

# CAUGHT IN THE MIDDLE

*Reading and Writing in the  
Transition Years*

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## In the Classroom: Student Engagement, Teacher Support

For the purposes of this book, the *middle years* include pre-adolescent and young adolescent students who are developing their own interests as readers and expanding their personal abilities as writers. They may be in schools that are organized in a variety of ways: Kindergarten to Grade 8, Grades 6 to 8, Grades 7 and 8, or Grades 7 to 9. Of course, these students will be in different stages of development while placed in one classroom, caught between childhood and adolescence. Some are avid voluntary readers while others are struggling; some write easily with a good command of transcription skills while others lack confidence to put pencil to paper or cursor to screen. Some speak up in discussions about novels, eager to share their responses, while others draw back and remain silent. Most want to work independently, manage their own learning, and follow their own interests. As they try to find their own voices, they are discovering the complexities of relationships and the tentative nature of their roles in a middle-school community.

### ***We are right in the middle of things and eager to find our voices.***

Tina Benevides teaches Literacy and Psychology at Nipissing University. She is completing her Ph.D., examining the role of technology on the literacy development of middle-years students.

According to Tina Benevides, of Nipissing University, we can observe many of the following features and qualities in these young adolescents.

#### **Qualities of Adolescents**

The lives of middle-years students are changing every day, something that is reflected in their *literacy* lives, both their manners and attitudes, and in the content of what they say, read, and write. Family patterns are altering. Young people are becoming more critical of parents, adults in authority, and siblings; they depend more and more on peer groups, and have celebrities, sport heroes, and friends as role models. Establishing an identity becomes the most significant task of adolescences, and they begin to integrate the opinions of influential people in their lives — parents, friends, and teachers — into their own beliefs.

Future careers are talked about, and they start to look forward to their own independence, testing their own positions at every stage.

Many are developing a sense of history and of their place in society; they are becoming concerned with justice and the unfair treatment of minority groups. They may have a justice orientation and tend to see issues in “black and white,” allowing little room for error, evidencing extreme idealism, becoming very cause oriented. Some believe that they are invincible — “It can’t happen to me.”

Their physical development is a central factor influencing their lives, relationships, and identities. Boys experience growth spurts about two years later than girls, something that may encourage separation between boys and girls. Neurological changes allow young adolescents to begin to develop metacognition — the ability to think about their thinking; they also allow them to increase their ability to examine symbolic or abstract ideas or concepts, and advanced reasoning skills. Middle-years students are able to think about multiple options, possibilities, and hypothetical situations, and are able to consider concepts such as faith and spirituality. They generally prefer active over passive learning activities and enjoy working with their peers.

Middle-years students may experience increased sensitivity to popularity and appearance, becoming more sensitive about weight, gender changes, or about their skin (acne), hair, or teeth (braces). They experience increased identification with peers and have an increased need for their acceptance and approval. Therefore, adolescents spend more time with friends than their families.

So, what will we develop as an excellent literacy education for all of these students in our schools right now? How will we ensure that they will be ready to make their way successfully into secondary school and beyond? A tall order, so let's begin by exploring what is expected of these students and how teachers can work with them to achieve these expectations.

### **Great Expectations**

Students in the middle years are expected to read and write independently and more often, to read longer and more difficult texts in a variety of curriculum areas, to read faster and more selectively, to write coherently with their own voices, to remember more information, to make integrated connections with the curriculum, and to explore the various modes and uses of technology.

Yet there are new words, terms, and content to learn in all of the different subject areas, and some of the texts teachers are using may be outdated, inaccessible, or unclear. Readers of widely differing abilities may be expected to read the same resources with few support structures. There may be little technological support, such as computers or adaptive technology; still, schools and districts are finding ways of transitioning into the 21st century, and more and more teachers are incorporating the New Literacies into the daily work of the classroom.

