

NORTH CAROLINA ASSOCIATION FOR MIDDLE LEVEL EDUCATION

JOURNAL

Volume 36, Issue 2, Fall 2025

Highlights in this issue:

- **Investigating the Development of Middle Level Educator Professional Dispositions**
- **Teaching Multiple Perspectives to Middle School Students**
- **Fostering a Sense of Connection for Young Adolescents**
- **A Practical Guide to AI for Teachers**



Manuscripts

The NCMLE Journal, a double-blind peer reviewed journal, is an official publication of the North Carolina Association for Middle Level Education. It publishes a wide range of articles related to middle level practice, theory, commentary, and research. Its primary objective is to enrich the understanding of the developmental and educational needs of North Carolina's early adolescents.

Manuscripts should be written in a clear, non-technical style for an audience consisting largely of preservice teachers, in-service teachers, and administrators. Each article should not exceed 15 double-spaced pages, including in-text citations and an accurate list of references when appropriate (APA style). Authors should submit their article through the NCMLE Manuscript Submission Form with a separate title page that states the author(s), institutional affiliation, position within that institution, and a contact email address and telephone number. Deadline for submission to the Fall issue is May 15 and the deadline for the Spring issue is November 15.

All manuscripts will be acknowledged upon receipt. The editorial review board will carefully review the article to determine if it is a good fit for the NCMLE Journal. Authors will subsequently be notified of publication decisions.

Additional correspondence should be addressed to:

NCMLE Journal Editorial Board

Email: journal@ncmle.org

Duplication Policy

All published manuscripts become the property of the NCMLE Journal and cannot be published elsewhere without permission. An author may self-archive an author-created version of their article on their own website and their institution's repository, including their final version; however, the author may not use the publisher's PDF version which is posted on www.ncmle.org and/or www.ncmlejournal.org. Furthermore, the author may only post their version provided acknowledgment is given to the original source of publication by inserting a link to the published article on NCMLE's website. The link must be accompanied by the following text: "The original publication is available at www.ncmle.org and www.ncmlejournal.org."

Published articles represent the authors' views and do not necessarily represent the views of NCMLE.

Editors for this issue (alphabetical order by last name):

Joey Lord, Appalachian State University

Daniel Maxwell, UNC Charlotte

Editorial Review Board for this issue (alphabetical order by last name):

Dustin Johnson, High Point University

Denise Johnson, Winston Salem State University

Jeanneine Jones, UNC Charlotte

Karen Kopitsky, UNC Charlotte

Wendy Lewis, Appalachian State University

Erica Neal, UNC Charlotte

Contents

From the Editors Joey Lord, Daniel Maxwell	4
Faculty Perceptions of Educator Dispositions: What dispositions do middle level teachers need, and does teacher prep teach them? Holly J Thornton	5
Learning Others' Point of View: Teaching Students Perspective Eric Groce, Margaret Gregor, and Robin Groce	15
The Missing Link in Student Success: Why Connection Matters Now More Than Ever Christopher S. Culver	26
Column: Topics, Tech, and Trends "From Chalkboards to Chatbots: A Practical Guide for Teachers" Emily McEntire	30
Column: Between Teachers "Lessons Learned Along the Way" Susan M. Furr	35
Column: Community Connections "Book Selection Challenges: A Growing Concern" Michele Bost	38

From the Editors

Dear Readers,

With the arrival of fall and the beginning of a new academic year, we are pleased to share with you the latest edition of the *NCMLE Journal*. This season's cover image, a small, emerging plant, was chosen as a symbol of the new growth and fresh possibilities that surround each new school year. Our aim is for this image to capture the spirit of growth and development so essential to middle level education, where hope and potential take root each year in classrooms across our state.

This edition brings together an inspiring collection of research, reflection, and practice. The opening article offers a timely investigation into the professional dispositions middle level educators need, asking what it truly means to teach in ways that honor the human elements of education. Another piece invites us to think deeply about perspective-taking, reminding us of the critical role empathy plays in both civic life and adolescent learning. A third contribution highlights the urgent importance of connection, arguing that in an era of rapid change and digital complexity, relationships remain the "missing link" in student success.

Our column contributions also offer valuable insights. The Topics, Tech, and Trends column provides a practical guide to navigating the shift "from chalkboards to chatbots," offering tips for teachers to consider how emerging technologies can enhance learning without losing sight of student needs. In the Between Teachers column, readers will find thoughtful reflections on lessons learned throughout a teaching journey, and the Community Connections column concludes by highlighting the essential role that certified media specialists serve in middle schools across North Carolina.

As always, we are grateful for the commitment of our authors, reviewers, and editorial team, who dedicate their time and expertise to advancing the field of middle level education in North Carolina and beyond. Their work ensures that the journal continues to be a resource for preservice and in-service teachers, administrators, and all who support young adolescents in our classrooms.

We encourage you to engage with the concepts presented, and also invite you to consider contributing your own work to future issues. Each article, case study, and reflection strengthens our collective capacity to serve middle grades learners well.

