about what is happening and what is going well and not so well. Also I think it is very important to have a good relationship with your teacher. It makes you more motivated to work and learn.

And, last:

With youth, there comes detachment. Many teenage students break apart from their parents. What teachers don’t realize is that school is a place to get away from the parents. Good teachers don’t try to be the parents. Good teachers don’t try to be the parents to the kids while in school; they try to associate themselves with them. When I say, “associate” I mean that teachers should try to get to know their kids (not as teacher to student but peer to peer).

So, how do teachers familiarize themselves to reach the teens? Teachers have to understand that they cannot use force to control the kids. Surely the teachers have seen that students don’t learn if pushed. “If you push, I push back harder!” many students think. Teachers have to leave room for (our) off days. If teachers don’t let the students dread going to class. The teachers have to make sure that they don’t use treats (off days, food) as the main reason to learn. Teachers have to let kids break apart from them. They shouldn’t help the kids by talking down to them, nor should they go out of their way to help these kids. Teachers have to stop sending the kids to support groups or disciplinarians. Teachers have to try to be friends.

Be friendly. Make jokes. Give off days. And don’t target kids.

It is clear that students from classrooms that explicitly value and engender student voice perceive middle school relationships and learning in qualitatively different ways. They rarely called for teachers to be nice and hardly mentioned the issue of homework. Instead, these students wrote about the power of relationships and the relationship of power, the importance of curriculum and their beliefs about their own learning. Although more data and analysis are needed, we speculate that when students have a significant part to play in a democratic classroom, they respond as anyone might respond when given a voice. They speak clearly and passionately about those things that matter in their lives. Figure 1 summarizes student insights.

**Listening to young adolescents in middle school**

Are we willing to solicit, listen, and take seriously the voices of young adolescents? We would like to suggest a few ways to proceed:

1. **You might start in your school, team, or classroom** by asking your students the same question that we asked: “What should every middle school teacher know about middle school students?” Analyze the data in your teams or even as a whole school community. Most importantly, examine current practice in light of students’ expressed needs and concerns. Then, make the needed changes, being certain to share those with students.
2. Next, explore ways to have students more actively participate in making decisions regarding what and how they learn. We are not suggesting the traditional student council forum; rather, we are looking to advance decision making as an integrated part of classroom and school life for all students. Explore and invest in a wide range of democratic practices so that students can take control of their learning in collaboration with adults: student-led conferences, student self-assessment, planning the curriculum and assessment with students, leaning on student voice and choice in classroom life (e.g., developing a team or class constitution, letting students choose books they read, writing topics, research subtopics, and ways to demonstrate their understanding in a unit of study) (Beane, 2006).

3. Rethink the traditional student council and replace it with team-based student leadership that will involve many more students and create a vehicle for nurturing student leadership.

4. Use the small learning community or interdisciplinary team as a small living model of a democratic community. Host community meetings, conduct surveys, and gather for celebrations. Other than large school-wide assemblies, our young people have few opportunities to participate as active members of a living community.

The young adolescents from whom we heard suggested that middle grades schools are often challenging places in which both relationships and learning are not regularly rewarding. As we consider the kinds of schools we are hoping to create for our young people, listening to the voices of our students can lead us toward more honest, democratic, and responsive middle grades education.

Our aim in conducting this study was not to merely be nice or kind to young adolescents. Rather, we believe that young adolescents deserve to be heard and taken seriously. We find the current educational scene somewhat disparaging, as the scales seem heavily tipped toward education singularly prescribed by others. We believe that a middle school education should bring democratic practice to life, and, thus, should call us to, first and foremost, partner with the young people we serve. Bringing student voice front and center can nudge us toward education owned, at least in part, by those it claims to serve. This student’s words capture many of the sentiments we have discussed, as he implores us to attend to the beauty in youth. We will let his words be our last:

I can imagine that teaching eighth graders must be pretty tough. Half of us don’t even know who we are, so how could teachers understand us? It’s hard, but I can think of some ways. First of all, it must be understood that we are all trying to fit in. Eighth grade is a hard year and everyone has insecurities. I’m not saying to walk on eggshells around us, but be aware that our emotions can change like the wind. Be firm, but understanding and strict but gentle. Also, we need to get breaks from class work and homework. We have a life outside of school. Parts of us wish we were older, but other parts wish we were still in kindergarten, playing in the sandbox. If it’s nice weather, don’t give a lot of homework. You could even have us read aloud outside or something. We need time to breathe and enjoy life while we’re still kids.

References

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Coming in March to Middle School Journal Readers

Reading and Writing and E-Literacy
— Video games in the classroom
— Making bad writing good
— Writing with technology
— Dealing with the effects of cyberbullying
— Partnering peanuts and word processors

In your mailbox in early March
Bringing Family and Community into the Writing Curriculum
Donna E. Werderich

Condensed in a small area of the bakeshop, people are rushing around in every direction trying to get cakes decorated with frosting and candies. It’s Mother’s Day and everyone seems to want to have a cake made especially for his or her mother. I’m at the Jewel Bakeshop in Algonquin, Illinois, where the smell of fresh bread surrounds you and the employees are working hard to accomplish many different things in a short period of time. The manager, a woman dressed in a white shirt and a black apron, smiles at me. She is busy making a special order cake. “Cakes are the hardest product to make and they sell more around the holidays,” she explains.

—Profile excerpt written by a middle school student

While middle school educators are faced with No Child Left Behind’s demands for improving students’ literacy learning, it is also wise to incorporate family and community involvement into the curriculum (Jackson & Davis, 2000; National Middle School Association, 2003; No Child Left Behind, 2002). In designing activities that meet such demands, middle school educators should consider allowing their students to write profiles on family and community members, such as a worker at a local bakery shop, to support students’ literacy learning.

Although many middle schools have structured programs to enhance school-family involvement such as school plays, concerts, and sporting events, how often do middle school educators develop instruction in which family and community members become contributors to the learning process? This article examines how writing profiles integrates parental and community involvement into literacy instruction across the curriculum.

Why students should write profiles about community members
Profile writing is based on the premise that if we want students to become good writers, teachers must allow students to select real topics that interest them (Atwell, 1998; Harvey, 1998; Spandel, 2005). When students care about their topics, they invest their energy in writing well. Profile writing provides an opportunity for students to develop their expository writing skills, as they engage in nonfiction inquiry through questioning, researching, interviewing, observing, and notetaking. Profiling family and community members not only develops students’ writing skills, “it also provides students opportunity to reflect on their learning about the real world and merge their thinking with the ideas and information they have read and studied” (Harvey, 2002, p. 21). This is a significant reason to teach profile writing at the middle level, since encouraging adolescents to question, explore, and discover their passions is a primary responsibility of the middle level teacher (National Middle School Association, 2003).

In either the inner city, rural farm town, or inner or outer suburbs, family and community members have...
abundant talent and expertise. Moll, Amanti, Neff, and Gonzalez’s (1992) study of barrio families living in Tucson, Arizona, confirmed that educators should recognize the “funds of knowledge” held by members of their students’ families and communities. Indeed, it is the everyday world that middle school students can observe and learn from. Graves (2000) emphasized that educators need to provide students with skills to learn how to understand people, whether they are fictional characters, historical figures, or community members. Educators in middle schools and high schools have relied on traditional texts such as basal readers, novels, trade books, and magazines for teaching content and practicing literacy skills (Alvermann & Moore, 1991). By directing middle school students toward writing profiles on family and community members, teachers are providing their students access to new funds of knowledge and to knowledgeable adults.

**Integrating profiles into the curriculum**

Profiles can be effectively infused into a middle school curriculum by using a strongly supported integrated approach (Jackson & Davis, 2000; Langer, 2002). Using profiles as a central “theme” can foster connections across disciplines and between school, family, and community. This approach can also ensure that literacy skills are being taught, reinforced, and practiced in multiple situations. When attempting to teach a unit integrated across the curriculum, teachers need time for careful planning to support curriculum standards. Figure 1 provides an example of profiles being integrated into the curriculum through connections to standards. Once the standards have been identified, teachers need access to useful resources to develop and support instruction. The following framework provides resources, strategies, and activities for teaching an integrated unit on profiles.

**Figure 1** Profile writing as an integrated unit

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject Area Standards</th>
<th>Connections to Profile Writing</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Language Arts/Reading</strong></td>
<td>Mini-lessons during writing and reading workshops to facilitate students’ written profiles of family and community members</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Standards for the English Language Arts: (National Council for Teachers of English and International Reading Association, 1996).</td>
<td>Examine multiple texts to develop a deeper understanding of how profiles are written and to gain knowledge of members’ careers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>— Students employ a wide range of strategies as they write and use different writing process elements appropriately to communicate with different audiences for a variety of purposes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>— Students use a variety of information sources to gather and synthesize information and to communicate knowledge</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Math</strong></td>
<td>Interviewing family and community members who apply mathematical understandings in their careers (i.e., business, carpentry, engineering, finance)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National Mathematics Learning Standards: (National Council for Teachers of Mathematics Standards, 2000).</td>
<td>Compare the life experiences of community members from different cultures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>— Connections: Recognize and apply mathematics in contexts outside of mathematics</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>— Formulate questions, design studies, and collect data about a characteristic shared by two populations or different characteristics within one population</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Science</strong></td>
<td>Interviewing family and community members who work in science-related fields (i.e., agriculture, health/medical, technology)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National Science Education Standards (National Research Council, 1996).</td>
<td>Using aspects of scientific inquiry including asking questions, planning and conducting investigations of different careers or different populations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>— Unifying Concepts and Processes</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>— Science as Inquiry</td>
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<tr>
<td>— Science in Personal and Social Perspectives</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Social Studies</strong></td>
<td>Oral history interviews of older family members about their early life experiences or community members from different cultures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>— Culture and Cultural Diversity</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>— Time Continuity and Change</td>
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To develop students’ understanding of the literacy skills involved in writing a profile, teachers need to provide students opportunities to analyze multiple texts, which can capture students’ interest and promote active learning necessary for teaching adolescents (Worthy, Moorman, & Turner, 1999). Beginning the lesson by showing the word “profile” to the students, ask them to think about the characteristics and qualities of the profile genre as they explore examples from a variety of resources (see Figure 2). You might design lessons by bringing in clips from popular television programs such as 60 Minutes, The Today Show and biography programs on cable. For example, students can watch someone of interest on Biography for Kids, a weekly program on the Arts and Entertainment (A & E) channel. As another option, record several interviews from such shows as All Things Considered, Day to Day, Fresh Air, or Talk of the Nation broadcast on National Public Radio (NPR).

After examining multiple texts, have groups of students describe the characteristics of a profile (e.g., format, purpose, audience, author’s use of language and writing or speaking style). Have students share their responses and create a class list of their observations.

Who can students write about? To begin any writing project, students need time to brainstorm, as this is the first stage in the writing process (Atwell, 1998; Calkins, 1986; Graves, 1983; Murray, 1980). Because brainstorming is challenging for writers, a variety of resources can be used to help students select a family or community member for writing their profile. Distributing a graphic organizer (see Figure 3) can help students brainstorm an interesting subject to profile. Ask students to brainstorm names of family members who have an expertise or a personal story that matters to them. On the left side of the graphic organizer, students can write down their family members’ names, followed by their career title or life experience, such as a Grandpa being a WWII veteran. Students should also be encouraged to seek out community members they might like to observe and interview. Students might identify accountants, librarians, auto mechanics, physicians, veterinarians, or lawyers on the right side of the graphic organizer. Ultimately, teachers should help students find the best family or community member—people who are passionate about their craft and want to share it.

A second classroom resource useful for brainstorming community members is the telephone book. Students can let their fingers do the walking through the yellow pages or business sections of a phone book. Another valuable resource used for brainstorming is the local chamber of commerce. Your local chamber of commerce can provide you with brochures, pamphlets, and maps, which can provide a graphic location of businesses for students to consider visiting. By logging on to www.chamberofcommerce.com and typing in a name of a city, students can link directly to their city’s chamber of commerce Web site. Many chamber of commerce Web sites allow you to navigate to a specific category such as “health care and medical.” Within the categories are listings of businesses, including names, addresses, telephone numbers, and Web site links.

