South Carolina Association for Middle Level Education Journal

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An affiliate of the Association for Middle Level Education

The South Carolina Association for Middle Level Education Journal is an open-access, peer-reviewed publication that highlights research-based best practices that improve middle schools and the learning that occurs within and outside of the classroom. Readers of this journal are generally teachers, administrators, and other educators who are interested in the issues that young adolescents ages 10-15 and educators of those individuals face. The South Carolina Association for Middle Level Education Journal is published once a year in an online format.

CALL FOR MANUSCRIPTS

Manuscript Deadline: November 30
Classroom teachers, administrators, teacher educators, pre-service teachers, graduate students, and researchers are invited to submit manuscripts to the South Carolina Association for Middle Level Education (SCAMLE) professional journal. The SCAMLE Journal welcomes high-quality manuscripts of varying lengths that address the issues and needs of young adolescents. We accept practical, theoretical, and empirical papers, literature reviews, and book reviews specific to middle level education. We also accept creative writing and original artwork from middle level students and educators. Your manuscript must be original and must not be currently submitted for publication anywhere else.

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Preparing Your Manuscript
Use the following guidelines to prepare your manuscript:
1. Include a separate cover letter:
    a. List your name and school name, mailing address, and email address
    b. List any co-authors in preferred order with the above information for each
    c. Include a title, abstract (no more than 100 words), and key words
    d. Confirm that this work is original and has not been published elsewhere, nor is it currently under consideration for publication elsewhere
2. The body of the manuscript should not exceed 15 pages. Text should be double-spaced in 12 point font, preferably in Microsoft Word.
3. No identifying characteristics may appear in the body of the manuscript (i.e., names of participants, authors, or schools must not appear in your manuscript).
4. All submissions must conform to the style found in the 7th edition of the Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association (APA).
5. Full references for all citations should be included, following APA guidelines.
6. If student artifacts are included (i.e., artwork, photos, writing, etc.), authors must provide written permission releases for the use of the artifacts.
7. Images should be in .jpg format.

Submitting your Manuscript
Manuscripts should be typed in Microsoft Word and sent as an email attachment to SCAMLEJournal@usca.edu or deborahmc@usca.edu before the deadline.

Review of your Manuscript
The review process includes a preliminary evaluation by the journal editor for appropriateness, followed by a double blind peer-review process with at least two reviewers from the SCAMLE Journal Editorial Review Board. Acceptance is determined by the reviewers' recommendations and balance of topics in the annual issue. Your manuscript will be evaluated using the following criteria: https://docs.google.com/forms/d/1hoKGvEoC-dEEicZx1sZpGWltUZFW8Af2sHlXIIkzg7o/edit

A decision is typically rendered within 8-10 weeks from the call deadline. Please send questions about manuscript submission to the Editor, Deborah McMurtrie, at SCAMLEJournal@usca.edu or DeborahMc@usca.edu

Please contact DeborahMc@usca.edu if you are interested in reviewing manuscripts for the SCAMLE Journal.

2023
Table of Contents

Guest Editorial

Book Reviews

Referred Articles

Guest Editorial: Renewing the Commitment for Specialized Middle Grades Teacher Preparation and Licensure

Ellis Hurd
Kathleen M. Brinegar
Lisa M. Harrison

There is a nation-wide teacher shortage. While this statement might seem obvious to many, perhaps even an understatement to the many challenging and traumatizing things taking place within education (see Hurd et al., 2021, Hurd et al, 2022), it is a statement worth exploring. According to U.S. Government Accountability Office (U.S. GAO) (2022) the teacher shortage facing schools is real. It is worse in certain areas and for certain groups, such as in western states and for rural, urban, and high-poverty communities with Black and Brown students. However, the U.S. GAO found that "in every [U.S.] region, shortages were between 8-17 percentage points higher than five years earlier" (p. 15). U.S. GAO also found that the teacher shortage was made worse during the Covid-19 pandemic and has been exacerbated by two key issues: recruitment and retention challenges due to a negative perception of the teaching profession and a perceived lack of support for current teachers. Of course, there are many efforts and initiatives to solve the teacher shortage crisis in the United States, just as there are goals to have high quality teachers.

But the goals of high quality teacher recruitment and retention are in fact interrelated. These are a twofold goal that some states may struggle with meeting, keeping in mind the aims within both of these goals.

Despite current research and the struggles facing schools to recruit and retain teachers, there are some organizations that still question whether or not there truly is a teacher shortage. For example, the National Council on Teacher Quality (2018) argued that the "largely anecdotal, not based on data" teacher-shortage-narrative is really a decades-old struggle, misguided by limited policy papers and localized economic conditions of just a few states (p. 1). They further stated that the widespread deficit of teachers nationally is a perception due in part to state agencies that misalign teacher and job vacancy data against district hiring statistics. Their main point is that way too many teachers (in fact, 50%) leave the profession before they actually begin to teach, thus inflating statistics (p. 4). However, the NCTQ report is based on statistical data of national agencies dating back to before 2016 and has yet to be retracted or updated. In fact,

much of the world has changed since then, with a global pandemic, stock market strife, and global inflation. Regardless of one's orientation on the teacher-shortage-narrative, there is no denying that some schools are struggling to recruit and retain teachers, for various reasons. There is no denying that many schools are also having serious issues with recruiting substitute teachers. Some states, for example, are turning to unconventional ways to fill classrooms with teachers in order to meet the demand and to have an adult in front of children. The following list includes just a few efforts occurring nationally to address the teacher shortage:

- Golden Apple has created an accelerated 15-month teacher-pathway program
- A midwestern medical doctor has worked once a week as a substitute, donating his salary back to the school
- Some universities have incentivized teacher education programs for licensure completion in shortened amounts of time and for additional endorsements, with some offering multiple grade-span licensures
- Some states have offered provisional licensures to teachers, especially in high need areas, or licensure through community college programs
- Some states have offered provisional substitute licensures for those with an associate degree and for teacher education candidates while studying in their programs

While these collective efforts might seem advantageous in addressing the teacher shortage, some hold a hidden consequence: the dismantling of the specialized preparation and licensure of middle grades education. Some states have even made efforts to change or revert middle grade-span configurations (e.g., 4-6; 5-8) back to earlier generalized grade-spans (e.g., K-9) to allow for teacher mobility within and across schools. In fact, a few states and programs have offered a middle grades licensure with only one or two classes (the equivalent of 6-credit hours) in addition to an elementary or secondary degree. One university even went as far as to offer the middle grades licensure in one conference or workshop! Even though it seems that a K-9 licensure might help with teacher recruitment, it is potentially detrimental to retention. Furthermore, these efforts undermine the very ideals and progress of the specialized preparation and licensure of middle grades education as communicated and shared by the Association for Middle Level Education (AMLE), the National Forum, the National Association of Professors of Middle Level Education (NAPOMLE), and other national and state-level associations and agencies.

We argue this is not the time to solve educational and economic crises by changing grade-span configurations of teacher preparation programs, namely, to absorb middle grades education into elementary and/or secondary education, as it once was long ago. This is not the time to have teachers who do not understand the context of middle

grades education entering into their profession with only one or two classes as their foundation (an endorsement). The answer to the teacher shortage is not to have more teachers who do not understand what youth are going through today in order to fill a vacancy. The point of middle grades education is to have teachers trained to teach multiple grades with two or more disciplines (interdisciplinary curriculum) and who understand and know how to help youth in what they face each day.

Today's youth face considerable challenges, both online and in-person, seen by rising youth suicide (Curtin, Garnett, & Ahmad, 2022), poverty, homelessness, trauma and school violence (Lopez, 2022; Office for Civil Rights [OCR], 2021), and mental health illnesses (Geiger & Davis, 2019; NIMH, 2022; Prentis, 2022). Therefore, youth need educators who can rise to these challenges by being fully trained and who understand social and emotional learning for building community and competence (Vawter & McMurtrie, 2022). They need educators that can develop lasting relationships that go beyond superficial surfaces and academics alone. They need adult advocates that understand the "knowledge of the distinct nature and identities of young adolescents" (Hurd, 2022, p. 44). While we understand the short-term need for flexibility and reciprocity, we argue against one-sided efforts that do not allow middle grades teacher candidates to simultaneously achieve an elementary or secondary licensure in the same ways. We argue against the mistake to generalize grade-band configurations. According to Deborah McMurtrie, professor of middle grades education in South Carolina,

> Young adolescents have distinctive developmental characteristics, needs, and abilities that are specific to this age group. It is imperative that we provide our teacher candidates with the specialized knowledge, skills, and dispositions needed to address the unique needs of young adolescent learners in middle schools. If our teachers are not adequately prepared, we are dooming them to failure. Teachers who fail are more likely to leave the profession, thus exacerbating teacher retention and perpetuating the teacher shortage. (personal communication, December 19, 2022)

We advocate that schools and teacher preparation institutions renew their commitment to middle grades education and licensure. We advocate that policy makers and parents consult the very associations and experts in the field mentioned above who understand middle grades education and young adolescents. Moreover, we advocate for the specialized preparation and licensure of middle grades teachers. "The specialized professional preparation of teachers of young adolescents must be a high priority of teacher preparation programs, colleges and state certification agencies" (Hurd, 2022, p. 1).

At the core of this belief, and with the shifts within society and education these past years, we must realize how important it is that middle grades teacher preparation centers young adolescents and their learning. As

communicated in the 2022 Revised AMLE Middle Level Teacher Preparation Standards, "This required shift in focus has also led to the need for a critical stance and an awakened attention to the reform efforts that did not evolve from past generations. At the core, those efforts and the shift in focus must include culturally and developmentally responsive and sustaining instruction, anti-racist pedagogies, and a commitment to equity, diversity, access, and inclusion" (Hurd, 2022, p. 2). This is where the work must continue.

As schools and higher education teacher preparation programs continue to respond to the teacher shortage, there will be many ideas considered. We advocate for staying the course of middle grades education. We advocate for the specialized preparation and licensure of middle grades education for young adolescents.

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I Wish My Teacher Knew: Trauma, Stress, Loss, and Learning in Today's Classrooms

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As teachers and students continue to navigate the new normal of in-class, remote, and hybrid learning environments, three ongoing themes of trauma, stress, and loss have become pervasive. Here are important points for educators to consider:

- Seventy-five percent of American high schoolers and fifty percent of middle schoolers have described themselves as "often or always feeling stressed" by schoolwork. A PEW survey shows that seventy percent of teens say anxiety and depression are a major problem among their peers. (Maroney, 2021).
- Data indicates that as many as 43,000 children have lost a parent to Covid-19. Additionally, school/classroom lockdowns and quarantines have led to social isolation, resulting in increases in depression and anxiety in children and adolescents. Moreover, since schools can be a stabilizing force in many children's lives, switching from in-person to remote to in-person again can add stress (Curtis, 2021).
- Up to two-thirds of U.S. children have experienced at least one type of serious childhood trauma (e.g., abuse, neglect, natural disaster) or have experienced or witnessed violence. Research studies have indicated that trauma is possibly the largest public health issue facing our children today (CDC, 2019). Traumatized students are especially prone to difficulty in self-regulation, negative thinking, and being on high alert. Also, they may have difficulty trusting adults and may engage in inappropriate social interactions (Lacoe, 2013; Terrasi & de Galarce, 2017). They often have not learned to express emotions healthily and instead show their distress through aggression, avoidance, shutting down, or other off-putting behaviors. These actions can feel antagonistic to teachers who do not understand the root cause of the student's behavior, which can lead to misunderstandings, ineffective interventions, and missed learning time (Minahan, 2019).

The truth is that when it comes to being affected by trauma, stress, and/or loss in today's classrooms, no one (teachers included) is immune!

However, educators have the power to create schools that are places of learning about oneself and the world for all students and safe harbors for those whose lives are chaotic (Fisher, Frey, & Savitz, 2020). To reach and support all students, educators must approach everything they do through a trauma-informed lens. Dr. Jamie Howard writes, "There's chronic loss happening right now. So much of what kids have lost recently — the end of the school year, celebrations, camp — is related to real developmental milestones. These things…really matter to kids" (as cited in Sheldon-Deene, 2021, para. 13). Additionally, researchers have discovered how brains under chronic stress will have trouble learning new things and committing new material to memory (Pellissier, 2014).

When faced with such widespread trauma, how can teachers help students deal with and heal from stress and loss? How can teachers help students who are at risk for lowered academic performance? What about the teachers, many of whom are traumatized and stressed themselves?

This collection of resources can give all educators a broader understanding of stress, trauma, loss, and learning as well as provide information that can be applied directly into work with students in the classroom and the community. Rachelle S. Savitz, assistant professor of adolescent literacy at Clemson University, has partnered with Douglas Fisher and Nancy Frey, both at San Diego State University, to author their book, *Teaching Hope and Resilience for Students Experiencing Trauma: Creating Safe and Nurturing Classrooms for Learning* (2020). This powerful book can serve as a road map for creating uniformly excellent classrooms and schools by utilizing humane and growth-producing methods. Patricia A. Jennings (2019), in her book, *The Trauma-Sensitive Classroom: Building Resilience with Compassionate Teaching*, shares strategies that will help educators better understand how to create the kinds of experiences that will make learning possible while dealing with trauma. *Teaching, Learning, and Trauma: Responsive Practices for Holding Steady in Turbulent Times (Grades 6-12)*, written by Brooke O'Drobinak and Beth Kelley (2021), explores the intersection of teaching, learning, and mental health by utilizing the integrated approach of knowing, planning, being, delivering, and partnering. David Rockower (2022) shares in his book, *The Power of Teaching Vulnerably: How Risk-Taking Transforms Student Engagement*, how his personal journey of transforming his classroom into a safe space where students could take risks resulted in impactful learning for all. *Building a Trauma-Informed Compassionate Classroom: Strategies & Activities for Reducing Challenging Behavior, Improve Learning Outcomes, and Increase Student Engagement* by Jennifer Bashant (2020) is an excellent resource for teachers as they work to navigate the new normal

in their classrooms where many students are struggling. She offers a collection of checklists, charts, surveys, and inventories for assessing the classroom environment, student interests, and student triggers and she provides a variety of strategies to support teachers with these topics. Lastly, *Learning from Loss* by Brittany R. Collins (2022) is a valuable resource that provides teachers with an understanding of the responses a student may experience both biologically and behaviorally when dealing with loss. Also, Collins includes a variety of strategies for learning how to approach a grieving student and what to say to offer authentic support. (JRG)
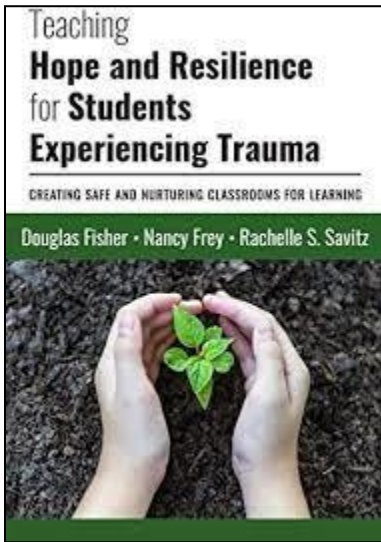
Teaching Hope and Resilience for Students Experiencing Trauma: Creating Safe and Nurturing Classrooms for Learning by Douglas Fisher, Nancy Frey, & Rachelle S. Savitz, 2020, 138 pp., Teachers College Press. ISBN 978-0-8077-6147-2

How many among us experience the daily trauma that substantial numbers of our students face? Trauma can take many forms including abuse, homelessness, poverty, food insecurity, discrimination, violent neighborhoods, school shootings, or family deportations. Throughout this book, the authors stress how schools and classrooms can become safe havens for the many students experiencing trauma, stress, and loss. However, this is only possible if teachers know and understand the appropriate methodology for working with today's students and understand the intentionality that must be behind their actions. In this book, the authors present five chapters that serve as a road map to guide courageous teachers on this journey. Acknowledging that while this is never going to be an easy task, they pose the question: "But who among us decided to enter this profession because we thought it would be easy?" (p. 7)

Chapter 1 focuses on the fundamental importance of *teacher-student relationships*. The authors point out that "hope-filled schools invest in structures that promote strong relationships" (p. 25). Research has shown the powerful influence of positive teacher-student relationships on learning. However, it has also been shown that students identified as low achieving are often treated differently by their teachers. Limited and negative interactions with teachers can increase the likelihood that these students will adopt negative attitudes about themselves and exhibit problematic behaviors (p. 13). However, teachers have the power to interrupt the pattern and build the resilience of students by developing stronger relationships characterized by warmth and support.

Chapter 2 addresses the way s*ocial and emotional learning* can be integrated into the school day. Some suggestions for helping students grow in their identity and agency include using class meetings to promote dialogue, aiding students who have difficult peer relations, addressing bullying and cyberbullying, and suicide prevention. While these situations may be painful to consider as part of a teacher's responsibility, the authors point out that whether teachers intend it or not, they teach students SEL in every interaction.

Chapter 3 focuses on the ways in which *literacies can be levers to maximize learning*, especially for traumatized youth. The authors posit that there is power in carefully selected literature and that writing can serve as catharsis. They write: "Literacy is a crucial tool for accomplishing the dual missions of teaching and healing" (p. 57).

Chapter 4 speaks to *learner empowerment*. The authors note how loss of agency is one of the most debilitating side effects of trauma. To offset this loss, they offer ways to teach for empowerment by having students engage in research and inquiry. Teachers are reminded that part of being a teacher is being a change agent in student-centered classrooms.

Chapter 5 explores the nature of the *school community as an agent of change*. As the authors point out, "Trauma-sensitive schools are a vital conduit for organizing efforts, supporting families experiencing trauma, and mobilizing community resources (p. 7).

Fisher, Frey, and Savitz have authored a book for the many teachers who may feel powerless when dealing with the trauma, stress, and loss that students bring to school with them every single day. However, they remind us all that "…the last thing that children who have experienced trauma need is pity and low expectations about their future. What they need is empathy and a path forward" (p. 5). This book shows teachers that path. (JRG)
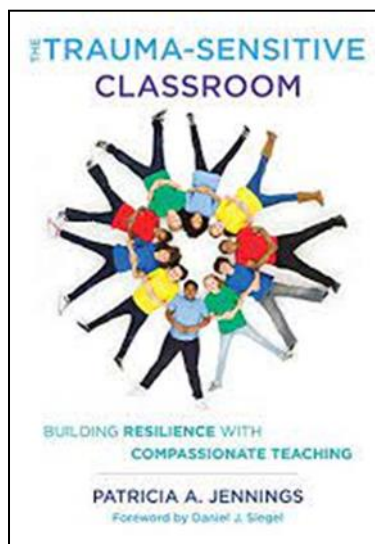
The Trauma-Sensitive Classroom: Building Resilience with Compassionate Teaching by Patricia A. Jennings, 2019, 200 pp., W.W. Norton & Company. ISBN 978-0-393-771186-8

Educational jargon can be casually bandied about, leaving teachers confused about how many more hats they will be required to wear as they work alongside their students! Patricia Jennings has authored a timely book that will help teachers define the terms related to trauma and stress they need to understand as they interact with children and adolescents in their classrooms. In the

"Introduction" she writes: "My intention is to provide the knowledge and skills educators need to create a compassionate learning environment in which all children and teens feel respected and understood and are provided the supports they need to flourish" (p.3). She goes on to explain how *trauma-sensitive* is the term she wants teachers to consider as they engage with their students. This term refers to "the educational practices and approaches that are intended to cultivate a safe learning environment and mitigate the impact of trauma symptoms on student learning" (p.3).

Jennings divided her book into three parts: "Understanding Trauma in Schools" (2 chapters); "Addressing Trauma in Schools" (3 chapters); and "Building Resilience with Mindful Compassion" (4 chapters).