Thank you for your continued support of the *NCMLE Journal*. May this edition inspire you to cultivate growth, connection, and possibility in your work with students and colleagues this year.

Warm regards,



Daniel Maxwell and Joey Lord

ORIGINAL PAPER

Faculty Perceptions of Educator Dispositions: What dispositions do middle level teachers need, and does teacher prep teach them?

Author: Holly J. Thornton

Abstract: The current shortage of qualified classroom teachers coincides with a pervasive emphasis on the concept of teacher as technician. Teaching is dominated by centralized top-down instructional decision-making, with a primary aim of teacher accountability. The very human elements required for effective teaching are being increasingly diminished within schools. This runs counter to middle level education's emphasis on relationships and connecting learning to young adolescent students' characteristics and lived experiences. The human aspects of teaching can be evidenced, evaluated, and cultivated through a focus on teacher dispositions. This article asks if educator preparation faculty share a definition of teacher dispositions and value them as a key element of successful teaching and learning. It also examines if faculty hold a common belief that these essential human elements can be taught to teacher candidates and how this may intentionally happen.

Keywords: dispositions, teacher preparation, human elements of teaching

Introduction

State Legislators increasingly question the need for professionally prepared educators. A shortage of teachers has led many states to rush to fill the gap with individuals who have little to no professional knowledge base or training related to teaching and learning. Estimates indicate that at least 406,964 positions were either unfilled or filled by teachers not fully certified for their assignments. This represents nearly one in eight of all teaching positions nationally (Tan et al., 2024). Middle level education is one of the top critical shortage areas (Lunsmann et al., 2021). Finding well-prepared teachers is compounded by the need for teachers who are prepared and committed to meeting the unique needs of young adolescents. At the same time, professional middle level licensure only exists in a limited number of states (AMLE, 2025). Another challenge to securing qualified middle level teachers is that 60% of teacher candidates have a deficit-oriented perception of young adolescent

learners, viewing their characteristics as negative and problematic. (Lunsmann et al., 2021). Successful middle level teacher candidates need to not only exhibit proficiency in the fields of assessment, curriculum, and instruction, but must also have the necessary dispositions to teach and reach young adolescent learners. They need to be positively disposed to creating democratic classroom environments where young adolescents are valued and respected and where all are welcomed, included and affirmed (Bishop & Harrison, 2021). The Association of Middle Level Education indicates the need for dispositions that are deeply connected to a commitment to young adolescents that enable teachers to become student advocates, role models, supporters of diversity, collaborators, and lifelong learners (Bishop & Harrison, 2021). Dispositional development is an important aspect of preparing candidates to work with middle level students (Lunsmann et al., 2021).

The shortage of qualified classroom teachers is coupled with a pervasive emphasis

on the concept of teacher as a technician (Villavicencio et al, 2024). Increasingly, teachers are under immense pressure to perform a de-professionalized role (Aronson et al., 2021). Teaching is dominated by centralized, top-down instructional decision-making, with a primary aim of teacher accountability. This technical positioning implies that teaching can be mastered by on-the-job learning. Teacher success is determined by standardized teacher evaluation frameworks that are tied to student achievement test scores. (Aronson et al., 2021; De Saxe et al., 2020; Gerdeman et al., 2017). The very human elements required for effective teaching are being increasingly diminished within schools. However, successful teachers are humans who do not merely enact technical steps and are not easily replaced by online learning modules or artificial intelligence. Middle level education emphasizes that teachers are successful at teaching and reaching all students through developing relationships and connecting learning to students' characteristics and lived experiences. The de-professionalization of teaching creates a heavy burden placed on teachers at a time when retaining teachers is vital (Aronson et al., 2021; De Saxe et al., 2020; Gerdeman et al., 2017), and teachers indicate that human connections with students and acting in their best interests are foundational to their desire to be a teacher (See et al., 2022). Maintaining and developing this humanness may be central to teaching as a profession and the success of young adolescent learners. These human aspects of teaching can be evidenced, evaluated, and cultivated through a focus on teacher dispositions.

Dispositions provide the human framework and relationship structures that resist the concept of teaching as a technical endeavor and support teachers to reach students as individuals, enabling them to become successful learners. Public school classroom teachers have been struggling with challenges related to de-professionalization, including an overemphasis on test scores and a controlled and limited

curriculum. Pacing guides and scripted approaches are employed to ensure standardization of teaching content and practices. Professors in teacher preparation have long lamented the challenges and issues faced by classroom teachers over the last decade. Increasingly, the de-professionalization and control of teacher educators is becoming dominant in the teacher preparation field as well (Milner, 2013, 2023). A lack of focus and concern for the development of beginning teachers' dispositions echoes deprofessionalization. (Aronson et al., 2021; De Saxe et al., 2020). To refute a reductionist definition of the teacher as a technician, middle level teacher educators need to research, develop a better understanding of, and contemplate how to teach the human element of teacher dispositions.

What are dispositions, exactly?

