Curiosity and Complexity in Middle Level Education

02 EDITORS' COLUMN
Curiosity and complexity in middle level education
Dan Bauer & Joanne Previts

03 Promoting creativity in the middle grades language arts classroom
Katherine E. Batchelor & William P. Bintz
Four overarching principles and concrete learning activities help teachers to overcome challenges to promoting rich and authentic creativity among students.

12 Using common planning time to foster professional learning
Robin Dever & Martha J. Lash
Researchers examine how a team of middle school teachers use common planning time to cultivate professional learning opportunities.

18 Habla con ellos—Talk to them: Latinas/os, achievement, and the middle grades
Spencer Salas, Jeanneine P. Jones, Theresa Perez, Paul G. Fitchett, & Scott Kissau
Moving bilingual children beyond subordinated categories toward full engagement in relevant and authentic learning that embraces their communities.

24 Using academic notebooks to support achievement and promote positive classroom environments
Alison Rheingold, Caitlin LeClair, & Jayson Seaman
Authors examine how the use of academic notebooks impacts collaborative learning experiences of young adolescents.

In This Issue | September 2013 Volume 45 Number 1
As Middle School Journal enters its 45th year, our world so shared and shaped by these pages undergoes continual morphing, contraction, and expansion—consistent with and parallel to any professional community. As AMLE reconfigures its publications and enhances its outreach to meet this brave new world and to advance the important philosophies, theories, practices, and implications of true middle level education, readers will notice modifications to AMLE publications including Middle School Journal. While the journal contains fewer articles than past volumes, the association remains as committed as ever to the mission of both this publication and of RMLE Online as concrete manifestations of a deep investment in the expansion of the knowledge base that informs both policy and practice through research-rich, conceptual articles with “vivid descriptions of practice grounded in middle level literature.” That unwavering allegiance will become clear in coming years as this publication continues to transform to meet the needs of middle grades students and the professional educators who collectively form AMLE’s constituency.

Because we know we must recognize and respect the unique needs of diverse young adolescents, we use this shared scholarly space to advance informed pedagogies that emerge from inquisitive, brave teachers unwaveringly committed to responsiveness and relevance. We start our editorship with an embrace of the highest values of teaching, learning, and professionalism that have consistently manifested our association’s pooled action, advocacy, and understanding over the past 40 years.

We know we live and teach in a constantly-reductivist age in which notions of teaching and learning have been too often shrunk to platitudes and one-size-fits-all formulas. All of us who have taught with ambition and earnestness know better than to fall for such seductive simplicity. Successful teaching at the middle level has always required an affirmation and an understanding of the complex needs of young adolescents and the need for collaboration inherent in our roles as middle grades educators.

The four articles that follow elaborate important needs that may go unnoticed in an age in which test scores dominate over everything else. The works of these authors exemplify the complex nature of our practice, which seeks to generate insatiable curiosity in young adolescents.

We are reminded of a recent lively discussion among teacher candidates regarding whether or not we can “teach” or even “measure” creativity. With stories from their field placements that both cheered and flabbergasted us, we have concerns that some teachers may fear this volatile territory, thereby potentially deadening the learning environments they share with students. Fortunately, Katherine Batchelor and William Bintz offer timely ways teachers can enhance creativity for a wide variety of learners.

In the second article that follows, Robin Dever and Marty Lash’s examination of using common planning time as a conduit to foster professional development adds relevant knowledge to the literature regarding this noteworthy practice. As well, their work highlights the need for continued, in-depth investigation of this practice.

Spencer Salas and his colleagues offer a compelling strategy of inclusion, engagement, and responsiveness for all of us who face ever-diversifying classrooms while states like Arizona, Alabama, Georgia, and others have passed strident immigration laws that divide people sharply along racial and cultural lines.

In the final article, Alison Rheingold, Caitlin LeClair, and Jayson Seaman’s collaborative study yields findings about how one strategy, the use of academic notebooks, was effectively implemented to instigate meaningful learning experiences for young adolescents. The authors also provide middle level teachers with cues on how to best use this specific type of notebook.
Promoting creativity in the middle grades language arts classroom

Four overarching principles and concrete learning activities help teachers to overcome challenges to promoting rich and authentic creativity among students.

Katherine E. Batchelor & William P. Bintz

Creativity is not the finding of a thing, but the making something out of it after it is found. 

– James Russell Lowell, poet

Middle level educators around the country aim to create a classroom environment and a way of teaching that is developmentally responsive, challenging, empowering, and equitable for every student (National Middle School Association, 2010). One way to ensure this is to include instruction that promotes creativity. This article offers guiding principles and shares instructional lessons that can assist teachers in promoting creativity in the language arts classroom.

We begin by identifying different definitions of creativity. Then, we discuss the importance of creativity and describe defining characteristics and behaviors of creative thinkers. Next, we offer guiding principles to promote creativity in the middle grades language arts classroom, share instructional lessons that reflect these principles, and present samples of student work that resulted. We end with final thoughts on promoting creativity in middle level education.

What is creativity?

Creativity is a complex concept in large part because it involves many definitions and terms, all of which have changed, and continue to change, over time. Traditionally, creativity has been defined primarily in terms of individual personality traits and is evidenced by the creative ways individuals think and behave. For example, a psychometric view identifies traits like divergent thinking and problem-solving skills and focuses on predicting the likelihood of individuals producing creative responses to real-life problems and situations (Fishkin & Johnson, 1998). A social-personality view posits that creativity is connected to a person’s motivation, personality, and sociocultural environment. This view identifies common traits in people identified as creative. These traits include “risk-taking, independence of judgment, self-confidence, attraction to complexity, self-actualization, and an aesthetic orientation” (Morgan, Ponticell, & Gordon, 2000, p. 8) as well as ambition and high level of commitment to one’s work (Gardner, 1993). Renzulli (in Hong, Hartzell, & Greene, 2009, p. 193) expands this list with task commitment, a trait that includes hard work and determination.

Today, creativity remains complex, maybe even more so because it is defined more broadly. While multiple definitions of creativity still exist, these definitions have shifted from a one-dimensional view (a list of personality traits) to a multidimensional view (Fishkin & Johnson, 1998). This multifaceted perspective perceives creativity as a combination of uniqueness and relevance (Beghetto, 2007); In essence, creativity today is viewed as individuals involved in a creative process—the process of taking an existing idea or problem, seeing the idea or problem in multiple ways with multiple solutions, and solving or transforming it into something new and worthwhile.

Why is creativity important?

Historically, creativity has been the lifeblood for innovation and economic progress in the United States.
According to Zhao (2006), the “secret weapon that has helped the United States remain an economic leader and innovation powerhouse is the creative, risk-taking, can-do spirit of its people” (p. 30). This secret weapon has not gone unnoticed by other countries around the world, especially in the area of education. Many countries around the world have reformed their educational systems to intentionally include more creativity in their schools (Zhao, 2006).

However, while other countries are encouraging creativity, it appears that the United States is shying away from it. Creativity scores in children have declined since 1990, especially with children in kindergarten through sixth grade (Bronson & Merryman, 2010). Similarly, a recent study tracking 1,000 school-aged children found that the ratio of skill instruction to creative thinking in elementary classrooms was 10:1 (Gallagher, 2009).

Findings like these should trouble dedicated teachers because creativity is clearly important to any society’s future. It plays an active role at both societal and global levels. Science, technology, and the arts advance due to creative individuals, and critical thinking helps “build a more interactive world that fortifies human civilization” (Sak, 2004, p. 216). It is especially important in schools. Students can better manage future societal challenges if they are able to experience creative learning in schools (Treffinger, 1992).

Creativity is also important because it is a source of pleasure. Being immersed in personally rewarding, creative activities can lead to overall happiness. When students engage in an activity that is personally rewarding, they will likely be creative (Gardner, 1993; Sternberg, 2000), what Csikszentmihalyi (1997) calls being in “flow.” This flow experience occurs when the creative mind or body is stretched voluntarily to the limit of experiencing something engaging and challenging at the same time (Gardner, 1993). When students undertake interesting and important tasks “they are more likely to devote their undivided interest and have flow experience” (Rea, 2001, p. 161). Additionally, students are less self-conscious during creative activities, experience fewer distractions, are less concerned with failure, use reflection and self-feedback, and experience an internal sense of accomplishment (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997).

**What are characteristics and behaviors of creativity?**

A popular assumption among many parents and teachers asserts that highly creative individuals also have high IQs, and, therefore, creativity should only be encouraged in gifted classrooms. Although intelligence and creativity have been linked, it can be difficult to distinguish between the two (Naglieri & Kaufman, 2001), and “students with low IQ scores can be creative” (Kim, 2005, p. 65). What’s more important is that creativity needs to be promoted in all classrooms. Consider the following middle school students:

“Charlie” (pseudonym) is a seventh grader. He is the first to brainstorm and generate ideas for projects and usually initiates more ideas than needed, most of which will never be developed. He asks “off the wall” questions that seem off-topic to the teacher. Many times, he will start a question with “What if...” and reassure the class that there is more than one right answer to any question. He even questions the need to learn certain content material during class. He’s emotionally intense. Yet, he’s been caught several times daydreaming in school. When he turns in work, it is usually messy, unorganized, and can be difficult for the teacher to interpret, due to seemingly unrelated tangential thinking. During class discussions, he makes mental leaps and connections and has “aha!” moments that catch both the teacher and his peers off-guard.

“Max” (pseudonym) is also a seventh grader in the same class. He knows the answers to the teacher’s questions. He’s attentive in class and appears interested. He is a hard worker, but he is cautious. He will complete assignments on time, and everything he turns in is accurate and complete. His work is neat and organized. Little interpretation is needed on the teacher’s part because he has already asked how the teacher wants the work displayed.

