

Secrets From the Middle:  
Making Who You Are Work For You

Elyse S. Scott

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## Introduction

As with so many teachers, early on, my favorite activity was to play school with my two younger sisters acting as my reluctant but compliant students. It was one thing to play teacher and then decide to be one, but I had many hurdles to cross. I would be the first person in my family to go to college, there were few funds for such an endeavor, and I got little to no advice except the minimal from my high school guidance counselor. With the help of scholarships, my mother's ingenuity, and my own "never let Mom down" guilt complex, I made it through college.

Eventually, I had settled on an English major and am almost embarrassed to say how I arrived at my choice of certification in secondary education, grades 7–12. My age at the time is my only defense—what does a 19-year-old really know about forecasting her life's work? I felt I could not be an elementary school teacher because teaching young children to read was too overwhelming a task and what if I failed them? I also felt this age group was too needy, having had a hand in raising my sisters because my mother worked two jobs and was rarely home. At the high school level, I would have to worry about the New York State English Regents. The strongest argument in my mind was that there was "least harm" in junior high (middle school would be a later concept). In addition, I had what was a most painful adolescence, rife with out-of-whack hormones, an alcoholic father, and a textbook case of low self-esteem. I thought I would, at least, be an empathetic teacher who had walked in my students' shoes.

Who knew that when I was ready to face the job market, I'd be grateful for any job? In the early 70s, tons of students were looking for scant jobs, and I would have to teach part time at the local community college for quite a few years before making my way into a public school position. But the gods were with me, and finally I landed a position teaching grades 7 and 8, and I taught at that school for the rest of my career. Like all those teaching in middle school, I came to realize that we are kind of the black hole in between elementary school and high school. Our "clients" don't necessarily put education as a high priority on their list. They have too many other things they are dealing with, some completely out of their control. I would always marvel at year's end of eighth grade how incredibly different our students would look in June compared to their yearbook picture that had been taken sometime in October or early November! Imagine what was going on inside of those children's minds and bodies.

If you ask middle school students their number one reason for coming to school, they will usually say it is to see their friends. That is pretty stiff competition for teachers. In elementary school most students are still in awe of the process: it is the age of discovery for them, and they want to please their teachers. By high school most students have to get serious about the not-so-distant future of a job or college; for many it is a settling down time. But the middle is exactly that: a transition time when students are bridging the gap between childhood and maturity. Adolescents are known to cross that bridge many times in a single day!

All of this being said, what is our goal after all? It is to have our students learn and learn deeply. We want them to internalize what we have taught them and learn valuable life lessons along the way. The secret to accomplishing this was to reach my students, truly get inside their minds and hearts. In order to do that, I had to exert Herculean efforts all day, every day.

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## Know Yourself

Okay, so it doesn't matter how you ended up in a middle school or junior high. Perhaps it has always been your aspiration to teach at this level. More commonly these days, that's where the job offer was, and beggars cannot be choosers in this climate. Or perhaps, even more difficult for some, you were transferred from high school, and this is awakening a whole other teaching zone in your brain! While I don't want to talk anyone down from the high of landing a job, I must caution against idealism and unrealistic dreams. The best way to enter a middle school is with "eyes wide open" and with extreme caution. Perhaps at your interview, with a certain detached perspective, you noted the high energy and bubbling enthusiasm of the hallways reaching an almost chaotic pitch. In reality, the atmosphere in a middle school can be quiet and laid-back some days and at a feverish pitch on others. The middle school can seem like a laboratory for hands-on, inquiry-based learning on its best days, and, quite frankly, a cuckoo's nest on others. Most times it is somewhere in between. If you know that going in, you learn to adjust your internal barometer to what is normal.

### **Analyze your tolerance level.**

It helps to analyze your tolerance level for this "new normal," as I call it. I have had many colleagues who operate very well in an atmosphere of organized chaos. They thrive on the high energy, the feverish pitch. I never was one of them, even at the beginning of my career, so it has nothing to do with increasing age or crankiness. I always needed an organized, calm atmosphere in which I could thrive, and I knew early on I couldn't teach

students if I wasn't in a comfortable place for me. Adolescents will take their cues from you. You don't have to be dogmatic or unreasonable. I have found that if you explain who you are as a person and why you do the things you

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**Lay out a blueprint for your role, your students' role, and the logistics of your classroom.**

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do, kids are willing to listen. So, decide where you fit in the scheme of things. Envision what your classroom will look like, how it will "run" for forty-five minutes or so, and how your students will act in that room. Having a clear vision with eyes wide open allows you to lay out a blueprint for your role, your students' role, and the logistics of your classroom. You don't want to do this after the fact; it is so difficult in middle school to undo what is already done!

**Embrace flexibility and choice.**

After many years of establishing routines that worked and tweaking things that did not, I offer this advice. Workshops on classroom organization, behavior management, and lesson design are incredibly helpful. But the real beauty of professional development was its offering of a menu from which I was free to choose what appealed to me within the vision I had

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for my own classroom. In working with younger teachers, I found that they often feel they have to take what they have learned as gospel with no room for flexibility and choice. Your classroom must be your creation, not some "should be" model offered up by well-meaning colleagues, education websites, or textbooks. I always told my students that my classroom was my home away from home, and I fostered an atmosphere that was calming, welcoming, and interesting with plenty of room for active engagement in the lessons. There are plenty of successful teachers who run on high gear, but I have usually found that at the center of it all is a modicum of structure and clear guidelines.

**Make *who you are* work for you.**

The same holds true for your vision of yourself as “teacher.” You are who you are. You have a personality, a background, a belief system. To survive in a classroom with adolescents, you cannot turn on or off who you really are. That would be incredibly exhausting. Of course, you can make modifications and adjustments—that is called survival. The key is to make “who you are” work for you and ultimately for your students. Another way of looking at it is this: How would you want the curriculum you must deliver imparted to you if you were on the receiving end? What would make you listen and take notice? What kind of person do you trust, respect, and look up to?

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Therein lies the secret of the whole experience. What can you give as a unique human being that will first establish trust? What can only **you** give as a human being that will yield respect? What can only **you** give as a human being that will keep them coming back interested and enthusiastic? Notice I used the word *give* not *do*. Secret Number One: You must be a giving human being first; a teacher, second.