Over time, multiple definitions and perspectives associated with teacher dispositions have made it difficult to establish the usefulness of dispositions and to build a common research base (Ritchhart, 2001). Dispositions have been grounded in the construct of "habits of mind," dating back to Dewey (1933), who defined dispositions as indicating a belief that is internal and unintentional that determines teacher actions. Dispositions have been described as animating, motivating, and directing teachers' abilities. They are present in patterns of frequently exhibited behavior that is intentional on the part of the teacher and situated within a particular context and particular time (Freeman, 2007; Katz & Rath, 1985; Ritchart, 2001).

The lack of a clear, universally accepted definition of what dispositions are continues to make the ability to assess dispositions questionable. It has led to questioning the usefulness of assessing them (Choi et al., 2016). A representation of this lack of shared understanding and measure of dispositions was demonstrated when NCATE (2007) removed

the definition of dispositions from its glossary, indicating that the definition was “To be determined” (p. 45). More recently, the intensity with which faculty seek to build a collective understanding of dispositions seems to be waning, as does its prevalence in research and standards development. A lack of shared understanding of dispositions makes them challenging to document and evaluate, let alone teach in educator preparation programs. Concerns have been expressed about the violation of students’ rights and privacy. Court cases have focused on colleges of education “using” dispositions to remove teacher candidates from preparation programs or forcing them to sign contracts that push the college’s belief systems onto students, thus violating their rights (Wilkerson, 2006; Leo, 2005). A still unresolved question within the literature on educator dispositions has been whether dispositions relate more to observable behaviors, or evidence the less tangible aspects of teaching like attitudes, beliefs, values, and morals (Hess, 2006) or align with the intellectual and cultural aspects of teaching (Stooksbury et al., 2009). Consequently, Osguthorpe (2013) states that faculty

...cobble together a list of traits, values, beliefs, and attitudes that is derived from discussions of several faculty members who are sitting around a table, trying to achieve consensus on what is important, without any discussion of philosophical underpinnings --- be they habits of mind, virtues, abilities it is easy to recognize the value of theory and philosophical grounding when it comes to knowledge and skills, but too many of us rely on our intuitions and practical experience alone when it comes to dispositions (19).

The question of how educator dispositions affect student learning and understanding has not been clearly addressed within the literature. To

address this, nearly 30 years of research have gone into studying the impact of dispositions on student learning and the development of the framework for *Dispositions in Action* (DIA). The DIA framework emerged from the observation of classroom teachers and resulting, iterative validation studies completed with groups of exemplary teachers. *Dispositions in Action* (Thornton, 2006a) may be thought of as the link between educators’ perceptions of teacher roles and relationships with learners and learning. Dispositions ultimately determine the decisions teachers make and the actions they take. The framework has led to an observational rubric indicating a range from responsive to technical dispositions. The disposition to be responsive is a thinking-based orientation that considers the needs and actions of the learner, developmental characteristics, their cultural background and experiences, levels of understanding, student questions and misconceptions, and the learning context and community. In contrast, teachers who are technically inclined view their role as teachers as that of a technician, knowing how to successfully employ prescriptive teaching skills, with limited deeper decision making and reflection, leading to little variation from situation to situation and student to student.

The lack of a clear, agreed-upon definition of what we mean by dispositions and this lack of focus on the impact on student learning has often reduced dispositions to easily recognizable descriptions of professional behaviors such as promptness and appropriate dress on simple checklists, or verbatim statements of standards language for accountability and accreditation (Thornton, 2018). Such an approach does not capture the complexity of dispositions nor their promise in teaching and reaching young adolescents to think, understand, and lead the world of the future. Nor does it bode well for the future of teaching as a human endeavor.

Why do dispositions matter?

The literature reveals that significant issues and concerns related to a candidate's success are almost always dispositional (Osguthorpe, 2013). Issues that arise during field experiences are often related to the moral and ethical aspects of teaching practices or a candidate's way of being with students in a classroom setting. Terms such as responsibility, commitment, care, kindness, open-mindedness, and other less tangible concepts are often used to describe dispositional concerns when candidates are struggling within field experiences. (Osguthorpe, 2013; Anderson & Brydges, 2011). Research indicates that teachers' attitudes, values, and beliefs about students, teaching, and themselves have a significant impact on student learning (Taylor & Wasicsko, 2000). Teacher dispositions directly impact the depth of student understanding and correlate with candidate success on licensure assessment measures such as the edTPA (Thornton, 2006, 2018). Intentional development of dispositions, provided by mentors who understand the particular needs of young adolescents, may extend candidates' abilities to more effectively reach and teach middle level learners (Wei et al., 2009).

This positive impact on student learning, coupled with the importance of recognizing and maintaining teaching as a human endeavor, suggests that teacher preparation faculty should be concerned with understanding, evaluating, and teaching effective teacher dispositions. Teacher preparation should focus on triggering and enhancing the dispositions necessary to effective teaching (Riveros et al, 2012). Research reveals that building knowledge and honing skills related to effective dispositions causes candidates to leave a teacher preparation program with changes in their dispositions (Diez, 2006). Thus, a focus on developing an understanding of dispositions and intentionally teaching dispositions that cultivate candidate effectiveness and deepen students' learning should be central to research and professional

development initiatives in colleges of education.