What can we learn from these two students? One might conclude that Max is a high achiever, while Charlie...
is a creative thinker. Which type of child do many teachers prefer to have in class? According to Cropley (1994), the behaviors and characteristics displayed by Charlie, such as “impulsive, nonconformist, disorganized, adventurous, and imaginative” (p. 18) are not preferred by many teachers. In fact, some teachers would see Charlie as a distraction or label him as hyperactive (Hong et al., 2009). Charlie’s “novel” ideas are all too often dismissed by his teachers. This is because, during classroom discussions, teachers prefer focus and relevance over unique and imaginative interpretations of content area material and often interpret these ideas as interruptions (Beghetto, 2007). However, when educators ignore or dismiss free thinking, they “discourage students from investing intellectual energy in their learning” (Kennedy, 2005, p. 120). In theory, teachers appreciate the idea of creativity, yet, in practice, they are uncomfortable with it or even dislike it (Cropley, 2010).

### Guiding principles and instructional lessons

Building on definitions, attitudes, and behaviors associated with creativity, we offer guiding principles to help teachers promote creativity in the middle grades language arts classroom. We also share examples of instructional lessons that put these principles into action in the classroom. The principles include: (a) creating a classroom climate that values difference, not sameness; (b) valuing creativity; (c) active, purposeful, and collaborative learning; and (d) using multiple ways of knowing. Instructional lessons include: Inventing a Product and Selling It, Creating Your Own Country Book, Creating a Utopian Society, and Analyzing Song Lyrics as Poetry. These particular lessons were included because they were identified by Katherine’s middle school students as lessons they felt best promoted creativity in the classroom. Katherine describes each lesson in her own voice.

#### Principle 1: Promoting creativity means creating a classroom climate that values difference, not sameness

According to Sak (2004), a classroom climate that "supports unusual ideas, provides freedom of thought and freedom of choice is conducive to creative achievement” (p. 217). When teachers create a climate that supports unconventional answers and encourages curiosity, creative students excel (Bronson & Merryman, 2010). Three conditions are needed for this to occur.

The first condition is risk-taking. If there is an atmosphere of mutual respect and acceptance present, then creativity will follow. “Children learn from doing—and children learn to be creative from trying creative things” (Smith, 1996, p. 79). One way this will happen is if students are permitted to take risks with their thinking. The classroom climate must provide a safety net for students to make and learn from mistakes without fear of ridicule, shame, and defeat.

A second condition is asking questions. Asking questions is critical at all levels of schooling but is particularly important in middle level education. In preschool and elementary school, children formulate and ask questions easily, spontaneously, and effortlessly. Parents and teachers delight in children’s questions and use them to explore new interests, start new conversations, or ask more questions. In the middle grades, however, many students spend more time answering questions rather than asking them. Tragically, many students stop asking questions altogether. Bronson and Merryman (2010) poignantly capture this dramatic shift:

Preschool children, on average, ask their parents about 100 questions a day. Why, why, why—sometimes parents just wish it’d stop. Tragically, it does stop. By middle school they’ve pretty much stopped asking. It’s no coincidence that this same time is when student motivation and engagement plummet. They didn’t stop asking questions because they lost interest: it’s the other way around. They lost interest because they stopped asking questions. (p. 47)

From birth to death, asking questions is a creative act. In between, students can only be creative when they ask questions that are personally meaningful, relevant, and interesting to them. Answering questions is not a creative act. Students cannot be creative when they are answering questions that are personally meaningful, relevant, and interesting to others but not to themselves.
The final condition is, valuing and encouraging difference, not sameness. For example, teachers can develop lessons that encourage students to think differently by formulating different, even unconventional, solutions to problems. Encouraging students to think differently promotes creativity and leads to a creative classroom environment. One instructional lesson, Inventing a Product and Selling It, combines novelty with value—one of the key aspects of creativity.

**Inventing a product and selling it.** Throughout the year, I overheard students commenting on popular television ads. I wanted to tap into this interest and allow students to explore various techniques that commercials used to enhance consumerism. I also wanted students to practice these techniques on each other. Could they create a commercial that was just as engaging and persuasive to their peers as the ones on TV? Could they create their own product and apply these techniques in the packaging and marketing of their product?

I developed an instructional unit on the topic of invention. I designed it to enhance student awareness of propaganda, artistic design, and script writing and to support their desire to learn and practice videotaping, media editing, and creating a finished digital product using Windows MovieMaker.

Students were organized in collaborative groups of four and given a bag of everyday objects such as toothpicks, a paper bowl, a plate, string, a spoon, a Styrofoam cup, paper clips, and fabric squares. I invited students to create a new product with these objects (see Figure 1), label it with a specific purpose, and ensure that it worked. Over the next three days, teams packaged their inventions, incorporating at least two propaganda techniques in their packaging. Students then created a storyboard and script to market it through a 30-second commercial using at least three propaganda techniques. They videotaped their commercials, loaded them onto laptops, and then edited the frames using Windows MovieMaker, adding special effects.

Students presented their commercials on the “big screen” showcasing their creative inventions to their peers. By working together as a collaborative team and then as a marketing firm, students shared and built upon the creative strengths of their peers. I encouraged students within groups to collaborate on creating an innovative product and an entertaining commercial.

At the end of the unit, I invited students to write reflections on the experience. One student wrote that this activity was his favorite because it “embraced middle schoolers’ creativity the most … giving us a chance to make something and package it.” Another student related this activity to his working definition of creativity. He wrote:

> The invention unit allows kids the opportunity to make something from nothing, which, in my opinion, is the epitome of creativity. If you can see what you have available to you, and picture what you can make with it, then that is TRUE creativity.

**Principle #2: Promoting creativity means valuing creativity**

Teachers who promote creativity, also value it. They see it as an essential component in learning. Teachers who promote creativity also enjoy it. Hong and associates (2009) stated that “teachers who enjoy work that requires creativity tend to provide instruction that increases creative thinking in students” (p. 204).
Teachers who promote creativity also take risks. They feel free to play and explore and establish a “climate that welcomes exploration and risk-taking and cultivates the disposition to play” (Eisner, 1985, p. 183). Creating Your Own Country Book is another instructional lesson that promotes creativity. It invites students to play with their thinking by creating an informational book that integrates social studies concepts, creative writing, and illustration techniques. It also promotes students’ thinking of creativity as something that is unique and relevant to their lives.

Creating your own country book. I believe that collaboration supports student learning, especially across the curriculum. As a language arts teacher, I often sought out ways to work creatively with other content area teachers at the same grade level and sometimes across grade levels. Creating Your Own Country Book was the result of my collaboration with a social studies teacher.

In their social studies classroom, students were learning about different countries, ancient civilizations, and the rich culture surrounding them. I wanted students to deeply understand these countries, civilizations, and cultures and demonstrate their understandings with informational writing. Students were invited to write and illustrate an imaginative informational picture book based on a non-existing country they created.

First, students browsed through a variety of informational texts and brainstormed a list of what they noticed about the writing, format, and layout of this genre. Over the next two weeks, students engaged in mini-lessons regarding various components of countries and civilizations—geography, currency, language, culture, traditions, government, historic events, resources and trade, and climate. Then, students turned to adopting these components to fit their imaginative country through the creation of an informational picture book. In addition, some students chose to describe their civilization’s components through rhymed text, while others included a fictional story about their civilization as a supplementary text.

As a culminating event, students shared their books with the class. They noted that each book was unique and creative (see Figure 2). They also noted that this activity allowed them to engage in creativity, rather than passively learning the same social studies standards through a textbook and workbook. One student stated:

Figure 2 Student’s “currency” page from country book
This challenge enhanced my creativity because I had to be creative with an assortment of ideas within the book, such as the visual appearance and content. I feel like it really challenged me to think of not just one idea but enough to fill up a whole book. I also think that it appealed to the whole class because it is broad enough that each individual student can be creative with their book in their own way.

Afterward, our class showcased the informational books throughout the school library, during parent night, and around each content area classroom. Interestingly, these student-created informational books were the books students selected during independent silent reading time.

Collaboration, more than competition, promotes creativity.

**Principle #3: Promoting creativity involves active, purposeful, and collaborative learning**

Collaboration, more than competition, promotes creativity (Collins & Amabile, 1999). Collaborative learning happens when “heterogeneous groups of learners can work together, share information and levels of expertise, and increase their knowledge base” (Morgan et al., 2000, p. 12). Collaboration allows students to team up and discuss projects with their peers and take on a more active role in their learning (Smith, 1996, p. 79). Creating a Utopian Society is an instructional lesson that promotes creativity, active learning, and collaboration. This lesson was part of a larger unit of study focused on dystopian literature. It enhances students’ creativity by asking them to take an existing problem and solve or transform it into something new.

**Creating a utopian society.** I developed a text set of dystopian literature including *The Giver* (Lowry, 1993), *Truesight* (Stahler, 2004), and *Animal Farm* (Orwell, 1946). After reading selections in the text set, students were organized into literature circles and discussed two focused inquiry questions: What is the possibility for a utopian civilization to exist? What conditions are needed for this utopia to thrive? During the discussion, one student suggested that the class create their own society. I expanded this suggestion into an instructional unit in which students could do just that. They demonstrated how their utopian society could exist by developing: a 3-D map (see Figure 3); government style and rules pertaining to citizens; sources for news, food, and housing; and journal entries showing day-to-day events in the lives of the citizens. At one point, students banded together several societies to trade “goods” with each other when they realized that their resources may not be enough to sustain life for members of their society. This became an opportunity to experience economics in a meaningful, creative way.

Student reflections indicated this lesson allowed them to be creative. Specifically, it enabled them to use and develop analytical and higher-level questioning and rationalizing skills, increased their understanding of dystopian literature, and enabled them to apply opposite concepts in creating an ideal society. They worked and shared ideas in groups and questioned themselves and each other as to whether such a utopia could actually exist and how it could be sustained. In the end, many students realized that creating a utopian society was much more difficult than first assumed.

![Figure 3 Utopian society](image-url)
Principle #4: Promoting creativity means using multiple ways of knowing

Promoting creativity means first recognizing that students have multiple ways of knowing. Among others, these ways include language, mathematics, drama, art, and music. Promoting creativity also means developing instructional lessons that build on not only student ways of knowing but also on their personal experiences, background knowledge, and current interests. Analyzing Song Lyrics as Poetry is an additional instructional lesson that was used as part of a larger unit of study on literary themes. It integrates music, visual imagery, and digital writing into the study of poetry and highlighted the art of word choice. This lesson encourages creativity by inviting students to take their current knowledge on a topic and recast it into new understandings.