She explains in Part I how trauma and stress manifest in the body by explaining the physical, mental, and emotional components. However, she cautions that children and teens who have been exposed to trauma and adversity do not fit one profile. She notes that every person is different so this means that teachers must be sensitive to individual students' needs. In addition, she devotes a section in Part I to address the trauma and stress many teachers experience that not only impacts how they might react to their students but also could lead to their own burnout. Jennings provides vignettes, checklists, and suggestions that teachers and schools can take to become more trauma-sensitive.

In Part II, Jennings introduces her readers to what she has identified as the "Three Keys to Compassionate Teaching." These include building supportive relationships, creating safe spaces, and supporting prosocial behavior. Be assured that Jennings does not look at this through rose-colored glasses; instead, she writes frankly about the difficulties teachers face when trying to build caring relationships with trauma-exposed students. She describes how these students may interfere with classroom learning as well as distrust peers and adults, especially authority figures. They may be overly defensive or defiant. They often find themselves in conflict with their peers, either victims or perpetrators of bullying. Some dissociate and become socially isolated. However, understanding that these behaviors are symptoms of the trauma can help teachers begin to understand these students and hopefully provide them with the support they need (p. 49).

Part III explores how teachers can build their own resilience, enabling them to provide what students need to build their own resilience. Establishing a trauma-sensitive educational environment hinges on teachers who "have the resilience to resist the tendency to overact and can recover quickly from the challenges that arise day to day" (p. 107). In Chapter 6, "Building Resilience," the author addresses teachers directly by providing information, self-awareness and self-management strategies, and a resilience self-reflection checklist. Chapter 7, "Mindful Awareness," defines what mindfulness means in an educational environment and includes trauma-sensitive practices for teachers. Chapter 8, "Compassion," explores the elements of compassion along with providing trauma-sensitive practices to build compassion

between and among teachers and students. Chapter 9, "Cultivating Compassion in the Classroom," could very well be the most important chapter in this book. In it, Patricia Jennings presents a holistic picture of *what could be* in any classroom in any school in any geographical location. Teachers who are mindful, purposeful, intentional, resilient, and trauma-sensitive position themselves as role models and advocates for all students.

As a final bonus, the author provides readers with an extensive "Appendix" that has listings of related and supplemental texts. Educators will want to explore these resources to learn more about trauma-sensitive classrooms and schools as well as resources to incorporate into instruction for students of all ages. (JRG)
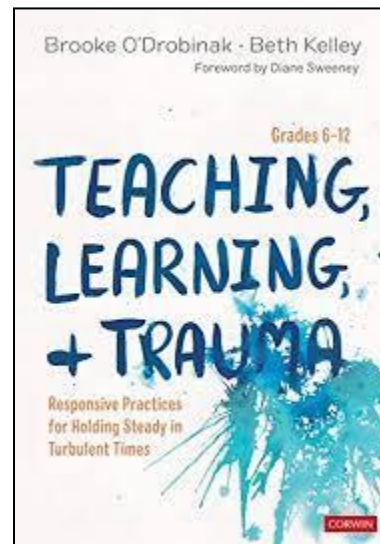
Teaching, Learning, and Trauma: Responsive Practices for Holding Steady in Turbulent Times (Grades 6-12) by Brooke O'Drobinak & Beth Kelley, 2021, 152 pp., Corwin. ISBN 9781544362892

In the "Introduction," Diane Sweeney writes that if her own teenagers attended a school like the authors describe in this book, "I would be confident that the teachers in their lives understand them as complex individuals who carry a heavy burden of what it's like to be a teen in today's turbulent times" (p. xiii). This book could very well become the "go-to" book for teachers who want to move their instructional practices in a direction to meet the needs of their students. After all, the world today is quite different from the world in which most teachers grew up.

The authors of this book have conceptualized an integrated model in which teaching, learning, and mental health practices come together (p.1). Some of the topics addressed in this book include understanding and teaching adolescent learners with chronic stress and trauma; self-regulation is the key to calm; healthy relationships in complicated times; conflict resolution. All adults who interact with adolescents in an educational environment will benefit from spending time on each of these critical topics. As the authors write: "Offering an integrated approach to education provides a pathway through chaotic situations into those which are more stable" (p. 129). Isn't this what all educators want in their classrooms and schools?

These two authors have created an interactive handbook that would benefit all educators of adolescent learners. Their intended audience list includes teachers, counselors, instructional coaches, principals, and district leaderships.

As they note, "We are all in this together" (p. 2). Each of the seven chapters includes vignettes from the world of secondary education, valuable and much needed information about the chronic stress and trauma that currently exists in all facets of our society, reflections for readers to record their own thoughts, and a "Toolkit for Tomorrow." Each chapter also ends with personal encouragement from Brooke and Beth entitled, "In the End, Be Loving." This book will make you smile and feel hopeful, despite its focus on the sad and disheartening content of stress, trauma, and loss. (JRG)
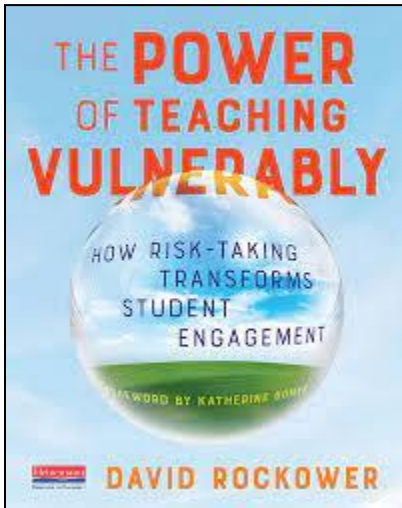
The Power of Teaching Vulnerably: How Risk-Taking Transforms Student Engagement by David Rockower, 2022, 136 pp., Heinemann. ISBN 978-0-325-13523-6 With so much emphasis and attention on the trauma, stress, and loss that today's students are experiencing, one question remains: What about the teachers? The good news is that David Rockower, recipient of the 2017 National Middle School English Teacher of the Year award, has authored a book that puts teachers at the center. He argues that teachers must bring their authentic selves into the classroom by teaching through the lens of vulnerability to develop positive student relationships. Indeed, a poignant "Foreword" written by Katherine Bomer sets the tone for readers as she points out the importance and power of teachers engaging in a vulnerability discourse, just as David does in his book.

Readers will quickly notice that David has written this book in first person---*this is his story*. We as readers can take the journey alongside David as he came to understand what he named "teaching and learning as a vulnerable act" (p. xv). He questions how we as teachers can support our students both educationally and emotionally if we are not willing to be vulnerable and open ourselves up to them. He notes that while we routinely ask our students to take emotional risks at school, are we willing to step up and take those risks ourselves? While this idea of allowing ourselves to be vulnerable may seem scary or difficult to many, be assured that David is there alongside us all to show us how he did it. He begins by sharing three dimensions of teacher vulnerability: personal, relational, and dialogic.

David explains that *personal vulnerability* allows our students to see who we are as authentic human beings instead of just "the teacher." This is when we share with students our failures, joys, hobbies, or memorable moments. He notes that personal storytelling is a wonderful community-building activity. Students learn to trust adults who willingly open up

and make themselves vulnerable by telling stories. Perhaps it was a time when your parents caught you in a lie; maybe it was the time you won the "Best Sense of Humor" award in high school. Regardless of the story, just the intentional telling of it can begin to chip away at the outer shell of even the crustiest adolescent in your class!

He goes on to explain how *relational vulnerability* allows you to admit fault, offer genuine apologies, listen deeply, or give specific, heartfelt compliments, while *dialogic vulnerability* invites crucial conversations that may create tension or discomfort into the classroom. Follow David on his journey to become more vulnerable in the classroom by reading chapters 1-4 in his book.

By now, you may be asking yourself: "But where do you draw the line? How do you set boundaries?" Don't worry; David tackles these questions in Chapter 5, "Vulnerability and School Culture." He cautions readers that it takes time to build a trusting classroom environment where everyone feels safe. If teachers try to go too fast, it can become counterproductive to the work of establishing an authentic learning environment (p. 110).

Teachers would do well to heed David's final words in "Closing Thoughts" where he urges teachers to "be brave and be real" (p. 119). Numerous research studies have shown that a positive, caring, authentic student-teacher relationship is fundamental to a student's academic, emotional, and social learning. Students coming to school from places of trauma, stress, and loss need caring adults in their lives. As David writes in the conclusion of his book: "We learn from people we care about, and we can only care about them if we know them. Show them who you really are, tell stories, laugh, cry, and allow them to do the same" (p. 120). (JRG)
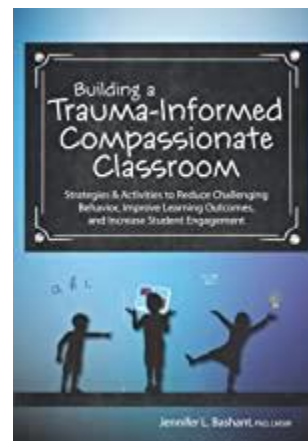
Building a Trauma-Informed Compassionate Classroom: Strategies & Activities for Reducing Challenging Behavior, Improve Learning Outcomes, and Increase Student Engagement by Jennifer Bashant 2020, 98 pp., PESI Inc. ISBN: 1 683 732 758 "Trauma is defined as an event or situation that exceeds one's ability to cope" (p. 3) In addition to the many demands teachers face in the classroom to instruct a diverse population of students, teachers have historically faced challenges that continue to cause concern. Some of these include school safety, funding, class size, poverty, and bullying. Over time, teachers have worked to develop strategies to deal with these issues because they impact students in significant ways. However, since the covid pandemic, students are facing circumstances that are causing stress, anxiety, and depression and teachers need help in addressing this new level of support needed by their students.

Jennifer Bashant's book is a much-needed resource for teachers that is easy to navigate. The book is divided into three parts and teachers can choose the part that best meets their immediate needs.

Part I is titled "Understanding Trauma and Its Impact on Students." There are three chapters in this section, all of which offer valuable information on how to identify and deal with student trauma in an effort to build a trauma-compassionate classroom. Bashant makes the point that trauma is individualized based on the experiences students have had in their lives. These experiences form an emotional foundation which may render the student emotionally strong or emotionally wounded. Students who are emotionally wounded and have trauma history have lived experiences that have rendered them unable to cope. These students need teachers who understand where students are in terms of their emotional foundation. This knowledge will help teachers develop and implement self-regulation strategies to help students address their ability to make decisions, problem solve, and develop healthy relationships with both their peers and teachers. Bashant offers a variety of checklists and charts in Part I along with a crisis plan for teachers to identify, assess, and determine what coping and self-regulating strategies best suit each student. Bashant reminds teachers "It is one thing to understand the clinical manifestations of trauma, but it is another to know how to respond in the moment when disruptive behavior is derailing the lesson and affecting 20+ other students (p. viii).

Part II is titled "Compassionate Classrooms are Conducive to Healing." There are three chapters in this section which offer teachers many ideas for building an inclusive and supportive classroom environment and connecting with family to share ideas. Bashant addresses such topics as: teacher response to behavior, collaborative vs punitive discipline, building positive relationships, identifying behavior triggers, improving behavior by planning for triggers, and developing strong connections with families. Students who have experienced trauma are extremely sensitive to the teacher's facial expression, body language, frustration, feelings, tone and volume of voice, and mood. As a result, it is essential that teachers are mindful of their non-verbal communication and Bashant offers a teacher checklist to assess this. Having a collaborative classroom where every student feels safe, valued, and cared for by the teacher allows a student with a trauma history to engage and thrive as a learner. Teachers need to build a classroom environment that empowers students to build confidence as learners and to share positive interactions, dialogue, and discussions with both their teacher and peers. Once again, Bashant offers teachers an array of checklists, charts, surveys, and inventories for assessing the classroom environment, student interests, and student triggers and she provides a variety of strategies to support teachers with these topics. She also offers helpful information and strategies in the form of checklists, questionnaires, and surveys for families along on ways to address both their child and their connections to the school.

Part III is titled "Encouraging Personal Growth and a Positive Vision for the Future." It includes four chapters which offer teachers ideas about teaching students how to: label feelings, build resilience, identify their personal strengths, acknowledge gratitude, embrace kindness, have compassion for self and others, and develop personal calming strategies. The statement that stands out in this section is "All of us are born with gifts and talents, and we feel good about ourselves when we have opportunities to showcase them" (p. 59). Teachers who develop a personal relationship with each student and who foster a positive class climate make teaching and learning much more enjoyable. Students who feel valued by their teacher are more willing to engage in positive ways in the classroom. Bashant offers a comprehensive Neurodiversity Strengths Checklist (Armstrong, 2012) for teachers to identify student strengths in a variety of areas to include: personal, communication, social, emotional, cognitive, creative, literacy, logical, visual-spatial, physical, dexterity, musical, nature, high-tech, spiritual, cultural, and other. This survey can be adapted for students to do a self-assessment. The information gleaned from this survey can be useful for teachers as they come to know their students in detailed ways.

This book is a valuable resource and a must have for teachers as they work to navigate the new normal in their classrooms. At the end of the book, Bashant offers a collection of extremely useful resources for teachers that include products, apps, books, and YouTube videos. (VAO)
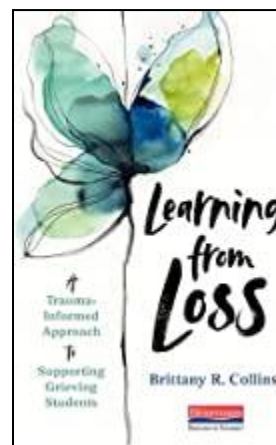
Learning from Loss by Brittany R. Collins 2022, 166 pp., Heinemann ISBN: 0 325 134 200 The pandemic has had a negative impact on all of us and brought many challenges. One of those challenges is the many forms of loss we have experienced as a result of the pandemic. Some of the losses include healthy living, changing work schedules, time with family and friends, going to sports events and concerts, going out to dinner, spending time at the gym, enjoying travel, and living with the deaths of family and friends. Of particular concern is how young people are processing these losses. Students of all ages may not have developed effective coping strategies to deal with the stress, fear, anxiety, and grief they may be feeling as a result of the pandemic. Teachers need resources to deal with the new mental health crisis in students. Brittany Collins's book *Learning from Loss* offers many strategies that can be implemented to support students who are struggling. The book is divided into eight chapters which are easy to navigate. Teachers can choose chapters that best suit their immediate needs.

Teachers will find chapter 1 titled "When a Student is Grieving, What's Going On?" helpful in developing foundational understanding of the responses a person experiences both biologically and behaviorally when dealing

with loss. Collins offers a list of these responses some of which include anger, avoidance, sadness, denial, attention seeking, people-pleasing, complaints of headache and other physical issues, helplessness, hopelessness, apathy, and self-destructive behavior. She then follows up with a collection of strategies teachers can use to support students who are struggling. Collins makes the point that teachers need to create a classroom environment where students feel safe, valued, cared for, and connected to their teacher and peers. This type of collaborative environment helps students feel a part of the classroom community surrounded by support from everyone. One feature that appears at the end of each chapter is titled "Write and Reflect." Here, Collins offers teachers prompts to reflect on some of the classroom experiences they have had when dealing with students experiencing loss.

Many of us have had the experience of feeling unsure of how to approach someone who is grieving. It is always a challenge for teachers to address sensitive topics, especially with students who are vulnerable. In chapter four titled "What Should I Say? The Courage to Connect and Communicate with Grieving Students," Collins details a strategy titled "CODE" which is a four-step framework that outlines how teachers can facilitate supportive conversations that are both strategic and sincere when approaching fragile students. CODE is an acronym for compassionate, open-ended, direct, and evolving. Collins suggests teachers can reflect on their own losses and remember what it felt like to be supported.

Approaching a grieving student by having a private one-on one conversation that demonstrates genuine concern and respect for their loss is a good starting point. Open-ended questions are also encouraged in this framework. This positions students as the narrators of their experiences and provides the teacher with some insight into the nature of the students' grief. Being direct is also a part of this process. Although teachers should not force a student to talk about their grief, letting them know that you are willing to share in an honest conversation when they are ready. And finally, some students may not be comfortable talking about their loss and when this happens, teachers can offer support in ongoing ways. Compliment students for their efforts, share book titles that may be helpful, attend extra-curricular events letting students know you care and are reaching out to build a relationship with the student.

Collins' book will be an important addition to a teacher's professional library. It offers sound advice, strategies, checklists, charts, and a comprehensive list of resources and further reading at the end of the book. The pandemic will continue to impact schools. Teachers want to be ready to address students' mental health issues in effective ways and this book is a good starting point. (VAO)

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Kindling a Desire to Read: A Review of Three Young Adult Novels

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Abstract: Drawing on experiences as an English teacher and as a teacher educator, this article offers a review of *Nothing Burns as Bright as You* by Ashley Woodfolk (2021), *Paradise on Fire* by Jewell Parker Rhodes (2022), and *Year on Fire* by Julie Buxbaum (2022). The review offers suggestions to promote adolescent reading. Authentic characterizations, realistic dialogue, credible events, and elements of suspense draw readers in and keep them reading. Recommended as viable works to spark students' interest in reading, *Nothing Burns as Bright as You*, *Paradise on Fire*, and *Year on Fire* are contemporary young adult novels to consider when guiding students through self-selected books.

Keywords: adolescent literature, YA novels, climate change, gender identity, sexual orientation, parent-teen relationships

Introduction

A fire sparks, ignites, enflames, engulfs, and smolders until it is extinguished. Much like bystanders drawn to the simmering embers of a slow burning fire, readers are enticed into the lives of adolescents in *Nothing Burns as Bright as You* by Ashley Woodfolk (2021), *Paradise on Fire* by Jewell Parker Rhodes (2022), and *Year on Fire* by Julie Buxbaum (2022). From climate change to gender identity and sexual orientation to parent-teen relationships fraught with complexities, these novels expose realistic issues from adolescent perspectives. These novels compel readers to consider various viewpoints, empathy for others, and acceptance of differences. Mirroring real life, few topics are off limits, and much is laid bare for readers in Woodfolk's, Parker Rhodes's, and Buxbaum's recently published young adult (YA) novels.

Collectively, *Nothing Burns as Bright as You*, *Paradise on Fire*, and *Year on Fire* abound with robust characters with diverse ideas, identities, expectations, religions, genders, places, families, cultures, and communities. While most readers are readily familiar with typical trials and tribulations of adolescent friendships, young love, relationships with parents, and a need to belong, these novels are catalysts to extend readers' thinking about particularly complex issues today and create a desire to read about these realistic subjects. As an adult reader of young adult literature (YAL), I often find myself jettisoned back to my own struggles as a teenager; yet, through these narratives, I am vividly reminded of challenges adolescents face today that are vastly different

from my own. The authors' realistic and frank use of language in dialogue complements the authenticity of the characters. In each of these YA novels, readers are positioned to step inside the minds of diverse adolescents who each contend with their own struggles. Through these novels, I raise the question: how do I, as an educator and caring adult, better support and respond to adolescents' challenges today? The insights gleaned from *Nothing Burns as Bright as You*, *Paradise on Fire*, and *Year on Fire* offer opportunities for constructive conversations around serious and sensitive contemporary issues. Too, these YA novels portray characters and situations which resonate with young readers today.

Young adult novels can serve as a conduit to explore life's many challenges and affordances. Zaczek (2022) notes, "Books are an immensely powerful tool for intersectional understanding" of critical issues and promote critical thinking (para. 8). Like many teachers, I take great pleasure in making time for books by reading, recommending, discussing, and revisiting works to promote reading with the goal of sparking a love of reading with students. Prioritization of reading is a hallmark of good instruction, and *Nothing Burns as Bright as You*, *Paradise on Fire*, and *Year on Fire* are ones that I choose to include in my classroom library.