Conducting successful interviews
“Learning how to acquire information from others brings more than life to the curriculum: It is an essential life skill” (Graves, 2000, p. 21). Teachers need to teach students how to conduct effective interviews. A collection of interviews from the resources suggested in Figure 2 provides models of interviewing techniques. View, listen

Raise writing expectations to emulate the way publishing works in the real world.
to, or read these with students and discuss different strategies used during the interview process. Guidelines for conducting an interview might include:

— Avoid yes/no questions. These questions often begin with “Do,” “Have,” or “Is.”
— Try beginning questions with “What” and “How” to encourage explanation.
— Ask meaningful, relevant questions. “What do you like about your work?” not “What is your favorite color?”
— Ask questions you really care about.
— Organize your questions in chronological order, with the last few questions creating your conclusion.
— Keep in mind, more questions may develop during the actual interview.
— Listen carefully and write down important notes.

Writing interview questions
Harvey (1998) recommended providing students with a few “safety net” questions, in case they encounter a challenging subject. These are universal and can be adapted.

— How did you develop your interest or expertise in this field?
— Who helped teach you what you know?
— What knowledge do you have about this field from personal experience?
— Whom do you admire in your field? (pp. 108–109).
Specific, teacher-created interview questions are not recommended. Rather, students are encouraged to ask questions that they want answered. Figure 4 provides excerpts from students’ profile writing, illustrating some of the answers they wrote about from the questions they cared about.

After drafting and finalizing their interview questions, students should conduct mock interviews. This activity prepares students for the interviews they will conduct later with real profile subjects.

Mock interviews
Conducting interviews provides students opportunities to practice their speaking skills. Likewise, interviewing can help students develop their listening skills, which are often the most neglected area of language arts (Opitz & Zbaracki, 2004). Several researchers have concluded that students who are better listeners are also better learners (Elley, 1989; Lundsteen, 1979; Pinnell & Jaggar, 2003; Strother, 1987).

To conduct mock interviews in a classroom, set the stage with pairs of students’ desks facing each other around the classroom. The interviewer must be prepared with his or her list of questions, paper to write on, and something to write with. The partner then plays the role of the interviewee. The interviewee has a difficult job because answers to questions will be in an impromptu fashion. The overall goal of this activity is for students to have the experience of being the interviewer who uses speaking, listening, and writing skills. After practice, students will be busy conducting authentic interviews, sharing their experiences with others, and writing drafts of their profile.

*Figure 2* Multiple texts for profiles

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Books on Biographies and Profiles:</th>
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<tr>
<th>Magazines with Pop Culture Profiles:</th>
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<tr>
<td>Esquire</td>
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<tr>
<td>Rolling Stone</td>
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<tr>
<td>The New Yorker</td>
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<tr>
<td>Vanity Fair</td>
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<tr>
<td>Parade</td>
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<tr>
<td>The Chicago Tribune Magazine</td>
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<td>The New York Times Magazine</td>
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<tr>
<th>Television Programs:</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>60 Minutes</td>
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<tr>
<td>Oprah Winfrey Show</td>
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<tr>
<td>The Today Show</td>
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<tr>
<td>Biography for Kids</td>
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<tr>
<th>Radio:</th>
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<tr>
<td>National Public Radio</td>
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<tr>
<td>All Things Considered</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Talk of the Nation</td>
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<tr>
<td>Morning Edition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fresh Air</td>
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<tr>
<td>Science Friday</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

*Figure 3* Graphic organizer

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Family Member / Career or Life Experience</th>
<th>Community Member</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dad carpenter</td>
<td>accountant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mom dental hygienist</td>
<td>librarian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uncle Joe airline pilot</td>
<td>auto mechanic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aunt Rosa hair stylist</td>
<td>veterinarian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grandpa WWII veteran</td>
<td>coach</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Involving Parents and Community* 37
Multiple outlets for student publishing

The opportunity to publish one’s written work is an integral part of the writing process (Atwell, 1998; Calkins, 1986; Graves, 1983; Murray, 1980). Equally important is making published work error free. Routman (2005) underscored that it is essential for teachers to raise their writing expectations to emulate the way publishing works in the real world. Raising expectations regarding students’ writing means teachers must insist on correct spelling, grammar, and punctuation. When expectations are high and teachers provide sufficient support and instruction, the students can take pride in publishing excellent work. To make publication matter, students need multiple outlets to publish their work, other than just writing for their teachers. What follows are suggested publishing opportunities for both inside and outside the classroom.

Author’s chair

Graves and Hansen (1983) described a method of student publication called “author’s chair.” The celebrating of a completed piece of writing occurs during a sharing session in the classroom, during which the writer sits in the author’s chair to read aloud his or her writing to other students. While this sharing session is typical in primary and intermediate grades classrooms, adolescents welcome a slightly different version of author’s chair. Consider creating periodic “author houses” during the school year. For example, at the end of the fall semester, dedicate a class period for a “Cider House.” Arrange small-group gatherings instead of a whole-class sharing session. Provide apple cider for students to enjoy while listening to the readings of other group members’ profile writing. For future author houses, you may offer hot chocolate, punch, or lemonade.

Classroom, school, and local newspapers

Many teachers and schools send home weekly or monthly newspapers informing parents of learning activities as well as social and athletic events. Such communication strengthens the relationship between home and school (McCann, 1992). With the use of a computer, students can design newspapers to resemble the publication of authentic newspapers such as The Chicago Tribune or The New York Times. Furthermore, many local newspapers welcome the reporting of school and classroom events. Students could submit their profiles to a local newspaper after obtaining written consent from the subject.

Linking technology and publication

One way to link technology and publication is a student-designed classroom Web site. Teachers can learn how to create Web pages with their students at Educational Web Design (www.oswego.org/staff/ccchamber/webdesign/edwebdesign.htm).

This Web site provides links to sites for teachers to obtain free graphics, sound files, and animated gifs. Another site, www.publishingstudents.com, offers additional advice in publishing student writing. This Web site includes a page for teachers to exchange ideas and a list of award programs and writing competitions for students. Many other publishing opportunities exist.

Figure 4 Profile excerpts written by students

Q: How would you describe a typical village hall meeting?

“The meetings. You want to know about what goes on at those village hall meetings, right? They talk about everything and anything. One of the topics was the final approval of the second fire station. Meetings take place every Thursday night at seven o’clock, and can last anywhere from forty-five minutes to four hours.” But Mrs. Smith doesn’t care. She says they’ve got everything. Excitement, tension, and more.

Q: What do you dislike most about being a veterinarian?

Julie explains that it is hard to put a pet down after you have known it for a long time. “Sometimes it feels like putting down your own pet.” Julie would know with her two dogs and one cat exactly how much you can love an animal.

Q: How would you like your employees to think of you?

Maria is a well-righted person who likes to have a strictly open relationship with her employees. “I would like them to see me as a trusted friend instead of the BOSS.” A good relationship with your employees is one thing, but showing them appreciation for a good job performance is another. “My appreciation is showing them how they are doing a good job,” she says. When the company has just finished a big shipment, she might take them out to lunch, or might give them extended vacation time. “Most of all is a thank you at the end of every day.” But business is business, and she can only continue to offer her clients a promise to provide the best service they can and most importantly gain companies’ complete trust.
on the Internet: www.kidpub.com provides a forum for classrooms around the world to display their literary writing, while www.kidnews.com publishes feature articles and other genre pieces written for kids and by kids of all ages. Yet another site, www.kidsontthenet.com, publishes tens of thousands of young writers from all over the world. Whatever the chosen method, publication matters if students are to improve their literacy skills and experience authentic authorship.

Final thoughts

Students need to tap into a valuable primary resource—family and community members. Recognizing these people can expose middle school students to a variety of role models to help them develop their own identity (Jackson & Davis, 2000). After interviewing the CEO of a large marketing company, Emmanuel concluded,

I think Maria is a people person who can get along with her employees and can have a good relationship with them. I think she is a person who likes to get the work done and wants it to be great every time.

Would it not be nice if adolescents, the adults of our future, emulated the strong qualities that Maria revealed to Emmanuel?

Providing opportunities for students to explore the lives of different people through profiles also allows students to connect literacy skills to the real world. By integrating family and community into the curriculum with profiles, educators can show students that literacy is not a skill just practiced with classroom texts; rather, it is an important ability exercised in daily life.

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Memo To: All Faculty
From: Principal
Subject: Middle School Parent Contact Program

In an effort to reach out to the members of the community, we are initiating a new Middle School Parent Contact Program. Please record all modes of contact with parents (phone conversations, e-mails, mailings, meetings). It is important to record the date, time, contact name or relation to student, and a brief description of the content of the conversation. Please follow the format below:
10/09/07, 12:10 p.m., John Doe’s mother—left voicemail—discipline problem

Our goal is to help parents understand our commitment to excellence for their children.

Later in the middle school teachers’ lunchroom:
Teacher 1: Did you read that memo this morning?
Teacher 2: Is she out of her mind? I want less parent involvement, not more.
Teacher 1: Who has got the time? This is crazy.
Teacher 3: I don’t think it’s such a bad idea. Come to think of it, I can think of at least five parents I really should contact anyway.

Building strong bonds between home and school is one of National Middle School Association’s (2003) 14 characteristics for successful middle schools set forth in This We Believe. Yet as the opening dialog helps illustrate, getting teachers to actually believe in the value of parental involvement is not always easy. This article examines a range of key issues in the literature on parental involvement. The article then addresses some practical suggestions for teachers to assist them in embarking on an effort to open lines of communication between their classrooms and their students’ homes.

Parental involvement is carefully defined, and the benefits of parental involvement are discussed. After exploring the reasons school efforts to generate parental involvement sometimes fail, the article concludes by describing several key methods for involving parents successfully in their children’s education.

To add a sense of context to the discussion, woven throughout the article are real e-mail communications between parents and teachers. These e-mails should help readers gain a clearer understanding of the benefits and challenges of making a parent contact program work. Pseudonyms have been used in the e-mails to maintain privacy.

While parental involvement is important at every grade level, it is critical at the middle level because parents of young adolescents have a tendency to become less actively involved in their children’s education. According to Hill and Taylor (2004), parents often have

This article reflects the following This We Believe characteristics: A shared vision that guides decisions — High expectations for every member of the learning community — School initiated family and community partnerships
a very active presence in their children’s elementary schools, but this presence greatly declines as students enter the middle and high school years. Eccles and Harold (1996) concluded this decline is partly due to parents’ fears that they cannot help effectively with more challenging school subjects. Yet parental involvement remains vital throughout a student’s education, so it is important to reverse this decline at the middle level to keep parents actively contributing to their children’s educational success.

This article presents a middle school parent contact program at a Pennsylvania middle school. The goal of this program is to strengthen lines of communication between the home and the school. Like most schools, this middle school has, for many years, made basic efforts to involve parents in their students’ education. For instance, the school has always held a “Meet the Teacher Night” in early September. Meet the Teacher Night allows an informal meeting between parents and teachers. However, because it is held early in the school year, no discussion of a student’s progress can take place. Teachers and parents also get together a few times during the year to plan each grade level’s field trips. Teachers are even encouraged to make requests of the school’s parent organization for resources to support various projects. Newer efforts at developing parental involvement include providing parents with online assignments and grade access, circulating a district newsletter, and creating student progress reports.

While all of these activities provide useful opportunities for developing some level of parental involvement, they are mostly targeted to a general parent audience and provide only limited insight into a particular student’s performance. Many of these efforts are also isolated, one-time events. What the middle school parent contact program provides is detailed communication between teachers and parents about student performance on a continual basis. This shifts the focus from offering events for parents to developing ongoing relationships with parents.