What do teacher preparation faculty think about dispositions?

A study was conducted to examine how education professors define dispositions, their presence within teacher preparation, and their teaching methods, addressing some of the aforementioned concerns.

The research questions were as follows:

- How do teacher preparation faculty define teacher dispositions? Is there a shared understanding?
- What do teacher preparation faculty consider important related to teacher dispositions?
- Do teacher preparation faculty believe dispositions are taught? How?

A survey examining teacher educators' definitions of teacher dispositions, their importance, faculty concerns related to the use of dispositions in the field of education, and how faculty teach dispositions was conducted. The survey questions were grounded in the literature about how teacher dispositions have been defined, evaluated, and addressed within education. The survey included themes found within the literature, such as morals and ethics, patterns of professional behavior, patterns of thinking, personality traits, the variety of tools and approaches to assessing dispositions, the relationship between dispositions and teaching behaviors, teaching dispositions in teacher preparation, and identified concerns about dispositions.

These themes within the literature led to the development of a psychometric survey that was electronically distributed (via email) to all faculty members of the identified college of education faculty at a North Carolina university. A list of email addresses for each full-time faculty member and student teacher supervisor was requested from each of the college of

education's departments. The response rate was 33% across all departments combined. A Likert scale was employed to measure the attitudes, opinions, and perceptions of the teacher preparation faculty regarding their understanding of educator dispositions. The survey allowed participants to express their level of agreement or disagreement towards multiple statements representing constructs found in the literature base about educator dispositions, quantifying their responses in terms of level of agreement. Respondents were to indicate their level of agreement with each question response statement. The percentage of the surveyed faculty that agreed with each statement (combined 3 and 4 level scores) was analyzed and determined (see Appendix).

Interestingly, all responses for each question indicated significant percentages of faculty in agreement with the statement, with 65.2% agreement being the lowest score on any response item, and 23 of the 31 possible responses scoring agreement percentages of 80 % or higher. This can be correlated with the literature base, indicating that the definition and use of the construct of teacher dispositions is vast, varied, and largely inconsistent.

Analysis of the surveys indicated that the two most frequently supported definitions of dispositions went beyond a surface level. Faculty viewed dispositions as being essential to effective teaching, determining teacher instructional decision-making and student/teacher relationships. Dispositions were also reported as representative of morality and deeply rooted perceptions of self and others. A stark contrast can be drawn between these top two responses and the next highest level of agreement. This response focused on more surface definitions of behavior (*Professional behavior such as promptness, willingness to receive criticism, work ethic, reliability/follow through, and use of appropriate language*). The least supported definition was centered on self-perception.

Responses related to what was viewed as evidence of dispositions revealed that faculty believe teacher dispositions do animate teaching and can be examined through observation of teaching behaviors. They were also viewed as impacting the nature and results of student learning. There was less agreement with evidence, including self-reporting, behavior checklists, and evidence of student beliefs. The restating and use of standard language as evidence had the least positive responses.

Despite the lack of a shared and articulated definition of teacher dispositions, the respondents in this survey valued dispositions, viewing them as crucial to the human aspects of teaching and how this may ultimately impact students as learners. However, most of the faculty respondents stated that dispositions cannot be taught. The second most frequent response indicated that faculty believed that dispositions can be modeled for teacher candidates. Overall, the faculty reported that the college of education did not have a direct focus on intentionally teaching candidates the desired dispositions.

Respondents indicated their concerns related to the construct of teacher dispositions and its place within teacher preparation. The most frequently expressed concern was that educator dispositions could lead to a focus on issues that may be controversial, such as morality and ethics. This was followed by concerns that there is no consistent or agreed-upon definition within the profession. Responses also indicated concern about reductionist approaches to teacher dispositions. The least frequently indicated concern focused on the dispositions' ambiguous nature and messiness.

Discussion

Teaching is increasingly questioned as a profession that requires rigorous and intentional preparation that uses research-based instructional decision making. Filling large

numbers of vacancies with unprepared or underprepared lay people is justified by the thinking that teaching is a matter of “doing”. This definition views teaching as merely implementing increasingly prescriptive and technical acts, void of the need for human relationships and responsive decision-making. The value added and importance of what the teacher brings to the classroom, beyond technical prowess, is neglected within the profession and teacher preparation programs. The underlying human filter that determines the actions teachers take in the classroom and their impact on student learning may be best represented by the construct of educator dispositions. Within this study, a shared understanding of this construct, or even a basic shared definition, remains lacking.

If teacher education professors recognize the value and importance of a teacher’s dispositions in instructional decisions and the nature of student learning. In that case, the emphasis on reductionist approaches to educator dispositions within colleges of education is problematic. Administrative tasks, such as efficiently filling a growing number of unfilled teaching positions or collecting data for teacher preparation accreditation, can ignore or complicate this problem. Considering dispositions as largely intangible or innate, or even intractable, contributes to neglecting explicit teaching and cultivation of educator dispositions within candidate preparation. This, coupled with the potential for controversy surrounding such an ill-defined goal, has led to surface-level approaches to dispositions and missing the opportunity for this aspect of teaching to be considered consequential to student learning. The lack of an intentional and research-grounded approach to educator dispositions further misses the increasingly necessary representation of teaching as a complex and human endeavor. This act cannot be replaced by scripted novices or artificial intelligence.