Nothing Burns as Bright as You, *Paradise on Fire*, and *Year on Fire* candidly address real issues that warrant awareness and understanding without over sentimentality or maudlin characterizations. In this way, Bishop's (1990) book–life metaphor is fitting:

> Books are sometimes windows, offering views of worlds that may be real or imagined, familiar or strange. These windows are also sliding glass doors, and readers have only to walk through in imagination to become part of whatever world has been created or recreated by the author. When lighting conditions are just right, however, a window can also be a mirror. Literature transforms human experience and reflects it back to us, and in that reflection we can see our own lives and experiences as part of a larger human experience. Reading, then, becomes a means of self-affirmation, and readers often seek their mirrors in books. (p. ix)

Nothing Burns as Bright as You, *Paradise on Fire*, and *Year on Fire* spark a desire to read – created through mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors – and illuminate authentic experiences and emotions of adolescents.

Book 1: Nothing Burns as Bright as You

Ashley Woodfolk's *Nothing Burns as Bright as You* is narrated from a unique second-person point of view – a nameless, female adolescent addresses her partner and reveals past, present, and future ideations of their intense relationship. Woodfolk's lyrical verse novel explores the complications and boundaries of friendship which evolve to queer love. The

powerful story unfolds in a single day with nonlinear alternating chapters that illuminate the foundations of friendship, courtship, and demise of their relationship. The tenuous bond of an adolescent friendship which turns to love reveals excitement and passion but also deterioration. While the narrator's life is a metaphorical dumpster fire, the two young women set a dumpster on fire. Their pyromania and consequences of the destruction set their relationship ablaze. Through it, the narrator confronts "you" – her friend turned lover – and questions the path of their friendship which leads to love and then to destruction. The evolution of their relationship brings to light myriad variables that influence the trajectory of their relationship altogether. It begs the question, is a relationship ever too far gone to make amends?
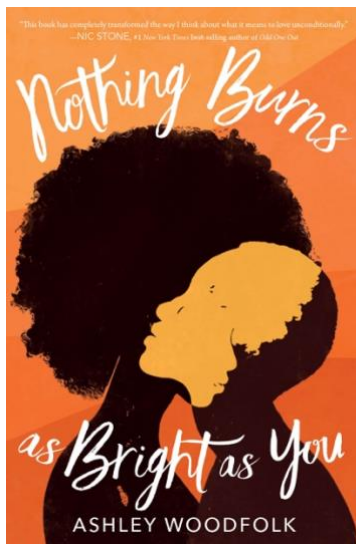
From beginning to end, Woodfolk discloses the depths of emotions and vulnerabilities of two young, black, gay women whose "lives are on fire and no one f--king cares" (p. 54). They are students with "potential" but are viewed as "too different. And no one likes different" (p. 50). Difficult choices and circumstances consume the characters and readers alike. Reminiscent of an awakening, the narrative evokes catharsis with the realization that sometimes people, "are wrong, so wrong. Wrong for each other, and most of the time wrong about each other" (p. 262). It is this revelation that offers a sense of acceptance and understanding of a partnership gone awry.

If readers seek an action-packed YA novel, this is not the book to read. A character driven novel, *Nothing Burns as Bright as You*, forefronts difficulties and delinquency that profoundly impact the narrator's formative years and her future. Woodfolk's vivid descriptions immerse readers into a passionate, yet troubled, relationship where intensity and destruction tug at the heartstrings.

Woodfolk realistically illuminates social constructs and conventions about love as well as harassment of females. For the narrator, these experiences occur at thirteen as she spends a day at the beach with her family. While there, she notices a girl on the beach and "the tiny flowers on her swimsuit" (p. 41). She recognizes that it "meant something: about what [she] liked, about who [she] might love someday" (p. 42). Too, she understands that her feelings are unconventional and contemplates what "people might think, how it might change everything" (p. 42). This revelation highlights the need for acceptance, even in – especially in – a world where difference is frowned upon.

Too, the notions of vulnerability and naivety are exposed. Her thoughts are interrupted by a man who lures her into the water on the pretense that his own child, a toddler, is learning to swim. Once they are in the ocean, he tells her the toddler has disappeared. At that frantic moment, she suspects "something sinister" and makes a lifesaving but risky decision to escape and swims far past the "ropes and buoys" (p. 47). She nearly drowns but is rescued at the last minute by her father. Although her family is grateful for her rescue, she is berated by her own father who chastises, "What the hell were you doing?" (p. 47). To that, she acquiesces, "I didn't need to be rescued" (p. 47). The sentiment is not lost on readers as she asserts, we live "in a world that always makes things that aren't your fault your fault" (p. 48). A powerful testament to the prevalence and impact of victim-blaming.

Contradictions run throughout the novel, and the most evident contrasts are between the two women themselves. The narrator refers to herself as "reckless and oddly sweet and gentle and possessive" while her partner is "moody and bizarrely kind and gorgeous and intense" (p. 68). Danger and safety. Fear and excitement. Together and apart. Fire and water. The tensions bring forth the imminent demise of their relationship. While fire is the metaphor that holds the narrative together, it is also fire that leads to the ruinous ash heap of their relationship. The narrator even refers to their relationship as a "novel length word problem" (p. 227) where she is "afraid to stay, but more afraid to go" (p. 224). These two young women navigate their own passions and perils where juvenile delinquency and "violence delights" (p. 210). Destruction alters their lives forever. Caught up in fear and desperation, the narrator protests, "F--k it; F--k everything; F--k the whole world" as she contemplates setting alight a series of fires (p. 233). Just as a fire can be contained or blown out of control, the characters confront the dumpster fires in their lives through decisions that affect them long after the fires are out.

The first chapter is a prelude to the contentiousness of relationship as "Opposites" sets up a series of contrasts between their personalities. The narrator reveals the crux of their fraught relationship as she compares the two of them to "Fire and water. Flames and frost. Hot and cold, burning and freezing. Opposites" (p. 6). Like a fire, their relationship ignites, burns wildly, and is snuffed out. To rekindle desires would be to set the fire alight again, but will the fire burn again, and will the two women succumb to the backdraft?

Woodfolk's syntactical precision and word choices mesmerize and sustain the reader, while the unraveling of events moves the nonlinear story forward. In a recent interview, Woodfolk (Stone, 2020) provides three key take-aways from *Nothing Burns as Bright as You*: for readers. First, nothing is wrong with you. Second, there is someone out there who will love you unconditionally – if not now, later. And third, you are worth fighting for. These are life lessons driven home through poignant thoughts and feelings of a candid narrator.

Fire is a metaphor for the relationship between the narrator and her partner. The narrator professes, "You set me on fire while I sent something else up in flames, and the only thing

that will put me out now is you" (p. 19). Just as igniting a fire requires a heat source, so does a relationship. It is the unpredictability of the fire and relationship which keeps readers tuned in and waiting to see if a renewal will bellow life into the old flame.

Book 2: Year on Fire

Year on Fire by Julie Buxbaum explores the intricacies of family, friendship, love, identity, and the truths or lies people tell to protect themselves and others. Told from alternating perspectives of four teens in Los Angeles - Immie, Arch, Paige, and Rohan - the primary plot centers on a case of arson when a fire is set in a restroom at their high school. The fire mystifies students, and speculations about the arsonist run rampant. With an arsonist on the loose, the case heats up through first-person accounts of the four friends. Immie, Arch, Paige, and Rohan provide commentary on the school fire and reveal their own private fires. Through these personal narratives, their innermost insecurities, vulnerabilities, and perceptions of their lived experiences are laid bare as revelations about the arson are exposed. The suspense, diverse characters, and multiple plot lines engage readers from the first to the last page.
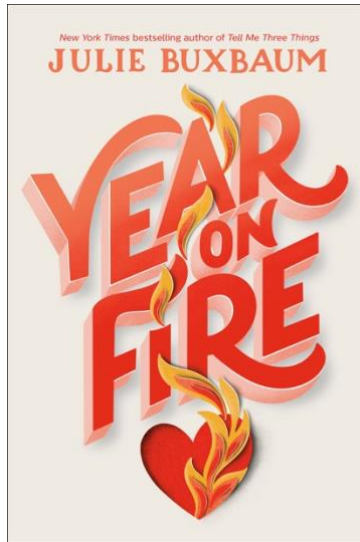
Each teen contends with a myriad of internal and external conflicts, which run the gamut from appearance, physical and emotional attraction, neglect, domestic violence, self-worth, academic performance, and societal expectations. Twins, Immie and Arch Gibson, struggle with a father who is narrowminded and volatile while their mother tries to maintain a sense of normalcy. Immie and Arch contemplate their own feelings about their respective romantic interests against a backdrop where family and societal norms take an emotional toll. Paige lives a financially privileged life, but she is largely left on her own to navigate nearly every aspect of her teenage life, including romantic interests, high school friendships, and day to day decision-making. Rohan, a transfer student from the United Kingdom (UK), is caught between his parents' contentious divorce as he navigates a move to the United States that he did not choose. Rohan faces his father's marital infidelity, his mother's independent life, and separation from Kaia – his best friend and former girlfriend in the UK – all while dealing with the demands of academics and friendships in a new high school.

Buxbaum depicts difficulties between adolescence and adulthood through authentic characters and realistic events; consequently, the characters' struggles resonate with readers.

Year on Fire provides a clear reminder of the complexities of growing up and the tensions which persist into adulthood. Buxbaum boldly explores queer and straight love, marital and parental relationships including domestic violence and infidelity, and nuances of friendships and siblingship. Buxbaum's exploration of human experiences illustrates both boundaries and bonds of relationships. Too, Buxbaum illustrates that actions have lasting consequences and emotions are very much a part of the human psyche. The heartfelt novel affords readers with opportunities to understand teenage experiences, dilemmas, and choices. For adolescent and adult readers alike, this recommended novel serves as a timely reminder of the need for acceptance, compassion, and understanding through life's challenges.

Book 3: Paradise on Fire

Jewell Parker Rhodes's *Paradise on Fire* takes readers on a teenager's journey across the United States to a California wilderness camp. It follows Addy as she travels solo for the first time from her and her grandmother's New York home. Although it is Addy's grandmother, Bibi, who decides to send Addy to the camp, Addy makes the best of it as she takes both a geographic and emotional journey to overcome the trauma of her parents' untimely deaths.

On a plane with a group of unfamiliar teens from the east coast, Addy and the others are destined for Wilderness Adventures located outside of Los Angeles. Referred to as "Paradise Ranch," Addy wonders how a remote camp could, in any way, be paradise. From the first page, Rhodes establishes themes of transition, maturation, trauma, survival, and loss. Just as Addy has been tested as a child when her parents died as a result of a fire, Addy's spirit is once again tested when faced with a California forest fire. The fire causes a chain of events in which she and her fellow campers find themselves in grave danger. Defenseless, the only way for the campers to survive is to escape, but where do they go? Without knowing the lay of the land, how will the teens escape? With an aptitude for spatial awareness and geography, Addy's cartography skills have the potential to save lives, but the emotional toll is great, and the consequences are lasting.

As the fire burns acres of land, the campers seek escape routes, but no one – not even the camp counselors – knows the lay of the land better than Addy. Seeing, feeling, and tasting the fire bring back latent memories of her parents, yet her survival depends on calculated measures to find a viable escape route. Addy wrestles with the past and the present. Caught in a dire situation, it is her grandmother's advice that keeps her
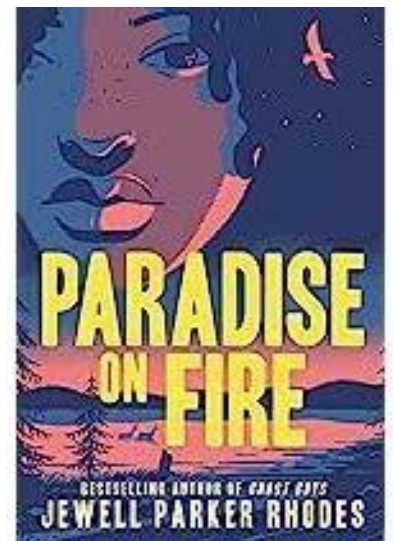
going as she recollects, "Bibi always told me I could fly" (p. 98). Will it be enough to keep her from clouded judgement and propel her into action to save her own life? Will her campmates succumb to the suffocating smoke or escape the rolling flames? In addition to the obvious man-vs-nature conflict, the internal battle and remembrance of deadly fire rattles Addy. The heat, smoke, and fastmoving flames are no match for anyone much less an inexperienced group of teenager campers. It is Addy's penchant for cartography and adroit geographic skills that have the potential to save her and the others, but in doing so she risks her own life. Without her efforts, she knows her campmates will perish. The flames, advice of her grandmother, bonds to her new campmates, and the haunting memories of her parents' deaths do not escape her. With her past experiences and knowledge, she confronts the all too familiar flames.

It is through Addy's journey from the Bronx to LA – placed alone for hours on a plane, thrust into a van, and plopped into Paradise Ranch – that readers vicariously experience leaving home, traveling, making friends, contemplating the past, and battling for a brighter future. Through Addy's journey of firsts, she sees the world from fresh eyes – housing unlike any in the Bronx where "thirty single-story homes, mostly painted white" and "mobile homes" coexisted (p. 15). Along the way, Addy skeptically views forests of trees from the van window like "a horror movie" where "people have vanished" (p. 19). She experiences night air that "[smells] of green, cedar, and smoke" (p. 23). And later, she finds herself up against the choking cinder and smoke that claimed the lives of her parents and consumed her own life. Could she, would she, have the strength, endurance, and fortitude to survive it? In doing so, would she be able to save others?

Rhodes depicts Addy's childhood trauma and the incredible strength of spirit it takes to reconcile the past, deal with the present, and hope for a promising future. A straightforward plot, realistic character development, rich descriptions, and authentic dialogue engage readers from beginning to end. Rhodes taps into her own appreciation of the natural environment as a backdrop for the novel. She captures the importance of "environmental stewardship" while recognizing the significance of human impacts on the natural world (Macchia, 2021). Rhodes presents National Parks as opportunities for adolescents to better understand the natural world, but notes that students of color infrequently access National Parks. Gathered from a 2020 survey, Rhodes' afterward in *Paradise on Fire* indicates "minority visitation [to National Parks] is low: less than 2 percent of African American, 5 percent Asian American, and 5 percent Hispanic American" populations (p. 246). As Rhodes offers understandings about environmental wonders, she affords readers with ideas for exploration and learning in National Parks. In this way, adolescents are exposed to opportunities that exist for little or no costs across the United States.

Conclusion

When I first began teaching several decades ago, the body of YAL was not nearly as robust, diverse, or abundant as it is today; yet, it has also never been so publicly scrutinized, criticized, contested, and banned (Natanson, 2021). Today, perhaps more than ever, the impetus to engage students in the act of reading is imperative. To kindle a desire to read, adolescents need opportunities to access a wide variety of texts that reflect their lives, demonstrate relevancy, and pique their interests.

Fisher and Frey (2018) assert:
> to increase reading volume, teachers have to expand the amount of choice students have in what they read. Students who have opportunities to choose their own books develop elaborate strategies for selecting books and are more likely to become intrinsically motivated readers (p. 91).

It is simply not enough to offer works from the cannon alone. Although the classics have a special place in my heart as an English teacher and avid reader, today's adolescent readers need more…more supports such as modeling, resources, choices, and time for reading.

Throughout my career I have prioritized reading, whether it was first grade, high school special education, secondary English, or today with pre-service teachers. I enjoy discussions with my students where we talk about authenticity, credibility, readability, representation, cultural consciousness, interest, engagement, and self-selected books. Ultimately, I want pre-service teachers to kindle a love of reading with their students and spark a desire to read beyond the classrooms. In this way, reading allows students opportunities of self-discovery. Ivey and Johnston (2013) suggest "that while constructing meaning from text, students [also use] text to construct meaning in their lives" (p. 270). These opportunities support students to become lifelong readers, writers, thinkers, and learners.

Teachers play a critical role in enriching students' reading experiences. Time to read and opportunities to choose books are important factors to kindle students' desire to read. Morgan and Wagner (2013) assert that book selections allow students to "[rediscover] reading by choosing good books" and in turn "[invigorates] their passion for reading" (p. 666 & 659).

Nothing Burns as Bright as You, *Paradise on Fire*, and *Year on Fire* abound with rich language, well-developed characters, realistic depictions of adolescents' life challenges, and candid explorations of prevalent social issues. As the YAL market expands with genres, subject matter, literary forms, and representations of the diverse world in which we live, readers are presented with opportunities to recognize, understand, and act upon the very real issues presented. *Nothing Burns as Bright as You*, *Paradise on Fire*, and *Year on Fire* offer diverse perspectives, lifestyles, identities, understandings that are larger than ourselves.

Appealing to a wide audience, *Nothing Burns as Bright as You*, *Paradise on Fire*, and *Year on Fire* provide readers with understandings about friendship, love, survival, loss, reconciliation, redemption, and hope.

Nothing Burns as Bright as You, *Paradise on Fire*, and *Year on Fire* each offer a slice of what contemporary YAL looks like. As I emphasize with preservice teachers, it is essential to:

- *Know* what is happening in the YAL market *and* know what is happening with students
- *Explore* YAL authors and genres
- *Evaluate* the strengths, challenges, and opportunities around banned and challenged YAL
- *Discuss* YAL with colleagues, friends, and students.
- *Advocate* for a wide variety of YAL in libraries and classrooms
- *Promote* a culture of reading
- And, *read* lots of YAL including these three titles!

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More than Academic: Texts for Teens

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Abstract: Middle and high school students are dealing with many heavy issues and topics daily – and we're noticing the strain this is putting on their mental health -- yet there are several texts that can be used to help middle grades students develop decision making skills and coping strategies. Teaching reading and writing with books like these in classrooms can help students build a sense of empathy and compassion for others, along with offering them opportunities for contemplation and reflection. Plus, these experiences can also allow students a safe space to invite dialogue and discussion about topics that are part of their worlds.

Keywords: literature, text sets, engagement, social and emotional needs, diversity, empathy, resiliency

Introduction

Today's young adults are balancing several issues, many that are not related to their academic endeavors, and we are noticing the strain this is putting on their mental health. In fact, over 70% of adolescents indicated that anxiety and depression were a major problem amongst their peers (Pew Research Center, 2019). Other noted concerns included bullying, drug and alcohol addiction, poverty, teen pregnancy, and gangs. While academic demands are still a source of stress for middle and secondary students (Pew Research Center, 2019), it is apparent that today's adolescents are carrying burdens that aren't only academic in nature.

In an effort to equip students with the needed tools and strategies for these numerous societal influences and stressors, educators can plan, develop, and implement instructional engagements in their classrooms that, while standards and academic based, serve a far greater purpose than the acquisition of literacy skills. Instead, with learning opportunities that focus on the education of the whole child, we can begin to offer another place for adolescents to lay down some of the heavy burdens they carry with them, as we attend not only to their academic needs, but their social and emotional health, which can have impacts on their academic achievement, civic engagement, and facilitate movement towards social justice endeavors. Utilizing literature that addresses these societal issues can offer students the space to begin dialogue and discussion about those matters that encompass more than the academic demands; they can also

serve as vessels for critical reflection and consideration of the social and emotional needs of our students.

While today's pedagogical considerations often take up social justice as a means in which to move students to activism and civic engagement, before this type of engagement can occur, students' own social and emotional needs must be first considered. Utilizing contemporary literature to ascertain and acknowledge the depth and breadth of worldly issues can offer powerful moments for students to consider these narratives as reflections of their own worlds. This provides spaces for conversation and action beginning in the classroom but moving beyond the school walls. While social justice teaching in some cases is restricted to theory with little practical teaching application, Freire (2001) reminds us that, "Right thinking requires right doing" (p.1). Creating spaces for learning that involves more than the acquisition of academic skills can be part of this "right doing," Freire described.

One way that middle grades teachers can address the academic and individual needs of students is by incorporating literature into their instruction that addresses timely topics along with titles that focus on life skills and decision making. Utilizing text sets and mentor texts for mini lessons can aid teachers in constructing lessons that meet the academic demands standard sets require, while also offering students additional opportunities to engage and respond to quality literature. Access to high quality literature from classroom libraries can have extended benefits, as students who are given opportunities to read inside of school are more likely to read outside of school as well (Catapano, Fleming, & Elias, 2009; Fractor, Woodruff, Martinez, & Teale, 1993; Reutzel & Fawson, 2002). In fact, students who have access to diverse books read 50-60% more than their peers (ILA, 2018).

