

NEWSLETTER

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Stuck in the Middle: Strategies to Engage Middle-Level Learners

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Introduction

Keeping middle school students focused and engaged in the classroom is quite a challenge amidst all of the complex changes-physical, intellectual, emotional, and social-that they experience during this phase of their lives. Youth aged 11 to 13 years-a period sometimes called the 'tween years -are characterized by a growing desire to think and act independently while at the same time caring deeply about being accepted by peers and being part of a group (Caskey & Anfara, 2007). Add to those dynamics the feelings of vulnerability and self-consciousness that come with puberty, and educators have an imposing set of forces to consider when designing strategies to effectively reach middle school students.

Literature about middle school reform acknowledges the importance of an academically challenging and supportive environment to engage young adolescent learners. Student motivation, a meaningful curriculum, and student choice also are important factors for engaging middle-level learners (Caskey & Anfara, 2007; Newmann, Marks, & Gamoran, 1995; Learning Point Associates, 2005). This month's newsletter addresses student motivation and illustrates three strategies that can help create a meaningful curriculum to engage middle-level learners. The strategies draw from effective classroom practices across grade levels as well as from research about the social, emotional, and physical development of middle-level learners.

Student Motivation

All teachers face the challenge of motivating students to learn. Although the link between student motivation and achievement is well documented, the "dynamics of motivation are not" (Marzano, 2003, p. 144). Many research studies have sought to define and measure student motivation while identifying practices to foster the asset in learners.

Creating a Task-Oriented Classroom

Research points to orientation of the learning environment as a critical factor for motivating and engaging students. A school or classroom that is performance-oriented emphasizes ability relative to others. By contrast, a task-oriented environment is focused on effort and improvement, which research shows is correlated with greater levels of student engagement and achievement. Several studies have concluded that schools can foster a task-oriented environment (Anderman, Maehr, & Midgley, 1999; Fenzel & O'Brennan, 2007; Haselhuhn, Al-Mabuk, Gabriele, Groen, & Galloway, 2007). A study of African-American middle school learners placed at risk demonstrated that a school climate focused on personal mastery with positive and supportive adult relationships fosters motivation and engagement (Fenzel & O'Brennan, 2007).

Table 1 shows some of the key characteristics of performance-oriented classrooms and task-oriented classrooms (Anderman et al., 1999; Haselhuhn et al., 2007).

Table 1. Learning Environments

Performance-Oriented Learning Environments	Task-Oriented Learning Environments
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Emphasis on the importance of grades, tests scores, and social comparison• Classrooms grouped homogenously by ability• Pull-out and retention programs• Instruction and assessment emphasize correct answers over understanding	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Emphasis on effort, mastery, and improvement• Mixed-ability classroomsCross-age and peer tutoring programs• Time used flexibly to allow strategic and short-term grouping• Student mistakes are regarded as integral to learning

Increasing Students' Efforts on Assignments

Teachers often encourage their students to do their best work and put forth their best effort. However, neither grading practices nor achievement formulas have found a way to measure actual student effort. Although recognizing a student as "most improved" or as an "excellent worker" provides a level of recognition, teachers can foster even greater self-awareness of effort in their students by asking them to respond in writing to prompts that require them to reflect on the efforts they made on an assignment and associating that effort with the grade they will receive.

Overcoming Students' Fear of Failing

Self-perception of academic ability is a significant factor in motivation. Middle-level learners are more likely than elementary and high school students to doubt their academic ability (Heller, Calderon, & Medrich, 2003), particularly when encountering more demanding content. Young learners may believe their academic ability is fixed and that they cannot grow smarter. Students who attach feelings of self-worth to achievement may avoid challenges they believe are beyond their capabilities, especially when peer acceptance is growing in importance.

Reluctance to engage with difficult material can be mitigated with deliberate instruction about

the learning process. By explaining that it is normal to experience difficulty and even confusion when learning new material, students are less likely to believe that it is their lack of ability keeping them from immediately demonstrating proficiency. This helps create a virtuous circle: In addition to possessing a desire to learn, successful students believe they can learn.

Specific Strategies to Improve Student Motivation and Engage Middle School Students

Educators and researchers alike note that:

As anyone who has spent time with middle school students can attest, attempting to build the skills of disengaged adolescents is a futile enterprise. Whether expressed as defiant non-compliance or passive "checking out," the student who refuses to learn will succeed in that effort (Learning Point Associates, 2005, p. 4).

By infusing relevance, authenticity, and choice into the curriculum and learning activities, educators can make learning more purposeful. Young adolescents are more likely to engage in the classroom when they connect content and learning tasks with life beyond the classroom walls (Caskey & Anfara, 2007; Learning Point Associates, 2005).