The belief that educator competence is defined by professional knowledge and skills, and that alone is sufficient for producing teacher excellence, has existed for some time (Collinson, 1999). Legislatures have focused on content coverage over pedagogy and strict oversight of curriculum to reduce teaching to a consistent, “non-controversial”, scripted, and paced procedural act. The current culture of increased managerialism, accountability, routine planning, assessment, and reporting procedures has changed not only the way education is delivered but has also profoundly affected teacher identity (Gray, 2007). This has become a reality in both the P-12 and university classroom. Professors in colleges of education are no longer immune to this de-professionalization (Franklin-Torrez & Haniford, 2018). This may be illustrated by dispositional assessments within teacher preparation that continue to reflect reductionism, superficiality, disconnectedness, and a culture of compliance (Diez, 2006, 2007).

A focus on student-centered dispositions and the importance of relationships and student ownership is foundational to middle level education. These values run counter to the current standardization and technicalization of teaching. Embracing, defining, and owning the construct of educator dispositions, as aligned with middle level teacher preparation, may be a means for middle level educators to continue to teach against the grain in the best interests of young adolescent learners and future middle school teachers. If the disruption of defining teaching as a technical act does not come from those who prepare professionals to enter the field, how can we expect teachers in the field to take on this daunting challenge (Milner, 2023)? Understanding and developing effective dispositions within middle level teacher preparation may be a place to push back. According to Wenzel and Roberts (2025):

“Providing middle level students with teachers who have dispositions most well suited to the specific needs of

young adolescents is what students deserve.... dispositions of new and experienced teachers need to be cultivated or strengthened to meet the changing demands of middle school curriculum and learners.”

References

- Association for Middle Level Education. (2025). *Executive summary: Professional preparation and credentialing of middle level teachers*.
- Anderson, D., & Brydges, B. C. (2011). Professional teaching dispositions for elementary versus middle/secondary: Testing the generalizability of findings from rubric assessment data to identify and improve performance of struggling and high-risk teachers. *International Journal of Arts & Sciences*, 4(11), 253–268.
- Aronson, B., Anderson, A. B., Ellison, S., Barczak, K., & Bennett-Kinne, A. (2021). The last refuge of the incompetent: Urban teacher perceptions of their positions in public discourse. *Educational Studies*, 57(1), 21–36.
- Bishop, P. A., & Harrison, L. M. (2021). *The successful middle school: This we believe*. Association for Middle Level Education.
- Choi, H., Benson, N., & Shudak, N. (2016). Assessment of teacher candidate dispositions: Evidence of reliability and validity. *Teacher Education Quarterly*, 43(3), 79–81.
- Collinson, V. (1999). Redefining teacher excellence. *Theory Into Practice*, 38(1), 4–11.
- De Saxe, J. G., Bucknovitz, S., & Mahoney-Mosedale, F. (2020). The deprofessionalization of educators: An intersectional analysis of neoliberalism and education reform. *Education and Urban Society*, 52(1), 51–69.
- Dewey, J. (1933). *How we think: A restatement of the relation of reflective thinking to the education process*. D.C. Heath.
- Diez, M. E. (2006). Assessing dispositions: Five principles to guide practice. In H. Sockett (Ed.), *Teacher dispositions: Building a teacher education framework of moral standards* (pp. 49–68). AACTE Publications.
- Diez, M. E. (2007). Looking back and moving forward: Three tensions in the teacher dispositions discourse. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 58(5), 388–396.
- Franklin-Torrez, C., & Haniford, L. (2018). Understanding our identities as teacher educators in an era of deprofessionalization. In D. Garbett & A. Ovens (Eds.), *Pushing boundaries and crossing borders* (Self-Study of Teacher Education Practices).
- Freeman, L. (2007). Teacher dispositions in context. In M. E. Diez & J. Rath (Eds.), *Dispositions in teacher education*. Information Age Publishing.
- Gerdeman, R. D., Wan, Y., Molefe, A., Bos, J. M., Zhu, B., & Dhillon, S. (2017). *Impact of TNTP's teaching fellows in urban school districts*. American Institutes for Research.
- Gray, S. L. (2007). Teacher as technician: Semi-professionalism after the 1988 Education Reform Act and its effect on conceptions of pupil identity. *Policy Futures in Education*, 5(2), 194–203.
- Hess, F. (2006). *Schools of reeducation? Professional standards for the accreditation of schools, colleges, and departments of education*. National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education.
- Katz, L., & Rath, J. (1985). Dispositions as goals for education. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 1(4), 301–307.
- Leo, J. (2005, October 24). Class(room) warriors. *U.S. News & World Report*.