Allowing students choice when it comes to the selection of titles as well as access to diverse titles is especially important for striving readers and underrepresented student populations. Research indicates that when students have a variety of books readily available to them and are allowed choice and avenues for dialogue and discussion amongst their peers, more students will read willingly (Brooks & Frankel, 2019; Guthrie & Humenic, 2004; Ivey & Johnston, 2013). Freire (1970) asserted that dialogue has transformative power for individual identities and identity construction and can aid in the formation of collaborative communities in which these revelations may occur. Creating this community through dialogue can only occur when students are able to "speak their world" (Freire, 1970, p. 88). For some students, their realities may be different from their peers or may include challenges that they find difficult to openly discuss. While many educators are aware of what Moll and colleagues (2006) describe as rich "funds of knowledge" that students possess, it is those "dark funds of knowledge" (Zipin, 2009) that many teachers wrestle with. Literature becomes a natural vehicle to capitalize on our student interests and needs, while also addressing their funds of knowledge, both light and dark.

Text sets are resources collected by the teacher that span a variety of reading levels, genres, and perspectives and often include multiple types of media centered around a common theme. Utilizing books in middle grades classrooms can offer several benefits to students in a variety of settings but are especially beneficial in the times following the pandemic. With students emerging from what could be described as a fragmented and destabilizing educational experience during COVID, returning to the traditional school routines can be challenging. In some cases, behavior issues can be a battle, while the social adjustments required can be frustrating for some. With this in mind, we have compiled a variety of texts that can be used to help attend to students' emotional and social needs, while also acknowledging the challenges exacerbated following the pandemic. Plus, as many students learn to re-navigate the face-to-face social world after considerable time online, and in many cases, isolation from their peers, offering students opportunities to engage in discourse with their peers, while also addressing many of their social and emotional needs, can prove beneficial.

You'll notice that several of these books in the text set are picture books, which is purposeful due to the fact that picture books serve as unintimidating modes of delivery for material. Knowing that some middle grades students are reading below grade level, the incorporation of these books helps to remove this potential barrier. Additionally, teachers may choose to extend this lesson idea by allowing students to create their own picture book on a social topic. Using pictures books in the original text set offers students the ability to make note of the features and characteristics of this particular genre which they can then transfer into a writing composition of their own. Below are some sample texts that can be included in a text set that focuses on decision making, mental health, and social emotional learning.

After the Fall: How Humpty Dumpty Got Back Up Again

Santat's (2017) children's book focuses on the familiar fairy tale favorite, Humpty Dumpty, but this time, we get the rest of the story. Told in beautiful illustrations and vivid text, readers learn how Humpty's fall has affected him since the event. Afraid to venture out a because he is fearful of getting hurt
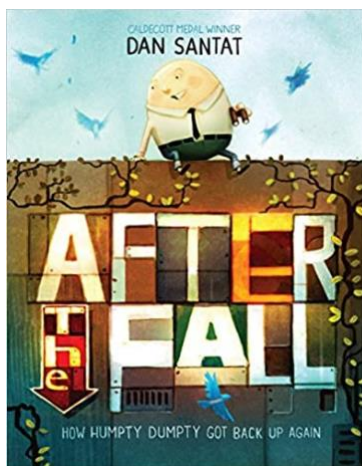
again, he begins missing out on the activities he loved the most.

After a while, Humpty realizes exactly what he is missing out on due to his fear and he decides to venture out and try again. This book is a fantastic example of resiliency and the power of conquering fear. Plus, since the storyline focuses on a character who's known mostly for his tragic fall,

this allows readers to see that their shortcomings or mistakes don't have to define them; instead, they can write the rest of their stories. Failures don't have to be defining moments, but rather opportunities for learning, reflection, and change.

Scholastic Choices: I Did It Without Thinking

Hugel (2008) compiled true stories from teens who have made rash decisions without thinking and how that impacted their lives. Within the book, a variety of teenage students share

their accounts, both positive and negative, that impacted them. Some share about getting a tattoo while others share about helping the homeless. The teens reflect on their choices after they have occurred and, at times, wished they could have done things a little differently.

The book not only gives students a chance to hear from other students just like them, possibly making similar decisions as them, but also see the regret and pain the choices have brought upon themselves. Plus, it gives a first-hand account of how taking time to make decisions not only can help you at the moment but also long term, saving yourself from years of regret.

Princess Princess Ever After

O'Neill (2020) takes us on a journey of two unlikely friends; Princess Amira is a strong, warrior-like character whereas Princess Sadie is more of the sweet and kind type. Princess Amira helps rescues Princess Sadie from a town and the two

set off on their adventure to rescue others. The story puts a spin on the traditional "save the princess" storyline. Instead of the traditional fairy tale components, which are often gendered, this graphic novel shakes things up. These princesses save a prince in distress, deviate from the violence of slaying an ogre, and instead engage in dialogue and teach him to dance among other adventures. This graphic novel

blends several different aspects of decision-making into a single storyline with diverse storylines and LGBTQ characters. It touches on the decision to act ethically, like when Sadie convinced Amira to help save the prince. It also

addresses the pressures of pleasing parents and sometimes making choices that best serve yourself. Plus, it includes traditionally oppressed populations in the characters: LGBTQ+, African American, and female. The story allows readers to see that how you treat others and the choices you make go a long way.

Extra Yarn

Barnett and Klassen (2018) share a touching story of a young girl's impact on her community through a magical box of yarn. The story starts with a black and white town, until Annabelle uses the yarn to "beautify" the streets. She makes a sweater for herself and her dog and another for a bully and his dog, who quickly changes his mind about the sweaters. At school, Annabelle is turning heads and distracting the class so she knits a sweater for all of her peers (and the teacher) and still had more yarn. People travel from all over after hearing about the amazing yarn that Annabelle had that never ran out. Later, a duke offers ten million dollars to purchase it from her, but she denies the request. The duke steals the yarn and when he arrives back home, the box is empty. He throws the box out of the tower in anger, and it floats across the water back to Annabelle, where she continues to knit with the yarn.

This story truly is that of giving. Annabelle always had a little extra to give her community, never knowing when she would run out. She continued to knit sweaters for all and found joy in doing so. The story shows students that doing for others not only brings them joy but also yourself while giving them purpose. Others may try and steal what you are doing as their own, but it is only you who has the ability to do what you do. Students who are learning about decision-making can see the impact on the community in a fresh light with a creative story.

Same, Same but Different

Elliot and Kailash live on opposite sides of the world with very different ways of living; however, they find commonality in many of their hobbies and everyday routines. Through pen pal-like correspondence, Kostecki-Shaw (2012) tells the story of two boys sharing what their world looks like, such as their passion for climbing trees. One boy climbs in a backyard with a treehouse and the other in the forest with monkeys; they find that even though they do not have the exact same experiences, they both love climbing. Through a series of other similar experiences, the two boys recognize they are from different cultures but have so much in common, forming a friendship from across the ocean.
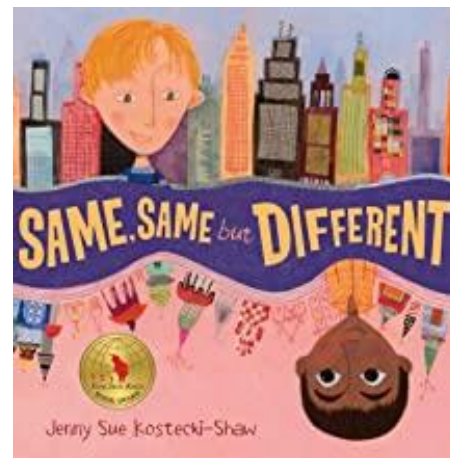
This picture book gives students a chance to see that no matter how different we might think we all are, we are more similar than different. The story gives a chance for reflection for students to relate to the characters and think about the friendships they have. Especially in diverse populations, students can see that although they might come from different home environments and cultural practices, they can connect on some level. As students build their decision-making skills, they are able to see how they can treat others that seem different; they can not only bridge the gap between them but possibly form friendships as well.

Fox

Wild's (2008) picture book offers multiple opportunities for rich discussion. Unsettling, yet hopeful, *Fox* follows the characters of the magpie, dog, and fox and the impact of their brief encounter and interactions. A stunning work that addresses trust, loyalty, betrayal, and hope, this picture book is one that is certainly not for young readers. Its abrupt ending doesn't have the typical bedtime story resolution, which offers multiple chances for students to discuss the complexity of the relationships and the consequences of decisions as well as the impact decisions may have on those around us.
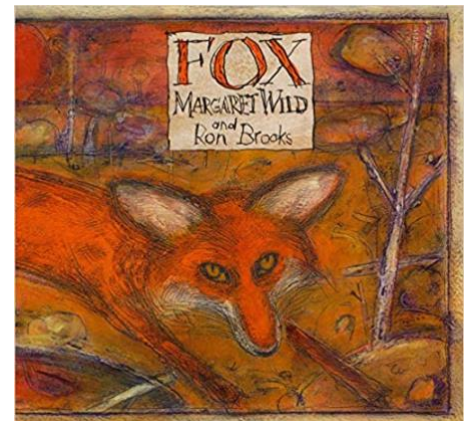
Conclusion

While these suggested books are only a few of the possible texts that can be integrated into middle school classrooms, these can provide students with opportunities for discussion and reflection, while also addressing world and societal concerns. Because dialogue and discussion can be transformative for students and since literature can allow students to engage and interact with a variety of characters, books such as these are invaluable in the classroom. By attending to our students' social and emotional needs, we can begin to better prepare them for the challenges of the world.

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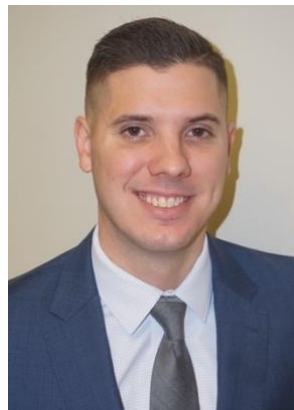
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Shaking Up Assessment: Integrating Low and High Technology Tools

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Abstract: Assessment is an important component of education because it communicates whether the academic goals are met within a class. Generally, assessments offer opportunities for educators to target their teaching goals and to measure the extent to which the expected goals are attained (Madani, 2016). Incorporating the right technology provides opportunities to enhance teaching and learning. This article presents several low- and high-tech tools that middle grades educators can integrate into their instructional practice as a developmentally responsive way to facilitate the assessment process.

Keywords: assessment, digital tools, technology integration, technology toolkit

Background

Assessment is an important component of education because it communicates whether academic goals are met. Assessment paired with instructional goals is the cornerstone of a teacher's instructional methods. It can become easy to stick to tried and true methods of assessment that do not fully take advantage of the technical innovations within education. Innovative assessment measures can be both low- and high-tech, with each offering various affordances that impact the instructional environment. Middle school students are substantial consumers of technology and integrating innovative assessment methods has the potential to increase engagement and motivation. The purpose of this article is to discuss ways teachers can use technology to address assessment in a middle school class.

There is a plethora of assessments for learning in education; however, for the purposes of this article, special attention will be paid to pre-assessment, formative, and summative assessments as these methods offer a holistic view of students' academic performance. Assessment is viewed as a strategy to detect and determine students' content understanding, abilities, and processing.

Additionally, assessments are used as an intervention in the classroom to promote learning through data collection and constructive feedback (Black & Wiliam, 1998). Assessment is seen as one of the essential teaching and learning methods. It requires several instructional tools and strategies and aids educators in identifying the needs and competencies of their learners accurately. Generally, assessments offer opportunities for educators to target their teaching goals and to measure the extent to which the expected goals are attained (Madani, 2016). Assessments are important at the middle school level as they make the teaching-learning process valid and reliable as teachers can adjust their instruction based on the data collected from their assessments.

The position paper for The Association for Middle Level Education (AMLE) (2021) illuminates the importance of ongoing and authentic formative and summative assessments in the classroom. Specifically, successful middle schools have "varied and ongoing assessments [that] advance learning as well as measure it" (Bishop & Harrison, 2021, p. 9). This information is pertinent to collect as it assists in shaping and tailoring learning goals for current and future instruction. Jackson (2009) argues that to compete in a global society, middle school students "require innovative assessments that go beyond standardized tests" (p. 9). Further, authentic assessments that mirror the real-world have had a positive impact on student learning, autonomy, motivation, self-regulation, and metacognition (Villarroel et al., 2017). Again, these sentiments align well with AMLE's views on curriculum where "instruction fosters learning that is active, purposeful, and democratic" (p. 9).

Types of Assessments

Pre-assessments occur before instruction and formative assessment. Formative assessment occurs during instruction and summative assessment occurs at the end of instruction. Pre-assessments act to establish a baseline of student performance from which student growth or learning gains can be measured (Lazarowitz & Lieb, 2006). This type of assessment is typically low stakes, where the student is not penalized for their gaps in knowledge on the way to mastering content and skills. The aim of formative assessment is to expose student thought, allowing teachers the ability to draw on established conceptualizations of student learning and integrate these ideas into teaching, thereby ensuring a deeper understanding of concepts (Heritage, 2007). Finally, summative assessments are intended to show a unification of student learning. Unlike formative assessments, which are usually used to provide input to students and teachers, summative evaluations are generally high-stakes and are used to measure students' overall learning growth (Gardner, 2010). Tech Thought (2018) provides a succinct description of each assessment measure and their appropriate use (Table 1).

> *Successful middle schools have "varied and ongoing assessments [that] advance learning as well as measure it" (Bishop & Harrison, 2021, p. 9).*

Table 1: Assessment Types

Diagnostic	Assesses a student's strengths, weaknesses, knowledge, and skills prior to instruction.
Formative	Assesses a student's performance during instruction, and usually occurs regularly throughout the instruction process.
Summative	Measures a student's achievement at the end of instruction.
Norm-Referenced	Compares a student's performance against a national or other "norm" group.
Criterion-Referenced	Measures a student's performance against a goal, specific objective, or standard.
Interim/Benchmark	Evaluates student performance at periodic intervals, frequently at the end of a grading period. Can predict student performance on end-of-year summative tests.

Educational Technology vs. Instructional Technology

Technology plays a pivotal role in our lives. Students entering middle school in 2019 were amongst the first groups of children that have not lived in a world without smartphone devices. These students have experienced the proliferation of smart devices, applications, and emerging technologies that are not only changing the way we live but the environment and the ways in which we learn.

Technology, as its most general, is defined as "a system created by humans that uses knowledge and organization to produce objects and techniques for the attainment of specific goals" (Volti 2009, p. 6). Burmaoglu, Sartenaer, and Porter (2019) explored how to conceptualize *technology*, with their final definition including the fluid and adaptability that the term needs to embody: "Technological emergence is a cyclic process in highly creative scientific networks that demonstrates qualitative novelty, qualitative synergy, trend irregularity, high functionality, and continuity aspects in a specified time frame" (p.1). More often, when educators discuss the role and application of technology, we think about instructional and educational technology. Januszewski and Molenda (2013) posit that learning is facilitated and improves performance through educational technology. It is important to note that *educational technology* and *instructional technology* are often used synonymously. However, the former is often used as the broader term, whereas *instructional technology* often refers to the process (Ely, 2008). Aziz (2010) takes this a bit further and focuses on the nuances of the definition that ensure longevity. He classifies educational technology under five components: implementation considerations; appropriateness; facilitate learning through sense, memory, and cognition; enhancing teaching practice; improving learning outcomes. When we look to accreditation bodies and pillars in educational technology standards, the CAEP

organization (2022) includes elements related to the use of specific categories of tools that demonstrate educator mastery in ways that support student learning, whereas the International Society for Technology Education (ISTE) (2020) frames the standards in which educational technology functions in and stresses the importance of pedagogy over tools.

Much of what comes to mind when thinking about technology is high-tech options that permeate our everyday lives; however, the definition's broad nature often discounts the low-tech solutions that can equal or surpass many of the high-tech alternatives. Low-tech is often simple, using traditional or non-mechanical methods (e.g., graphic organizers, sticky notes, grouping strategies, alternative writing tools), whereas high-tech is often computer-based using sophisticated devices (e.g., smartphone, computer, Web 2.0 tool, Virtual Reality). Using low-tech options can capitalize on time and budget efficiency, as well as appeal to multisensory learning. Incorporating the right technical hardware and software provides opportunities to enhance teaching and learning for both the student and teacher.

Integrating Low- and High-Tech Strategies

The following examples provide various low- and high-tech tools that can be used to enhance assessment strategies within instructional contexts. Just like with all forms of technology, it is important to consider the meaningful integration and sound pedagogical underpinnings that guide assessment selections and to not use technology just for the sake of using it.

Graphic Organizers

Graphic organizers are low technology tools that can be integrated into all content areas. There are several types of graphic organizers, but the main purpose of this tool is to generate a visual representation of how concepts are related in content areas. Graphic organizers can be designed by teachers alone or in collaboration with their students (Irwin-DeVitis & Pease, 1995). This tool can be used for formative and summative assessment.

Assessment Category: Formative, Summative
Technology Category: Low-tech
Similar tool to consider: Mind42 https://mind42.com

Plickers

Plickers is a free classroom response system that allows students to engage in formative assessment while providing a sense of confidentiality to their responses. Considered a low technology tool, Plickers consist of supplying each student with one card to manipulate to show what they believe are the best responses to teacher questions. The teacher will use their own technology in the form of a smartphone or iPad to scan student responses. Since 85% of adults in the U.S. own a smartphone (Pew Research Center, 2021), it is possible that using this classroom response system will incur little to no extra cost. Studies have investigated the effectiveness of using Plickers for formative assessment to enhance student learning in the classroom (Elmahdi, Al-Hattami, & Fawzi, 2018). This low technology tool is ideal for assessing in any middle school

content areas, as one card per student is fairly easy to access, and the high technology tool used with this system is provided by the teacher, thus avoiding the potential pitfalls of a school that has yet to institute one-to-one technology.

Tool Link: https://get.plickers.com/
Assessment Category: Formative
Technology Category: Low-tech
Similar tools to consider: Gradecam | https://gradecam.com/

Immediate Feedback Assessment Technique
The Immediate Feedback Assessment Technique (IF-AT) form, first recorded by Epstein, Epstein, and Brosvic (2001), is an alternative for recording answers to multiple-choice questions to conventional Scantron bubble sheets. IF-AT was founded on psychological principles for human learning. Like a lottery ticket experience, the student selects the best choice and scratches to reveal the correct response. If the answer is correct, the student will see a star after the film is scratched from the surface. If a star does not appear, this indicates to the students that they selected the wrong answer and should make another attempt. The IF-AT is a welcoming approach to assessing in a middle school classroom as students are allotted another opportunity to select the best response, which potentially decreases test-taking anxiety and prompts students learning based on receiving immediate feedback (Maurer & Kropp, 2015). The IF-AT form can be used independently or collectively for pre-assessment, formative, and summative assessments.

Tool Link: http://www.epsteineducation.com/home/
Assessment Category: Pre-assessment, Formative, Summative
Technology Category: Low-tech
Similar Tool to consider: Test Scanner |
https://www.apperson.com/

Manipulatives
Manipulatives are physical objects that are used as teaching tools to engage students in hands-on learning. They can be used to introduce, practice, remediate, or assess a concept. They can be purchased, brought from home, or created by the teacher or student. Manipulatives are defined as "objects that appeal to several senses and that can be touched, moved about, rearranged, and otherwise handled by children" (Kennedy, 1986, p. 6). This tool can be virtual, but for the purposes of this paper, it is considered as a low technology tool. Manipulatives can be used is all content areas as a formative assessment to show understanding of concepts learned in a middle school class.