Relating Lessons to Students' Lives

Young adolescent learners experience a growing awareness of the world they live in and begin to question the value of what they are learning. "They pose broad, unanswerable questions about life and refuse to accept trivial responses from adults" (Caskey & Anfara, 2007, p. 3). Teachers can instill the value of academic content by relating topics to past experiences and life outside of school and involving learners in tasks that reflect civic or work-world responsibilities (Caskey & Anfara, 2007; Heller et al., 2003; Newmann et al., 1995). A relevant curriculum relates content to the daily lives, concerns, experiences, and pertinent social issues of the learners. Teachers can gain insight into student concerns by taking periodic interest inventories, through informal conversations, and from classroom dialogue (Learning Point Associates, 2005). These issues and topics then can be incorporated into units, lesson plans, and further classroom discussions.

The capacity for moral reasoning expands alongside the intellectual development of young adolescents. Caskey and Anfara (2007) urge teachers to capitalize on this by providing opportunities for learners to write about their thoughts and feelings about social issues or ethical dilemmas. Such issue-driven assignments allow learners to practice both writing and higher-order thinking skills while exploring their own beliefs.

Making the Learning Authentic

Newmann et al. (1995) advocate for authentic instructional practices to engage learners and offer three criteria for authentic instructional practices: construction of knowledge, disciplined inquiry, and value beyond the school.

The first step in construction of knowledge is to acknowledge students' existing understanding and experience. Identifying students' preconceptions and initial understanding is critical to the learning process. "If students' preconceptions are not addressed directly, they often memorize content (e.g., formulas in physics), yet still use their experience-based preconceptions to act in the world" (Donovan & Bransford, 2005, p. 5).

Second, structured activities to facilitate disciplined inquiry are critical to the construction of knowledge (Marzano, 2003; Newmann et al., 1995) describe this process as building on the learner's prior knowledge to develop a deeper understanding, integrating new information, and using the knowledge in new ways.

The third criterion for authentic instructional practices is value beyond school (Newmann et al., 1995). This may entail connecting content to personal or public issues as well as the demonstration of understanding to an audience beyond the school. Examples of such activities include writing persuasive letters to the city council to advocate for a skate park, interviewing community elders for an oral history project, or communicating the impact of a development project using scientific concepts.

Newmann's conception of authentic instructional practices requires that all three criteria be met; however, he also acknowledges that "repetitive practice or memory drills might help students

build the knowledge and skills that can later serve as the basis for authentic performance" (1995, p. 4).

Giving Students Choices

Finally, providing choice in middle-level classrooms will engage learners. Providing opportunities for students to select a topic or text acknowledges young adolescents' need to exercise more decision-making power. Researchers note the following:

Adolescent learners sometimes experience a world of rules and regulations imposed on them by adults who seem not to understand their world. The physical and emotional changes they experience are a further source of feelings that they have no control over their lives (Learning Point Associates, 2005, p. 5).

Schools can help provide choices to learners by supplying a variety of text options including age-appropriate books at various reading levels, digital media, newspapers, and magazines. Teachers can collaborate to design a variety of learning tasks or assessment options aimed at the same objective to give students a choice in activities or demonstrations of learning.

Conclusion

Research shows that when young adolescents are actively engaged in learning, they are more likely to achieve at higher levels. Educators can facilitate student engagement by fostering motivation with task-oriented learning environments and teaching students that building new knowledge requires effort. In addition, when curriculum content and learning tasks are relevant and authentic and incorporate choice, students are more likely to view their education as purposeful and engaging.

For More Information...

In addition to the publications cited in this newsletter, the following resources provide opportunities to explore further student academic engagement in the middle grades.

Additional Resources

Appalachia Educational Laboratory. (2005). *Effective instructional strategies* (Research Digest). Charleston, WV: Edvantia. Retrieved May 23, 2008, from

http://www.edvantia.org/pdta/pdf/Effective_Instructional_Strategies.pdf

Boardman, A. G., Roberts, G., Vaughn, S., Wexler, J., Murray, C. S., & Kosanovich, M. (2008). *Effective instruction for adolescent struggling readers: A practice brief*. Portsmouth, NH: RMC Research Corporation, Center on Instruction. Retrieved May 23, 2008, from

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Organizations

The National Association of Elementary School Principals: <http://www.naesp.org>

The National Association of Secondary School Principals: <http://www.principals.org>

The National Forum to Accelerate Middle-Grades Reform:

<http://www.mgforum.org/ImprovingSchools/STW/STWbackground.htm>

The National Middle School Association: <http://www.nmsa.org>

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