Analyzing song lyrics as poetry. Whether speaking or writing, word choice is not just a skill, it is an art. As a language arts teacher, I love language and appreciate the artistic use of words and phrases in informal conversation and in formal writing. The new Common Core State Standards (2010) for Reading in grades 6–8, for example, include strands stating students should be able to “determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone, including analogies or allusions to other texts” (p. 36).

In response, I developed an instructional unit on poetry as a way to implement instruction that honors “the diverse skills, abilities, and prior knowledge of young adolescents” and “cultivates multiple intelligences, draws upon students’ individual learning styles, and utilizes digital tools,” (NMSA, 2010, Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment section, para. 4). In addition, I wanted the unit to incorporate digital writing into a multimodal display of student understanding as well as connect students’ popular culture interests with their high-tech world of media literacy.

Student interest was a primary focus. Throughout the year, we routinely listened to music in the classroom, and many of our conversations centered on lyrics, genres, and artists. In this unit, one aim was for students to view popular song lyrics as poetry. First, students were to reconnect with multiple forms and authors of poetry. Each day we focused on a specific theme, sharing various poems and songs that related to the theme. Seeing poems side by side with song lyrics, students discovered that poetry was not a writing genre to be feared or ignored. In fact, the more they identified specific techniques that poets and songwriters shared, the more they incorporated these techniques into their own poetry writing. This unit also allowed students to focus on thematic concepts, author’s voice, inference, figurative language, and imagery.

Next, students brainstormed a list of literary themes and selected one that was meaningful to them. Students were to connect this theme to two popular song lyrics and then use it to write an original song that incorporated literary devices identified in the state standards. Students shared their songs through PowerPoint presentations in which they incorporated collages of images symbolic to their theme while their songs played in the background. Presentations also included slides that connected broader concepts to their chosen theme, such as other literary works, artwork, popular culture, and social and political examples. One student’s reflection on this lesson stated:

I know a lot of kids already like a variety of music genres and listen to songs all the time on their iPods, but when I first started the lesson, I didn’t like music. However, when I completed my analysis of my chosen songs, I appreciated music more. This lesson made me the person that likes music today, so it holds a lot of sentimental value for me.
Final thoughts

We often perceive teachers as artists and teaching as a creative art. In many ways, teachers must be creative to handle everyday challenges, such as addressing standards, contending with overcrowded classrooms, and working within limited instructional time frames. It is important to note, however, that while certainly complex, creativity is a natural way of thinking and learning—it is what makes humans unique.

Creativity is a human potential. It does not belong, from birth or by genetics, to a selected few. There is no creativity gene, a gene that individuals are born with that provides them with a predisposition for creativity. There is also no academic discipline that has an exclusive monopoly on creativity. Historically, art class has been reserved and protected as a place where creativity is valued and expected, and art museums have been revered as places where creativity is displayed and discussed. Other disciplines, however, such as mathematics, science, social studies, and language arts, also value, use, and promote creativity as an integral part of their disciplines. The creative and artistic work of Mitsumasa Anno in mathematics, Thomas Locker in science, Anthony Browne in social studies, and Gary Crew in language arts are just a few examples of how creativity is an important teaching and learning tool in art class and across the curriculum.

It is also important to recognize that being creative and generating creative learning experiences may not always be easy for teachers, especially beginning teachers. Creativity is complex and multidimensional, and promoting it in the classroom itself requires creativity. That said, teachers should not promote creativity because they are required; creative experiences should be implemented because teachers understand how such experiences benefit students. To get things started, we share here a text set (see Figure 4) of high-quality literature on creativity. This text set includes titles, such as Weslandia (Fleischman, 1999) and The Invention of Hugo Cabret (Selznick, 2007), in which the main characters exemplify creativity. Using these texts as classroom read-alouds, learning centers, or independent reading can encourage creativity to flourish. Students are likely to positively respond to the intricate plots, rich details in illustrations, and the overlying message that these titles share: Creativity exists within us all but is unique to each individual. We share this text set because it helped us think differently about creativity. We hope it does the same for you.

In addition to this text set, we anticipate that these principles and lessons will assist teachers in starting new conversations, hearing new voices, and asking new questions about ways to promote creativity in the middle grades language arts classroom.

References


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Using common planning time to foster professional learning

Researchers examine how a team of middle school teachers use common planning time to cultivate professional learning opportunities.

Robin Dever & Martha J. Lash

An example of what happens at a typical professional development session involves a group of teachers sitting together at a workshop convened by an administrator who chose a new skill or technique they will be learning. The session occurs after school, and some teachers can think of a million other places they would rather be, including their classrooms. At the front of the conference room stands the “renowned expert” (often unknown to the teachers), lecturing while failing to capture their attention. Some teachers co covertly grade papers; others write notes back and forth, whisper to one another, or discreetly text and play games on their phones. The figure conspicuously absent is the administrator, who, after making the obligatory introductions and motivational comments, left to attend to more pressing matters. At the end of the session, the teachers take their handouts and packets, return to their classrooms, close the doors, and resume the many roles they must play as teachers, never to discuss the day’s topic again.

Increased emphasis on meeting state standards, more stringent requirements for designation as highly qualified, and intensified accountability for student performance have foisted new expectations upon teachers and stimulated changes in professional development models in which the greater urgency is clearly to attend to the teacher’s role as learner. Consequently, professional development must become more meaningful, effective, and applicable to daily practice; it must address the specific needs of each school, classroom, and teacher. A promising reform model, the professional learning community (PLC) is a means to change the paradigm of professional development. Implement PLCs in middle grades schools, using common planning time (CPT) during both interdisciplinary and content area team meetings has been proposed. Incorporating professional development into an already-established domain of a middle grades school allows teacher learning to take on a new form in an established framework and points to our primary research question: What does an embedded professional development model look like for both interdisciplinary and content teams using professional learning communities in one middle grades school?

The literature of professional development

Many factors have influenced the quality of professional development programs. Although researchers have tried to find the “missing link” in identifying which elements of professional development are most important in teacher learning and student outcomes, they have deemed no single identifier most significant (Flowers, Mertens, & Mulhall, 2003; Guskey, 2003; Hord, 1997; Thompson, Gregg, & Niska, 2004). Instead, researchers have agreed that many factors must be in place for professional growth to occur and for that growth to have an impact on student learning. Many agencies and organizations have listed characteristics of effective professional development; however, they vary, and most of the supporting evidence is inconsistent and contradictory (Guskey, 2003). Key components of
successful professional development include type of activity, content of the activity, role of administration, environment in which the activity occurs, and collaboration during the activity. Thus, the literature shows that school administrators are moving away from professional development in which teachers passively receive knowledge to models in which they actively participate in job-embedded, collaborative learning. The latter type of professional development links teacher learning to immediate, real-world problems and allows for direct application, experimentation, and adaptation to each teacher’s situation (Sparks & Hirsh, 1997).

At the time of this writing, the PLC was one of the most widely discussed topics in professional development and education (Thompson et al., 2004); a clarion call has been raised for its implementation (InPraxis, 2006). Definitions of the PLC feature a great number of interpretations, descriptions, and elements and, because none of these are exactly the same, misuse of the term has occurred (Bredeson, 2003; Bloom & Vitcov, 2010). One inconsistency is in the nomenclature: PLCs are called learning communities, communities of practice, professional communities of learners, or communities of continuous inquiry and improvement (InPraxis, 2006). In addition, PLCs comprise a range of participants, including individuals on grade-level teams, high school departments, school committees, professional organizations, and entire school districts (DuFour, 2004). Regardless of these inconsistencies, PLCs are generally thought to encourage participants to take on—as part of their jobs—a wide range of professional development activities, which could include linking performance standards, strategies for assessment, and the consequences of those assessments (Bredeson, 2003; Bloom & Vitcov, 2010).

When successfully created and practiced, PLCs engender many benefits. First, they increase support for school improvement efforts (Protheroe, 2004). PLCs provide time for staff members to work together to solve problems in their schools, encourage a collaborative culture among teachers, and reduce isolation (Bloom & Vitcov, 2010; Caskey & Carpenter, 2012; InPraxis, 2006). Teacher collaboration entails a shared responsibility for student success and development (Hord, 1997). Professionally renewed teachers are more likely to inspire students; in fact, PLCs and student achievement are positively related (Protheroe, 2004). Lee, Smith, and Croninger (1995) discovered many benefits to both students and staff in secondary schools after implementing PLCs, including a reduction in the achievement gap, higher satisfaction among staff members, and lower student dropout rates.

One of the common issues in implementing professional development is the availability of time; in middle grades schools, the most viable solution to this dilemma is the use of common planning time (CPT) for professional development. The CPT team is defined as “a group of teachers from different subject areas who plan and work together and who share the same students for a significant portion of the school day” (Flowers et al., 2003, p. 58). Teachers need time to plan lessons, develop assessments, create and refine instructional strategies, and collaborate with other professionals (Jackson & Davis, 2000; NMSA, 2010). Studies on middle grades schools have shown that (a) even when common planning time is available for teams to work together, few middle schools actually provide enough time for focused, ongoing professional conversations that result in higher performance standards and (b) simply having time set aside for CPT does not make a difference in the way teams function (Mertens, Flowers, Anfara, & Caskey, 2010).

Despite an ongoing national study into the effectiveness of CPT teams (Mertens et al., 2010), the role of the CPT team in PLCs has yet to be determined. Both structures—the CPT team and the PLC—involve a community of educators working together to better meet the needs of their students; however, research is lacking regarding whether or not CPT teams and PLCs are linked. To close the gap in the literature, we observed middle school teachers with common planning time working together in a professional learning community and discovered how collaboration and the formation of a community affect teacher and student learning. This research sheds light on both CPT teams and PLCs as well as their relationship to one another.