Assessment Category: Formative
Technology Category: Low-tech
Similar tools to consider: National Library of Virtual Manipulatives | http://nlvm.usu.edu/en/nav/vlibrary.html

Exit Slips
Exit slips are a quick and easy way to keep students engaged with a lesson as it ends. This low-tech tool can be used as a closure activity to review content and assess student learning (Frey & Fisher, 2007). At the close of class, students will

write down their thoughts on the lesson, typically responding to a teacher-developed content specific prompt. A grade is not given, but the answer to the student shows the process of thought and helps the instructor to correct any material misunderstandings.

Assessment Category: Formative, Summative
Technology Category: Low-tech
Similar tools to consider: Socrative | https://socrative.com/

Kahoot
This assessment tool is a great way to add gamification strategies to your instruction. Within Kahoot, instructors create student response learning games in the form of quizzes. There are various options for student collaboration through team-based play either individually or within groups through synchronous or asynchronous options. Kahoot is very user-friendly with various templates, pre-made questions, or through the sharing of existing games. Metrics are provided through reports that offer educational information on each students' performance, a breakdown of each question, and the ability to down the full report in a spreadsheet.

Tool Link: https://kahoot.com/
Assessment Category: Formative
Technology Category: High-tech
Similar tools to consider: Gimkit | https://www.gimkit.com/

Edpuzzle
Edpuzzle is an interactive video tool. Within this assessment tool, instructors are able to edit video content while adding various quizzing options to assist in meeting instructional goals. Options such as integrating audio content, comments, and resources extend learning beyond the initial video. The platform offers administration techniques that ensure students review the content and aren't able to move past essential information. Additionally, metrics provide instructors with information about embedded quizzes and have the ability to download for integration within Learning Management System grade books.

Tool Link: https://edpuzzle.com/
Assessment Category: Formative
Technology Category: High-tech
Similar tools to consider: Vizia | https://vizia.co/

Flip
Formerly Flipgrid, this tool brings video production into virtual discussions all arranged through various "grids" organized by topic. Instructors can post a reflective question through various multimedia options. Consequently, students respond by recording or uploading a video recording. Instructions have options to set parameters on video length and responses, and students have options to enhance their content using text, images, stickers, and GIFs. Flip also connects educators and students to the community, allowing for easy sharing and collaboration. There is a searchable "Disco Library" with a wide range of accessible topics, as well as adding your own creations to this library to share with the world.

Tool Link: https://info.flip.com/
Assessment Category: Formative, Summative
Technology Category: High-tech
Similar tools to consider: Seesaw | https://web.seesaw.me/

Spiral

Spiral seeks to transform the 1:1 experience for teachers and students. Within this platform, various applications are available to maximize the educational experience within the classroom and the use of devices. The tools available are limited to four types including quizzing or questioning, creating interactive videos, collaboration management and group assessment measures, and interactive discussion abilities using multimedia. One of the best features of Spiral is its seamless integration with Google Classroom and the G Suite. The platform provides a centralized dashboard where all students, classes, and lessons are viewable. Additionally, there are links to the various applications available where planning is made easy.

Tool Link: https://spiral.ac/
Assessment Category: Formative
Technology Category: High-tech
Similar tools to consider: Nearpod | https://nearpod.com/

Formative

Formative is a great option for flipping classrooms. With options to integrate with Google Classroom or access through a link, this tool can be used with existing Learning Management Systems. Formative allows instructor opportunities to create various assessment activities such as quizzing, open-ended response questions, or uploading multimedia. Instructors have the ability to create activities from scratch or utilize the large library of shared content. Additionally, instructors can provide a wealth of resources and content to students that can be utilized in response to formative feedback. Instructors are able to track students by state standards that are already integrated within the platform, as well as provide real-time feedback to students. Data are downloadable to a spreadsheet for easy integration into Learning Management System's grade books.

Tool Link: https://goformative.com/
Assessment Category: Formative
Technology Category: High-tech
Similar tools to consider: Classkick | https://classkick.com/

Poll Everywhere

Poll Everywhere is an online technology tool that enables students to vote through text messaging (SMS), smartphone, or computer on custom teacher-generated polls. This digital tool allows the teacher to create various types of assessments ranging from multiple-choice, word clouds, clickable images, open-ended questions, etc. Additionally, it allows a certain safety in student response as all individual responses are anonymous. This type of assessment, although collective, can engage the most apprehensive student in your classroom. Poll everywhere can be used as a preassessment or formative assessment. This tool is considered high technology.

Tool Link: https://www.polleverywhere.com/
Assessment Category: Pre-assessment, Formative
Technology Category: High-tech
Similar tools to consider: Meeting Pulse | https://meet.ps/

Conclusion

Assessment is a key part of the student matriculation experience. It is used to determine how a student is progressing toward mastery. Assessment is important at the middle school level because it teaches students how to establish individual and group goals, shows them how to monitor their own success, and offers benchmarks to assess their own level of achievement. Students should experience the major types of assessment in every lesson (i.e., pre-assessment, formative, and summative) as it provides information to track comprehension of the content and to take an active role in the learning process.

Technology has impacted the way we experience the world and thus, the way we teach our students. Incorporating technology into instructional methods, specifically within assessment has the potential to support and engage students who experience a ubiquitous technology ecosystem. Specifically incorporating mobile technologies has shown to improve, "student perceptions of learning, engagement, and actual assessment scores" (Denker, 2013; Jones, Crandall, Vogler,& Robinson, 2013 as cited in Heflin, Shewmaker, & Nguyen, 2017, p.92). Many educators are driven by their desire for greater efficiency to shape positive student outcomes, impact feedback practices, and integrate innovative approaches (Bennett, Dawson, Bearman, Molloy, & Boud, 2017).

Additionally, as educators consider using technology-enhanced assessment measures, it is critical to consider various instructional strategies, software, and hardware options to ensure sound pedagogical practice. It is our hope that the tools and strategies featured in this article will help middle school teachers not only think about technology and assessment, but will combine the two to deliver effective assessments that appeal to digital learners.

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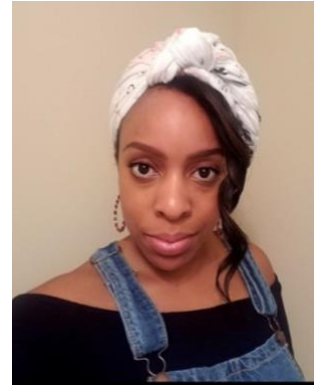
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Connectedness in the Classroom: Classroom Management in the Middle School

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Abstract: As documented by research and assertions from middle school instructors, teaching adolescent students can be a challenging experience for many. Specific challenges include mediocre student engagement, lack of motivation, substandard academic performance, and disengaged teacher-pupil relationships. This article addresses these challenges by offering research-based options for teachers to consider when designing a classroom management system that will improve the aforementioned challenges. The techniques and strategies presented focus on developing relationships and building upon them to make teaching and learning experiences positive, engaging, relevant, and impactful.

Keywords: classroom management, adolescent learner, teaching, supportive relationships, student behavior, expectations, procedures, research-based

Introduction

Teaching today's adolescent learner can be a daunting task, but it can also be an equally rewarding experience. Middle school teachers are expected to know content and pedagogy, develop engaging lessons that meet the needs of diverse learners, and use a variety of instructional strategies that will boost student achievement. To become effective teachers and continuously improve our craft, we are further expected to connect with the students we teach by establishing and maintaining strong and trusting relationships. According to Beaty-O'Ferrall et al. (2010), it is imperative that teachers "win their students' hearts while getting inside their heads" (p. 4). They assert that connecting with students will result in fewer classroom behavior problems and better academic performance (Beaty-O'Ferrall et al., 2010).

Classroom management is critically important in the middle grades years when students are more likely to experience declines in academic motivation and self-esteem (Beaty-O'Ferrall et al., 2010). Research indicates that these declines can be linked to the classroom and particularly to teacher-student relationships (Furrer & Skinner, 2003). Being cognizant of such research findings and incorporating strategies from the fields of counseling and psychology into classroom management systems could assist in reversing these declines.

An engaging learning environment and positive classroom climate in which students are encouraged to excel academically is a recipe for student success. This is especially true if students feel a sense of belonging. An environment where teachers can effectively plan and engage students in learning experiences that meet their diverse needs creates a rewarding and fulfilling experience for teachers and students alike.

Classroom management with a focus on building relationships relates directly to the Association for Middle Level Education (AMLE)'s position statement, in which Bishop & Harrison (2021) describe essential attributes of a successful middle school including:

- Policies and practices are student-centered, unbiased, and fairly implemented.
- Educators respect and value young adolescents.
- The school environment is welcoming, inclusive, and affirming for all.

Creating an engaging learning environment and a positive classroom climate are admirable and desirable goals. But how can these goals be accomplished? Incorporating specific strategies from the field of education coupled with strategies from the fields of counseling and psychotherapy will assist teachers in designing a strong classroom management system. This system must establish and build upon a foundation of trusting relationships with their students.

The purpose of this article is to provide research-based options to consider when designing a classroom management system. These techniques focus on developing relationships and building upon them to make teaching and learning experiences positive, engaging, and impactful.

Procedures and Expectations

The first days of school for teachers and adolescent youth are filled with the excitement of a new year and the anxiety that accompanies it. It involves meeting new friends and reuniting with the old, acting confident - even though you may not feel that way - and a host of other thoughts and feelings. To prepare for the first day of school and all the days that follow, it is important for teachers to establish procedures and expectations for his or her students. Procedures to consider include but are not limited to the following categories: procedures for entering and exiting the classroom, procedures for completing and submitting individual and group work, procedures for teacher-led activities, technology use, emergency drills and other general procedures.

Establishing, discussing, and practicing procedures for all major activities in which students will engage during the first days of school will help your management system run

smoothly and help to avoid chaos. Teachers should provide students with specific feedback to confirm that they are following procedures as expected or if corrections are necessary. Although it is important to establish procedures and expectations during the first days of school, it is equally important to revisit them throughout the school year.

During the same timeframe, planning and reviewing specific expectations with student involvement is necessary. It is customary for teachers to enforce a set of school rules. These rules are often presented to the students and their parents, who are asked to review them together and sign a document indicating that both parents and students understand the rules and consequences students will face should they decide not to follow them. Expectations for student behaviors should be based on these rules but framed in positive terms by the teacher with input from the students. Expectations could include high standards for engaging in classroom activities, the quality of work submitted, and being prepared, responsible, respectful, and reliable. Students should be invited to provide specific examples of each expectation. When students are involved in developing classroom expectations, they are more likely to follow them.

Connecting Relationships and Classroom Management Systems

It is crucial for teachers to know the students they teach. When teachers learn who their students are, they can begin building trusting relationships with them. Once authentic relationships have been established, teachers can design lessons and effectively engage students in activities that are relevant and have lasting impact throughout their students' educational journey. To facilitate this process, I offer the following recommendations: 1) demonstrate empathy, 2) maintain your composure, 3) redirect negative behaviors, 4) honor students' culture and identity, and 5) build a strong community.

Demonstrate Empathy

Researchers agree that probably the most important aspect of a positive relationship is empathy (Beaty-O'Ferrall et al., 2010). A teacher displaying empathy results in the students feeling understood. This is crucial to reaching and relating to young adolescents (Beaty-O'Ferrall et al., 2010). Empathetic relationships are especially important for difficult adolescents (Beaty-O'Ferrall et al., 2010). As we discuss empathy, it is important to examine the meaning of this term. Adler (1956) explains that empathy is "seeing with the eyes of another, hearing with the ears of another, and feeling with the heart of another" (p. 135).

Some students may initially feel comfortable sharing their problems and dilemmas with teachers who indicate their understanding in a manner that unintentionally creates distance. For example, during the initial stages of the pandemic, a female middle school student once emailed her teacher and explained that she was experiencing difficulties submitting her electronic assignments from home during the pandemic. The teacher responded by saying, "You did not have any problems submitting your assignments from home up to this point in the school year. The district has provided laptops for you and your peers, and you are required to complete all assignments whether you are at school or at home. I expect you to continue submitting your assignments as you have been doing up to this point in the school year."

Feeling discouraged by her teacher's unempathetic response, the student had no indication that her teacher understood her situation and did not feel comfortable explaining her dilemma any further. Had the teacher taken the time to discuss the student's situation further, she would have learned that the only way her student was able to complete the homework assignments in the past was by going to the library while attending an after-school program. In her home, the student did not have reliable internet connection nor an appropriate space to study. She was able to use her friend's computer to send the email, but after the pandemic worsened, she could no longer visit her friend's home or submit virtual assignments on a consistent basis.

The teacher could have encouraged the student with an empathetic response such as, "It must be difficult trying to study while being distracted by your siblings and being concerned that your internet connection could go out at a moment's notice." This empathetic response would have demonstrated the teacher's understanding which she would have appreciated. It would also elevate the level of respect that she had for her teacher. Moreover, it would have encouraged the student to further communicate with the teacher so they could discuss alternative ways to keep the student engaged during the pandemic.

Maintain Your Composure

An important component of building relationships includes the ability for educators to control the impulse to display negative reactions to students' inappropriate behavior. Adolescents have the uncanny ability to accurately pinpoint the things that make teachers feel tense, irritated, aggravated, and anxious. The "ability to manage one's own issues as they arise is one of the counselor's most demanding skills" (Beaty-O'Ferrall et al., 2010, p. 7). It marks the difference between the effective and the ineffective counselor (Van Wagoner et al., 1991). This aptly applies to teachers of adolescent students as well. Once a professional gives in to emotions such as anger, exasperation, or displeasure, his or her emotions to function becomes impaired to a degree (Beaty-O'Ferrall et al., 2010).

It is not uncommon for adolescent students to make disrespectful comments and attempt to manipulate his or her teacher. Taking the comments and inappropriate behaviors personally will likely result in conflict and relational strife. To prevent conflicts such as this, Beaty-O'Ferrall et al. (2010) advise teachers to "suspend his or her issues as they arise - to 'place them on the shelf,' so to speak, to be addressed later." It is certainly difficult to demonstrate empathy if teachers are unable to momentarily set their emotions aside. Students are

extremely observant, and they monitor teachers' reactions in challenging situations. The manner in which teachers react will have a definitive impact on the relationship that ensues. Adolescents will analyze the situation and determine if the teacher practices what he or she preaches. As an example, Alexa, a seventh-grade student yells out in class because a group of her peers are "talking about her." The teacher quietly speaks with Alexa outside the classroom door and advises her to ignore what others have to say about her. Later, the teacher reacts angrily when she is disrespected by a group of students. Observing her teacher's reaction to a similar situation, Alexa will have little respect for the teacher's hypocritical display. Teachers can demand respect or earn it. However, earning respect is much more effective, and a teacher's demeanor has a great impact on how he or she is viewed and respected by students.

Redirect Negative Behaviors

When addressing students' negative behaviors, rather than reacting negatively, an approach for connecting with students is to "admire" their negative attitudes and behaviors. Just the phrase, "admiring their negative behaviors" may cause one to scratch their head and read it again. However, this approach is based on a well-established area of research called positive psychology (Seligman, 1999). This approach looks upon negative student behavior as a skill he or she has been practicing and refining for many years. In the case of a manipulative female teen, for example, being manipulative might have been the only or best way of getting her needs met in her family. It is to be entirely expected that she would bring these same skills to school in an effort to meet her needs there as well.

Beaty-O'Ferrall et al. (2010) advise: "Rather than engage in a power struggle with such a student, a teacher should acknowledge the skill that the student has worked so hard to develop - and then redirect it. It is important that this skill is applied with sincerity. Any hint of sarcasm could lead to further alienation between the student and the teacher" (p. 6).

So how might one admire manipulative behavior and redirect it? Consider the following example of a manipulative adolescent girl as offered by Beaty-O'Ferrall et al. (2010).

> Rather than address the girl's manipulations as such, mention to her, "I have noticed that you have the ability to influence people. Is that true?" She will probably reply with something like, "What do you mean?" The teacher can respond by saying, "Well, I have noticed that you can get people to do what you want them to do. Am I wrong?" At this point, the student will likely look at the teacher somewhat suspiciously and smile saying, "Well that's true sometimes, I guess." The teacher can then respond, saying, "You have a valuable skill there. If you use it in other ways, you may find more successful ways of getting your needs met. This skill could be valuable in certain careers, such as corporate management, sales, or even counseling." The young adolescent is usually quite surprised to hear something she has previously been

criticized for now being admired and looked upon as something potentially valuable (Beaty-O'Ferrall et al., 2010, p. 7).

Although adolescent behavior can be quite disconcerting at times, this example provides an opportunity for a new perspective in terms of how teachers could react in a way that helps build trusting relationships. It is common for teachers to feel exasperated when students appear to display pleasure in creating situations that cause teachers to respond in a negative way. Responding to such situations by admiring and then guiding students to redirect inappropriate behaviors is an approach that teachers should consider as they build relationships with their students.

The examples of student misbehavior can cause a great amount of consternation. In many cases, exercising the ability to keep one's composure - consider silently counting to ten - and address the concern in a positive and productive way will help to diffuse the situation. Moreover, though a teacher may become disappointed with a student's negative behavior, students should know that it is the inappropriate actions - not the student - that is the source of disappointment. The statement below supports this premise.

> It is important for the teacher to show that although the student's behavior is disapproved of, she or he still values the individual. The inappropriate behavior must be corrected without rejecting or attacking the learner's self (Marciniak, 2015, p. 117).

Honor Students' Culture and Identity

Developing relationships with students who come from culturally different backgrounds can be challenging and requires specific skills from new and experienced teachers alike (Nieto, 2008). As indicated earlier, it is crucial for teachers to know the students they teach. When teachers learn who their students are, they can begin building trusting relationships with students.

When attempting to build relationships with adolescent students from diverse cultures, additional challenges must be acknowledged and addressed. Such challenges include overcoming barriers that prevent teachers from being empathetic with students from diverse cultures. As asserted by Beaty-O'Ferrall et al. (2010) "these barriers are due to a fear of the culturally different, a lack of knowledge about the differences and similarities between cultures, persistent negative stereotyping and general intolerance" (p. 8).

The process of learning who *all* our students are involves overcoming the fears mentioned above. Creating opportunities to engage students in activities that help them gain a better understanding of their peers would greatly benefit them as they prepare to join college and the world of work. They must prepare to work with peers, colleagues, clients, community members and students from diverse backgrounds.

It is equally important for teachers to engage in these activities as well. By doing so, the teacher will also learn more about

cultural similarities and differences, address negative stereotypes, become more tolerant and less fearful of those who are culturally different. Once these fears have been addressed, the teacher and students will be better equipped to show empathy for each other and build stronger relationships.

To assist with the development of multicultural classroom activities and connecting with multicultural students, it would benefit teachers to take advantage of professional development opportunities that focus on multicultural competence. Multicultural competence includes centering one's awareness of cultural attitudes, beliefs, knowledge and skills (Beaty-O'Ferrall et al., 2010).

Teachers and students benefit from developing multicultural competence. Further, teachers can develop relationships by using the curriculum in ways that are relevant to their students' experiences inside and outside of school. Discussions and activities should allow teachers and students to share experiences about success, failure, struggles, and achievements. Such opportunities promote inclusivity, relevance, active engagement, mutual respect, and trusting relationships.

Build a Strong Community

Overcoming barriers that prevent teachers from demonstrating empathy for their students is indeed necessary and abundantly valuable. Rejecting these barriers provides opportunities for teachers to continue moving in a positive direction - making it possible for trusting relationships to evolve into relationships that are also supportive. For students to feel supported, it is important to provide a safe environment in which they feel comfortable asking questions, sharing ideas, being creative, making mistakes and taking risks. Teachers should encourage students to engage in activities and provide constructive feedback about their accomplishments on a consistent basis. Providing individual feedback demonstrates care for each student and encourages them to meet the high expectations that teachers have for their students.