- <http://www.usnews.com/usnews/opinion/articles/051024/24john.html>
- Lunsmann, C., Beck, J., Hinton, K., & Perry, B. (2021). Middle level teacher recruitment: Challenging deficit narratives. *Middle School Journal*, 52(5), 12–24.
- Milner, R. H. (2023). *The race card: Leading the fight for truth in America's schools*. Corwin Press.
- Milner, R. H. (2013). Policy reforms and de-professionalization of teaching. *National Education Policy Center, School of Education, University of Colorado Boulder*.
- National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education. (2007). *Professional standards accreditation of teacher preparation institutions*. NCATE.
- Osguthorpe, R. D. (2013). Attending to ethical and moral dispositions in teacher education. *Issues in Teacher Education*, 22(1), 17–28.
- Ritchhart, R. (2001). From IQ to IC: A dispositional view of intelligence. *Roeper Review*, 23(3), 143–150.
- Riveros, A., Newton, P., & Burgess, D. (2012). A situated account of teacher agency and learning: Critical reflections on professional learning communities. *Canadian Journal of Education*, 35(1), 202–216.
- See, B. H., Munthe, E., Ross, S., Hitt, L., & El Soufi, N. (2022). Who becomes a teacher and why? *Review of Education*, 10(3).
- Stooksbury, L., Schussler, D., & Becaw, L. (2009). Conceptualizing dispositions: Intellectual, cultural, and moral domains of teaching. *Teachers and Teaching: Theory and Practice*, 15(6), 719–736.
- Tan, T. S., Arellano, I., & Patrick, S. K. (2024). *State teacher shortages 2024 update: Teaching positions left vacant or filled by teachers without full certification*. Learning Policy Institute.
- Taylor, R., & Wasicsko, M. (2000). *The dispositions to teach*. <http://www.educatordispositions.org/dispositions/The%20Dispositons%20to%20Teach.pdf>
- Thornton, H. (2018). *The it factor: What makes a teacher great?* Brille.
- Thornton, H. (2006). Dispositions in action: Do dispositions make a difference in practice? *Teacher Education Quarterly*, 33(2), 53–68.
- Villavicencio, A., Klevan, S., Patton Miranda, C., Jaffe-Walter, R., & Cherng, H. S. (2024). The freedom to teach: The role of (re)professionalization in cultivating responsive schooling for immigrant students. *Educational Studies*, 60(2), 156–176.
- Wei, R. C., Darling-Hammond, L., Andree, A., Richardson, N., & Orphanos, S. (2009). *Professional learning in the learning profession: A status report on teacher development in the United States and abroad*. National Staff Development Council.
- Wenzel, A., & Roberts, J. (2025). *Coaching teacher dispositions* [Research summary]. <https://www.amle.org/coaching-teacher-dispositions/>
- Wilkerson, J. R. (2006). Measuring teacher dispositions: Standards-based or morality-based? *Teachers College Record*. <http://www.tcrecord.org/Content.asp?ContentID=12493>

Appendix

1. How do you define teacher dispositions?

- Values that influence moral dimensions of teaching, such as issues of ethics and equity, **93.7%**
- Habits of mind necessary to effective teaching are seen in patterns of behaviors exhibited frequently and intentionally in the classroom, **91.5 %**
- Filters that define how teachers make decisions about approaches to student relationships, curriculum, instruction, and assessment, **89.6%**
- Professional behavior such as promptness, willingness to receive criticism, work ethic, reliability/follow through, and use of appropriate language, **85.6%**
- Collection of cognitive dispositions that capture one's tendency to engage in certain patterns of thinking, **82.9%**
- Personality traits such as sense of humor, flexibility, collegiality, enthusiasm, and confidence, **79.8%**
- Teachers' perceptions of themselves in relation to others and the greater world, **71.8%**

2. How are dispositions best evidenced?

- Dispositions animate, motivate, and direct abilities and are observed in the patterns of one's frequently exhibited behavior, **93.5%**
- Dispositions are evidenced through grounded observation processes that evidence how teachers are responsive or technical in how they enact teaching and learning that directly impacts learners' experiences and success, **89.2%**
- Dispositions are evidenced through the identification of teacher beliefs that work against the educational success of students from diverse backgrounds, such as mismatches between teachers' and students' worldviews, backgrounds, experiences, and languages, **79.6%**
- Dispositions are professional behaviors that can be observed with a rating scale or checklist, **75.2%**
- Dispositions are evidenced in self-reporting such as pre- and post-test scores before and after preservice courses or field experiences, responses to written student cases, guided self-reflection, or journaling, **70.3%**
- Dispositions are evidenced through the documentation of CAEP and other SPA standards that define dispositions as "values and commitments" using standards-based checklists, rating scales, or rubrics, **65.2%**