Methodology
To study the role of CPT and PLCs in professional development, an in-depth, observational case study of one middle school, purposefully chosen in light of its
professional development initiative, was the focus of this study. Topper City School District (pseudonym) is located in a suburban residential community in the Midwest near a major city. The district includes one middle school. The ethnic composition of the district is 94% Caucasian and 6% minority. Data collection tools included initial and final questionnaires; field notes and personal memos written during and after observations; interviews with the teachers, principal, and curriculum director; and a collection of artifacts related to the professional development model in place in this school system. Observations of teachers in collaborative meetings served as the primary data source; 16 observations of the CPT team (interdisciplinary team) and 27 observations of PLCs (content area teams) as well as one inservice were documented.

This study focused on one eighth grade interdisciplinary team (CPT team); its five members had been together three years, meeting twice per week during their common planning time for the purpose of designing interdisciplinary units, discussing student affairs, engaging in professional development, and discussing any day-to-day issues. Observations then extended to the content-specific PLC meetings of each member of the interdisciplinary team. The content area PLCs met twice per week during their common planning time.

Findings
Observation of interdisciplinary CPT teams showed that their focus veered from academic issues to the social and behavioral issues associated with the students. During interdisciplinary common planning time over the course of the year, teachers typically discussed the following topics: students’ academic issues, assessments, behavioral issues, parent issues, school events, team events, nonacademic issues, organizing working lunches, and other concerns.

In contrast to the CPT teams, themes emerging from the PLCs related to their productivity. The common themes emerging from each PLC team were as follows: an understanding that their purpose was to benefit their students; a cohesive desire that their teaching should impact student learning; sustained engagement in unit planning, resource sharing, content-related discussions; minimization of student-specific discussions; and avoidance of nonacademic talk.

The original intent of this study was to focus on the interdisciplinary team and its professional growth, in particular, its common planning time, by observing teachers in their content area professional learning communities (PLCs). Early in the study, however, the anticipated professional learning taking place during CPT team meetings proved to be less than the strong professional growth observed in the CPT team members’ content-specific PLCs. These findings are substantiated and shared along with themes of collaboration, resistance, and teacher-led initiatives.

CPT team: Student behavior, teacher socialization, school connections
The events that took place during CPT team meetings centered around serving students’ needs. Even though the structure of a CPT team met the definition of a PLC in that it was a group of teachers from different subject areas who shared a group of students and planned together, they were still working together through professional collaboration with the intent of improving student learning. This goal was accomplished through activities such as organizing working lunches, planning team field trips, choosing the Student of the Week, and aligning test schedules. Teachers, thereby, worked to improve student learning; however, the greatest amount of time was spent discussing student issues. Two of the greatest concerns continually raised were student behavior and student work. These types of discussions were common and, generally, did not lead to any specific plans of actions to deal with the behavior.

During CPT, discussions were centered on “housekeeping” activities such as scheduling and completing paperwork. It became clear that CPT revolved around students and their actions, not around teachers’ actions. These interdisciplinary teams tended to be reactive in nature toward students’ negative social behaviors and academic issues (e.g., late work). Although these topics were relevant to their students’ learning, they were often general in nature, making teachers reactive onlookers instead of proactive leaders; knowledge helpful to the team did not increase. Although these topics presented a professional learning opportunity, the interdisciplinary team did not adopt a proactive stance toward students’ social behaviors. During CPT, the interdisciplinary team did not collaborate to create interdisciplinary units or share any specifics about academic lessons occurring in their classrooms. Furthermore, the conversations among the interdisciplinary team members during CPT often devolved into nonacademic talk.
PLC: Content focused translates to professional development

Although the PLCs clearly had a direct link to student learning, teachers gained new knowledge about their teaching from others in this venue. Overall, conversations centered on what teachers were doing, not on negative behaviors of students and teachers’ subsequent reactions, a common subject at CPT team meetings. In the PLCs, the teachers created lessons and common assessments, shared resources, and discussed teaching strategies. Conversations were proactive in a way that allowed them to focus on improving their teaching. During these meetings, teachers collaborated with one another about their specific subjects and teaching methods. They referenced their teaching specifically, unlike teachers meeting during CPT, who rarely spoke of the teacher behaviors but focused more on students. Observations and interviews of members of both CPT teams and PLCs yielded the following finding: At Topper Middle School, the CPT team is actually a kind of PLC. Despite their having different names, their overall purposes at the school appeared to be the same; however, when teachers were asked whether or not they saw their CPT team as a form of a PLC, they stated that they did not. They described the two as having two different and distinct functions, and the overlap of the two structures was not apparent to the teachers. Evident in the observations, reasons for this may include teachers’ lack of training in the definition and purpose of the PLC, the name by which each is called, and thus how definitions for each may intersect. They might come to realize that, in each, they are indeed working together, collaborating professionally with the intention of increasing student achievement.

The content of a professional development activity can greatly impact teacher learning, as was the case with the proceedings of the PLCs at Topper Middle School, which included implementation selection by the teachers (grade specific, teacher led, and subject specific). In addition to the PLC committee leading the school-wide initiative to implement PLCs, the teachers themselves had the autonomy within their PLCs to make decisions relevant to their individual group or grade level. With no set agenda mandated by the administration, teachers dealt with areas their teams deemed important. We observed teams meeting in their content area PLCs and found that autonomy in the content areas fostered the drive and motivation needed to improve teaching and student learning.

The main focus of each PLC throughout the year was to create common assessments and to align the units on which they worked. Each PLC had its own procedure for creating common assessments. Other activities included unit planning and resource sharing. In PLCs teachers also discussed the teaching of their content areas and relevant issues and struggles. Discussion of this nature would have been difficult if teams were not content specific.

Collaboration, resistance, and teacher-led initiatives

How teachers collaborated with one another and with their administrators became a critical factor in the success of the CPT teams and PLCs at Topper Middle School. The essence of a PLC is teachers working together, creating an atmosphere in which learning occurs; however, a team does not simply materialize because a group of people are placed in a room and told to work together, as was the case at Topper Middle School. The lack of initial training in the nature of the PLC and how it functions resulted in some PLCs with members who had little motivation to work together. They were sometimes placed with teachers with whom they had little previous connection, which produced mixed results. Generally, teachers shared professional knowledge, respect for one another, and openness to one another’s suggestions; however, not all PLCs enjoyed open collaboration because some teachers, for varying and sometimes unknown reasons, resisted the notion of the PLC. The “resisters” were members of various PLCs, and their negativity affected their own PLCs as well as others. This situation was most clear in the language arts and science PLCs, for which teachers self-reported lack of trust in one another. Lack of trust could explain teachers’ reluctance to contribute ideas or to acknowledge one another’s contributions for fear of ridicule or exclusion.

Administrators were aware of teachers resistant to the PLCs and described them as having taught in their own niches for a long time. One administrator noted:

We have to begin to break down those self-induced barriers that they’ve put up. And not that they’re not good teachers in their own right—they are. They just have a tendency to be independent contractors, and that is not what this is about. This is about collaborative instruction.
The members of the school-wide PLC committee, unable to explain the nature of the PLC and thoroughly train the staff at the beginning of the year, also noted resisters to the concept of the PLC. They discussed those resisters and how they could address concerns. One strategy was to send a team of teachers regarded as resisters to a neighboring school district for the day to observe how that school’s PLCs functioned, with the hope that they would see the positive student benefits. After their visit, those teachers then reported back during their PLC inservice. One PLC committee member stated, “I think that really helped because it got more people involved, and it showed that we weren’t asking them to do something else on top of what they’re already doing. [Instead, it’s] something that’s going to help them do what they’re doing.” Indeed, at this point, some of the resisters changed their view of the PLCs and worked more purposefully in their PLCs.

At Topper Middle School, the teachers looked to their building principal for guidance and support of the PLCs. When asked about his role, he replied, “I want this to be a teacher-driven enterprise. We know by the history of teachers and administration that, oftentimes, top-down implementation is not very successful or at least not very long term.” The teachers agreed with their administrator; however, the notion of an administrator allowing this model to be teacher-led caused mixed emotions. Although teachers delighted in having the power to make changes within their own PLCs, they often longed for stronger guidance and support from their administrator. During the course of our observations, the administrator attended only two PLC meetings.

On several occasions, PLC members discussed the role of the administration in handling resisters. When asked about the administrator’s role in PLCs, one teacher replied, “It’s frustrating because you know there are people that are, like, outwardly resisting against this [PLCs], and … I don’t feel like we’re getting a whole lot of support from administration.” However, the teachers’ desire to have more guidance and support from their administration never reached the administrator’s agenda.

In addition to intervening with resisters and providing resources, teachers continually discussed their desire for an administrator to address the need for an assessment of the PLC model, but one was never conducted. The school-wide PLC committee had no formal plans for assessing the model within the school and, although supportive of the idea, did not want the added responsibility of a self-assessment. At the end of the school year and of this study, no formal evaluation was conducted or planned. For the following year, the district, the building, the interdisciplinary team, and the individual PLCs established goals, recognizing that moving to a job-embedded professional development model is a process that requires time. The teachers agreed that PLCs were their primary professional development tool and could see them as the anchor for all their future professional development.

Discussion and implications
The findings of this study of an embedded professional development model at one middle school and its interdisciplinary and content teams’ implementation of PLCs bring to the foreground three main discussion points: collaboration between administrators and faculty; the substance of PLCs, regardless of whether they were CPT interdisciplinary teams or content area PLCs; and the value of teacher-led professional development. Implications for further consideration and research include how PLCs function in a middle grades school, new outcomes expected from professional development, the critical elements of PLCs, the role of administrators, and the role of teachers resistant to professional development.

Collaboration between teachers and administrators is critical, in the PLC literature as well as at Topper Middle School where this research was conducted, in determining whether or not professional development outcomes are met. Collaboration at Topper comprised both positive and negative elements. When the collaboration was positive, it yielded strong outcomes such as resource sharing, assessment creation, and unit planning. When the collaboration was negative or absent, however, it resulted in poor attendance at or minimal participation in the CPT team or PLC, complaints about workload distribution, and concern that the professional development model might not work because of distractions and a lack of guidance. The negatives clearly limited the faculty’s ability to reap the benefits of the PLCs.