Teachers can further support their students by providing a variety of interesting activities that encourage a joy for learning. Inviting students to complete a survey about topics that interest them or ideas they would enjoy exploring is an intentional method for generating valuable ideas when designing inclusive lessons. Alternatively, teachers are encouraged to ask students to share topics in which they are interested. Typically, young adolescents are eager to learn about topics they find interesting and useful ones that are personally relevant (Brinegar & Caskey, 2022). They also favor active over passive learning experiences and prefer interactions with peers during educational activities (Brinegar & Caskey, 2022).

Teachers need to plan curricula around real-life concepts (Brinegar & Caskey, 2022) and supply authentic educative activities (e.g., experimentation, analysis and synthesis of

data) that are meaningful for young adolescents (Brinegar & Caskey, 2022).

Providing an environment that invites students to become part of a community in which they will participate, have a role and a voice that will be heard will cultivate a sense of belonging as well as a forum to interact with their peers. Students can be invited to participate in a variety of ways. Teachers could seek students' input on upcoming projects, issues or concerns that may interest them. Students could also be invited to engage in community projects. Brinegar & Caskey (2022) explain that "because young adolescents' interests are evolving, they require opportunities for exploration throughout their educational program" (n.p.). Involving students in the planning of projects, eliciting, and incorporating their ideas, gives them a sense of ownership in their learning. Seizing opportunities to interact with and provide positive feedback for students after they complete their tasks help teachers to strengthen supportive relationships that have already been established.

> *For students to feel supported, it is important to provide a safe environment in which they feel comfortable asking questions, sharing ideas, being creative, making mistakes and taking risks.*

Conclusion

In sum, teachers should be guided by research conducted by Furrer & Skinner (2003), which suggests that a priority for schools should be building the quality of children's relationships. Expanding on this advice, it is imperative for teachers to incorporate these behaviors in their behavior management system to make teaching and learning experiences positive, engaging, relevant, and impactful. When teachers connect with students, the result will be fewer classroom behavior problems.

Further, teachers must be mindful of the importance of knowing the students they teach. When teachers learn who their students are, they can begin building trusting relationships with *all* their students, including those from diverse backgrounds. For these relationships to evolve, teachers should use the curriculum in ways that are relevant to their students' experiences inside and outside of school. Providing a safe environment in which students feel comfortable asking questions, sharing ideas, being creative, making mistakes and taking risks demonstrates the support that students need to feel supported.

Demonstrating empathy within a safe environment helps students to feel that they are understood. Including these techniques and strategies into the classroom management system will chart a definitive path to connectedness in the classroom.

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Supporting Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgendered and Queer (LGBTQ) Youth in Southern Middle Schools

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Abstract: During my experience teaching in a conservative, southern middle school, I have found that gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered and queer (LGBTQ) youth are not afforded the same support systems as other minority groups within the classroom. I have noticed that students who self-identified as a member of the LGBTQ community were less engaged, had lower overall grades, and were frequently victimized by both students and faculty at times. I believed that I could increase the overall mental and physical health in the classroom by instilling supportive means that would translate inside and outside of the classroom. From both personal experiences as a member of the LGBTQ community and students' current challenges, I was able to implement five classroom supports in support of LGBTQ students. The purpose of this article is to advocate for these students and share positive strategies to support them in the classroom.

Keywords: LGBTQ youth, microaggressions, inclusive, preferred pronouns

Introduction

The gay equal rights movement started in the 1920s and lost traction until the late 1960s when activists such as Harvey Milk and Marsha P. Johnson pushed for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered rights. Over the last few decades there has been substantial progress in the search for equality; however, this change has been slow. With more representation of LGBTQ members seen in mainstream media, more youth are self-recognizing their own sexuality and voicing their sexuality at younger ages. It is crucial as these children are recognizing their uniqueness, that all parties involved are able to provide not only understanding but support as well.

This topic relates directly to the Association for Middle Level Education (AMLE)'s position statement, in which Bishop & Harrison (2021) describe essential attributes of a successful middle school including:

- Educators respect and value young adolescents.
- The school environment is welcoming, inclusive, and affirming for all.
- Every student's academic and personal development is guided by an adult advocate.

This past year, the Trevor Project surveyed 35,000 LGBTQ youth across the United States between the ages of 13 and 24 to answer questions regarding their challenges. The survey concluded the following results:

- 75% of LGBTQ youth reported that had experienced discrimination based on their sexual orientation or gender identity at least once in their lifetime.
- 42% of LGBTQ youth considered attempting suicide in the past year, including more than half of transgendered and nonbinary youth.
- LGBTQ youth who had access to spaces that affirmed their sexual orientation and gender identity reported lower rates of attempting suicide than those who did not.

These results detail that LGBTQ youth need more support in the classroom not only academically but emotionally as well. The wellbeing of LGBTQ youth not only relies on supportive means inside the classroom but also the climate of their institution and community. LGBTQ youth that live in conservative areas of the United States like the South, face an increase of societal issues. The Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD) reported there was a significant disparity between the national discomfort compared to southern discomfort of citizens in relation to LGBTQ members in their communities (Table 1).

	National Discomfort	Southern Discomfort	Difference of Southern Comfort vs National Discomfort
Seeing a gay co-worker's wedding picture	27%	32%	5%
Electing a gay politician	29%	35%	6%
Attending a same-sex wedding	34%	40%	6%
Bringing a child to a same-sex wedding	43%	50%	7%
Learning my child was dating a transgender person	59%	61%	2%

Table 1 adapted from GLAAD

National and State Contexts

Individuals living in areas that are not supportive of their identities are less likely to flourish due to the unique challenges they face in their schools and communities. For example, LGBTQ people in southern regions of the United States are more likely to be misunderstood due to the influence of conservative beliefs. Generally speaking, Southern Christianity views homosexuality as a sin and as a moral issue. According to the Pew Research Center (PRC), 78% of individuals in South Carolina report as Christians with 69% of those individuals stating that religion is very important to them (Pew Research Center, 2020). Regardless of our personal beliefs or values, however, teachers have an obligation to support, respect, and care for all students.

Application

As with any underrepresented group in the classroom, it is crucial that teachers are equipped with professional development and supportive means to help all students in and out of the classroom. Middle school is a pivotal time where students are not only going through physical changes but social and emotional changes as well. During middle school, students are starting to realize both their sexual and gender identity. It is important that teachers are able to foster a classroom climate that is a safe space for all students. This is especially important in more southern communities where any gender or sexual identity deemed outside the realm of "normalcy" tends to lead to ostracization from their peers.

Over the past two years I have implemented some instructional practices that related to what I wanted as an LGBTQ youth and the future needs of students similar to Student A and Student B. The instructional practices I adapted over the last two years were based on recent testimonials of students at my current school (Table 2).

Student A: "Hi, my name is [redacted] and I identify as transgendered. A lot of kids respect me for who I am, like a lot of my friends for example. But I also face some 'mean' people that kept asking my questions that made me feel super uncomfortable. One question that I hate the most is 'What's between your legs?!'. A lot of people ask me that over and over again. Only one teacher I feel really respects me and calls me by my preferred pronouns and/or by my preferred name. I have some teachers that refuse to call me by my preferred name. A teacher said, 'Well I'm going to call you what your parents want me to call you.' I would really love it if all the teachers would call me by my preferred name and/or my preferred pronouns. I don't like being called a girl. Please call me a boy because I am one."

Student A's name has been redacted for confidentiality. Student A is a current seventh-grade student I have taught for the past two years.

Student B:
"I don't feel like part of the school community because I am never accepted because of it, first reason is that my friends dropped me because of it, I even got people that I'm

not even friends with to despise me and people treat me differently. Honestly, I am still friends with my past friends, and they came out to me too, making me feel that I'm not alone. I've been let alone because of some students because most of them chose their religion over friends and just left our friendship behind. As a non-binary homosexual, I pretended to be interested in females so that I don't lose anyone else. People call me by he/him but it's they/them. I just don't feel the same as the other kids most of the time, but I'm like my friends and they're the only people I talk to. The school should just be accepting and supportive of everybody, and that everyone can be equal no matter their preference of gender."

Student B's name has been redacted for confidentiality. Student B is a current sixth-grade student.

Table 2: Student Testimonials

With the thoughts and feeling of my students in mind, I have adopted five practices that can be implemented in any class to help foster a welcoming environment for not only LGBTQ students, but all students as well.

Instructional Practices for Supporting LGBTQ Students

Fostering an Inclusive Classroom

In order to make students feel welcomed and safe, it is important to implement a classroom management style that reflects that. In my own practice, I have based my classroom management on building mutually respectful relationships with and among students. Giving students opportunities to work together in diverse groups can help students overcome assumptions they may have about other students based on aspects of their identity and can help all students feel more comfortable in class, especially if they are a member of an underrepresented group (Kennesaw, 2020). By setting a strong foundation in the classroom about acceptance, the students will follow the expectation. A climate of acceptance in the classroom can be implemented in a multitude of ways, i.e., ice breakers, modeling effective ways of communicating, a zero-name-calling policy, etc. An effective ice breaker activity I have implemented in the classroom is *Identify Grouping*. This activity, created by the Human Rights Campaign (HRC), is best implemented during the first days of school, when educators are establishing routines and rituals. The activity encourages students to group themselves and then analyze how they chose to group themselves following the activity. This allow students to reflect on how they felt to be grouped with other students and more importantly on how it feels to not be included into a group. *Identifying Grouping* helps build an authentic sense of community in the classroom and supports all students regardless of cultural and personal differences.

I have also found it effective to lead by example by treating all students with kindness and fairness. When adapting and implementing an inclusive classroom, it is important to show

consistency in classroom management consequences for students that are not adhering to the classroom climate. In the event a student is not adhering to the mutual respect and inclusivity in the classroom, correct their behavior immediately. It is important for the students to recognize that broken rules have consequences, but also show that you will be an enforcer of the rules and procedures. For example, in my current classroom, if students resort to name calling, I will conference with the student immediately and ask reflective questions such as "How does it feel when someone is speaking to you in a negative way?" "How do you think the other student may have felt based on your actions?" "Does name-calling make someone feel included?" and "How do you feel when you are excluded by your peers?" Asking these questions allows the student to reflect on their behavior while also encouraging them to change their mindset. By creating a positive classroom climate and environment, all stakeholders can learn in an environment that is conducive for learning.

Acknowledgment of Preferred Names and/or Pronouns

Kids understand themselves better, and at a much younger age, than adults assume. This includes their gender identity. Gender identity refers to one's inner sense of being male, female, both, or neither (University of Pennsylvania, 2021). From the excerpt from Student A in Table 2, a student in the seventh grade, it is clear that they acknowledge their identity and have preferred pronouns. Yet navigating the legalities and having the courage to call a student their preferred pronouns can raise issues for students, parents and teachers. Under Title IX, students are legally protected to have their preferred name and/or pronouns used in the classroom (NEA, 2016). Parents may push back on calling a student an alternative name due to conflicting ideologies within the family, but students are within their legal right to be addressed by gender confirming names/pronouns. At the beginning of the school year, I recommend that teachers encourage students to fill out a handwritten questionnaire with their preferred name. This provides you with written proof of the students' request.

As educators, we are advocates for our students and their rights. Even when issues arise with parents or administration (at parent request), we must remain firm in advocating on the behalf of our students. If a student has a preferred name that may challenge the societal feelings of your area and possibly ostracize the student, it is my best practice to call the student by gender-neutral pronouns such as they or them. This makes it clear that you respect their identity and want them to feel comfortable in class.

More Inclusive Sexual Health Classes

The current Science curriculum in South Carolina introduces sexual health classes in the seventh grade. Middle school is a difficult time for students emotionally and socially even without the complexity of gender identity and sexual orientation. In my current school, students can opt out of sexual health classes which can save them from an uncomfortable situation in class, but ultimately can lead to additional ostracization amongst their peers. Opting out of a

sexual health class has additional drawbacks due to the state's limitations of comprehensive, progressive sexual education. Students who opt out of sex health classes can fail to receive the limited but valuable sexual health education that young teenagers need. Incorporating more inclusive sexual health classes can first start with having a nonbiased teacher implementing the curriculum. This will help implement a positive classroom climate but also stop teachers from subconsciously implementing their own personal beliefs regarding sexuality and sexual health. Sexual health classes can also be more inclusive by choosing non-specific vocabulary when explaining concepts. For example, when talking about the act of sex, instead of saying sex occurs between a woman and a man, the teacher can rephrase the sentence by saying that sex occurs between two consenting adults. This not only reinforces that sex does not only occur between people of the opposite sex, but emphasizes the importance of two consenting adults.

Recognizing Microaggressions

Sexual or gender microaggression is a subtle negative attitude conveying that one's sexual or gender identity is less valuable than the dominant culture's defining identities (Foreman, 2019). Students A and B in Table 2 both outlined times when teachers and staff exerted microaggressions that made them feel less than who they are. Student A and B both felt diminished when a teacher refused to call them by their preferred name and/or pronouns.

Teachers refusing to call students by their preferred name is a microaggression. When people do come out as transgendered or gender fluid, using their name assigned at birth is an explicit way to insult them. As a member of a school community, it is important to not stand by and allow others to display these aggressions towards students. According to Foreman (2019), if you ask a person about their pronoun use in a very genuine and kind way, many people may find that validating or welcoming because you are not making assumptions and are giving them the respect to self-identity.

Other examples of microaggressions include allowing students to say statements such as "that's gay;" assuming students' identity and/or sexuality based on how they present; and showing unfairness in the classroom. A study conducted by Baricevic and West (2018) interviewed fifteen high school students ranging in grades nine to twelve identified five main microaggressions students commonly shared: 1) expressed denigration; 2) lack of recognition; 3) change in relationships; 4) stereotyping; and 5) mixed messages (see Table 3 for classroom examples). As an educator it is important to both recognize when these microaggressions are happening and to intervene. A positive school community is not effective when faculty and students are not all on the same page.

> *Have a courageous conversation with colleagues and encourage them to call students by their preferred names and pronouns.*

Microaggression	Nonverbal and Verbal Examples
Expressed Denigration	*Nonverbal:* Rolling of eyes, looks of disgust or disdain, giving the "cold shoulder" when in presence of self-identified LGBTQ student. *Verbal:* Name calling; making inappropriate jokes about gender and sexual orientation; refusal to be partnered with LGBTQ students; forcing students into boy/girl teams.
Lack of recognition	*Nonverbal:* Ignoring LGBTQ students; ostracizing students from their peers. *Verbal:* Refusing to call a student by their pronoun; grouping all LGBTQ individuals as gay
Change in Relationships	*Nonverbal:* Refusal to speak to a student who has affirmed their gender or sexual preference aloud. *Verbal:* Targeting a student based on identity; forcing other students to distance themselves from a student.
Stereotyping	*Nonverbal:* Assigning an LGBTQ student to a pink team, assuming a student's sexual identity. *Verbal:* Engaging in speech such as "Of course he likes dolls, he's gay," "Sally really good at softball because she's a lesbian," "He is clearly going to be a drag queen because he's gay."
Mixed Messages	*Nonverbal:* Praising the student when not exhibiting and/or engaging in stereotypical behaviors but ignoring them when being themselves. *Verbal:* Speech such as "He's very smart but too bad he's gay;" "Sara is really pretty for a lesbian."

Table 3: Examples of Classroom Microaggressions

Conclusion

As a member of the LGBTQ community who recognized their own sexuality in middle school, I have experienced individuals along the way that made school unbearable. LGBTQ students are no different than any other student in the classroom and should be treated with equal respect. This is by no means a comprehensive list on how to support LGBTQ students. Teachers should actively educate themselves and seek out professional development to aid and assist supporting underrepresented students in the classroom. The mentioned instructional strategies can only be applied with high fidelity through teacher education and understanding of this group of students. An educator should be a blank slate in the classroom not showing religious, political or sexual identity and orientation biases in the classroom. It is crucial for teachers and educators alike to remember that all students want to be accepted, treated kindly, and made to feel safe in the betterment of their education.

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Time to Escape! Using Escape Rooms in the Middle Grades Classroom

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Abstract: Motivation and student engagement are at the forefront of quality instructional design and implementation. While traditional teaching methods may have been effective in the past, today's diverse student body, with their rich literacy experiences in both print and digital worlds, demand unique classroom engagements. Because problem solving and critical thinking skills are ones that are required for student success both in and out of school, instructional opportunities should be designed with this in mind. One way to address the diverse skills and needs of today's students, along with the instruction of academic skills needed for success, is through the implementation of literacy escape rooms. Using literacy escape rooms can provide students with opportunities to practice and refine several academic skills in a highly motivating and engaging setting.

Keywords: literacy, engagement, motivation, problem solving, escape rooms

Introduction

Today's young adolescents need ample time and opportunities to practice problem solving, think and critically question, and work collaboratively in a team setting. These, along with experiences that are motivational, impactful, and engaging, can be the key to successful learning opportunities for students at all levels, but especially at the middle grades level. Plus, because today's classrooms are highly diverse, not only in student background, culture, and language, many classrooms have students with a wide range of ability levels and interests. With this in mind, escape rooms become prime opportunities to plan, create, and implement activities that motivate students *and* address content.

As a literacy educator, I am constantly searching for ways to introduce, reinforce, and refine the necessary skills that today's students need for literacy achievement. These skills often are centered around the ability to articulate arguments, read for different purposes, identify textual evidence, summarize, close read, and analyze, to name a few. In many instances, teaching these skills through traditional instructional methods and scripted curriculum programs focus on teaching these skills in isolation. However, real world literacy application requires consumers of texts to conduct these skills in tandem, across a variety of genres for multiple purposes. Plus, offering students lesson engagements that are standards-driven, but engaging and hands-on can create learning experiences that can motivate and challenge middle grades students.

One of the main challenges in the middle grades classroom is that of engagement and motivation. Classroom teachers may find themselves competing with several outside factors that can affect classroom instruction and student engagement. While lectures and teacher led engagements focusing on "stand and deliver" methods are often part of core traditional instruction, this antiquated delivery modality may not take into account today's sophisticated learners who demand high level engagement and interaction. Remember, these young adults are consumers of material that is often instantaneous and interactive. In fact, much of what they consume online through social media and their online perusals appeals to multiple senses and is not one dimensional in delivery. Instead, students are often consuming texts that include visual and auditory components along with opportunities for reaction and response. This can sometimes make a traditional instructional delivery method for lessons ineffective. Thus, teachers may find that seeking out unique and novel methods for instruction can address the need for effective but engaging lessons.

Regardless of the content area or learner level, problem solving and critical thinking are skills needed in order to prepare students for life outside of the classroom. While project-based learning is sometimes used to help students address these highly sophisticated skills, they are not employed consistently across all content areas. Plus, in some instances, hands on lessons and engagements may be relegated to specific classrooms like science, for example, where labs are integral parts of the curriculum. However, offering students learning opportunities to practice problem solving skills and collaborative engagements in all content areas is imperative for student success, both in and outside of the classroom.

As a literacy educator, and as a former middle grades teacher, I find myself looking for additional ways to motivate and engage students while they build and enhance their literacy skills and competencies. In my experience, I have found that young adults are taking part in a number of highly sophisticated literacy skills in their personal lives that are often not utilized to their full potential in the academic classroom. Because the traditional ways in which we teach literacy skills can sometimes feel disjointed and unauthentic, finding examples of these academic skills that students are executing in their personal lives can create connections and relevance between the academic and home worlds. My interactions with adolescents have provided me with multiple examples of literacy skills that are practiced outside of school. These include:

- Responding to texts (reactions to social media posts, videos, or photos online)

- Research (Locating information through multiple sources about their favorite sports figure, music icon, or actor counts as research)
- Summarizing material (Athletes develop highlight reels with clips of plays from games, kids write posts for social media, and give a summary of their days when asked, "How was your day?")
- Making inferences (Check out the real-world example given in *Writing Workouts* (Harper, 2023)

And the list goes on. What this tells us is that students have experience with a number of literacy skills and seem to do quite well with them when the material they are tasked with is relevant, authentic, engaging, and connected to their interests and background knowledge. As an educator, all of these real-world observations prompt me to plan and develop instructional engagements that transfer this knowledge into spendable classroom capital. This aligns with the Association for Middle Level Education (AMLE)'s position statement which lists the five essential attributes of a successful middle school as responsive, challenging, empowering, equitable, and engaging (Bishop & Harrison, 2021). In addition to the five attributes, Bishop & Harrison (2021) describe characteristics of a successful middle school including:

- Educators respect and value young adolescents.
- The school environment is welcoming, inclusive, and affirming for all.
- Educators are specifically prepared to teach young adolescents and possess a depth of understanding in the content areas they teach.
- Curriculum is challenging, exploratory, integrative, and diverse.