3. Importance/Impact of dispositions

- Dispositions represent the human element of teaching and teacher preparation, **95.2%**
- Teachers are not mere cogs whose technical expertise is the main determinant of student success, **93.8%**
- Characteristics of teachers evolve from their dispositions and are the impetus for successful teaching and learning, **93.4%**
- Dispositions determine how teachers are responsive to the diverse needs of all students, **89%**
- Most novice and even veteran teachers' struggles with success in the classroom are due to dispositional concern, **88.5%**
- Beyond standards accountability tools, dispositions are implicitly, yet intentionally, taught, and an important part of learning how to teach, **88.3%**

- Dispositions are the intangible aspects of teaching that directly impact students' success, beyond planning, procedures, or methods, **84.2%**
- Dispositions separate average teachers from great ones, **79.5%**

4. How are dispositions taught?

- They cannot be taught as one's dispositions do not change, **97.6%**
- Through modeling of desired dispositions by professors, master teachers, colleagues, and others, **94.4%**
- Through intentional identification and understanding of one's dispositions and their impact on all learners/learning, **88.8%**
- Through intervention and developing action plans to develop desired teacher/candidates' dispositions, **88.7%**
- Through building a common understanding of research and language about educator dispositions among candidates and professionals, beyond standards language and documentation systems that are often not grounded in dispositional theory and research, **82.6%**

5. What are your concerns about dispositions?

- They are potentially problematic in addressing/intervening with candidates and may open up potentially problematic dialogue about beliefs, morals, and equity, **92.3%**
- They are not well understood by teachers and teacher educators, as the research on dispositions is typically not a focus in the professional field, **90.6%**
- The current focus tends to be more on accountability than substance, **85.9%**
- They are reduced to direct or loosely correlated dispositions language from state and national standards that often restate pedagogical standards of practice with the words "value," "believe," or "committed to" in front of them, **84%**
- They are by nature ambiguous, and necessarily messy and less concrete than many technical educational processes and elements, **77.1%**

Dr. Holly Thornton (thorntonhj@appstate.edu) is a professor of middle grades at Appalachian State University whose research centers on teacher quality, with a specific focus on effective teacher dispositions. She has also authored a book related to this research entitled *The it factor: What makes a teacher great?*

ORIGINAL PAPER

Learning Others' Point of View: Teaching Students Perspective

Authors: Eric Groce, Margaret N. Gregor, Robin Groce

Abstract: Middle school students are confronted with social media and news posts on socio-political issues that reflect multiple perspectives every day. They often lack the ability to analyze the points of view presented. Becoming informed, engaged, and compassionate citizens, the goal of many school districts across our nation, begins by learning to view the world through multiple lenses, working toward empathy, compromise and collective decision making, and placing problems in context. Researchers note that there are benefits to teaching students the skills used to recognize, analyze, and develop perspectives on the variety of information presented. This article presents multiple non-threatening and time conscious activities that teachers can use to help their students recognize different points of view, analyze them, recognize bias and propaganda, and develop critical information literacy skills. After engaging in these lessons students may see that there are many ways to interpret a situation and develop an appreciation for multiple points of view.

Keywords: perspective, points of view, problem solving, information literacy

It's not what you look at that matters; it's what
you see.
- Henry David Thoreau

Contemporary headlines are filled with socio-political issues incorporating multiple perspectives. Are vaccines safe? What effect will tariffs have on our economy and international trade partners? Can the effects of climate change be slowed or reversed? These topics, and many more, are complex multidimensional subjects which require contextual understanding and cultural competencies. If our students are to be equipped to comprehend, analyze, and address these and other issues, they must be able to recognize and incorporate multiple points of view into solutions. Specifically, they must listen and seek to understand differing viewpoints, engage in civil discourse, be adept at identifying bias and propaganda, and exercise critical literacy skills. Becoming informed, engaged, and compassionate citizens, the goal of many school

districts across our nation, begins by learning to view the world through multiple lenses, working toward compromise and collective decision making, and placing problems in their proper context.

Theoretical Framework

Researchers have recognized multiple benefits to teaching the processes associated with recognizing and developing multiple perspectives. Burchinal et al. (2020) posited that perspective-taking as well as empathy could be linked to academic achievement and strong emotional health. Cigala et al. (2015) concluded that young children with greater abilities in perspective taking exhibited more prosocial behaviors during peer interactions, including helping and sharing. Caldwell (2024) noted that students who can examine multiple perspectives can “grapple with the concepts of incomplete stories, multiple viewpoints, stereotypes, social pressure, and power” (p. 5). Finally, Endacott

and Brooks (2013), researchers on historical empathy, theorize that perspective taking in historical contexts facilitates understanding of the principles, attitudes, and beliefs about the lived experiences of others and how they may have interpreted a situation.

Perspective is an inherent trait in multiple subjects, including literature, social studies, and art, and is also present in many daily interactions and events. Before progressing to more complex or nuanced topics, students may benefit from short introductions where they can gradually learn to recognize and investigate various perspectives. Initially, it is not imperative to dedicate an entire class period or lesson to the topic. The activities listed below can be used to initiate discussions around perspectives and can be accomplished with a minimal time commitment.