A pattern of discussion topics emerged from both CPT teams and PLCs. These topics ranged from student learning to nonacademic talk. The patterns revealed what types of conversations were held in each type of meeting and what type of professional learning occurred. The discussions that occurred in CPT team meetings
centered on school events and student behavior, without specific follow-through. In the PLCs, the discussions typically focused on academic issues, and teachers were able to stay on task as well as follow through on ideas.

Finally, because the PLC model was teacher led, it effectively gave teachers the power to lead their own professional development; yet, at the same time, members of PLCs and CPT teams yearned for more guidance and support from their administration. The content of the professional development model, which included subject-specific topics, was a major factor in its effectiveness. It allowed team members to gain support from others who taught the same subject and relate their professional learning directly to their classrooms. As a result, according to observations and interviews, they became more interested in professional learning and showed more enthusiasm and passion for what they did.

During the course of the study, several implications surfaced, including the way this model fits into the context of a middle grades school and the overlap of a PLC and CPT team. Although professional development in middle grades schools has been researched (Flowers & Mertens, 2003), the specific context in which PLCs can be successfully created in middle grades schools has not. Advocated for quite some time, professional learning communities in middle schools can take the form of small teams of teachers using common planning time to discuss meeting the needs of the students (Jackson & Davis, 2000); however, the overlap of PLCs and CPT teams has not been explored. The overlap seems an important element for administrators and teachers as they turn their attention to student outcomes.

Interestingly, what seems to be an obvious connection between CPT teams and PLCs was not so obvious to the teachers at Topper Middle School. They struggled with the idea that CPT teams may also be PLCs, perhaps fixating on the different names, the years of being told that attention to content is professional development, and a hesitancy to accept attention to students’ social needs as a legitimate concern of professional development. The philosophy underlying the design of the PLC model matches foundational beliefs supported by the Association for Middle Level Education (AMLE, formerly National Middle School Association [NMSA], 2010) that professional development should be a part of the daily routine of the school (i.e., job embedded) and closely aligned to goals for both student and teacher success and growth. Because the CPT team is job embedded, as recommended by AMLE, and its structure resembles a PLC, the CPT team is a logical tool for professional development.

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Habla con ellos—Talk to them: Latinas/os, achievement, and the middle grades

Moving bilingual children beyond subordinated categories toward full engagement in relevant and authentic learning that embraces their communities.

Spencer Salas, Jeannine P. Jones, Theresa Perez, Paul G. Fitchett, & Scott Kissau

Our faculty in the Education Department at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte often spends time discussing issues we see within our middle grades program, including with our undergraduate teacher candidates in clinical and student teaching settings, with practicing teachers in initial licensure programs, and those learning their way into an M.Ed. in Middle Grades Education. It was at one such meeting that we found ourselves returning to the concern of our content area teachers not feeling knowledgeable about working with Latino newcomers. We were talking our way around the edges of the topic, hoping for solid language that would give clear voice to this issue, when Jeannine shared this story:

I’d never encountered a child who truly couldn’t speak a single word of my own language. Yet there they were, two gorgeous Latina girls sitting quietly in the very back of the room, hands folded, staring at the tree outside the window, surely bored half to death, understanding absolutely nothing. The teacher wasn’t helping much either because, just like me, she didn’t know what to do or even where to begin. She didn’t speak their language, and they didn’t speak hers. Much to my dismay she made a beeline straight for me after class, and I was pretty sure it wasn’t to discuss the student teacher I’d come to observe next block. Instead, just as I feared, it was to eagerly ask for my advice on how to work with those two girls. My conversation on the topic was short, with that five minutes pretty much covering everything I knew. That day left a real mark on me. That image, though 20 years old, is still so vivid in my head that I can recall the yellow shirt one of the girls was wearing. Like I said, it left a mark on me because it forced me to confront something that was a dangerous void in my teacher life, and I realized I’d better figure it out fast. I’m worried that our program still isn’t where it should be in this area, and especially given our growing Charlotte Latina population.

Jeannine later shared that things got better for the two Latina girls with the arrival that semester of an English as a second language educator. This teacher helped them on their way to learning a new culture, navigating a new school, and, even more important, becoming a part of the school community through both curricular and extracurricular activities. In time, the language became easier for them, too, opening not only academic doors but social windows, which are critically important to young adolescents (Strahan, L’Esperance, & Van Hoose, 2009; Stevenson, 1998).

Twenty years later, thousands of young adolescents now come into our middle grades classrooms from a rich array of countries, some with a strong working knowledge of English, some with emerging proficiency in their new language, and some with nothing at all in terms of mainstream communication skills—many, like those two young girls, are of Latino heritage.

Culture plays a critical role in the most effective middle schools (NMSA, 2010), and we consider transnational children of immigration to be a great wealth, a rich blessing. We work tirelessly to equip today’s middle grades teachers to serve this group of children better than we did 20 years ago. As teacher educators within The University of North Carolina Charlotte’s large, urban college of education, we now regularly receive requests for assistance from middle and high
school teachers and administrators who are interested in establishing a better school environment for their increasingly diverse adolescent populations. In central Piedmont, a large and growing number of Latino families accounts for much of that diversity.

As of 2007, Latinos comprised 15% of the total U.S. population, with approximately one-third self-identifying as Mexican in origin. In North Carolina, the percentage of Latinos has increased by approximately 69% from the years 2000 to 2007 (National Council of La Raza, 2010), and they continue to transform communities across the state in wonderful and dynamic ways. Unfortunately, though Latino schoolchildren are the fastest growing K–12 population in the U.S., their educational achievement in the middle grades remains significantly lower than their non-Latino counterparts across disciplines.

While recognizing that measures of school achievement are generally social constructs that can marginalize non-dominant communities, these measures must be considered, nonetheless, as they have become a critical part of conventional school conversation. As with all groups of children, Latino achievement matters for the futures of these very same families and for our nation’s place in the global workforce. Addressing the educational needs of immigrant and U.S.-born Latinos in the middle grades can help curtail a cycle of underperformance indicative of past generations.

Although professionals across many fields need to consider the multiple and overlapping domains at play in the educational development of children of immigration (see Figure 1), our focus is specific to the sociocultural processes at work in classrooms and schools. These processes include “the social and psychological distance between first and second language speakers, perceptions of each group in interethnic relations, cultural stereotyping, intergroup hostility, subordinate status of a minority group in a given region, and patterns of assimilation” (Collier, 1998, p. 21).

Teacher education for the middle grades must embrace the culturally and linguistically complex spaces that our classrooms and institutions have become. In particular, we need to better develop our individual and collective dispositions—attitudes about difference that can play an enormous role in the achievement of youth from non-dominant communities.

Latinos in the middle grades are particularly vulnerable to potentially harmful sociocultural processes at work in classrooms, curricula, and institutions. In their large-scale longitudinal study of immigrant children’s adaptation processes, Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco (2001) documented the extent to which immigrant adolescents are susceptible to toxic social mirroring about their potential and self-worth (see also Portes & Salas, 2010). Because middle grades teachers are educated specifically to work with early adolescents, and because they hold the collective wisdom that comes from teaming (NMSA, 2010; Powell, 2011; Strahan, L’Esperance, & Van Hoose, 2009), those who educate this age group are uniquely positioned to counteract institutional and community messages that may stereotype Latino adolescents in negative ways. Even more important, middle grades teachers who form positive

“Culture plays a critical role in the most effective middle schools (NMSA, 2010) and we consider transnational children of immigration to be a great wealth, a rich blessing—and we work tirelessly to equip middle school teachers to serve this group of children better than we did 20 years ago” (p. 2).

Figure 1 Making schools work for Latino adolescents (cf. Collier, 1996)
relationships with Latino youth can make a difference in their educational trajectories, or as the Association for Middle Level Education (AME, formerly NMSA) (NMSA, 2010) has articulated, “Academic success and personal growth increase markedly when young adolescents’ affective needs are met. Each student must have one adult to support that student’s academic and personal development.” With Curtin (2006), we find that the positive effects of such advocacy are especially apparent for young Latinos who work better for teachers whom they feel care deeply about them and about their futures (see also, Valenzuela, 1999). Caring, we argue, begins with talking.

Let’s talk

Middle grades teams often pose very appropriate questions that range from “What motivates Latino students?” to “How can I better engage immigrant parents?” However, they generally ask these questions of each other, the school’s ESL teacher, their university professors, or search the literature that they study about immigrant children. Although these are very useful approaches, the most powerful tool middle grades educators can employ is direct conversation with their students; for example: “Who are you as a Latino?” “What does that mean to you?” “How is your culture different from the cultures of other adolescents in our class?” “In what ways is it the same?” In other words, rather than talking generally about Latinos, who they are, and what distinguishes them from other adolescents, we should ask our students directly how schools might work better for them and their families, in particular. Begin that association in an authentic and meaningful way through simple conversation: Habla con ellos. It is through talking to our students that we help them form healthy personal identities and positive relationships with peers and adults (Strahan, et al., 2009). Three initial questions work well to open the conversation: “Tell me about your family,” “I love that we are different, but how are we the same?” and “What do you do best, and what brings out the best in you?”

“Tell me about your family”

Though we talk to our students about who they are, we rarely take time to ask about their families; this, in turn, can quickly lead to assumptions and stereotypes regarding an immigrant students’ familial and cultural history. For example, many educators we work with are surprised to learn that the majority of Latino English language learners (ELL) in K–12 schools were actually born in the United States and have attended U.S. schools all of their lives (Passel, 2009). A teacher’s inadvertent framing of a U.S.-born Latino as “not American” might perpetuate a sense of foreignness. Acknowledging and engaging the complex ethnic identities of students is essential to affirming the cultural mosaic of our middle school classrooms, our local communities, and our nation (NMSA, 2010). It all begins with simply saying to your students, “Tell me about your family.”