To begin exploring all of these issues, one must first understand exactly what parental involvement entails.

**What is parent involvement?**

To: Ms. Reilly  
From: Concerned Parent  
E-mail Subject: How can we help?

Algebra has not been easy for Blake. However, he works very hard to get the grades that he gets. This class is the one that I worried about the most.

Blake had a tutor last year and that seemed to help him. He ended the year as a B student. We are prepared to do whatever it takes to keep him there! Our family has just been offered a once in a lifetime opportunity—a trip to Mexico. We will be leaving on Friday and returning a week from Monday. I hate to pull Blake out of school for this, but we cannot turn down this opportunity. Please let me know what we can do once we return to bring him up to speed.

P.S. You now have my e-mail address. Please feel free to contact me. I look forward to meeting you.

Since the beginning of formal schooling, there has always been some form of collaboration between the home and the school. However, each reform movement in education has led to a change in the relationship between parents and teachers (Hill & Taylor, 2004). As Tutwiler (2005) noted, “Parent involvement in education has changed over time, from parents as primary educators, to parents as responsible for choosing adults to educate their children” (p. 119). This shifting relationship means today’s parents need to become “students” of the current educational system. McEwan (2005) cited several books that are now available to parents on how to get the best education for their child. According to McEwan, the need for active parental involvement is greater than ever.

The literature on parent involvement can be divided into two basic categories: parent involvement in the home and parent involvement in school. Epstein (1995) outlined six school and parent practices that support parental involvement. Three of Epstein’s categories relate to parental involvement in the home. These are basic parental obligations, family involvement in the home, and community exchange or collaboration. Epstein says parents do not need to be experts on the topics their children are studying. Instead, parents need to provide a place and time for children to study, they need to monitor progress on homework, and they need to develop a basic understanding of where their child should be at each grade level. These are all forms of parental involvement at home that Epstein says can lead to academic success. Epstein’s categories relating to parent involvement in the school include developing effective communication between teachers and parents, creating opportunities for parents to volunteer or serve as audiences for student performances, and engaging parents in decision making for various school activities. Spera (2005) provided a similar definition of parent involvement based on the ways parents can help in schools.
This article began with a description of a program instituted by a principal in a middle school almost two years ago. One of the main premises of the middle school parent contact program was to strengthen communication between teachers and parents. Teachers, in many cases, are responsible for making the first contacts and then keeping the communication going throughout the school year. While many teachers feel they do not want to contact parents unless a child is failing or there is a major discipline problem, it may not be good practice to so limit initial contact with the home.

Parental involvement is a better predictor of student success than is family income or educational level.

What are the benefits of parental involvement?

To: Kelly’s Parents
From: Ms. Reilly
E-mail Subject: Kelly’s Progress in Algebra
Hello, this is to give you an update on Kelly’s progress in algebra. Kelly started out strong and has a good grasp of the basic algebraic concepts. However, for the past week Kelly has been struggling with some of the new material. It started with her assignments not being completely finished, and then as the week progressed, she has not been completing the assignments at all. I know she was absent yesterday, and so I used part of today to review with her one-on-one about the missed assignment. That was when I noticed that she was having difficulty understanding earlier material. It is still early in the quarter, and Kelly has plenty of time to get her grade back up to where it was. There is some review work that Kelly can be working on over the weekend, and she can certainly be finishing the missed assignments.

I will be in touch early next week, Ms. Reilly

To: Ms. Reilly
From: Kelly’s Parents
E-mail Subject: Solving Kelly’s Difficulties with Algebra
Hi, thanks for your note about Kelly. We were not aware she was having a problem with algebra. I guess it was a bad time for her to miss algebra for an orthodontist appointment. I usually try to schedule them after school or, at least, NOT during core subjects, but that didn’t work out on Thursday.

We discussed your e-mail on Friday, but when my husband sat down to help her, Kelly hadn’t brought her book home! I’m better at language arts, and he’s better at math, but even he was having trouble helping her without her book. It’s so frustrating: She was screaming and crying and being IRRATIONAL and 13!!! She’s always been the type of child who, if we attempt to help her with homework, just puts up a wall and says she doesn’t get it or some such thing. And then she refuses to get it!

But we’re not giving up! We just told her to bring the book home tomorrow. I realize it’s a short week, but is there a time that you offer extra help, not for the quiz, but maybe next week so that she won’t get behind?

What else can we do? We want to work with you however we can to help Kelly be successful in math. We really appreciate your input.

Thank you, Kelly’s Parents

The first e-mail from the teacher to the parents began what became a regular form of communication between Kelly’s parents and her algebra teacher. The teacher made the initial communication and the parents responded. While Kelly was not failing or having behavior problems, without this initial communication and the follow-up that ensued, one or both of those outcomes may have occurred.

Perhaps the greatest benefit of parental involvement is the way it tends to enhance student performance. Sheldon (2002), for example, noted that a variety of research studies have shown a connection between parent involvement and academic achievement. Dodd and Konzal (2002) also argued that active parent involvement improves students’ academic success. In fact, Dodd and Konzal argued that parent involvement is a better predictor of student success than more commonly used indicators such as family income or educational level. One reason parent involvement often leads to academic success is that involved parents help model positive views of schooling. For instance, when parents ask their children to share stories of what happened in school, this involvement usually helps children develop a sense of ownership for their education. According to Gonzalez-DeHass, Willems, and Holbein (2005), “students whose parents are involved are more likely to take personal responsibility for their learning” (p. 117). These researchers say students whose parents discuss school with them also tend to earn higher grades.

The e-mail from Kelly’s parents paints a typical picture of the scene that occurs in many middle schoolers’ homes each school night. There are several different factors at play. One of the biggest problems is a student not bringing home any material, despite the fact that there is a homework assignment to be completed. One way to correct this problem is to see if the parents are willing to check out a second book from the school. Many schools will rent textbooks to parents for a small refundable deposit. In the case of an assignment not in the textbook, a second worksheet can also be e-mailed as an attachment to parents of students who may have a tendency to lose assignments on the way home or leave
them in their lockers. This may require teachers having to scan publisher created assignments into the computer or typing up assignments in a Word document. However, when teachers get assistance from parents, the time seems much more worth investing.

A second benefit of parental involvement is enhancing school programs and creating a positive school climate (Epstein, 1995). According to Hargreaves (2003), parents are often one of a teacher’s “most underused resources” (p. 128). Parents can provide support, knowledge, time, and assistance when they are encouraged to become active in a school. In fact, Hargreaves argued that parental involvement helps build safer, more nurturing environments for students. In essence, when teachers work actively with parents, schools tend to function more effectively. Though parent involvement is positive, in Kelly's home, as in many homes, it can spark the intergenerational battle about who has more knowledge. Many middle school students believe there is no way their parents can possibly help them with algebra, as the following quotes from parents demonstrate:

“Granted it has been 30 years since I took an algebra class, but I still remember this stuff.”

“I'm pretty good at algebra; I just can’t convince Jacob I am.”

“You know, I can solve inequalities with the best of them.”

A third benefit of parental involvement is that it provides a means for teachers to become more familiar with their students' backgrounds. Parent involvement can help teachers learn about the challenges students may face at home (Tutwiler, 2005). Meyer (1996), for instance, noted how his attitudes toward his rural students were changed when he traveled to some of their family farms. While it is, of course, not always possible to visit the home of a student, having the parent share family history and background information with the teacher can be an invaluable learning opportunity. According to Dodd and Konzal (2002), this sharing can be achieved by inviting a parent to come speak to a class, by having a meeting in the community that is accessible to all parents, or by having a school-community liaison to act as a bridge between the school and the home. This is certainly evident in the communication from Kelly’s parents. The teacher can get a sense of a frustrated 13-year-old refusing to allow her parents to assist with homework. This may not be a behavior that this child would demonstrate in class in front of her peers or teachers. Because of the e-mail contact, however, the teacher now can see that, while Kelly may be putting up a strong front in class, the material is causing her some difficulty when it comes to the independent work at home.

If teachers and parents both sincerely commit to making a cooperative effort, parental involvement can create wonderful opportunities for students.

What causes parent involvement efforts to flounder?

To: Ms. Reilly
From: Concerned Parent
E-mail Subject: A Communication Problem

Hello—I believe there was a misunderstanding between you and Ashley concerning a test that was given in your classroom last week. Apparently, she did not complete the test, and you had instructed her to come back at a later time to complete the test. Ashley said she went to your classroom on Friday; however, that was not a convenient time, and she was told to come back some other day by you personally.

Today (Tuesday) the test was given back to her with a score of 70% (I believe), and when she asked about completing the test, you stated there was nothing she could do now. She was upset about being told one thing and then when she attempted to follow through on those initial instructions, she was unable to do so.

Please address this matter with her soon. Ashley is a responsible, mature student and would like to rectify this situation as soon as possible.

As I stated earlier, I believe there was a grave miscommunication between you and Ashley.

Thanking you in advance for your time and cooperation in this matter.

Teachers and parents are increasingly keeping in touch via e-mail communication.

photo by Alan Geho.
To: Ashley’s Mom  
From: Ms. Reilly  
E-mail Subject: RE: A Communication Problem  

Thank you for your e-mail. As I read through it, I can certainly see that there was a miscommunication between us. I have tried to emphasize from the beginning of the school year that students have to watch the clock when taking tests and quizzes. Part of test-taking includes being able to manage time wisely. I did not give Ashley any indication that she would be able to finish the test later. What I said was that I would need to take a look at her test and see what she had not finished. If I felt that she had enough time and did not finish because there were parts that she did not understand, then there would not be an opportunity to leave after having seen the test, study those parts, and resume the test at a later date. However, if Ashley wanted some extra minutes after the bell had rung, to finish what she could, that option was made available to her. Ashley chose not to stay. Ashley returned Friday morning as all the students were leaving to attend the assembly, and I had to explain to her that this was not a good time, as I needed to go with my students. I asked her to stop by later. She didn’t, and I had to return the tests, as all students were anxious to find out their scores. I would have explained this to Ashley if she had given me the opportunity.

I hope this clarifies the incident for you. I will certainly address this issue with Ashley at an appropriate moment. It is great to have this communication channel open. Working together, I am sure we can strengthen Ashley’s test taking skills.

Ashley wanted some extra minutes after the bell had rung, to finish what she could, that option was made available to her. Ashley chose not to stay. Ashley returned Friday morning as all the students were leaving to attend the assembly, and I had to explain to her that this was not a good time, as I needed to go with my students. I asked her to stop by later. She didn’t, and I had to return the tests, as all students were anxious to find out their scores. I would have explained this to Ashley if she had given me the opportunity.

I hope this clarifies the incident for you. I will certainly address this issue with Ashley at an appropriate moment. It is great to have this communication channel open. Working together, I am sure we can strengthen Ashley’s test taking skills.

I will be in touch, Ms. Reilly

Miscommunication between student and teacher or teacher and parent can easily lead to everyone feeling bad. As the previous e-mail exchange shows, teachers can feel frustrated and let down by their students when they receive an e-mail or a phone conversation from a parent that seems to contradict the original conversation that took place between the teacher and the student. It is important for teachers to develop effective skills for responding to such communications. If handled incorrectly, such negative exchanges can derail any hope of building strong parental involvement. Yet, because accusatory e-mails create such emotion-filled situations, it can be extremely tempting for a teacher to get defensive and fire off an angry response.

Stepping away from the computer before writing a response is a good first step to bring some clarity to the situation. After all, even negative e-mails from parents do open the door to communication. As they reply, teachers want to keep this potential in mind. Even a negative exchange, if handled carefully, can be a building block for future positive communications. The previous e-mails show the teacher’s attempt to recap the situation honestly and to explain where misinterpretations might have occurred. The e-mail also ends by trying to encourage further communication between parent and teacher. The situation still involves tension, but the detailed response can help show the parent the larger picture.

