Not Really Stuck in the Middle with You: Instructional Strategies that keep adolescent learners actively engaged and moving forward!

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We are middle school students and generally in the age range of 11-14 and these things are true about us; at least for today. What makes us unique and what do we want you to know about us as learners?

- **We like to work with our peers and most of the time we enjoy helping each other.**
- **We like for learning to be fun; we enjoy humor, but we hate to be embarrassed or made to feel different or insignificant.**
- **We like to fit in with our classmates but also want to be valued for our unique identities.**
- **We want to know that our opinions are valued and have influence on decisions made regarding our learning.**

Middle school age students have an abundance of energy and need to be allowed to use their energy in positive and creative ways. This can happen in collaborative environments that provide for:

- A student-centered environment.
- Students frequently being in control of their own learning and allowed to be decision makers.
- Learning may be co-operative, collaborative or independent.
- Students can work together to reach a common goal.
- Students willingly help each other sharing/exchanging skills and ideas.
- Students compete with their own previous performance, not against peers.

With all the above truths in mind, this article focuses on some successful means to engage middle school age students and keep them interested in your lessons.

Calling upon the collective wisdom of teachers, researchers, and reflections from veteran middle school leaders- here are some foolproof lesson ideas. A very enthusiastic Language Arts and Academically Gifted teacher Angie Fleming shared the following lessons as one of her go-to activities that embrace these opportunities for collaboration and respect for learner needs.

"*I am trying to build on the concept of altruism in my classroom and actually let my students discover this for themselves. They love to participate in pre-reading vocabulary activities especially one that I call "vocabulary shake-out." Students work together in groups and have two minutes to look at a picture (related to the lesson/ vocabulary) and work individually and collaboratively to come up with as many words as they can. The goal is for them to access as many words as possible about the big ideas noted in the picture image.*"

With the use of this strategy- students begin to make connections to the reading activity before they start the passage- yet they are building a community of support with each other. When they compete with each other in their teams, they are actually learning from each other, and ultimately they are building a collaborative outcome and contributing to the learning community of the whole class. Each student makes a contribution of value and all students benefit from the individual and collaborative efforts for vocabulary building & recognition and are therefore better prepared for one of the main components of reading mastery – vocabulary skills.

Another strategy shared by Fleming is a "Note Taking" competition. Students again, working in groups- take notes on a text before answering text questions. They compete to gather as many notes as possible without being repetitious and ensuring that they are capturing main concepts/ ideas. As they share their information, they are actively listening to determine who has a new idea or

information they may not have discovered. In doing so, they are gaining new insights, preparing themselves for the lesson and competing but collaborating with the learning community. The new reading activities are less challenging, and the students are better equipped to attack the passages because of the pre-reading notes and concepts they have gathered and shared with the class in their competitive formats.

Students need to expect feedback from their teachers and their learning community peers. Feedback needs to be timely, frequent, substantive, constructive and specific. Students need to respectfully be able to challenge each other's explanations/rationale and use reasoning to support their arguments and conclusions. As an observer of many excellent lessons in my career – the times that I have witnessed students receiving authentic feedback from teachers and their peers have really been very powerful for the learning experience and classroom community. As noted earlier-students want to feel that they are valued and that they have influence over their learning. "Reflection allows us all to see our multi-dimensional selves and provides us with the foundation and traction to move forward. We could all use more of that.' (Hodgson, Oct. 2016).

Allowing for reflection, feedback, critique, and adjustments to their work allows students to grow and perfect their skills and enhance their learning. Reflection is a real-world skill and an important developmental strategy for all ages but especially the "middle school aged often ego-centric but peer directed/influenced adolescent." Taking the time for reflection and interaction in a community of learners not only helps with building confidence in the application of practices and new learning but also helps create better problem-solving skills. Real world problems require a variety of skills and review and multiple strategies to solve them. (Muir, Beswick, & Williamson 2008).

As we work with this age group and the truths that have been purported in this article, it is important to keep these characteristics about the middle school aged learner at the forefront of what we do with our pedagogy and classroom environments so that students feel comfortable and connected to our settings. Our lessons need to allow for some student choice, independence, collaboration, ownership, flexibility, and sense of contribution from our learners. A value of who they are and their unique characteristics and their very socially dependent needs can create for an exciting and enjoyable learning experience with all content areas. This can be done in multiple ways with any content as we keep these needs of the learner in mind and adjust our learning environments accordingly.

References

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