Let’s take a look at how that plays out in a classroom: Janet is an eighth grade social studies teacher in a rural North Carolina middle school. Many of her students are from Puebla, Mexico. On any given day, you can walk into her class and hear adolescents conversing in both English and Spanish. She encourages her students of both Mexican and United States heritage to collaborate. Code-switching—effortlessly shifting between Spanish and English in a single communicative event—is just one way the students leverage their linguistic dexterity to collaboratively navigate the social studies curriculum.

As part of this state-mandated curriculum, Janet is responsible for teaching her students about the various industries that have called their state home. As she got to know her students, she came to realize that many of their parents worked in the local chicken processing plant. Since food processing stands as an important state industry, she decided to assign her class the task of interviewing their parents, other plant employees, and community members to determine how the plant has interacted with their lives, the surrounding community, and North Carolina in general.

At the assignment’s end, the students were excited to share their findings, and a rich conversation permeated the room for days through both academic dialogue and social conversation. Mexican students discussed the layers of their transnational identity and how moving from a large city like Puebla to a small rural community was a cultural shock. Others explained how their parents came to the United States years before they were even born and that their cultural experiences have been primarily through the eyes of their parents and older family members. European American and African American students realized that their previously held misconceptions of life in Mexico (i.e., sleepy villages, cacti, and undocumented immigrants who sneak across the border in the dead of night) were incongruous to the rich, multifaceted, charismatic life experiences of their classmates. In addition, the class enjoyed a detailed discussion that focused on the chicken processing
plant, the labor conditions that their family members experienced there, and the role of this large industry in shaping the community’s culture. As the students’ final discussions and project presentations came to a close, Janet again emphasized their experiences as members of the community, of the school, and of their families; the role of globalization in industry; and how various cultural values shape contemporary North Carolina life.

Honoring the cultural histories of immigrant adolescents means taking an engaging approach to curriculum by developing instruction that reaffirms Latino students’ “funds of knowledge” or their ways of knowing that students learn at home and in their communities and bring with them to school (Moll et al., 1992). This volitional change in mindset shifts teachers from deficit thinking (i.e., what my students don’t bring to school) to a culturally responsive disposition (i.e., what my students contribute to the learning) that, instead, centers on a concept of “gifts” students offer. Geneva Gay (2000) refers to culturally-responsive teaching as “using the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of references, and performance styles of students from diverse backgrounds to make learning environments more relevant to and effective for them … (which is) culturally validating and affirming” (p. 2). Middle grades teachers who leverage Latino students’ unique familial and cultural histories into their instructional design will not only motivate learners within their classrooms but will also foster a sense of engagement that can translate into higher achievement.

“I love that we are different, but how are we the same?”

We acknowledge and celebrate diversity in our classrooms. However, talk of diversity often focuses on the differences between us. Though we want to avoid downplaying adolescents’ distinct cultural histories and individual uniqueness, we can also address the many commonalities we share. According to Schumann’s Acculturation Theory (1998), second language acquisition parallels second culture acquisition. An important component of this theory is the notion of social distance or the degree of difference between cultures. Learners who feel that the culture of the second language community is very different from their home culture may struggle to adjust to and become comfortable in environments in which they are framed as outsiders. So, if we strictly emphasize how Latino and non-Latino cultures are different, we may inadvertently exaggerate social distance and impede our Latino students’ academic progress.

Social isolation is sometimes apparent in middle grades classrooms in which teachers might observe Latino students hanging out exclusively with fellow Latinos. To facilitate interaction between Latino and non-Latino students, teachers will likely need to engage them in dialogue about what they have in common, regardless of ethnicity or national origin. That dialogue can quickly begin by asking our Latino and non-Latino students how we are unique and how we are similar.

For example, in Rowan County, North Carolina, Luis leveraged his role as the school’s soccer coach to create a mentoring program in which seventh and eighth grade Latino and non-Latino athletes began each practice with a focused conversation about things going on at school and in their lives. At the start of the season, they generated a list of issues they wanted to address in their discussions. Luis then began each practice by facilitating a short, open-ended conversation based on these topics; topics included his players’ relationships within the school, bullying, dating, and a variety of social situations that seemed common across the group. The season later concluded with a shared reading of A Home on the Field (Cuadros, 2006)—the story of how a soccer team’s rise to the state championship recast a small North Carolina town’s secondary school’s relationship with its Latino community. In the case of Luis and his student athletes, conversations brought them closer together by creating a space where they could talk about the things that mattered to them at that moment. More often than not, the boys found that they did have much in common with their teammates. Soccer practice became a focused time for honing individual and team skills to succeed on and off the field, with the strong message that we can do more if we understand and support each other.

“What do you do best, and what brings out the best in you?”

Working better for and with Latinos and other students might begin by teachers asking, “What do you like to do?” or perhaps “What are you good at doing?” Institutional understandings of Latino adolescents’ potential and achievement are often framed in the idea that decisions governing retention, promotion, and graduation should be based on a single, high-stakes, standardized test score—what Valenzuela (2004) calls “Texas style accountability.” Unfortunately, too many of our Latino
students may not see a relationship between what they do best and what we ask of them in our assessments. In addition, they may have heard about what they’re not good at doing for so long that they have actually internalized the idea that they aren’t particularly good at doing anything at all—or at least not anything that schools value. The category of English learner is one such example; the thing that many Latino children are good at doing, being bilingual, is often undervalued and ignored rather than called on and celebrated. Though we may be weary of stereotypes that unintentionally limit educators’ expectations, we can generalize that Latino children of immigrant families have indeed developed strategies for adapting to new communities and circumstances. For example, when facing crises Latino families can mobilize their communities quickly through reciprocal networks (Suárez-Orozco & Páez, 2002). What’s more, in terms of their expectations for teachers, Latino parents generally focus on the “educación” of their children, or the manner in which they are expected, from a Latino perspective, to interact with others (Rodríguez-Brown, 2010; Valdés, 1996).

Cultivating the kind of classroom environment in which teachers and students talk to each other about what they do best and what brings out the best in them takes time. Many students have likely never been asked such a question by a teacher, or at least not with frequency. Should middle school teachers find that engaging students in that sort of dialogue is too difficult, they can turn to the families of their students by including them in a discussion about experiences the family has had with schools, administrators, and teachers. Should those conversations include negative situations, teachers can also ask how those experiences could become more positive for the family. In this way, we all learn from each other.

Again, let’s turn to the classroom for a tangible example: In his culturally and linguistically complex eighth grade social studies classroom in Cabarrus County, North Carolina, Jeff was so inspired by his students’ freehand cartooning and doodling that he introduced cartooning software into his curriculum. Students who had readily described history as boring and who perceived themselves as disinterested and even struggling students were immediately absorbed in story boarding historical events, such as the French Revolution, and historical concepts, such as citizenship and freedom. Because story boarding requires the framing of text with images across cartoon-like cells, Jeff quickly recognized its connection to more sophisticated graphic novels, and he decided to use these novels as alternatives to his history textbook (Christensen, 2006). Allowing for additional layers of critical analysis, and after providing language scaffolding for the English language learners (Frey & Fisher, 2004), Jeff passed out copies of A People’s History of American Empire (Zinn, Buhle, & Konopacki, 2008). Embedded with pictures, the graphic text offered students visual renderings of complex social studies concepts and served as an engaging ancillary to his daily instruction. As a culminating project, the students developed their own graphic short stories on the history of democracy. Through cartoons and graphic novels, Jeff found a way of simultaneously building his students’ competencies in technology, content understanding, collaborative learning, and innovative thinking about social studies. Moreover, he deeply interested them in the content of the class, and, as a result, the majority of his students began thriving.

Habla con ellos

Contemporary teacher education and professional development for the middle grades and elsewhere continues to fall short for many transnational children of immigration. Instead of shying away from our individual and collective shortcomings, we can embrace what we don’t know as a starting point for professional renewal—just as our colleague, Jeanneine, shared in the vignette that opened this discussion. Professional renewal can begin with a conversation. Talk to them. Who students are, where they come from, what they already know and know how to do, and who they are in the process of becoming are all engaging relationship builders. These topics can and should serve as starting points for dialogue and community growth in each middle grades classroom. This is doubly important for our Latino newcomers, who have so much to offer beyond the stereotypes with which they are often labeled.

We have discussed three initial questions that are guaranteed to grow meaningful and strategic discussion in middle grades classrooms: “Tell me about your family,” “I love that we are different, but how are we the same?” and “What do you do best and what brings out the best in you?” There are, of course, endless others. More dialogue is necessary across K–12 institutions, but such dialogue is especially urgent for developing young adolescents across the middle grades. As Wang and Holcombe (2010) have argued, adolescents’ perceptions of their middle grades
environment directly and indirectly influence their academic achievement. We must, therefore, work with Latinos to make schools and schooling more welcoming for them. We need to consider not only the risks and challenges of these critical years but also what makes middle grades students succeed. This process can begin by “identifying and nurturing young people’s ‘sparks,’ giving them ‘voice,’ and providing the relationships and opportunities that reinforce and nourish thriving” (Scales, Benson, & Roehlkepartain, 2011, p. 263).

The questions we have composed here could very well engage all students across the middle grades, and we hope educators will continue to work to create spaces for dialogue with as many students as possible. Latino adolescents especially need strong advocates during these middle grades years, a critical juncture in their personal and educational trajectories. We know that nationally Latino adolescents are not thriving in the middle grades, but many educators want to make a difference, a big difference. They want to know the answers to “What motivates Latino students?” and “How can I better engage immigrant parents?” These questions require a commitment to knowing our students better and to communicating that middle grades education is a participatory, additive, and nourishing process grounded in solid relationships and ongoing dialogue. Habla con ellos—Talk to them.

References

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Using academic notebooks to support achievement and promote positive classroom environments

Authors examine how the use of academic notebooks impacts collaborative learning experiences of young adolescents.