Of course, not all efforts at developing strong parental involvement are going to succeed. There are a variety of obstacles teachers are likely to face as they try to expand their interactions with parents. One obstacle, according to McEwan (2005), is that many parents do not hold the same respect for educators that they once did. McEwan cited a number of reasons for this change: a growing distrust of institutions in general, a decline in once common courteous behavioral patterns, and changes in traditional family structures and childcare patterns.

According to Yan and Lin (2005), levels of parent involvement also vary among racial and ethnic groups. This can lead to another obstacle: language conflicts. For many ethnic groups, language tends to be a barrier when it comes to communicating with the local school (Dodd & Konzal, 2002; Ogbug, 1999; Paratore, Hindin, Krol-Sinclair, & Duran, 1999). Ogbug, for instance, showed how immigrant parents’ fears about their English skills caused them to avoid contact with their children’s teachers.

A third obstacle can be teachers’ willingness to let parents into their classrooms. Rather than seeing parents as partners in the classroom, Hargreaves (2003) pointed out that many teachers find parents to be a pain: “The major reason that teachers have negative feelings about parents was that parents questioned their expertise,
judgment, status, and purpose” (p. 129). Teachers generally spend much of their day working without consultation with other teachers or parents. Teachers normally prepare lesson plans on their own, and they generally deliver those lessons to the students without anyone else’s participation. Co-teaching is extremely rare, and even coordinated planning is not common. Thus, teachers often find it difficult to allow someone else into their classroom, especially if that person is likely to judge and criticize what is taking place.

Recalling the many obstacles that can block efforts at developing parental involvement can help a teacher find the strength to reply effectively to the e-mail of an upset parent such as the one that began this section. Even the angriest parent just wants to be heard. Lending an attentive ear and taking time to carefully respond, can help show the parent that the teacher is also concerned. The next section offers further ideas for avoiding problems and, instead, developing successful parent involvement. A proactive campaign to develop parental involvement can limit the number of angry parent e-mails that are sent or at least shift the tone of those e-mails from accusations to requests for help.

How can parents be involved successfully in their child’s education?

To: Ms. Reilly
From: Concerned Parent
E-mail Subject: Can we try daily reports?
Is there ANY WAY I can get an e-mail each day or have Nick fill out a form each day to hand to me so I know what he has to do? That way I know for each day what work he has to finish. The communication, I guess, is not the best with him and me. Even when I ask him if he has homework, he says he did it or he has none. Therefore, can you and I do a note or e-mail so I know what the real story is? I think we can keep Nick on track if we do it this way.

Thank you so much for the e-mail. It gives me some hope.

To: Nick’s Mom
From: Ms. Reilly
E-mail Subject: Can we try daily reports?
While we do not have a form that students can use for assignments unless they have been absent, all students were provided with an assignment planner at the beginning of the school year. This planner is where students can take down nightly assignments. Let us check and see if Nick is using his. There is also an assignment board in the front of the room that lists the daily assignments. When Nick enters the room, he can copy the assignment into his planner and then have me initial that he has listed the correct assignment. You can then check the assignment listed in the planner and my initial will verify that assignment needs to be completed for class the next day. If there is no assignment, I will state so in the planner.

Thank you for your willingness to see to it that Nick gets his assignments done each night.

Ms. Reilly

Regrettably, most school communication with parents takes place only when something is going wrong, such as homework not being completed, a student misbehaving in class, or a student earning a poor test score. However, according to McEwan (2005), “Parents crave communication—real communication that specifically describes how their child is doing, tells them what is going on at school, and gives them practical and reasonable ways they can help their children at home” (p. 104). Thus, it is important for teachers to be in contact with parents to praise students’ successes in addition to seeking assistance when things are not going well.

While teachers may feel that the parent in this e-mail was making unreasonable demands of the teacher—requesting an e-mail every day that Nick does not complete an assignment—there are ways to make such reporting less time consuming. For example, providing families with a monthly calendar that lists homework assignments, upcoming tests and quizzes, and project deadlines gives parents advance notice on what work to expect their child to be doing. Many school districts require their teachers to use Web-based programs such as Apple’s iCal desktop calendar to provide an online schedule of upcoming work. However, if this is not a requirement, teachers can create their own calendars from a template and provide it to students and parents at the beginning of each month.

When communicating with parents of different ethnic and racial backgrounds, teachers must carefully consider language usage. Ogbu (1999) recommended, “Teachers should use simpler words and talk in a way that parents and teachers can understand each other” (p. 178). Teachers should work to avoid jargon and strive to elicit parental discussion about a child’s performance.

Sending home progress reports throughout the quarter, rather than waiting until the end of a grading period when it may be too late for intervention, also can keep parents involved. It can be especially useful for teachers to seek direct confirmation of parental involvement. Parents can be asked to sign off on projects once they have discussed them with their child or to fill out simple evaluations about a child’s work at home on a specific project.
Probably the best way to develop parental involvement is to invite parents directly into the schools. Dodd and Konzal (2002), for example, described several successful programs in which parents were brought in as aids to teachers. These programs included parents being a presence in the classroom to help with tutoring, using parents as guest speakers to demonstrate to students how concepts learned in school would be used in the future, and having parents instruct students about concepts teachers were not familiar with, such as local community issues.

Unfortunately, though, parents tend to visit schools mostly during students’ elementary years and not at the middle and senior high level. According to Hill and Taylor (2004), at the middle and high school levels, parental involvement tends to be more home-based monitoring and questioning of students, while parents of elementary students are more likely to participate in some classroom activity. This shift from school involvement to more home-based involvement can actually be quite challenging for parents, as Drummond and Stipek (2004) observed. These researchers found that many middle and high school parents experienced great levels of anxiety because the parents feared they were no longer sufficiently involved in their child’s education.

Finally, Congress has even pushed beyond these individual teacher and parent efforts. The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 includes a section providing for parent involvement centers (Yell & Drasgow, 2005). With limited outside funding now available, the possibilities for developing effective parental involvement seem brighter.

Conclusion

E-mail Subject: Thanks for the Updates
Hello again. Thank you for the information. … I cannot begin to express the depth of my appreciation for all that you have done for Neil. I especially appreciate the update on Neil’s assignments because in my son’s world, he never has homework. Thank you so much.

This paper began with a real memo from a principal to all faculty in the building about a new parent contact program to be introduced at her middle school. While many teachers were a little skeptical of the program, all did participate. According to the principal, the program worked because “parents are more likely to support the teacher and will push their children to comply because ‘this teacher cares about you.’” Like McEwan (2005), the principal stressed the importance of making positive contacts with parents.

The middle school parent contact program generates about 400 communications between parents and teachers each month either via e-mail, phone, or written notes sent home. According to the principal, there has been a positive response to the program, resulting in more frequent visits to the school by parents to discuss students’ misbehavior or lack of work. Because teachers are initiating these communications, many of the “face to face confrontations have now been avoided because the not doing homework or the misbehaving in class was exposed in its initial stages and was not allowed to grow to the detriment of the student’s grade” (principal, personal communication, June 26, 2006).

This particular parental involvement program seems to be having success because teachers are working to communicate with parents before problems begin to take too great a toll on the learning process. Because parents are involved from the beginning, they tend to be more supportive, and they often even welcome suggestions from the teacher as to how to improve their child’s situation and attitude. The principal also noted that the number of complaints to the office about teachers significantly dropped during the program’s first year, because parents were hearing the teacher’s side of the story and not just hearing the child’s version.

To: Ms. Reilly
From: Karen’s Parents
E-mail Subject: A Final Note of Thanks
Thank you for taking extra time with Karen and for communicating with us so regularly. I sensed you were really committed to your students when I read the flier you gave us parents on “Meet the Teacher Night.” As a parent, it feels so good to know your child’s teacher actually does want to hear what you have to say and to get you involved with homework and activities and projects. We appreciate your interest. Karen was always a good student and has always performed very well on standardized tests, and she used to be, I think, competitive in a healthy way. But in sixth grade, she began slacking and doing just enough to get by a lot of times. She has always said she likes math, so I hope we can turn this around. Her science grades are bouncing around this year, too. Thanks again for your help. Its great knowing the communication channels are wide open.

References

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Student-Led, Teacher-Supported Conferences: Improving Communication Across an Urban District

Amy Goodman

After participating in student-led conferences, an eighth grader responded in a fast write, “I feel more involved with what my parents think about me and the progress I’ve made.” A seventh grade student in another classroom wrote, “I thought that the conferences were actually kind of cool. They let us explain our work and grades instead of just teachers explaining how they think we did.” A parent completing a survey after a student-led conference commented, “Having my son explain more than the final grade truly helped me understand just what areas I can help him with.” Another parent remarked, “Great idea! Having kids explain their behavior lets the parents and teacher know where they need to improve.” When asked about how her first ever student-led conferences went, a veteran teacher said, “I was amazed at how honest and how articulate my students were.”

According to This We Believe, student-led, teacher-supported conferences empower young adolescents to accept responsibility for their own learning. Such conferences invite parents into the learning environment, helping them better understand the unique developmental needs of their children. Third, student-led, teacher-supported conferences change the way that teachers design and use assessments in classrooms (National Middle School Association, 2003).

Because educators in Anchorage, Alaska, have bought into these principles, through a grassroots effort, the Anchorage School District is slowly changing the way it reports academic, social, and emotional growth to parents. Managing complex change in a large district is no simple task. To accomplish this change, Anchorage is trying to mirror the best practices from the corporate sector. With a clear vision articulated, teacher skills outlined, incentives identified, resources gathered, and an action plan underway (Thousand & Villa, 1995), the district is working toward the goal of implementing student-led, teacher-supported conferences district-wide (Figure 1).

The Anchorage schools

Anchorage, Alaska, is an urban school district with more than 7,000 middle school students, 96 different languages, and a 23% mobility rate. We have curious moose that roam onto school grounds, earthquake drills along with periodic volcanic activity, and short winter days with five hours of daylight. Although we are located three hours by plane from Seattle, we still face the same issues that challenge urban middle schools every day in the lower 48: bullying, drugs, gangs, and leaving no child behind. Our nine neighborhood middle schools are diverse, representing

This article reflects the following This We Believe characteristics:

A shared vision that guides decisions — School-initiated family and community partnerships — Multifaceted guidance and support services
the various geographic and socioeconomic areas of Anchorage. Anchorage’s only Title I school, with an aging infrastructure, was demolished at the end of the 2006–2007 school year because of the passage of a bond to replace it. Opened in fall 2007 was a tenth middle school that relieved the overcrowding in many of the buildings and expanded the middle school concept by adding sixth graders to the mix. Regardless of the school, our underlying mission is the same. We provide our young adolescents with a strong, innovative curriculum and teachers who are responsive to their developmental needs.

A brief history of Anchorage middle schools
Twelve years ago, Anchorage began the journey of transforming its junior high schools to middle schools. The schools added staffing, restructured the master schedules to accommodate team planning time, and began to tackle the social and emotional issues unique to this age group. Instructional teams embraced the opportunity to coordinate their time through interdisciplinary planning and teaching and were receptive to staff development in literacy strategies across the curriculum. Elective offerings were re-evaluated, intramural sports were adjusted, and counselors became more integral to our success. However, effectively communicating with parents continued to be a challenge. Parents were still herded into multipurpose rooms to wait in long lines to talk to teachers individually for a few precious minutes about their child’s progress. Parents left with some questions answered, a report card in hand, and suggestions for their child’s improvement in school. But they also often left frustrated.

Not only were parents dissatisfied with this approach to conferences, but teachers felt ineffective. Because of this consistent feedback, a few visionary teams started exploring the use of student-led conferences. These agents of change eagerly learned from their elementary feeder schools and tried to offer an alternative to the secondary unscheduled parent-teacher conferences. Elementary teachers were facilitating 20-minute, pre-scheduled conferences, with students leading their parents through a portfolio of work samples, which documented their growth. These parents walked away every year in elementary school armed with invaluable assessment information presented through the voices of the students, and these parents were now the ones who had to wait in long lines at middle schools for a three- to five-minute conversation with a teacher. Something had to change.