With this in mind, I began developing and designing escape rooms that could be integrated in the middle grades classroom. Escape rooms have increased in popularity over the past decade and are essentially hands-on problem-solving experiences that require teams of individuals to collaboratively solve a series of puzzles to "escape" the room. Puzzles are often presented in a variety of formats and require multiple skills for solving. Ranging in complexity and structure, these puzzles may include cryptograms, ciphers, hidden messages, logic problems, word games, and more. These interactive experiences require individuals to use a specific subset of skills to successfully complete and solve the problems. Plus, because these puzzles are most often solved through a collaborative team effort, figuring out how to work together to solve puzzles that each require a very specific set of subskills is another challenge. Teams not only need to possess a series of competencies that can help them solve the puzzles, but they also have to figure out the best ways to communicate and delegate within their teams in order to be successful. After experiencing an escape room with a group of friends, I knew they could be used in classroom instruction and set out to design my own.

When planning an escape room for the classroom, one of my main goals was to make certain that the academic standards teachers are charged with addressing are front and center. In today's classrooms, making certain that instructional activities are directly tied to standards and targets is imperative. Fortunately, literacy escape rooms easily address a number of sophisticated academic skills including:

- Close read
- Textual evidence
- Comprehension
- Character analysis
- Synthesizing material
- Key word/vocabulary skills

These skills are in addition to the ones that students will employ that are content and discipline specific. What is different about utilizing an escape room for instruction is that many students are unaware of the academic skills they must employ to solve the problems. As a result, many students will readily approach the task without the same level of apprehension that may occur when presented with a traditional academic task.

In my experience, creating an escape room around a novel, major event, or concept in a content area can be an effective mode for instruction and assessment. For example, developing an escape room as a culminating assessment for a class novel or a larger unit can be a natural fit. They also serve well as modes of review for topics that students have background knowledge and experience with. Plus, they are fantastic instructional methods that can be implemented during what is traditionally considered down time for instruction including exam days, early release days, or dates leading up to a major holiday or break. But how does one go about creating one? Actually, it's not too difficult once you get started, and the time spent creating and implementing them are well worth it.

Two of my favorite escape rooms I developed were centered around novels. One was based on the novel, *Because of Mr. Terupt*, written by Rob Buyea and the other was focused on Shelia Turnage's novel *Three Times Lucky*. Each of these escape rooms served as the culminating assessment for the novels. However, planning escape rooms was something new for me as I had no experience whatsoever, but I actually found this to be a plus. As I began to plan both of these escape rooms, I knew I wanted the clues to tie back to characters or events in the novels because this would allow yet another opportunity for me to assess reading comprehension. I started by making a list of the main characters and events and began brainstorming possible clues that might work based on each of the character's individual traits and interests or based on the event of focus. In order for students to be able to solve each puzzle, they would need to know enough about each character or event in order to solve the puzzle.

For example, in *Three Times Lucky*, one of the main characters is called Colonel. I looked online for the military symbols for multiple ranks, including colonel and posted images around the room. Students had to figure out which

symbol or insignia represented the rank of colonel and use it to solve a clue. This clue was a direct connection to one of the main characters in the novel, but I also included clues about the setting. Because the setting of the novel was a café, I posted menus around the room with a variety of entrees listed. Students had a clue that stated, "Mr. Jesse's last meal." They had to recall what the character ordered at the café in the novel to find the corresponding dish on the menu. The price of the entrée was the code for one of their locks.

In *Because of Mr. Terupt,* one character was a practical joker who was always playing tricks on his classmates. I created a clue that was written in mirror image on a slip of paper that said, "Batman's Nemesis." In their packet of clues was a deck of playing cards. Students had to figure out that the joker in the deck of cards had one of the lock codes written on it. Another character in the same novel loved to garden. Students used small plastic shovels (included in their packet of materials) to dig up a clue in the class garden. The clue was a cipher that students had to use to solve a cryptogram in their puzzle boxes.
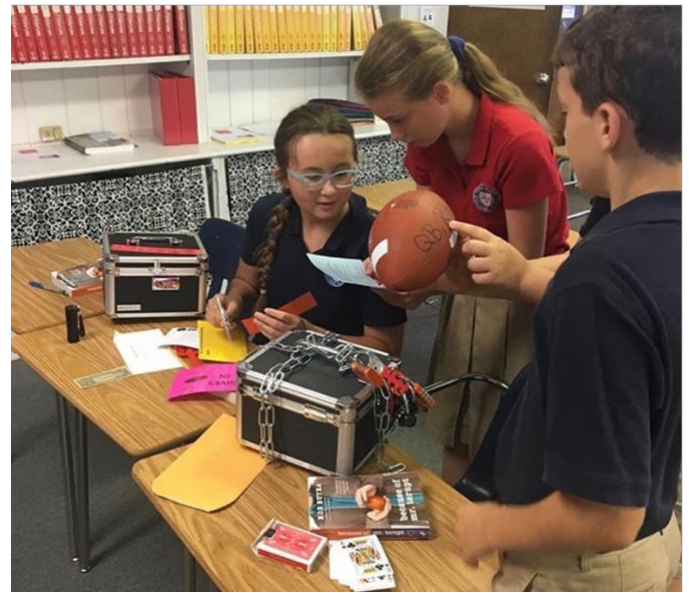
While I made certain to connect clues back to the novels, I also worked to make certain that the materials they needed in their kits also were connected. For example, because Mo in *Three Times Lucky* sends messages in a bottle to her mother, students found that their instructions for the escape room were given to them in a small glass bottle.

As you can see, each clue that was created tied directly back to the material in the novel that students read. Because each clue was related to a specific detail in the book, the literacy escape room became an easy assessment for reading comprehension. As an extension, students wrote a response where they connected each clue to the appropriate character and then explained why they knew this to be accurate.

Over the years, I have developed a number of escape rooms across many content areas for multiple grade levels. Although the clues listed above are based on novels, it is easy to create ones that can be used in content classrooms too. Over the years, I have developed ones on body systems, math concepts, elementary school novels, and social studies time periods and events. Almost any subject area or content concept can be developed into an escape room.

For example, the science escape room I created focused on body systems and was used as a culminating assessment after

students finished their unit on body systems. We included a clue based on each body system and used a variety of sources and material for the clues. In this escape room, I included QR codes linking video clips which students accessed via their phones, images and diagrams from their science textbooks, and material that required students to use their knowledge about body systems to travel to the appropriate place for the correct code. For example, one clue stated, "Your excretory system does most of its work in this room." Students had to use their knowledge about that system to determine that they needed to travel to the student restroom where a lock code was written on the bathroom mirror. Plus, despite the fact that this escape room was used in a science classroom, there were clues that incorporated student knowledge of other content areas for solutions. For example, one clue included a map of the school with certain classrooms marked with an order of operations sign. The clue instructed students to follow the order of operations and students had to go to the designated rooms in order so that they could get the code in the correct order.

Designing a Literacy Escape Room

One important item to consider is the nature in which a literacy escape room is planned and developed. Unless you plan on purchasing a ready-made escape room online (which I don't recommend), ample time needs to be allotted to create and plan one. These are not engagements that can be planned in a day. Instead, I have found it works best to develop clues and puzzle ideas over the course of a unit as this can help contribute to better quality escape rooms. I normally give myself several weeks to create one so that there is ample time for me to modify and revise any clues as needed.

The nature of escape room planning also lends itself to a collaborative teaching approach. Because so many of them can include cross curricular skills, working alongside a colleague when planning and implementing these can make the task of creation a little easier. Plus, because escape rooms often require several materials, sharing these with a colleague can also decrease the initial expense for a teacher.

If I am building an escape room based on a novel, I have found that some of the clue ideas come to me as I am reading. For example, when designing the one based on Sheila Turnage's novel *Three Times Lucky*, I knew I wanted to use a clue connected specifically to the color lavender which was also the name of one of the supporting characters. I went to a local hardware store and picked out a variety of paint chip samples that were light purple in color, but of which only one of the samples was called lavender. Because the paint colors also had a numeric code next to it, I had an automatic lock code that I could incorporate. This particular clue idea was rather easy to include and was a direct connection to the book.

Materials Needed

Literacy Escape Rooms can be as extravagant as you want or as simplistic as your budget allows. Teachers may find that some of their local state educational organizations offer grant programs that might serve as good financial resources for these projects. Regardless, there are a few materials that are necessary to make your project successful.

- A variety of locks (These should be a combination of three, four, and five numerical locks, along with four and five letter locks so word clues can be created. You could also use a padlock with a key as one of your locks as well.)
- Lockboxes (I typically use one similar to these that are found on Amazon. They work well because they already include a combination lock and have room inside the box where any instructions, clues, and accessories that are needed for the escape room can be stored. However, you can simply use a lunch box with a handle or put all your locks on one hasp if you do not have a lockbox. https://www.amazon.com/Vaultz-Combination-Lock-Box-Documents/dp/B004Q86PNI/ref=sr_1_8?crid=1DNSXLBI8KGE7&keywords=combination+lock+box&qid=1645368975&smid=A3MBJ9LSQAUIC0&sprefix=combination+lockbox%2Caps%2C110&sr=8-8
- Black light flashlights (These are great for use with clues written in invisible ink.) https://www.amazon.com/Morpilot-Flashlight-Ultraviolet-Blacklight-Inspection/dp/B01MZ0D414/ref=sr_1_6?crid=1626GM7U9E1D1&keywords=black+light+flashlights&qid=1645369131&sprefix=black+light+flashlights%2Caps%2C122&sr=8-6
- Hand-held mirrors from the dollar store (These are great for clues that are written in mirror image text, which can be easily accomplished using Microsoft Word.)
- Pens with glow in the dark ink for writing messages that can only be viewed under a black light.
- Hasps (These are used for attaching multiple locks.) https://www.amazon.com/Safety-Jaw-Steel-Lockout-Hasp/dp/B007I9SVI4/ref=sr_1_5?crid=3DXCX80SB9RP2&keywords=hasps&qid=1671499625&sprefix=hasp%2Caps%2C389&sr=8-5
- Different color card stock for the creation of color-coded clues.
- Window markers for writing clues on classroom windows or mirrors.
- Plastic protective paper sleeves or lamination materials so clues can be written on with dry erase markers and then wiped clean.

Tips for Creating Clues

Because Escape Rooms require students to solve a variety of puzzles and rely on an individual's ability to follow instructions to the letter, there are a few tips to employ that can help improve student success.

1. Color code clues. For example, if I am including a cryptogram for students to solve along with a cipher, I make sure those clues are the same color. That way, students know that the clue on red paper goes with

the cipher that is also presented on red paper. This can help students solve their puzzles in a more efficient manner. In addition, you might also include a corresponding colored sticker on any ancillary materials that students will use to solve a particular clue. For example, if I need to use the mirror to solve the clue on a yellow paper, I may put a yellow sticker on the mirror as well.

2. Include at least one puzzle that requires students to collect information from another area in the room or school. For example, in an escape room I designed on body systems, we included a clue that said, "Your digestive system needs fuel from this room." Students had to figure out that they needed to go to the cafeteria where they found a clue/code written on the wall.

3. Develop clues that require students to use different types of tools to solve them. For example, you might write a clue in invisible ink so students have to use a black light to see it or create clues written in mirror image so that students have to use a small handheld mirror to read them. Another clue I created was written in Morse Code and students had to use a corresponding chart to decipher it. Another clue required students to blow up a balloon and then pop it with a safety pin to get the code inside.

4. If possible, include some type of digital clue. For example, in a science escape room that I designed on body systems, we had a QR code that students scanned which took them to a YouTube video. They then had to answer a question based on the video.

5. Clues that require students to work with a partner can be beneficial. For example, cyrptograms can sometimes require collaboration between students and rely on a separate set of subskills.

6. If possible, include clues that have objects placed for display in the classroom that students must use to help solve their clues. For example, in one escape room, I had a football on display. Written on the football in black magic marker was "QB, RB, QB." In their packet of clues, students were given football trading cards. Using the information on the football, students had to figure out that if they lined up the football players by their positions (quarter back, running back, quarter back) the numbers on their jerseys created a code for one of the locks.

Managing the Escape Room

Once you have planned, developed, and created your Escape Room materials, it is important to determine how it will be executed, as this is equally important and can help you have a successful experience.

- Assign group members PRIOR to the activity. This allows the teacher to pair students together who have a variety of strengths which can result in a more successful engagement. In most instances, it is best not to allow students to pick their own groups. And don't simply do a random count off; you need to be strategic here about your grouping. For example, you don't want to end up with four kids who are extroverts and want to take charge. It simply won't work!

- Decide how many locks and puzzles you want your students to solve. If you have never done an escape room, I would start with about three puzzles and locks.

- Because I recommend having at least one puzzle that require leaving the room to answer, it is important to determine WHO in the collaborative group will be doing the traveling. In some classes with smaller numbers, we have allowed the entire group to travel where in other situations we elected one person from each group as the "traveler". We gave this student a special pass that they had to show teachers before they left the room to go get a clue. Choosing this student ahead of time can assist with possible classroom management issues. (Don't be tempted to leave out traveling clues as students enjoy getting to hunt for the answers.)

- Make sure you include a "Directions" card in the packet of supplies. This way, students can refer back to the directions if they have questions about what they are required to do. If possible, keep the directions the same for all escape rooms so that a routine is established for how the complete the task. For example, you might always include a red clue as the last clue they need to solve. Keeping that clue constant (always red) can help students as they determine which ones to solve first. Make sure the instructions are not too hard to follow-simplicity is best.

- Don't try to do the escape room with all of your classes on the same day. It takes some time to reset the locks and get the clues back to their original homes, so trying to do the same escape room with all your classes on one day, probably won't work. Instead, I recommend splitting it up so you can have time to reset the locks, redistribute the clues, and replenish any of the consumable clues. I might plan to conduct an escape room with my first, third, and seventh period classes in one day, and then on the next day, complete the escape room with my second and sixth period classes, for example.

- Before implementing the escape room, start integrating puzzles as bell ringers or tickets out the door. Giving students some practice with solving a variety of puzzles prior to the culminating task can help improve student success rate.

- Include one "Hint" card that teams can "cash in" to the teacher for a hint about a puzzle they are having a hard time with. However, with hints come penalties. I typically impose a five-minute penalty for using a hint card. This means that if students solve the entire series of puzzles and have cashed in their hint card, they must wait five minutes as a penalty before they are declared the winner. During this time, another team *could* still win. This penalty helps students determine if they really need a hint or if they simply

need to look at the problem in another way as a group. Plus, when cashing in the hint, all team members have to agree to use the hint, thus relaying the importance of collaboration and teamwork.

- Offer some incentive for completing the escape room as a reward. This can vary, but I have included rewards of candy and treats, homework passes, or other incentives that students would like.

While creating literacy escape rooms does take some time and planning, the potential rewards for student engagement, motivation, and skills make up for the effort. After implementing escape rooms with different groups of students, I am always met with, "Will you come back and do another one?" That's all I need to make sure I keep coming back with more.

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Using Music to Teach Math in Middle School

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Abstract: Music is an effective tool to use in the middle school classroom. Music is engaging, makes learning memorable, and can help relieve anxiety. Music can be connected to math in many different ways. Lyrics, melodies, and movement can be used to enhance learning. Students can learn the quadratic formula song to help with procedural memory; they can identify fractions in musical composition and notation; and they can write class songs to help retain information.

Keywords: music, mathematics, middle school

Introduction
Music can be a great tool to enhance learning and help students remember math concepts. Research supports the effectiveness of using music when teaching math to young students (Lovemore, Robertson, & Graven, 2021; Bsharat, Barahmeh, & Turkman, 2021). The majority of the research available is based around the use of music in elementary school math and for supporting procedural learning. Songs can be effective for memorizing information, but what about the math hidden under the surface of all that music? The benefits of directly using music in the middle school mathematics classroom offer rich opportunities for deep learning. How far does the inter-relatedness go between math and music? The connections reach far deeper than the surface. Music is connected to math in so many different ways. Spotlighting some of those crossovers is the focus of this article. We will start with examples of using songs to aid in learning and then share ways to connect music in math with interactive math activities and literature. Examples are provided in the appendix.

Why Middle School?
At first glance, the use of music seems very limited for teaching and learning in middle school. It is more common to find students in elementary school singing songs to remember the water cycle, the days of the week, and a variety of other essential details. From author James Walsh's perspective, "The few instances where music was incorporated in my own middle school experience have stuck with me more than any other topic (the black plague song from sixth grade history, the quadratic formula song from Algebra, and the mercantilism song from seventh grade history)."

Integrating music and mathematics is a great way to address young adolescents' physical, social, and emotional development. For example, moving to music is natural for most young adolescents. A middle school math teacher can use lyrics for the teaching and learning of geometric transformations and implement kinesthetic strategies to act out the changes associated with translations, reflections, and rotations. Think along the lines of songs like *The Electric Slide, The Cupid Shuffle, The Git Up, The Macarena,* and many more dance grooves. Middle school students love music and they love to move!

Increasing Engagement and Reducing Anxiety
There are many songs available from sources such as TeacherTube, BrainPop, and other online resources. We recommend starting by selecting a song appropriate for your content and your students. Play the song and let students enjoy the tune and lyrics. In addition to increasing student engagement, music can help reduce anxiety in the classroom. In 2019, a group of researchers helped to develop a collection of interactive songs to help reduce anxiety for a college Introductory Statistics course and found that it greatly helped students with preparing for tests (Lesser et al., 2019). The team implemented five different songs that aligned with the syllabus at a two-year college and a research college to see how students reacted. The students filled out a response sheet after utilizing the songs and both colleges found them to be "engaging, relevant, user friendly, and helpful for relieving their anxiety" (Lesser et al., 2019, p. 245-246).

Using Songs to Support Learning Math
Have you ever experienced hearing one of your favorite songs after not hearing it for years and still being able to sing along with the words? How often do you find yourself humming the jingle from a commercial advertisement? The musical tune helps us remember the words. In the same way, musical tunes can help us remember content we need to memorize. A study conducted on university students in an introduction to statistics course found that music strongly helped them understand topics. Furthermore, "comparing student responses to the pre-song prompts versus some post-song assessments on the same topics showed some short-term gain in understanding after engaging with each of those activities" (Lesser et al., 2019, p. 244).

At the middle school level, songs in math often help in remembering different formulas. For example, there are jingles to help remember the quadratic formula, sung to the tune of "Pop Goes the Weasel." Another example of incorporating songs is to utilize data circulating around music for mean, median, and mode. Appendix B includes an activity in which music is used to get students motivated to learn by utilizing the audio of songs. Play twelve different songs to the class, some recent and popular, some dated and not "hip"

anymore. Have students rate the songs on a scale from zero to five and then use the class data to find the mean, median, and mode ratings. The students will be actively engaged and really enjoy the rating part of the lesson.