Alison Rheingold, Caitlin LeClair, & Jayson Seaman

Picture the following: Actively engaged seventh graders, accessing resources that they created, using notebooks to prepare for their upcoming interviews with local community members who played a role in the Civil Rights Movement. Students work in small groups, leafing through their oft-used academic notebooks to find detailed information about people and events that relate to the people they will soon interview. Students take excellent care of their notebooks; they keep them organized and leave them in a designated location so that the notebooks are easily found when needed. No two notebooks look alike, though each has the same components; students’ own styles shape their notebooks, though the teacher takes care to assure the quality of work contained within. If you ask one of these students about the value of their notebook, they speak emphatically about the wealth of information they contain, visibly showing pride in their creations. These notebooks connect students to the material, to the classroom, and to each other.

Middle grades teachers, faced with increasingly heterogeneous classrooms, need specific tools and resources that support learning for all students. As depicted in the opening vignette, in this article we examine how a specific type of notebook—an academic notebook—can help promote in-depth academic learning. We describe how academic notebooks were used with a diverse seventh grade social studies class engaged in a multi-month investigation of the Civil Rights Movement.

Notebooks are commonly used in middle school classrooms as a place for students to record information delivered via lecture, classroom discussion, or independent work. A primary reason teachers ask students to use notebooks is to capture and organize information. In many cases, students are expected to use these tools with little direction, follow-through, or support; they are solely responsible for deciding what to put in their notebook, managing and caring for it, and knowing when and how to use its contents (Klentschy, 2010). For students unsure of how to do this independently, conventional notebooks can actually create a barrier to learning. One question we tried to answer through our implementation of academic notebooks was How can middle school students be best supported in the efficient and organized use of notebooks in the specific context of an extended collaborative project, and as a crucial resource for learning, in general? We found that employing explicit, teacher-driven strategies and structures to help students organize and make sense of their learning was the answer.

What Are Academic Notebooks?

Although various words could be used to describe the type of notebooks we discuss in this article, we employ Marzano’s (2004) term academic notebooks. In our case, which mirrors Marzano’s use of academic notebooks as a tool for building background knowledge, student notebooks had the following characteristics. They were (1) teacher directed, though student created; (2) a consistent place for students to put ideas and information they gathered, creating a “warehouse” of easily retrieved learning; and (3) a tool for both teacher and student to track learning. Students’ notebooks started out as blank composition-style notebooks—bound, with lined pages and no removable pages. Slowly, over the course of the project, notebooks became filled with handwritten notes;
The content of this article is based on our collaborative work (1) as a teacher implementing notebooks in this way for the first time and (2) as researchers studying student motivation during collaborative learning during the Small Acts learning expedition. Although academic notebooks were not the original research focus, over the course of this learning expedition our team began to notice how integral this tool was in helping each student both engage deeply with academic content and make meaningful contributions to the overall project. Upon closer study of the video, audio, and interview data we collected, it became impossible to imagine student motivation and engagement in this classroom without paying attention to their use of academic notebooks. In what follows, we outline four different themes that emerged from our research related to how teacher-directed, student-created academic notebooks supported student engagement, elaborating each theme with examples of student work, student perspectives captured throughout the learning expedition, and explicit directions for implementation. We then show what academic notebooks are and how they can be used as a successful tool for supporting all students’ learning, particularly in complex curricular units involving heterogeneous students.

Theme #1: Collecting and Retrieving Information—The Notebook as a “Goldmine”

I thought that the pages [of my notebook] where we wrote down definitions were helpful because we have the definitions of movement, segregation, and discrimination, and primary and secondary...
In this whole-class discussion, students—though they first appeared slightly confused by the question—quickly began participating by flipping through their academic notebooks and raising their hands to provide answers. On another occasion, the teacher referred to students’ academic notebooks as their “goldmine”—a resource to be mined for content-based gems.

According to Tomlinson and Imbeau (2010), effective instruction includes providing students with “access to what they will need as they work in a way that maximizes efficiency and minimizes disruption” (pp. 96–97). Academic notebooks were so impactful because of two teacher-directed structures: (1) all information needed was stored in one place and (2) the notebooks rarely left the classroom. They thus became a predictable part of classroom routines for each student. The amount of time saved by supplying students with the materials they needed when they needed them cannot be overstated; using notebooks in this way eliminated time that otherwise would have been wasted on logistics and allowed more time for teaching and learning.

Related to the academic notebooks as “goldmines” metaphor was the concept of “roadblocks.” For students to understand the Civil Rights Movement, they needed to explore the struggles and obstacles faced by people who worked to end racial discrimination. In one attempt to help them understand these struggles, students were guided in constructing a page in their academic notebook that visually conveyed these physical and sources. [This was helpful] because, not only are they on tests, but really, to understand civil rights you need to know the basic vocabulary. If I was trying to understand how to bake a cake and I didn’t know what flour was, [I couldn’t] make the cake.

In the above quotation, a student articulates why his academic notebook was important to him, comparing the information contained in his notebook to the ingredients needed to bake a cake. This analogy is a useful way to understand the first theme: academic notebooks used as a way to organize and retrieve information about the content being studied.

In the Small Acts learning expedition, the academic notebooks served as a place where students captured critical vocabulary, key concepts, and records of pivotal events by using note catchers (structured, but not prescriptive guides), graphic organizers, and free-form note-taking. In this way, they were consistent with Marzano’s (2004) suggestion that academic notebooks be used to build background knowledge. But they also became a foundation upon which students continually developed knowledge about the Civil Rights Movement. As students engaged in the process of building background knowledge, we noticed how important it was for them to have easily retrievable information for their ongoing development of civil rights concepts. A key feature of scaffolding is the use of prior knowledge (Fisher, Frey, & Lapp, 2012). Accordingly, in addition to being a place where they captured new learning, the academic notebooks served as a way for students to refer to prior learning and to add new insights and concepts (Marzano, 2007). This allowed them to build bridges between old and new ideas, going beyond isolated facts toward analyzing key events across time. Without using the academic notebooks in this way, the process would have been more about accumulating facts rather than organizing information to serve wider project goals.

Our video recordings captured messages the teacher gave about reasons to use their academic notebooks and about how to use them. Students were repeatedly cued to go to their academic notebooks both to add and retrieve information. For example, during a class early in the Small Acts expedition, the teacher said:

First off, let’s do a review. We have a goal. What is the goal that we’ve been talking about? What was the goal of the Civil Rights Movement? I like the way people are using their academic notebooks if you don’t remember.

In this whole-class discussion, students—though they first appeared slightly confused by the question—quickly began participating by flipping through their academic notebooks and raising their hands to provide answers. On another occasion, the teacher referred to students’ academic notebooks as their “goldmine”—a resource to be mined for content-based gems.

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Figure 1 Example of Student Work #1 — Roadblocks page, as developed over time
ideological roadblocks. Starting with a blank page, students glued a piece of “road” into their notebooks, which represented the journey toward freedom (see Figure 1, Example of Student Work #1). Throughout Small Acts, as their knowledge about the movement developed, students were asked to identify new roadblocks and add them to their academic notebooks. For example, in the beginning, as students learned key terms such as segregation and discrimination, they were able to easily identify these as roadblocks. Later, after viewing footage of the Little Rock Nine entering Central High School or reading firsthand accounts of the March in Selma, students were able to identify roadblocks such as “fear” and “power.” This roadblocks page was a resource that linked to all their learning about the Civil Rights Movement and, thus, was not only a place for accumulating information but was also used as a reference for ongoing research and classroom discussions. The notebooks became a tool for identifying with the movement and also for applying and thinking critically about key vocabulary and concepts.

Overall, academic notebooks supported building background knowledge, storing that content in easily retrievable ways, and creating classroom lessons that required each student to use the content throughout the flow of the project.

Theme #2: Using Academic Notebooks to “Do History”

We did the whole “getting ready for being a historian” with the primary sources, photographs, and the secondary sources when we cut them out of magazines. Then we learned what movement was and segregation. We learned the key words. And then I feel like the roadblock sheet was where we really started learning about the Civil Rights Movement.

Effective middle grades teaching is about finding ways to engage each student in thinking critically about content—not just making sure everyone can accumulate information and retrieve facts. In our case, academic notebooks served as a specific, tangible resource that enabled students not only to think like historians but also to take on the role of these professionals. In this theme’s opening quotation, a student describes how she used her notebook to build the skills needed to act and think like a historian by distinguishing between types of evidence and making connections across factual information.

Throughout Small Acts, students used their academic notebooks for critical thinking about historical events. Using multiple resources contained in their notebooks, students made predictions (also documented in their notebooks) and then assessed the accuracy of their insights by analyzing relationships among people, places, events, and perspectives—a key component of the Common Core State Standards. For example, students learned about the U.S. Supreme Court’s ruling in the Brown vs. Board of Education case and were asked to make predictions about how people around the country would react. Later, students reviewed and discussed their predictions then watched clips from the documentary Eyes on the Prize, with a purposeful eye toward comparing their predictions with what actually happened. Through classroom discussion and independent reflection, students then used their academic notebooks to record thoughts about their initial predictions. This was critical because students were able to refer to previously covered content and use it as a reference to effectively make and assess predictions. The academic notebook supported metacognition—the process of thinking about their thinking—among all students. See Student Work Example #2 for one student’s work.
Academic notebooks were also instrumental in allowing students to make original contributions to historical knowledge through their interviews and subsequent oral histories. The academic notebook was not just a collection of facts about the Civil Rights Movement, it was a resource that helped students think like historians (Levstik & Barton, 2010). For example, the notebooks prepared students to make meaningful connections between their interviewee’s firsthand accounts and historical events and abstract concepts covered in class. In the months leading up to the interviews, each student used his or her academic notebook to develop the ability to make predictions and connections. Individual students applied these skills effectively, helping them connect specific stories to larger concepts about the Civil Rights Movement. Even though the notebooks were not physically present in the interviews, they still helped each student to think, which was evident in reviewing transcripts of the interviews (McDonald, Huong, Higgins, & Podmore, 2005).

As in the first theme, students also received clear messages about ‘doing history’ in their notebooks. On one particular day, the teacher said:

Is there a place where we could go to remind ourselves about some of the roadblocks that we’ve identified? In your notebook, right? So, we’ve already identified some roadblocks, so you could go back and see. I’m looking for new roadblocks. I’m looking to make connections to some of the new learning since we last identified roadblocks.