Reflecting on the strengths of elementary student-led conferences and supported with current research by the National Middle School Association (Kinney, Munroe, & Sessions, 2000), a handful of volunteer teams sprinkled across the district decided to offer student-led conferences at the middle level. Although their early vision was well thought out, there were obstacles to overcome. One such obstacle was scheduling 120 families in the district-allotted, 20-minute time slots. These teams began by scheduling between 12 and 16 conferences concurrently in each of the four core teachers’ classrooms. This required the utmost in organization on the part of both teachers and students alike and made it difficult to provide for quality teacher interaction. Even with some weak points in this initial implementation, parents responded favorably to having assigned 20-minute conference times. Attendance on teams that held student-led conferences was extremely high, with teachers often reporting 90% or more of the parents attending. Parents commented on how they enjoyed hearing insights about academic progress through the eyes of the students and appreciated seeing artifacts and work samples. Student goal setting and ongoing reflections gave parents a better understanding of their students’ strengths and weaknesses. However, many parents remarked on how they missed the interaction with the teachers. In fact, some were quick to point out that the process felt no different than what they did every evening over the dinner table, the sharing of each other’s day. Even conferences that were facilitated by one “homeroom” teacher resulted in this kind of feedback. Parents liked the assigned times and enjoyed interacting with their children, but in the end, they wanted to be reassured by all of the core teachers that their children were where they were supposed to be, both academically and socially.

Student conference reform advances
The idea spreads
Student-led conferences continued to be refined by those teams that initially participated; however, it was awkward for some teams to participate in this alternative form of
conferencing in a school, while others did not. One school decided to launch a school-wide effort and sought support from the state. This school petitioned the state to use the time allotted for a post-conference, half-day inservice toward an additional evening of conferencing for parents. In addition, the state sanctioned the early release of students for an additional half day. Both the inservice teacher time and the early release of students enabled the school to offer two afternoons and evenings of student-led conferences (13 hours), instead of the customary one afternoon and evening (6.5 hours). The extra time for conferencing allowed the school to increase the teacher interaction level with each family, and at the same time, gave working parents more opportunities to schedule conferences at their convenience. With more time overall, teams could now comfortably schedule only six conferences concurrently during every 20-minute time slot, in contrast to the 12 to 16 they were previously squeezing in, allowing more time for each conference. This ensured that each teacher on the team had sufficient time to sit down with each family to address student progress. Conference attendance at this school increased from 65% to 85% in the first year of implementing student-led conferences. The state-approved time exchange, along with increased parent attendance, positive feedback, and empowered students provided compelling incentives for continuing with this school-wide initiative.

Soon after, another school decided to try school-wide, student-led conferences and also applied for a state waiver. Some of the original teams that were the district change agents were now invited by this school to share their successes and their implementation plans. Accomplishing change was easy at these two schools since the student-led conference initiative was home grown, and colleagues shared their skills with each other. With success stories floating around the district and participation numbers so high, district leaders started to take notice. Lengthy discussions were held, and the idea of implementing student-led conferences across the district blossomed. Bringing on board one to two new schools every year found its way into the district’s six-year plan, and a serious effort was made to provide adequate training for all schools.

Developing the action plan
As the middle school literacy support teacher, I was asked to help organize a half-day training template to be delivered at all of our middle schools during our fall 2006 inservice training. A committee was quickly formed, which included instructional support staff from special education, gifted education, science, math, social-emotional learning, and technology. Designing effective training was challenging because of the wide range in knowledge, skills, and experience in the district. Some teachers had been using student-led conferences for several years, while others were new to the concept. It was important not only to offer step-by-step guidance for the new users but to also improve the implementation models at the schools already participating.

One major improvement we wanted to tackle in our training was the role of the teachers within the conferences. We heard over and over from parents that they liked this student-led conferencing format, but they missed the face-to-face conversations with the teachers. We needed to correct the misconception that students were meant to lead the entire conference on their own, while teachers faded into the background.
To eliminate this confusion, we quickly adopted the phrase \textit{student-led, teacher-supported} conferences in all training discussions. Our ultimate goal for fall training was to provide a strong foundation, with a handful of consistent principles for all staff to follow, which would equip teachers with the skills they needed for success. We created a simple mnemonic, the ABCs of student-led, teacher-supported conferences, on which we based our training:

- A − Actively engaged
- B − Balanced portfolios
- C − Continuous communication.

To ensure the training was well received, the committee reflected on the early successes of teams training other schools across the district. Using that as a model, committee members decided to chronicle two experienced teams’ efforts to implement student-led conferences through videotape. We scheduled numerous filming sessions, which included teacher planning meetings, student preparation lessons, actual student-led conferences, and exit interviews with the parents, teachers, and students. With careful editing, four hours of raw footage was whittled down to a comfortable 15-minute videotape.

A fast-paced photomontage from across the district was a way not only to open the videotape but to also honor all the schools that were already underway with student-led conferences. The executive director of middle schools followed the photomontage with an introduction to where the district had been and where it was headed with its grassroots initiative. The body of the videotape was organized into short sections, recognizing the critical need to build in teacher talk time during training. To underscore our main points and to signal the end of each section for discussion, graphics were inserted (Figure 2). Section one documented the team preparation meetings, where teachers discussed scheduling families and tailoring forms to meet their needs. Section two addressed the preparation taken by students including selecting work samples for their portfolios, completing self-evaluation forms, and role-playing conferences. Observing an entire student-led conference from beginning to end would be too tiring for the viewers, so instead, we merged sections from two student conferences, toggling back and forth. To provide a meaningful overview, we zoomed in on the students sharing from their portfolios and showed the core teachers rotating in to comment on academic progress. Hearing directly from the stakeholders was a powerful way to conclude the videotape. Snippets from exit interviews with parents, teachers, and students woven together gave participants a chance to hear firsthand the voices of all those involved. This training videotape provided a pivotal, standardized resource to frame the professional development for all of our teachers.

**Figure 2** Examples of end-of-section discussion graphics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teacher Preparation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Start early</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Begin conversations with parents and students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adapt forms from the Middle Link</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Share tasks among each subject area</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Set up portfolios</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discuss guidelines for selecting work samples</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student Preparation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Select work samples that represent strengths and weaknesses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Include work samples from all classes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Create and attach sticky note talking points to each work sample</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Complete all self-reflection forms honestly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Practice with a partner – dress rehearsal</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Actual Conferences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Student:</strong> Avoid “show and tell” approach; elaborate on sticky note talking points</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Teacher:</strong> Provide anecdotal comments; use teacher stems to help construct rich comments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Student:</strong> Follow agenda and pause when teachers drop in</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Teacher:</strong> Keep moving from conference to conference</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Student:</strong> Pace yourself and stay focused</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Teacher:</strong> Schedule additional conference time at parents’ request</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Resources for teachers and parents
In addition to preparing the videotape, we also focused on centralizing our teacher-created resources. Working smarter and not harder is always an important goal for overworked professionals. Over the years, teams had been circulating various forms that worked well for them. Schools used these as springboards to create their own personal forms. Not wanting teachers to feel they had to start from scratch, district planners used this as an opportunity to upload the various resources on the middle school Web site, the Middle Link (http://www.asdk12.org/middlalink). Categories of forms quickly emerged (agendas, scheduling, behavior checklists, portfolio preparation, and post conferences), and these were placed into a “Teacher Resource Center.” To meet the needs of parents, we also created a “Parent Resource Center” that provided more extensive explanations, student and parent feedback about the conference experiences, and suggestions to help improve communication. It also became apparent we needed to be more responsive to our non-English speaking families, so we translated key informational materials into Spanish, Hmong, Korean, Tagalog, and Samoan. We also provided links to other Web sites for further research and recommended current professional books and journal articles.

Two members from the instructional support team co-delivered the half-day training sessions at each school in fall 2006. All members had, at one time or another, used student-led conferences in their own classrooms, so they felt they could passionately speak to the district-wide initiative. Trainers not only heightened awareness about student-led, teacher-supported conferences through the use of the videotape and the district Web site, the Middle Link, but they also took advantage of the training time and modeled cooperative learning strategies, differentiated instruction techniques, and reciprocal teaching to improve reading comprehension. Teachers walked away with a step-by-step checklist of what to do before, during, and after conferences. A trifold handout was created, laying out the roles of teachers, parents, and students side-by-side. Written using parallel construction, the Roles-at-a-Glance provided a concise list of responsibilities for all of the stakeholders (Figure 3).

Funding was secured to provide supplemental resources, which included multiple copies of professional books for teacher study groups. In addition to using the National Middle School Association’s practitioner’s guide by Kinney, Munroe, and Sessions (2000), Implementing Student-Led Conferences by Bailey and Guskey (2001) was selected. A credit class, “Using Digital Portfolios in the...
Classroom,” was created by the technology instructional support teacher and sponsored through the University of Alaska. Teachers were extended an invitation to participate, as a means to provide further opportunity for research and to procure continuing education credits.

**Ongoing training**

Besides providing all staff with this half-day training early in the fall, planners knew they would need to encourage ongoing conversations about student-led conferences throughout the year. Each semester, they scheduled two rounds of return visits to the schools in an effort to meet with core teams during their team planning time. Teams communicated to trainers the topics they wanted addressed, and these discussions were then tailored to meet the needs of each team. A common thread we heard from many teams was the need for more explicit instruction in how to prepare students to talk insightfully about their work samples. Because of this feedback, the instructional support team collaborated with students at one school to produce a nine-minute video capturing a role-play of a weak conference versus a strong conference. We also met with the district-wide core curriculum committees to brainstorm with department chairs best academic practices that enhance student-led conferences.

Meetings with the district-wide co-curricular committees (music, art, physical education, and world languages), challenged the support team to view student-led conferences from an entirely different perspective. From our experiences with student-led conferences early on, we knew attendance could decrease for co-curricular staff unless we carefully planned for their participation in the conferencing process. At all sites, we worked hard to address the issue proactively to increase the number of parents visiting with the co-curricular staff before or after their scheduled student-led conference with the core teams. By placing co-curricular staff in a central meeting area such as the multipurpose room or library, parents were easily able to access the teachers. In addition, co-curricular staff frontloaded communication with families by placing information and invitations into the core teams’ student portfolios. Visuals such as posters and digital videos were displayed around the school, showcasing the co-curricular staff and their classes. Many of the elective teachers opted for performance-based portfolio conferences, which lured even more parents to stop by to see them. Some schools used incentives to ensure co-curricular staff were not left out. The Passport graphic organizer (Figure 4), created by one of our schools, helped guide parents. Upon completion, it also served as a raffle ticket for student prizes the following day at lunch.

**How we know it is working**

Anchorage’s attendance rates after implementing school-wide student-led conferences is impressive. Figure 5 shows the change in parent attendance at fall conferences the first year after each of the seven of nine middle schools implemented the two-day, student-led conference mode. During this implementation, a standardized parent feedback form was made available to every family. Results were shared with each school and team to provide staff a chance to reflect on their implementation and set goals for the spring (Figure 6). During the months that followed, the support team continued with team visits focusing on those goals. Also during this time, Information Technology developed a tool (patterned after what a team of teachers had created on their own) that allowed parents to sign up for student-led conference appointment times over the Internet. In the spring, this was field-tested with success by two volunteer teams at one of the schools. The year came to a close with an online staff survey that was made available to each certified teacher to help shape a staff development plan for the following school year.