Fortunately, all of us can build our programs around our students' voices, so that they are engaged in and contributing to their own learning through talking, responding to reading, writing about their lives, researching significant inquiries, and presenting their discoveries to one another. We want to encourage students in these middle-years classrooms to work responsibly together as a community. If we negotiate with them how to explore the curriculum as language learners, we can observe from the inside out how each student learns best and select our strategies carefully, so that young people do not waste their time attending to what they already know or pretending they understand what they do not.

Voice is an important component in the formation of an individual's identity or self-image, and efforts to focus learners on developing their own authentic voice can help them to develop confidence in their own capacities, to realize their own potential, to maximize their abilities, and to take a self-determined path of

personal growth. We can listen to them, value their contributions, and prompt them into discovering more about themselves and their world.

When accompanied by effective social and emotional learning that creates a safe space where all participants are respected, student voice increases student engagement and promotes a willingness to take part in classroom activities or school activities as a whole. This welcoming atmosphere is especially important when dealing with the relatively sensitive issues that powerful and relevant texts tend to elicit. Students may not feel that they can move on to discuss their thoughts and feelings, or to question texts, until trust in the relationship with the teacher has been built and a welcoming climate created. Building a sense of membership in a community helps students overcome anxiety and gain positive self-efficacy; it also enhances learning and understanding. Perhaps then students can sustain their involvement in all types of learning activities, demonstrate positive attitudes towards school life, and become enthusiastic, optimistic, curious, and interested participants in their own growth. As teachers, we dream big, and we do our best to honor each of our students.

### ***A dynamic interplay***

Young people develop their thinking abilities and social dispositions by interacting with peers, other youngsters, adults, and their environment. The relationship between the teacher, the student, and the other learners becomes an integral part of the interplay in the classroom. This dynamic interaction helps our students develop an awareness of other viewpoints as they examine their own beliefs, standards, and values, increasing their ability to reflect on their own attitudes and behaviors and perhaps, alter their own thoughts about life. Students construct understandings together that would not be possible alone and, we hope, are better able to learn about and respect the uniqueness of others.

Relationships with friends, classmates, and teachers help students to cope with the sometimes rigorous demands of a mainstream literacy classroom. Collaboration among learners takes advantage of Vygotsky's zone of proximal development, where learners are challenged to achieve challenges slightly above their current level of development. Through working with other students who have different strengths and experiences, learners can extend their learning. Students with different skills and backgrounds collaborate in tasks and discussions and thereby arrive at a shared understanding. Through working with peers and building a sense of belonging, students are more likely to be able to bridge the distance between their developmental and experiential levels.

Learning needs to become an active process, where students make discoveries, developing their skills at prediction and intuitive thinking; where they can select tasks that are challenging, initiate activities, exert intense concentration, and expend great effort. Teacher development advocates encourage teachers to actively acknowledge student voice in decision-making power. Students can gain access to information and resources for making effective decisions, have a range of choices, develop an ability to exercise assertiveness in collective decision-making, increase positive thinking on the ability to make change, learn skills for improving personal or group power, change others' perceptions by democratic means and involvement in the growth process, increase their positive self-image, and begin to understand how to sort out right and wrong, important processes in the middle years.

More and more researchers, institutions, and support organizations worldwide advocate for the inclusion of students in school reform efforts. They see the

I liked the slogan on the T-shirts of the student helpers at a conference I attended: *How can I help you?* Not a bad mission statement for this book.

### **Community Building Through Drumming**

Peter Stratford supports community building through his physical education program for all divisions at Hawthorne Village Public School. He incorporates literacy and physical activity through Drum2BFit. His interactive and engaging program uses upbeat music as the students drum on fitness balls for a great workout for both the body and the mind. By linking expectations from music, language, and physical education, Peter feels that teachers can provide students with multiple opportunities to reinforce and demonstrate their knowledge and skills in a range of settings. For example, students can act out favorite fairy tales such as "Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs." Each dwarf has a different sound, and students, through their drumming, can help tell the story as it is read aloud.