In the above example, students were guided in how to use their academic notebooks as a means for making inferences across content they had previously studied.

In our case, academic notebooks established the ground upon which students applied their learning to doing historical research. By capturing untold stories of real people in their local community, the notebooks helped students to make a contribution to a historical body of knowledge. This sense of creating new knowledge—of fulfilling a need within their own community—connects with the importance of engaging students through a real purpose (Lattimer & Riordan, 2011). But our work also extends this idea in an important direction. We assert that student-developed materials—in this case academic notebooks—are also a necessary part of a classroom system, especially when applying content knowledge to complex, substantive projects. In our case, academic notebooks allowed students to hone independent thinking skills and to process information that was shared in class and, therefore, were a significant resource in supporting all students to “do history.”

**Theme # 3: Tracking Progress Over Time**

When asked at the end of the learning expedition, “What would you show from your notebook to help someone understand how and what you learned about the Civil Rights Movement?” one student enthusiastically responded:

I would show *my whole notebook* … mainly the learning goals assessments, because they were really assessing our thinking about different events and people. … I think it shows a lot of what we’ve been learning, because we have important things that happened and how [they were] part of the civil rights movement. How did segregation play a part, integration, discrimination and racism? We had to write those all down.

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A second example of a learning target assessment required students to recall information about four key events and then make connections to the role leadership, economics, political power, and communication played in each specific event. After receiving feedback from the teacher about areas in which they needed additional information, students used their notebooks to fill gaps and then presented their revised work in one-on-one conferences. See Student Work Example #4 for one student’s learning target assessment.

Because these assessments, and many others, were kept in the academic notebooks, students could refer to their goals as they continued to work on meeting specific learning targets, capturing what they did well and noting areas for improvement. Students reviewed assessments, feedback, and goals and used these as evidence in individual meetings with the teacher. Students were actively and continually engaged in collecting, interpreting, and reflecting on assessment information, helping to shift assessment from being performance driven (i.e., about getting a good grade) toward being about reaching learning targets (Ames, 1992).

The academic notebooks provided a record of what students had learned as well as a means for specifically reusing and sharing this information. Students understood the relationship between the goals and their actions—growing as learners and improving academically. As a result, students were more likely to see their work as purposeful—a key dimension of motivated learning (Blumenfeld et al., 1991; Magnifico, 2010).

Academic notebooks also helped each student engage in the process of assessment and in thinking about the progress of their own learning (Stiggins, Arter, Chappuis, & Chappuis, 2007). The academic notebooks provided a way for students and teachers to share responsibility for this process; in particular, the notebooks helped shift the responsibility to the student. The notebooks also allowed for individual students to learn at different paces while still contributing to the project and helped to scaffold learning as they progressed through different levels of understanding, as presented in the rubric. Using notebooks to track progress established clear connections between curriculum and assessment, as in assessment for learning rather than assessment of learning (Black & Wiliam, 1998).
When watching the hours of video, we noticed many instances of students using their notebooks as a resource for participating more fully in whole-class and small-group discussions. For example, as students gained knowledge about the Civil Rights Movement, whole-class conversations were used as a way to review and build on content. Students often had their academic notebooks open in front of them. As students were questioned, some did not need their notebooks and instantly raised their hands to answer. Other students would only raise their hands after leafing through their notebooks to find the needed information. Two practices, in particular, helped encourage widespread participation in class discussions: (1) continually emphasizing that all students should use their academic notebooks as a resource, making it normal for everyone to have their notebooks out; and (2) allowing sufficient wait time for reluctant students to access information from their notebooks. These practices created a way for each student to contribute, no matter how quickly he or she recalled information. As many have noted, it is critical for students to feel a sense of belonging and connection to others, and the notebooks were a resource that supported all students in making meaningful contributions (e.g., Anderman, 2003).

The notebooks also encouraged students to socially construct knowledge in the following ways: by talking about what they had in their own notebook; by building on what others had written; and by using the notebooks as a tool to work collaboratively with others. Through these practices, students were able to make meaning of the content, and the notebooks became an integral part of the classroom environment.

### Figure 4: Example of Student Work #4 — Learning target assessment with yellow highlighting showing teacher’s acknowledgment of student’s progress

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Movement: How was this event part of the CRM?</th>
<th>Segregation: What role did segregation play?</th>
<th>Integration: How was integration involved in this event?</th>
<th>Discrimination: What role did discrimination play in this event?</th>
<th>Racism: What role did racism play in this event?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Brown v. The Board of Education</td>
<td>Ranmargal was to integrate school</td>
<td>Linda Brown was allowed to go to school with the whites.</td>
<td>When she tried to get to school, she was met with a hostile reception.</td>
<td>When the little girls tried to get to school, they were met with hatred and threats.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Montgomery Bus Boycott</td>
<td>Civil rights was to desegregate city buses</td>
<td>Integration was a critical step towards equality.</td>
<td>The way African Americans got their bus was the way they were being treated.</td>
<td>The way African Americans got discipline was not being treated.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Integration of Little Rock Central High School</td>
<td>Integration was to desegregate high schools.</td>
<td>The reason why integration was so difficult was that the schools were not prepared.</td>
<td>The reason why integration was so difficult was that the schools were not prepared.</td>
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fellow students shared from their notebooks; and by making contributions not just to their own individual learning but also to the learning of the class as a whole. We found that academic notebooks provided a way for students to be contributing members of the classroom, helping each to have a voice and be seen by their peers as a valuable participant. These notebooks also enabled students to feel secure enough to share and, in turn, gain confidence when their contributions were noticed by the teacher and by peers.

Through modeling how and when to use academic notebooks, the teacher provided scaffolding that ensured each student would include important material in his or her notebook, making it available for future use in whole-class and small-group collaborative work. For example, when watching a segment of *Eyes on the Prize*, students were asked to write one quotation in their notebook that helped them understand the overall goals of the Civil Rights Movement. Afterward, students shared these quotations with the class. The teacher captured many of these quotations on a whiteboard in the front of the room and said, “If you didn’t write a quotation down, here’s one for your notebook.” The task of listening to the movie, picking out a quotation, and writing it down was beyond the level of English proficiency of several students. It was important that students had this information on a content level, but because this information soon would be used in small-group discussion, it was critical for each student to have captured it in order to be a full participant. In this way, notebooks served an important social function, leveling the playing field for more reluctant students.

In many ways, this theme displays teaching practices that help all students access the resources needed to engage meaningfully with academic content and with the social life of the classroom. It is critical for each student to have a supportive environment in which to work, interacting positively with their peers and contributing to the overall progress of the class and the common goals shared by all students.

**Implications for Practice**

While we understand that there is no single strategy or tool that provides the answer to effective instruction, we believe academic notebooks are a key resource for supporting heterogeneous classrooms. By adjusting practice to meet one’s own teaching needs and style and by making a concerted effort to meet the needs of individual students, academic notebooks can be a flexible tool that supports many aspects of instruction. Based on our close examination of this case, and taking into account our presentation of the four themes, here we share our best practices for implementing academic notebooks.

1. **Academic notebooks are a way to establish norms for gathering, organizing, and using information.** Used in the ways described throughout this article, notebooks scaffold good habits by creating structures and routines that eliminate many of the ubiquitous comments typically heard from middle grades students, such as, “I can’t find my work.” “I don’t remember what we did in the last class.” “I left it on the bus.” By establishing predictable ways for students to easily add and retrieve materials in their notebooks, students develop organizational skills needed for learning.

2. **Think of materials as supporting both academic and social goals.** Used primarily as a tool for helping hesitant learners participate more fully, academic notebooks also can be used intentionally to support a positive social climate and build community.

3. **Putting these structures in place takes time.** To be effective, students need to be intentionally taught and walked through the process. Although it takes time, establishing structures in the beginning facilitates their use throughout the year. However, it is a trap to think that there is not time to build the structure; instead, like a cabinetmaker crafting a jig before making cuts on a saw, the time spent custom-building good tools should be considered an investment in quality, which ultimately saves time. Also, be prepared to go through multiple iterations of the notebooks, adjusting as you go.

4. **Academic notebooks are not the perfect tool for all situations.** The structure of Small Acts lent itself to using academic notebooks: students genuinely needed to house, organize, and use information over an extended time to jointly address a complex problem. For other projects, however, a more manually adjustable, portfolio-type collection might be appropriate. Make adjustments depending on the content and on student needs.

5. **If done well, assessment of the notebook itself is not needed.** In our case, the notebook as-a-whole was not graded—there were no overall checks for neatness or completeness. Because each step was structured and individual components were evaluated, a “notebook
check” was not necessary, allowing students to focus on reaching learning targets and completing project goals.

6. Academic notebooks are not a stand-alone resource and can be used for multiple purposes. In our case, notebooks functioned in relation to the content/guiding questions as well as the other materials in the classroom such as a bulletin board that grew progressively more complex over time as it captured the collective learning of the class and “expedition folders” that were collections of student-produced artifacts. Also, notebooks themselves were used as evidence during student-led portfolio conferences, for students to demonstrate growth over time to their teachers and parents.

**Conclusion**

In this article we presented a rationale and supporting evidence for employing a certain type of notebook in middle grades classrooms. Specifically, we argued for a shift away from the open-ended expectations tacitly given to middle grades students about how to use a notebook. Conventional uses of notebooks can often end in disorganization, lack of clarity about expectations, and a lack of purposeful connection to learning content. They also can favor students who are already skilled in using notebooks. Academic notebooks, as we have described them, instead function as a key component in a classroom system that supports curriculum, individualized instruction, assessment, and overall environment of the classroom. Ultimately, we found that academic notebooks provided this classroom of diverse learners with routines that allowed for creativity while also giving needed structure and engaging students in rigorous academic content in meaningful ways. The notebooks provided a way for each individual to ask and answer the question, “Where am I/where are we in this journey?” which helped to establish ownership not just for content but also for the process of learning.

**References**


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