**District-wide change**

It is not unusual to hear about school or district educational initiatives that fail. Change is not easy. To avoid the common pitfalls of instilling change, we in Anchorage viewed the process through the lens of the business world, making customer service for our families a top priority. We accomplished our district-wide change because we had five elements in place: vision, skills, incentives, resources, and an action plan. Our vision started with a few teams across our district that wanted...
families. Resources such as professional books were made welcome, as was a transition to a six-day, half-day training as well as ongoing training throughout the year. All schools were invited to be part of the six-year plan of offering student-led conferences across the district. Ultimately, each school would launch school-wide, student-led conferences when its faculty felt it was ready. With all five elements in place, change took place. If any one of these elements had been missing, our results would not have been as positive.

We believe that thoughtful, district-wide change on a large scale can take place and that parent communication can be improved through student-led, teacher-supported conferences. We also believe that young adolescents can be empowered in their own learning and begin to accept more responsibility for that learning. Finally, we believe that assessment can be more responsive to their individual needs when it includes students’ reflections on the process. Although student-led conferences were an early vision of a few passionate teachers, district leaders carefully listened and acted upon the momentum they observed. Anchorage middle schools are poised for success as they continue to manage the complex change of offering an alternative to traditional parent-teacher conferences. Anchorage middle school educators are confident ongoing results will prove to be well worth the time and energy put forth by all.

References

Amy Goodman is a middle school literacy support teacher in the Anchorage School District, Alaska. E-mail: Goodman_amy@asdk12.org

Figure 5 Attendance rates after implementing student-led, teacher-supported conferences

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School</th>
<th>Student-Led Conference Attendance</th>
<th>Previous Fall Conference Attendance</th>
<th>Percent Change</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>School A</td>
<td>86%</td>
<td>65%</td>
<td>+21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School B</td>
<td>65%</td>
<td>58%</td>
<td>+7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School C</td>
<td>75%</td>
<td>62%</td>
<td>+13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School D</td>
<td>91%</td>
<td>78%</td>
<td>+13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School E</td>
<td>75%</td>
<td>62%</td>
<td>+13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School F</td>
<td>82%</td>
<td>70%</td>
<td>+12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School G</td>
<td>90%</td>
<td>78%</td>
<td>+12%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 6 Averages of parent survey responses (First year)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Items on Parent Survey</th>
<th>Average Scores (1 low – 5 high)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>My child was prepared for the conference.</td>
<td>4.38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I now have a better understanding of how my child learns.</td>
<td>4.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have a clear picture about what my child has been studying this quarter in each subject area.</td>
<td>4.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have a better understanding of my child’s effort, study skills, and classroom behavior in each subject area.</td>
<td>4.43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Each of my child’s core teachers made a point to make contact with me during the student-led conference.</td>
<td>4.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My child’s Elective/PE teachers provided information about my child’s progress.</td>
<td>4.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The student-led conference was valuable and informative.</td>
<td>4.40</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The goal is to increase student learning, so how do we know what’s working and what we need to improve at our school?

The National Middle School Association School Improvement Toolkit is a comprehensive online assessment of your school that gives you specific ideas to improve programs and practices to meet the needs of all students.

The School Improvement Toolkit provides

- An online assessment taken by all faculty based on *This We Believe: Successful Schools for Young Adolescents*
- Detailed data from the online assessments
- A comprehensive report outlining strengths and areas that need improvement
- Specific examples and strategies for school improvement and staff development
- Trained, experienced consultants who can visit your school to observe and report findings
- Personal assistance in planning long-term school improvement and professional development

Visit [www.nmsa.org/toolkit](http://www.nmsa.org/toolkit) to view a video, see a sample of the online assessment and reports, and read what others have to say. Contact NMSA at 1-800-528-NMSA for more information and pricing options.
Letter from the President
Theresa W. Hinkle

Have you ever noticed once an idea enters your mind it seems to pop up everywhere you turn? That’s the impact a quote I heard last spring has had on me. The chairperson of the NMSA Visioning Task Force shared this quote from A Leader’s Legacy by James Kouzes and Barry Posner:

Leadership is about taking people to places they’ve never been before, and we can’t go to those places without courage. Leadership is courage in action. Courage gives us the energy to move forward. Courage gives us the strength to sustain ourselves in the darkest hours. Courage enables us to leave a legacy that declares, “I was here, and I made a difference.”

Afterward, it seemed everywhere I turned I heard something that made me think of courage and leadership. At the recent NMSA Annual Conference in Houston, Cal Ripken, Jr. spoke about finding the courage to be a leader in those rare days when he wasn’t performing up to his usual standard of excellence. Even when his bat was failing him, he discovered the younger players depended on him for guidance, both on and off the field. And, as you would expect from Cal Ripken, Jr., he found the courage to be a leader for his team. The closing keynoter, Dr. Mae Jemison, certainly displayed the courage of a leader by repeatedly “being willing to step into a minefield” of a controversial topic. She spoke with eloquence and passion about changes that must occur if all our nation’s children are to receive quality education in the sciences. She will leave this as her legacy.

Perhaps you’re thinking, “That’s great if you’re a public figure, but what about me?” Andy Warhol once said, “They say that time changes things, but you actually have to change them yourself.” Each of us has opportunities to assume roles of leadership within our own spheres of influence. One opportunity open to all individual members of NMSA is the MiddleTalk list serve. The members of this group not only provide practical instructional and emotional support, they challenge one another to think outside the usual. One of the frequent contributors ends her e-mails with this quote from Anne Frank, “How wonderful it is that nobody need wait a single moment before starting to improve the world.” These committed educators display courage by reaching out to help and challenge one another. They may not describe themselves as leaders, but I certainly would.

Daily we are faced with challenges including difficult students, uncooperative teammates, frustrated parents, and school/district/federal policies with which we may disagree. Many of us are in schools where changes are being made in the name of accountability—changes like the loss of advisory programs, the elimination of exploratory classes, or the abandonment of other middle level concepts. Each of these challenges is actually an opportunity for you to be a courageous, collaborative leader. Will you speak out? For the first time, there is legislation in both the House and Senate that will provide much-needed resources for all middle level students, but especially for those students in schools of need. Will you speak out? This is your opportunity. Do you have the courage to leave a legacy that says you were here, and you made a difference?

Sincerely,

Theresa W. Hinkle

NMSA Welcomes New Staff Member

Dwayne Martin, membership development manager, finds innovative ways to increase NMSA’s membership base through marketing campaigns to retain current members and encourage others to take advantage of the many benefits membership offers.
NMSA's 34th Annual Conference & Exhibit brought together more than 8,500 middle level educators in Houston, TX. The conference was a time to learn, network with colleagues, and celebrate young adolescents. Keynote speakers were Rick DuFour, Cal Ripken, Jr., and Mae Jemison. A special thanks to the local planning committee for their hard work over the past two years to help shape the conference and give it that Texas flavor. Thank you to all who helped to make the conference a success. We look forward to seeing everyone next year in Denver, CO.

Distinguished Educators Recognized in Houston

Kathy Shewey and Kim Williams were honored as the 2007 recipients of NMSA’s Distinguished Educator Award at the opening general session of NMSA’s 34th Annual Conference & Exhibit. This award recognizes outstanding practitioners in middle level education—those who have made a significant impact on the lives of young adolescents through leadership, vision, and advocacy.

Kathy Shewey’s love for middle level education began 37 years ago at the University of Florida. Mentored by Dr. William Alexander and Dr. Paul George, Kathy is an innovative, progressive teacher and leader and a pioneer of the middle school concept. More important, she believes in the value of relationships with kids. Her vision is that of schools filled with caring and nurturing teachers; instruction that is relevant, alive, and engaging; and schools as places where students feel safe and accepted.

Kim Williams is a champion of the middle school concept at all levels. At William Thomas Middle School in American Falls, Idaho, Kim serves as a teacher and team leader, passionate about teaching and reaching all kids. According to Principal Randy Jensen, she is at the forefront of differentiated instruction, providing students with different avenues for learning based on their readiness, interests, and learning profiles. Her students say, “When you walk into her room you feel welcome. … She makes every one of us feel special.” Kim has also served as a mentor to many new teachers.

Alfred A. Arth Awarded NMSA’s Highest Honor

A John H. Lounsbury Distinguished Service Award was presented to Al Arth at the opening general session of NMSA’s 34th Annual Conference & Exhibit. Arth was the 19th educator to receive NMSA’s highest honor.

In his 33 years as an educator, Al has been a teacher, professor, author, presenter, and mentor. He pioneered undergraduate, graduate, and doctoral middle level teacher education programs. One of the original road warriors for the cause, Al carried the middle school message to educators far and wide. His list of speaking engagements and workshops includes more than 300 events, and his list of published works numbers more than 100—many coauthored by those he has mentored. Over the years, Al has assisted countless others in becoming active professionals for the middle school cause.
In an educational climate characterized by an enormous emphasis on accountability, our nation has been busy defining its educational goals to enable us to participate in a global economy. Even in this context, the concept of family and parent involvement in school has remained a top priority. Two examples illustrate this point. First, in 1994, Congress enacted the Goals 2000: Educate America Act. As stated in Goal Eight, “By the year 2000, every school will promote partnerships that will increase parent involvement and participation in promoting the social, emotional, and academic growth of children” (Sec. 102, 8, A). Some of the objectives of this goal included the establishment of programs to increase parent involvement, engaging parents in the support of academic work of children at home, and shared decision making at school.

Second, parents are mentioned more than 300 times in various parts of the No Child Left Behind Act (2002), specifically in Section 1118, Title I. This section of the Act is devoted solely to parent involvement. More specifically, this section requires that school districts and schools receiving Title I dollars must have a written parent involvement policy and build school capacity to effectively implement the parent policy provisions. Additionally, this policy must be developed jointly with parents and the local community. For the first time in the history of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), the law contains a definition of parent involvement:

The participation of parents in regular, two-way, and meaningful communication involving student academic learning and other school related activities including ensuring—that parents play an integral role in assisting their child’s learning; that parents are encouraged to be actively involved in their child’s education at school; that parents are full partners in their child’s education and are included, as appropriate, in decision-making and on advisory committees to assist in the education of their child; and that other activities are carried out, such as those described in section 1118 of the ESEA (Parent Involvement). [Section 9101(32).EA]

For the purpose of this column, we define parents as any family member, including a blended or extended family member (Shartrand, Weiss, Kreider, & Lopez, 1997), or other adult (e.g., grandparent, stepparent, or someone standing in loco parentis) who plays an important role in the child’s life (National PTA, 2000) or contributes to the learning of the child and his or her improvement in school. Readers are provided with a brief historical overview of parent involvement in schooling, the positive effects of parent involvement on students, related research on the topic, the challenges to effectively involving parents, and, finally, some of the models of parent involvement that exist.

**Historical perspective**

Historically, we have witnessed major changes in patterns regarding the relationship between the school and the
home. It has long been recognized that the parent is the child’s first teacher and that the home serves as the first classroom (Berger, 1995). In the early 19th century, the community and the parents exerted considerable control over the decisions of the school. The church, home, and the community generally supported the same agenda for student learning and the students’ evolution into the adult community (Prentice & Houston, 1975). Parents were directly involved in such decisions as hiring and firing teachers, determining the school calendar, and developing the school curriculum (Epstein, 1986).

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, different structures in school and family relations developed. Separate tasks and responsibilities were delegated to the school and the home (Katz, 1971). The school began to distance itself from parents, with the notion that teachers had specialized knowledge and the belief that parents were not qualified to contribute to issues related to curriculum and instruction. In the 1920s, parent involvement entered what Henderson (1988) called the “bake sale” mode. Some authors (Bushweller, 1996; Elkind, 1994) noted that parents were actually “dumping” their parental responsibilities on the school and acknowledged that schools were assuming more and more functions traditionally within the parent domain. By the 1950s, teachers typically held the view that they should teach, and parents should simply be supportive of the teachers and the school (Berger, 1995). By the 1960s, though, we began to see federal legislation that mandated parent involvement in schools. Passage of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA, 1965) was one of the first legislative acts linking parent involvement to education. Title I, part of ESEA, required that parents serve on school advisory boards and participate in classroom activities.