Fractions in Musical Notes

Music can also be a great tool for teaching fractions. Fractions abound in musical composition and notation. A study done in South Africa had teachers use musical notes and notation as a way to teach fractions to fifth grade students. Lovemore (2021) studied utilizing musical notes to teach fractions. Students were taught different notes and how they fit together in musical measures. Fractions were taught using the ideas learned from the music notes. While they had concerns at first that students were learning more about music than math, they found it to be "mutually beneficial for the learning of both music and mathematics" (Lovemore et al., 2021, p. 9). The study found that students were more engaged, more confident with their work, and benefitted from the authentic problem solving (Lovemore et al., 2021, p. 10-11). Using musical notes provides an authentic connection to help students learn about dividing fractions. 'Keep-change-flip' is a beneficial phrase for memorizing steps, but it does not show students why we get those answers very well. Using notes and fraction blocks from the start can better show students what dividing fractions looks like and help them grasp the idea better than if you just give them the steps to solve.

Quadratics in Sound / Parabolas in Music

Parabolas can be a challenging concept to connect with real-life applications. The book *Music, Math, and Mind: The Physics and Neuroscience of Music* by David Sulzer has a great chapter on soundwaves, and soundwaves look quite similar to parabolas. A great way to start learning about parabolas is by learning a little bit about sound waves and how the waves change based on the kind of sound being produced. For some more advanced math classes (specifically high school), sine and cosine graphs look very much like sound waves.

There's Math in Those Lyrics

Another way to use music in the classroom is to create problem-solving activities based on lyrics. Lyrics are full of lines that can very easily transfer over to word problems. Distance concepts are common topics related in song lyrics, so these can be made into conversion problems based around different song lyrics. Songs are a great tool to help remember concepts, as well as analyze the lyrics' meanings.

Writing Class Songs

Writing class songs can enhance learning of content. While there are multitudes of songs on Teacher Tube, YouTube, or prepared by the teacher, what if we give our students opportunities to write their own? Instead of giving students a song, letting them write their own song could help with retention. One idea is to split students into separate groups and let them collaborate amongst themselves. After a few minutes, bring them back together and let each group share their ideas. Hold a class vote and decide on the "class song" that can be

referred to when covering the topic. It may help to record each song since it will be different for each period, but then you can create classroom playlists of math songs that students can access.

Conclusion

Music is full of math that can really help students understand how some math topics work before getting to the actual material. Real world connections are one of the best ways to make math relevant to a student's life which does wonders to help with retention of material. The activities and ideas presented here may serve as a starting point for music-centered activities in the middle school classroom. It is really similar to how manipulatives were considered only for elementary students for the longest time before we realized they were great for middle school. The same can be applied for these math strategies integrating music. Together, mathematics and music can produce beautiful harmonies.

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Appendix A:
Making Math with Music Learning Center

Appendix B:
Annotated Text Set

Schwartz, D. M. (2017). *If You Hopped Like a Frog* (J. Warhola, Illus.). Scholastic.
> If you could hop like a frog, just how far could you jump? This book is a really fun way to talk about fractions and ratios with some really wacky examples. It runs through a ton of really silly ratios that would be a great way to start up a conversation about fractions.

Schwartz, D. M. (2006). *Millions to Measure* (S. Kellogg, Illus.). HarperCollins.
> From stones to distance to rulers, there are so many ways we can measure the world around us! This book gives some really fun and interesting ideas for what we can measure and how this applies outside of the classroom (to some ridiculous extremes). This is a great way to get students excited about topics that involve measuring or converting units.

Scieszka, J. (1995). *Math Curse* (L. Smith, Illus.). Penguin Young Readers Group.
> After Mrs. Fibonacci's class on Monday, it becomes harder and harder for our main character to stop seeing math everywhere they go! This book is filled to the brim with great real-world questions and conversation starters for the math classroom. This is especially great for those students that always ask, "how will this ever affect me in the real world?"

Sulzer, D. (2021). *Music, Math, and Mind: The Physics and Neuroscience of Music*. Columbia University Press.
> For a deeper dive into rich contextual examples, this book explores in-depth connections with the inter-relatedness of music and math on more advanced content. Specifically, the chapter on sound waves connects to the activity on parabolas in Activity 2. The entire book gives profound insights to how math and music are always together.

About the Authors

James D. Walsh is an undergraduate student at the University of South Carolina Aiken, where he is completing his degree in middle level math education. James is a member of the SC Teaching Fellows Program and recipient of the 2023 SCAMLE Teacher Candidate to Watch Award.

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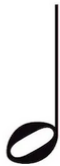
Activity 1: Fractions with Notes

Materials needed: Fraction blocks and a pencil

BEFORE STARTING

Watch this video explaining how we divide with fraction tiles:

In music, we break notes down into a few different types:

Whole Note	Half Note	Quarter Note	Eighth Note	Sixteenth Note
𝐨	♩	♩	♪	♪
1	1/2	1/4	1/8	1/16

By using our fraction tiles, we ca see that there are two half notes in a whole note, two quarter notes in a half note, and two eighth notes in a quarter note (we do not have tiles for the sixteenth notes, but two of those go into an eighth note!).

Using the skills from this video and the knowledge of each of the notes, lets do some dividing!

♩ ÷ ♪ = ____   𝐨 ÷ ♩ = ____

♩ ÷ ♩ = ____

Let's try some problems without the notes!

$$\frac{3}{4} \div \frac{1}{8} = \underline{\quad}$$

$$\frac{1}{2} \div \frac{1}{5} = \underline{\quad}$$

$$\frac{3}{4} \div \frac{1}{12} = \underline{\quad}$$

$$\frac{1}{2} \div \frac{1}{6} = \underline{\quad}$$

$$\frac{2}{8} \div \frac{1}{12} = \underline{\quad}$$

$$\frac{1}{4} \div \frac{1}{3} = \underline{\quad}$$

If you are having trouble using the fraction tiles, watch this video and try this approach instead:
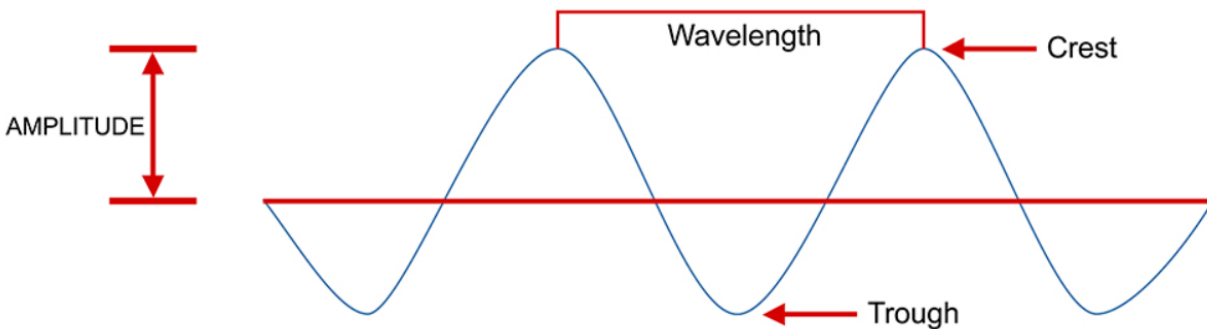
Activity 2: Quadratics in Sound

Materials needed: Pencil and calculator.

Everything that we hear (music included!) comes to us in the form of soundwaves:

Don't they look extremely similar to the parabolas of a quadratic function? If we look hard enough, we can find all kinds of math around us! Go through and solve these quadratic problems to better understand how soundwaves work:
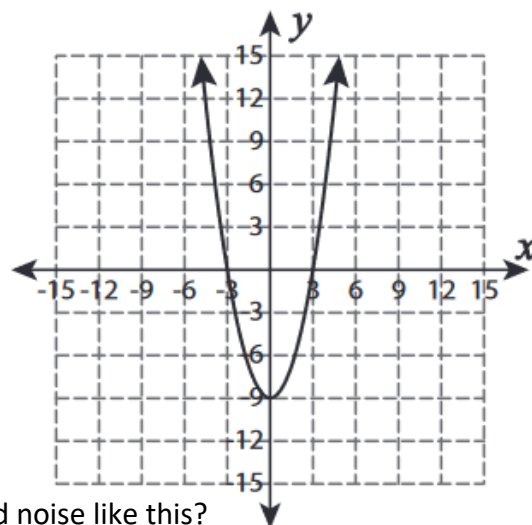
Determine the following from the given graph:

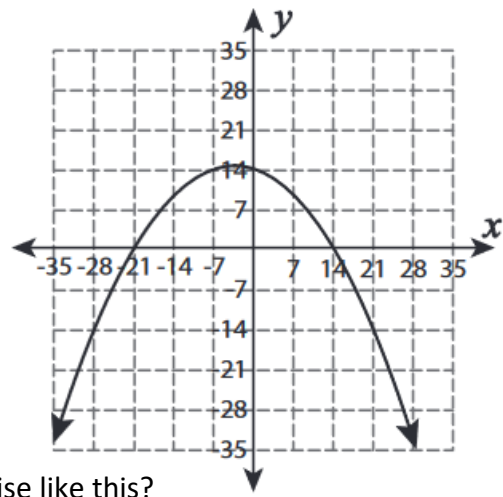Zeros: _____

Vertex: _____

Positive or negative slope: _____

Domain: _____

Range: _____
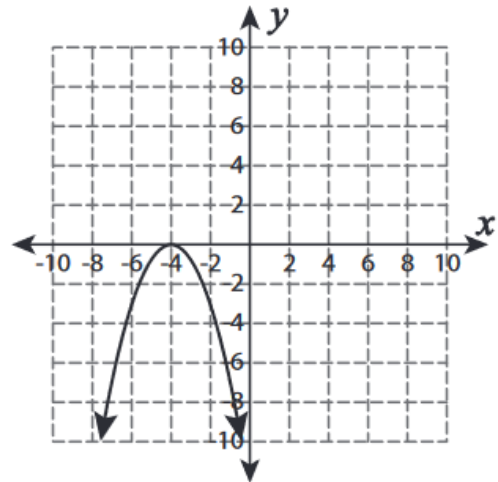
What kind of sound would make a high-pitched, loud noise like this?

Zeros: _____

Vertex: _____

Positive or negative slope: _____

Domain: _____

Range: _____

What kind of sound would make a low-pitched, loud noise like this?

Zeros: _____

Vertex: _____

Positive or negative slope: _____

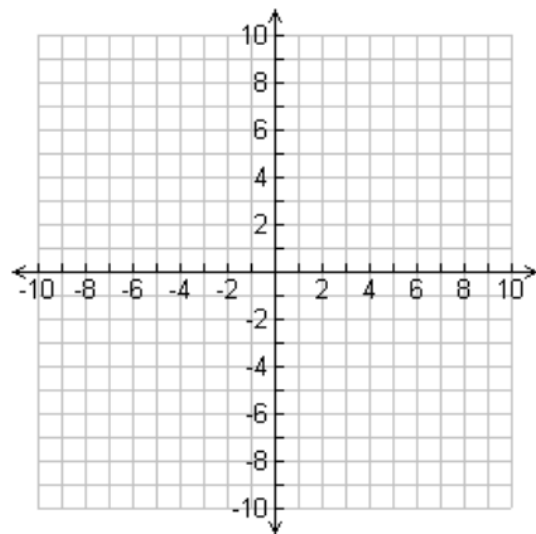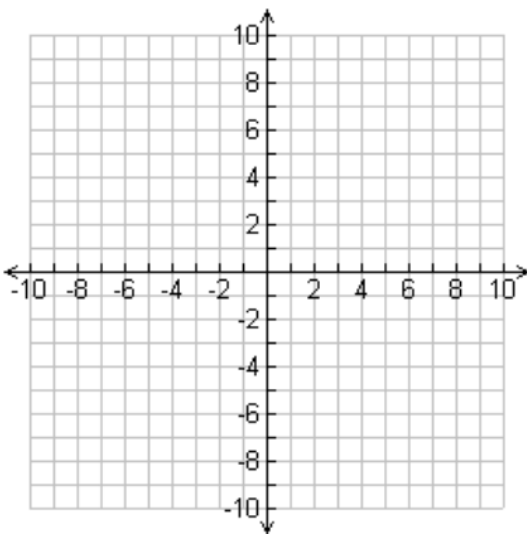Domain: _____

Range: _____

What kind of sound would make a quiet noise like this?

Can you make a parabola of a sound wave that is:

Quiet and deep   Loud and high pitched

Activity 3: There's Math in Those Lyrics!

Materials needed: A pencil and calculator (if needed)

We do not really realize it, but a lot of our music talks about math!

Using these song lyrics, answer each problem.

In their song "I'm Gonna Be," The Proclaimers sing "I would walk five hundred miles and I would walk five hundred more." If you walk at a pace of 3 miles per hour, how many days would it take you to walk that distance (round to the nearest tenth)?

Christina Perri sings "Darling don't be afraid I have loved you for a thousand years." How many minutes has Christina Perri loved her partner for?

Eddie Money sang about how he's got "two tickets to paradise." Eddie spent $400 on each ticket (paradise is an expensive place to go nowadays). If Eddie only makes $12.50 an hour at his job, how many hours did he have to work to get enough money for the tickets?

Justin Bieber talks about how he'd "spend ten thousand hours and ten thousand more oh, if that's what it takes to learn that sweet heart of yours." Is he really spending that much time to learn that heart? Use time conversions to prove your point.

Superfruit sings about someone that is "six feet tall and super strong." How tall would they be in centimeters? What about meters?

Harry Chapin sings about a driver "carrying thirty thousand pounds of bananas." How many grams of bananas is that? How many ounces?

Sticky Notes Matter: 3 Ways to Promote Mental Health in the Middle School Classroom

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Abstract: Mental health issues continue to be a prominent concern in middle level education. Adolescence marks a crucial period for developing healthy social and emotional skills to promote mental well-being. Poor mental health can affect grades, relationships, decision-making, and students' overall health. Building positive rapport and connections with students can protect their mental health. Encouraging students to journal their thoughts and feelings helps students process and recognize their emotions. Students enjoy using bright, colored sticky notes. I recommend that teachers give students opportunities to use sticky-notes to express themselves.

Keywords: mental health, adolescence, relationships, expressing, journaling, sticky notes

Introduction

Have you ever felt like no one cared? Have you ever just wished one person would ask how your day was going so you could pour your heart and mind out? Have you ever felt like your voice was silent, but your mind was very loud? Think about these 3 questions for a second, then imagine hearing an 11-12 year-old answer "yes" to all 3 questions.

"Mental health matters" is an adopted motto in many schools nowadays. Why does mental health matter now more than ever? Is this in response to the pandemic? Is this a response to the number of suicide rates increasing? Or is this a response to truly acknowledging how important mental health is for our students?

As a former caseworker for the Child Abuse & Neglect Division with the Department of Social Services, I professionally gained firsthand experience into the correlation of home environment, school, and mental health. My caseload consisted of mainly adolescents and more than 30% of my cases involved educational neglect. Working with the family to develop plans to promote safety, permanency, and well-being showed me the importance of mental health inside and outside of the classroom. After completing a 45-day investigation, we would meet with multidisciplinary teams to determine the needs for the family. Prior to closing the case, we would have to determine the cause based on investigative notes. I vividly remember a pattern with my clients: findings of educational neglect. The most common cause was negative relationships with teachers, bullying, and feeling like no one cared about them as a person. Hearing about the place where most kids should feel the safest in a negative light through the eyes of an adolescent was saddening for me. I then realized that mental health matters more than I could ever imagine. This marked the beginning of my discovery of the type of teacher I wanted to be for my students.

Entering the profession of education, I vowed to not only build positive relationships with my students, but to ensure every single day my students enter my classroom I check in with them, mentally. As adults, we suffer with our own mental health alone, but we have developed social and emotional skills to handle our issues (sometimes, right?). Stop and ask yourself how 11–12-year-old kids even begin to process their issues, mentally. How do we help our students discuss their mental well-being?

Why Mental Health Matters

Students are receiving less attention to their mental health because there is a common assumption that adolescents are competent enough to discuss their thoughts, emotions, and feelings. We know what they say about assumptions, right? The majority of my students are unable to identify negative/positive traits, complete an assignment on lined paper, or inform me when they need a band-aid for a paper cut. How can I expect my students to be able to address their mental health needs? I simply cannot, and this is why it is imperative we, as teachers make explicit to students how to care for their mental health.

Why does mental health matter? Mental health matters in adolescents because it helps a child feel secure, relate well with their peers, and foster mental and emotional growth at home and at school. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2022), 18.8% of adolescents ages 12-17 seriously considered attempting suicide; 15.7% made a suicide plan; 8.9% attempted suicide; and 2.5% made a suicide attempt requiring medical treatment. This is part of my "why" for advocating that teachers institute mental health strategies regularly into classrooms. The Youth Development Institute (2020) offers a list of Universal Youth Needs which includes a sense of belonging and a close lasting relationship with at least one adult. Bishop & Harrison (2021) describe essential attributes of a successful middle school including:

- Educators respect and value young adolescents.
- The school environment is welcoming, inclusive, and affirming for all.
- Every student's academic and personal development is guided by an adult advocate.

Research shows that having at least one trusted adult can have a profound impact on a young person's life (Raney, 2019). A simple "How are you feeling today?" can provide a small, daily opportunity to connect authentically with students. Here are some strategies to help.

Quick Mental Health Check-Ins

Mental health check-ins can be used to address students' social and emotional needs. These are quick questions to guide teachers to ask students how they are feeling. Here are a few questions I ask my students:

- How are you feeling today?
- On a scale of 1-10, how would you rate your sleep last night?
- What is the best/worst thing that happened to you this week?
- What color fits your mood today?
- If you drew me a quick sketch of your day, what would the sketch look like?

#MentalHealthMondays

On Mondays, in my student center, there is a stack of a bright colored sticky notes. At the beginning of the school year, we discuss why we use sticky notes in my classroom. 1) to complete #MentalHealthMondays; 2) use as bookmarks; and/or3) write a short note/drawing to Miss Gray if any issues may arise inside or outside of school other than Mondays. My students are super excited to use sticky notes on Mondays or write me a short note/drawing. The question is the same every Monday: "Monday begins the new week. How are you feeling today? How was your weekend? Anything new with you?" While my students are working, I play jazz instrumentals and my students appear to be engaged as demonstrated by pencils moving fast and filling up the sticky note. I complete a Google form for my students to determine how mental health is viewed in my classroom using the question: How do you feel about mental health in our classroom? Some responses I have received:

Student A:
"*I feel very good about mental health in our classroom, this is something I love about your classroom.*"

Student B:
"*I feel it's a nice thing to have because you get to tell what you are feeling, and it feels nice to tell someone how you feel.*"

Student C:
"*I think Mental Health Monday is good for checking on us to see if we are doing well.*"

Student D:
"*It feels good to share everything with someone when you do not have someone to talk to.*"

Student E:
"*It feels good to check in with you. No other teachers seem to do it or appear to care about Mental Health Monday.*"

Student F:
"*To be honest, I love it because we get to share our feelings.*"

"I Need a Sticky Note"

Sticky notes are used throughout the school day. When problems arise, some young adolescents may experience difficulty expressing their thoughts and emotions. My students will come to my desk and say, "I need a sticky note" and I immediately know this is a moment my student needs me. My students are aware of the classroom environment and how to ask for a sticky note without other students noticing. We have developed a classroom system in regard to the usage of sticky notes and when it is safe. My reasoning for using sticky notes is because sticky notes are 3in x 3in and it appears to students that do not have much to write. Students may have trouble gathering their thoughts, feelings, and emotions so I encourage my students to draw a picture and then briefly describe their picture using as many words as they can. After I review the sticky note, I use the same color sticky note and write back to them to ensure that I am acknowledging their feelings and I use a phrase: "xoxo, I am with you". I use this phrase with my students to promote togetherness and my hope is to let my students know their voice is heard, always. No matter what.

Conclusion

Mental health truly matters to me. Does it matter to you? How are you using your classroom time to check-in with your students? Curriculum is embedded with standards, but what about the social and emotional well-being of our students? Think about that one student who views school as their only safe space or who views their teacher as the only human being who cares about them and loves them dearly. If we can spend 5 minutes skimming our emails or making our coffee, can we spend 5 minutes checking in on our students, mentally? We all need to somebody to lean on.

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