Discussing the divide between parents and the school, Jacobson (2002) commented that, because parents lack the language or the educational background, some educators might view them as incapable of anything that would make a difference in their child’s education. In short, the general acceptance of teaching as a profession began to change the face of parent involvement in schools (Berger, 1995; Epstein, 1996; Zellman & Waterman, 1998).

Discussing the issue of parent involvement as it relates to middle grades education, the Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development (1989) wrote:

Despite the clearly documented benefits of parent involvement for students’ achievement and attitudes toward school, parent involvement of all types declines progressively during the elementary school years. By middle grade school, the home-school connection has been significantly reduced, and in some cases is nonexistent. (p. 66)

A similar analysis of declining parent involvement during the middle grades years is offered by Gotts and Purnell (1987) and Epstein (1987).

As the history of parent involvement in schools moves into the 21st century, we can no longer regard parent involvement as simply including parents in fund-raising or attending an occasional student play, music performance, or sports event. Parent involvement, as mandated by No Child Left Behind, includes the concept of a meaningful partnership consisting of regular communication and parent participation in the development and implementation of a plan for school improvement (Cowan, 2003). Increasing parent involvement, according to Myers and Monson (1992), is a positive initiative because students learn more in schools where parents become involved and offer their support.

**What research says**

**Positive effects of involving parents**

No Child Left Behind has highlighted the importance of parent involvement, however, the effects of parent involvement on making schools better and improving student achievement has been recognized for decades. While research regarding parent involvement began in the mid-1960s, research pertaining to parent involvement in middle schools did not appear until the mid-1980s. We saw the advent of this research in the 1960s, with the focus on at-risk students, the need for early intervention programs (Bronfenbrenner, 1974), and initiatives designed by the federal government to mandate parent involvement as a primary means to improving student learning. Parents, too, were influenced by research in the
late 1960s and early 1970s that suggested they should play a greater role in school governance because of the effects of school decisions on both children and their parents (Lightfoot, 1978; Sarason, 1971).

A review of the research on parent involvement reveals that parent involvement positively affects students’ achievement (Epstein et al., 2002; Fan & Chen, 2001; Herman & Yeh, 1983; National Middle School Association, 2003), attendance (Epstein et al., 2002), self-esteem (Mapp, 1997), behavior (Fan & Chen, 2001; National Middle School Association, 2003), graduation (Lommerin, 1999), emotional well-being (Epstein, 2005), and life goals (Lommerin, 1999) (see also Becher, 1984; Burke, 2001; Epstein & Dauber, 1989; Merenbloom, 1988; Olmstead & Rubin, 1982; Truby, 1987). Not only has a compelling connection been found between student achievement and parent involvement, but it is also interesting to note that these benefits cross lines of family income and parent education level (Chavkin & Gonzales, 1995; Funkhouser, Gonzales, & Moles, 1998; Henderson, 1981; Henderson & Berla, 1994; Pepperl & Lezotte, 2001; Young & Westernoff, 1996).

Henderson and Mapp (2002) revealed in an analysis of 51 studies that students with above average parent involvement had academic achievement rates that were 30% higher than those students with below average parent involvement. Henderson and Berla (1994) found that the most accurate predictors of student success in school were the ability of the family (along with the help and support of school personnel) to (a) create a positive home learning environment, (b) communicate high but realistic expectations for their children’s school performance and future careers, and (c) become involved in their children’s schooling. As Henderson and Berla wrote in the opening statement of their book, A New Generation of Evidence: The Family Is Critical to Student Achievement, “The evidence is now beyond dispute. When schools work together with families to support learning, children tend to succeed not just in school, but throughout life” (p. 1).

Most studies show that the value of education is impressed upon students when they see their parents and other family members involved in the school program (Myers & Monson, 1992). Moreover, these studies attest to the benefits of successful parent involvement, including:

1. higher achievement
2. improved school attendance
3. improved student sense of well-being
4. improved student behavior
5. better parent and student perceptions of classroom and school climate
6. better readiness to complete homework
7. higher educational aspirations among students and parents
8. better student grades
9. increased educational productivity of the time that parents and students spend together

Other research related to parent involvement

In addition to the effects that parent involvement has on students, researchers have examined variables that have most frequently been associated with parent involvement in schools. Unfortunately, attempts to identify factors implicated in variations in parent involvement have produced few consistent results. The factor most examined is socioeconomic status (SES) (Corwin & Wagenaar, 1976; Herman & Yeh, 1983). This research concludes that family SES plays a role in parent-school relations, but the general direction of its influence is too difficult to determine.

Teacher characteristics, such as level of education and sense of efficacy, have also been studied. Higher levels of education have been associated with more positive attitudes toward parent involvement (Becker & Epstein, 1982), but also with fewer parent contacts and more disputes (Corwin & Wagenaar, 1976). Ashton, Webb, and Doda (1983) studied teacher efficacy and found that lower levels of efficacy seem to be related to reduced teacher-parent contacts. Grade level and class size have been studied as a variable in the research on parent involvement. Lower grade levels have been associated with teachers’ use of more parent involvement strategies, and large class size has been associated with more teacher efforts to involve parents (Becker & Epstein, 1982). Additionally, Corwin and Wagenaar examined school formalization (i.e., rules and controls) and centralization (i.e., hierarchical structuring of the organization) and found that teachers in more formalized and centralized schools reported less parent involvement.
Challenges to parent involvement

Despite the positive effects of parent involvement on students’ success in achievement, attendance, attitudes, behavior, graduation, and life goals, parent involvement must sometimes be urged, coaxed, supported by initiatives, legislated, or mandated (Kerbow & Bernhardt, 1993). The real barriers that negatively affect the engagement of parents and the mechanisms that encourage parents to become engaged in their children’s education have not been clearly understood (Kerbow & Bernhardt). Moreover, there is sufficient evidence to suggest that parents and educators often have conflicting views of the roles for parents in schools (Abrams & Gibbs, 2000).

Many parents face obstacles in their attempts to become involved in schools. A few of the obstacles include (a) differing ideas among parents and teachers about what constitutes involvement, (b) a less than welcoming atmosphere toward parents in schools and classrooms, (c) minimal opportunities for involvement, (d) poor communication from schools, (e) lack of parent education and parenting skills, (f) time and job pressures, and (g) language barriers (Becker & Epstein, 1982; Hobbs et al., 1984; Lightfoot, 1978; Lortie, 1975; Moles, 1982). To this list, Plevyak (2003) added (a) cultural differences, (b) fear of authority-based institutions, (c) parent illiteracy, (d) family problems, (e) negative education experiences, (f) health, (g) living arrangements, and (h) lack of resources needed for participation to those factors that hinder parent involvement in schools.

From the viewpoint of teachers, research demonstrates that teachers may hesitate to involve parents because of the time investment required, the absence of external rewards for efforts to involve parents, and problems with low commitment or skills on the part of parents (Epstein & Becker, 1982; Moles, 1982). Additionally, teachers may actually fear parents questioning their professional competence (Epstein & Becker, 1982; Power, 1985) or blame them for children’s problems (Vernberg & Medway, 1981).

In looking specifically at parent involvement in middle grades schools, research from the Center for Prevention Research and Development (CPRD) at the University of Illinois found that parents were generally not aware of established middle level practices such as interdisciplinary teaming, advisory programs, integrated lessons, heterogeneous grouping, exploratory activities, or cooperative learning practices (Mulhall, Mertens, & Flowers, 2001). In addition, disadvantaged families reported a greater lack of awareness about these practices. Parents reporting higher levels of familiarity with middle level practices were more likely to report positive attitudes and engagement at their child’s school.

Models of parent involvement

The research is clear that children benefit when their parents participate in and are supportive of their schooling. The ways in which parents are, and should be, involved is less clear. In attempting to understand and describe parent involvement, researchers have categorized the forms and means through which parents participate. Models differ primarily in their philosophy and purpose for involving parents.

Chrispeels (1991) presented a framework for describing how the school, home, and community should work together. This model suggests that parent involvement has a hierarchical structure with co-communication being the basis for other types of involvement. Hence, more fundamental types of parent involvement occur that require less skill than more complex types. Her model includes the following components: (a) involving parents as partners in school governance, including shared decision making and advisory functions; (b) establishing effective two-way communication with all parents; (c) respecting the diversity and differing needs of families; (d) establishing strategies and programmatic structures at schools to enable parents to participate; (e) providing support and coordination for staff and parents to implement and sustain appropriate parent involvement from kindergarten through high school; and (f) using schools to connect students and families with community resources that provide educational enrichment and support (See pp. 369–369).

Epstein (1985, 1987, 1988, 1995) and colleagues (Epstein et al., 2002) developed a framework of six major types of parent involvement (see Figure 1) that is the result of many years of research in elementary, middle, and high schools. Her typology is the “primary framework to study parent involvement” (Chen & Chandler, 2001, p. 4), and was used by the National PTA to provide standards for parent/family involvement programs (National PTA, 1997).

Davies’ (1985, 1987) model has four categories of parent involvement. These include: (a) co-production or partnerships, (b) decision making, (c) citizen advocacy,
and (d) parent choice. While the first three elements in the model are similar to what Epstein and associates (2002) described, the fourth component, "parent choice," deals with issues related to tuition tax credits, open enrollment plans, alternative public schools, and the like. Other models have been developed by Berger (1991), Gordon (1979), Rutherford (1993), and Berla, Henderson, and Kerewsky (1989).

### Conclusion

Much of the research conducted on parent involvement in schooling has focused on either elementary schools (e.g., Epstein, 1986) or a combination of elementary and middle schools (e.g., Epstein & Dauber, 1989). There is certainly no debate regarding the importance and benefits of involving parents in the education of their children. A synthesis of the research on parent involvement in schooling reveals that the evidence is consistent, positive, and convincing: families have a major influence on their children’s achievement in school and throughout life. When schools, families, and community groups work together to support learning, children tend to do better in school, stay in school longer, and like school more. (Henderson & Mapp, 2002, p. 7)

Despite the value and importance of parent involvement to schooling, research also documents the difficulty of achieving this goal. Cutright’s (1984) study revealed support for parent involvement but also the realization that involvement was quite low. Greene and Tichenor (2003) reminded us that parents, too often, become and remain a forgotten treasure.

We call on middle school practitioners and researchers to look more carefully at the issues related to parent involvement in schooling during the middle grades years. As middle school teachers and administrators strive to involve parents in meaningful ways, we encourage them to conduct research (e.g., action research) at their schools and to share the results with the larger middle grades community. We also urge middle grades researchers to look more carefully at issues that are specifically related to the middle school context. The models for parent involvement discussed earlier would be appropriate to guide these research endeavors.

Epstein (1986) noted that there are two main theories of school and family relations. One perspective emphasizes the “incompatibility, competition, and conflict between families and schools and supports the separation of the two institutions” (p. 277). In short, the goals of the school and the family can be best achieved “when teachers maintain their professional, general standards and judgments about the children in their classrooms and when parents maintain their personal, particularistic standards and judgments about their children at home” (p. 277). The second theory emphasizes the “coordination, cooperation, and complementarity of schools and families and encourages communication and collaboration between the two institutions” (p. 277).

Schools must seek and find methods to increase the participation of parents in their children’s education. We are keenly aware that this participation decreases as students enter middle schools, so the challenge is great for middle grades educators. There are those who would argue that schools will be successful only to the degree that they are successful in involving parents (Cotton & Mann, 1994). Without parent support and active
participation, students do not achieve at acceptable levels (Walberg, 1984).

Myers and Monson (1992) offered a number of recommendations aimed at encouraging and nurturing parent involvement in middle schools. Their recommendations include (a) building a strong parent-school organization, (b) implementing an “open door” policy for parents, (c) involving parents in the orientation programs as students transition to middle school, (d) encouraging teachers to write personal notes to parents about students’ accomplishments, (e) conducting special events during the school year that are geared toward parent participation, and (f) conducting surveys to affirm the importance of parents’ opinions (pp. 20–24).

We should not forget that students are not the only beneficiaries of parent involvement. As parent involvement increases, teachers experience increased rates of return on homework and develop a greater sense of efficacy and higher morale. They report more success in their efforts to influence their students (Epstein, 2003). Parents, too, report greater satisfaction with teachers.

References
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The number of culturally and linguistically diverse learners in American classrooms is growing at an astounding rate (Lindholm-Leary, 2000; Young & Hadaway, 2006). In fact, according to the U.S. Department of Education, the number of students for whom English is a second language has doubled over the past decade, with more than 400 different languages spoken throughout the United States (Kindler, 2002; Young & Hadaway, 2006). These changes in our classroom demographics make it imperative that today’s teachers be well prepared to teach reading to a student population having great diversity in terms of culture, background, native language, and reading abilities (Nichols, Rupley, Webb-Johnson, & Tlusty, 2000).

This column will address one of the major concerns of teachers of linguistically diverse learners: vocabulary development. We begin with a brief discussion of the variations in the language systems of students with limited English proficiency (LEP) and then continue with a rationale for focusing on vocabulary and concept development as a major means of improving students’ comprehension. Then, we illustrate time-tested strategies for developing vocabulary through interactive discussion, collaborative learning, and engaged teaching. We conclude with some general suggestions for improving instruction for not only diverse learners but for students of all ability levels.

Ensuring success for linguistically diverse learners

At the middle level, educational factors are often cited as the primary reason for low achievement scores for students with limited English proficiency (Allington & Walmsley, 1995; Gunning, 2002; Li & Zhang, 2004; Walker, 2008). These educational factors influencing low performance for LEP learners are often the result of inappropriate material, poor pacing, and ineffective instruction, usually due to a lack of understanding of linguistic diversity (Li & Zhang, 2004).

Linguistically diverse students who lack competency in the language of the classroom do not enter the school setting with a linguistic void. These students have mastered a language and its systems comprised of significant speech sounds, grammatical structures, and meaningful vocabulary. Yet, they face the expectation that they will read and comprehend English with competency as part of their school curriculum (Heilman, Blair, & Rupley, 2002; Nichols, Rupley, Webb-Johnson, & Tlusty, 2000).

Figure 1 A semantic word map: Alternative energy sources
One way to facilitate English acquisition for these students is for teachers to have some knowledge of the basic linguistic features (phonology, syntax, and semantics) of the languages encountered in our schools (Li & Zhang, 2004). For example, Vietnamese students who are learning English as a second language have never heard in their native language the sounds /s/, /es/, /t/, and /d/ at the end of a word. Some languages follow a different syntax from that of English. The Spanish language contains no possessive forms of nouns (e.g., my dad’s car); consequently, students who are native Spanish speakers sometimes experience difficulties with such language structures in English. The semantics of other languages are also different. A Navajo speaker learning English would perceive the concept of the word “rough” as a series of many attributes, each having different labels, depending on the texture of the object.

Another way to provide meaningful instruction for LEP students is for teachers to keep in mind that reading development related to standards is linked to students’ strengths and weaknesses in their oral language capabilities (listening and speaking). Identifying the learner’s developmental level and providing instruction that exposes LEP students to language that is a little beyond their current level of development is critical for enhancing their success with the second language (Krashen & Terrell, 1983).

A third way to ensure the success of the linguistically diverse learner in the classroom is to integrate collaborative experiences along with the instruction. The use of collaborative learning with linguistically diverse students has ample support in the professional literature (Duke, Pressley & Hilden, 2006; Hill & Flynn, 2006) Providing tutors, working partners, and small-group instruction solicits dialogue to help LEP students feel a part of the classroom community. We advocate that the strategies described in this column be used in a collaborative context with students helping other students and the teacher serving as an interactive monitor to provide further assistance when needed.

Last, but not least, an essential way to help LEP students become more proficient in the English language is to provide instruction slightly beyond their current level of English competence through meaningful vocabulary instruction (Gersten & Baker, 2000). Because the relationship between vocabulary knowledge and language comprehension has been firmly established (Anderson & Freebody, 1981; Davis, 1944), vocabulary development should be a major component of every reading program for all levels of students. Vocabulary knowledge supports the reader’s text processing and interaction with the author, which, in turn, promotes the formation and validation of concepts and new learning. The vocabulary and experiences of the author and the reader are woven together to form the fabric of learning, confirming, reasoning, experiencing, enjoying, and imagining. Thus, the broader students’ vocabularies, the greater their ability to interact with and understand text (Nichols, & Rupley, 2004).

**Strategies for expanding vocabulary knowledge**

The groundwork of word-meaning development is the continuous development of language ability. Readers and writers share meanings and learners acquire a deeper understanding of vocabulary through interaction and discussion. We acquire meanings for words through direct experiences with people, places, objects, and events that create and refine meaning vocabulary. We also acquire vocabulary through vicarious experiences, including interactive technology, pictures, virtual tours, Web sites, reading, and writing (Blachowicz & Fisher, 1996). Vocabulary knowledge closely reflects students’ breadth of real-life and vicarious experiences, and students cannot comprehend and understand well without

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**Figure 2** Semantic feature analysis matrix for science

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Geological Period</th>
<th>Food</th>
<th>Size</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Walk</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dimetrodon</td>
<td>Permian</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Edaphosaurus</td>
<td>Jurassic</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ichthyosaurus</td>
<td>Triassic</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plateosaurus</td>
<td>Cretaceous</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compsognathus</td>
<td>Permian</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brontosaurus</td>
<td>Triassic</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Large</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stegosaurus</td>
<td>Jurassic</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Land</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Archaeopteryx</td>
<td>Cretaceous</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Land</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pterosaurs</td>
<td>Jurassic</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Water</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tyrannosaurus</td>
<td>Cretaceous</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Air</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deinonychus</td>
<td>Jurassic</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2 Legs</td>
<td>Large</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ankylosaurus</td>
<td>Cretaceous</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>4 Legs</td>
<td>Large</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Triceratops</td>
<td>Cretaceous</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

With your partner, go to the Smithsonian Museum Web site: http://paleobiology.si.edu/ Read about and take a virtual tour of the world of dinosaurs. Select a geologic period and tell what it would be like to be a prehistoric animal for that era.
through visual aids, modeling, demonstrations, and graphic organizers (Echevarria, Vogt, & Short, 2004; Fukkink & de Glopper, 1998; Merkley & Jeffries, 2000/2001). Described next are some vocabulary strategies that take advantage of these instructional tools.

**Semantic mapping** has long standing support as a method for preteaching key vocabulary concepts before students encounter them in their reading experiences (Baumann, Kame’enui, & Ash, 2003). Illustrating the relationship between key vocabulary terms in a map or web-like form before reading enables students of all levels of English proficiency to better understand the content to follow (Rupley, & Nichols, 2005; Nichols, & Rupley, 2004).

For LEP students, vocabulary instruction is most effective when it relates new words or derivations of words to existing vocabulary and background knowledge reading the text. Here the map is used during the reading stage, with students adding to the information with content from multiple sources (e.g., class experiments, the Internet, online encyclopedias, virtual tours). This practice results in student-developed clusters of information surrounding each subtopic. In this way, the map becomes an interactive learning tool to enable the dyads to discuss and use visual aids and online sources to deepen their understanding. In the postreading stage, upon completion of the semantic map, the teacher engages the students in a discussion about their newly expanded vocabulary and how it relates to the topic under study.

**Semantic feature analysis** (Johnson & Pearson, 1984) is another vocabulary instructional strategy that can help LEP students understand relationships and relate their background knowledge to the new words. Figure 2 is an example of a semantic feature analysis lesson that was developed for a sixth grade unit on dinosaurs. Semantic feature analysis is most appropriate for words and concepts that can be related by some common features. It can be used with narrative reading materials to analyze characters, settings, and plots, and it can be used with informational content to introduce, reinforce, and review new topics (Rupley, & Nichols, 2005; Nichols & Rupley, 2004).

The teacher begins by listing several familiar words that are related (such as Tyrannosaurus, Triceratops, Stegosaurus, and Brontosaurus) on the board, a chart or an overhead. In the next step, the students are asked to discuss features associated with the words listed. Then the teacher writes the student contributions across the top of the board or chart, creating a matrix, as shown in Figure 2. Working in pairs or small groups, the students indicate with a plus (+) if the feature is present or a minus (-) if it is not present. As the students broaden and define their concepts, the teacher and the class add more words and features to the list, discussing and analyzing the similarities and differences. Additional activities can be integrated to take the students from traditional sources of printed content, such as the textbook, to digital sources such as Web sites, virtual tours, and streaming video. Figure 2 shows a follow up collaborative

Vocabulary development should be a major component of every reading program for all levels of students.

some knowledge of the concepts that are represented by the print. As noted by Rupley, Logan, and Nichols (1999), “Vocabulary is a shared component of reading and writing—it helps the author and the reader to comprehend through the shared meanings of words” (p. 337). Increasing LEP students’ vocabulary is much more than learning names to associate with experiences. It is much more than looking up words in a dictionary. (Rupley, & Nichols, 2005; Nichols, & Rupley, 2004).

For LEP students, vocabulary instruction is most effective when it relates new words or derivations of words to existing vocabulary and background knowledge.
This is often difficult for the LEP student, who may lack knowledge of such word parts. Instruction in vocabulary should include an explanation and illustration of morphemic analysis. Vacca & Vacca’s (2005) Morpheme Circle Strategy can be useful because it asks students working in groups to locate four words with a similar word part (e.g., graph, peni-, anti-, -ology) and write them in a circle divided into four quadrants, as shown in the Figure 3 example for mathematics. Students can be encouraged to draw a picture, chart, or any representation that helps them remember the significant word part. Then, the class can engage in a discussion of how the words are related and what they mean.

For LEP students contextual analysis is best taught by guided practice in which the teacher or tutor models the procedure, uses familiar written examples, and provides scaffolding as students become proficient in using contextual analysis. Effective modeling, with the teacher thinking aloud the processes involved in determining word meanings through context followed by peer guided practice, has great potential with students for whom English is a second language.

The example shown in Figure 4 illustrates the Contextual Redefinition Approach (Tierney & Readence, 2000) in which students learn a strategy for using all of the accessible context clues (i.e., word level, syntax, semantic, and pictorial) to help students do more than just guess at word meanings. For this strategy, an LEP student can be paired with an English-speaking student to use both print and nonprint contextual sources to determine the word meanings. Figure 4 illustrates this strategy with some key social studies terms, identified by the teacher, for a lesson on the Civil War Era (i.e., antebellum and carpetbagger). Students jot down the information in chart form, indicating the context clues in the text and their subsequent predicted word meanings. Then they can seek out online pictures and definitions to confirm and broaden their understanding.

**Instructional considerations for diverse learners**

Although instructional methods used depend on LEP students’ capabilities, the text being read, the purposes for reading, and the context in which reading occurs, teachers can provide effective vocabulary instruction for LEP students by concentrating their efforts in the following ways (Blair, Rupley, & Nichols, 2007; Harmon, Hedrick, & Wood, 2005):

- Capitalize on variations in students’ culture and background knowledge to develop and expand their vocabularies.
- Use pictorial and linguistic content to help students visualize and make connections to their language and the English equivalent.
- Encourage interactive reading and discussion of both expository and narrative text.
— Use questions and provide appropriate feedback to students’ responses, encouraging them to develop thinking and reasoning strategies.
— Provide explicit/direct instruction when needed.
— Focus instruction on strategies for reading comprehension rather than skill acquisition (Don’t underestimate the reasoning and higher-order thinking abilities of linguistically diverse learners.).
— Use modeling and scaffolding to enhance students’ success in learning and apply these strategies in authentic texts.
— Help students establish purposes for reading that encourage them to engage actively in a variety of reading including both literary and informational texts.
— Give students varied opportunities to assume their own responsibility for learning through scaffolded teaching.

References

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