Art

Figure-Ground Perception

Students will likely have encountered the types of images where they must distinguish between objects and a background. A review of a few of these images (e.g., The Rubin Vase, My Wife and My Mother-in-Law) is easily located and will allow students to visually recognize several perspectives within an image. Students may also remember the picture book *Duck! Rabbit!* (Rosenthal, 2009) from primary grades, which uses the same concept.

Artistic Interpretation

Even to the most casual art observer, several prominent artists have a style that is distinct and recognizable (e.g., Picasso, Dali, Kahlo). On Instagram, the account @thenonmuseum frequently posts famous paintings (e.g., Nighthawks, American Gothic, Café Terrace at Night) that are recreated in several artists' unique styles. A discussion about identifying elements of signature styles and how the paintings changed (mood, coloring, emotive elements) after being recreated in another style

could be accomplished within a few minutes. This could serve as a placeholder to revisit when discussing more in depth matters in-depth on the topic. Another Instagram account from Thomas Deininger (@tdeininger) features birds and other animals from nature constructed from beach trash and other found objects. From one visual perspective, the creations appear to resemble the animals in color, size, and shape. As the viewer moves around the space surrounding the art, the realistic creatures transform into a miscellaneous collection of discarded objects assembled together in a seemingly random configuration. A writing prompt could follow the viewing and analysis of some of Deininger's work, asking students to recall an instance where a spatial shift in perspective revealed an alternate understanding, insight, or image. Teachers should preview this Instagram post to ensure that the reader comments are appropriate for student viewing.

Perspective in Art

Multiple types of perspective are used in art to provide a sense of depth and distance. This allows the artist to make the image more realistic and appear to be three-dimensional when it is painted or sketched on a flat surface. Comparing examples of art that contain linear or aerial/atmospheric perspectives with two-dimensional works will allow students to recognize the difference when they are in close juxtaposition. Incorporating the art teacher to co-teach a mini lesson or provide content knowledge on the topic could serve as a fruitful collaboration across disciplines.

Literature

Picture books are a logical choice to explore perspective. The reading level will be within the majority of middle grade students' ability, and the accompanying illustrations that complement the text will support understanding. Several books can be examined in a short time to establish multiple aspects of perspective due to

their brief length (40 pages or less). A few examples are provided below.

The Fishing Lesson

The story begins with a fisherman napping in his small rowboat in the harbor. He is awakened by a tourist who interrupts his slumber with multiple clicks of his camera. As the fisherman wakes up and tries to get his bearings, the tourist immediately asks a series of questions about why the fisherman is napping instead of fishing. In response to the inquiry, “So...why aren’t you going out to sea?” (Böll, 2018, n.p.) the fisherman explains he has already taken his boat and caught enough to sustain him for that day and the two following days. Undeterred, the tourist responds, “I don’t mean to interfere in your business, but...” (Böll, 2018, n.p.) and then begins to detail a plan where the fisherman could go out multiple times in a day and increase his catch and profit so that he could purchase a motorboat. He continues to explain the scheme where the fisherman would continue to fish multiple times daily, which would allow him to progressively build his business by adding a larger fishing boat, a refrigerated warehouse, a smokehouse, and a canning factory. Without giving a chance for the fisherman to interject, he continues by

expounding how the expanding business could include a helicopter, exclusive fishing rights, and a restaurant, which would conceivably allow the fisherman the financial security to “...come relax here in the harbor, take a nap in the sunshine, or just enjoy the magnificent view!” (Böll, 2018, n.p.).

The fisherman, finally given the opportunity to respond to the tourist’s ambitious business model, remarks, “But that’s exactly what I was doing just now. I was relaxing in my boat, taking a nap until you woke me up with the annoying *click click click* of your camera!” (Böll, 2018, n.p.). The story ends without any further dialogue, just the tourist standing at one end of the rowboat with a perplexed look on his face and the fisherman settling back into his nap. This example of perspective asks readers to reconsider preconceptions of ideals such as happiness and success. Classroom discussions could begin with an examination of each perspective within the story and then extend into topics such as contemporary material culture, identifying “successful” people, and varied conceptions of happiness. An exemplar is provided below to model how teachers can use picture books to teach the concept of perspective.

Lesson/Activity Sequence for *The Fishing Lesson* (to be completed over multiple days)

1. Read the book aloud, pausing often to ensure the students can view and interpret the illustrations. Next, ask students to write down their initial perceptions of the book as well as answer this prompt: Do you identify more with the tourist or the fisherman? Explain why. Next, lead a class discussion on the range of responses as well as the rationale.
2. Using the whiteboard or projector, display the following terms: Success, contentment, wealth, ambition, happiness.
In small groups, ask students to define/explain the terms verbally based on their own perceptions/perspectives and then complete the T chart (below) based on how the tourist and the fisherman would have defined the terms based on their actions in the text.

Tourist	Fisherman
success	
contentment	
wealth	
ambition	
happiness	

3. Review the illustrations from the section of the story where the tourist explains the possible expansion of the fisherman's business from buying a motorboat to exporting his lobster catch to Parisian restaurants. Pay particular attention to the evolution of the fisherman's clothing and grooming (e.g., blue jeans, tank top, & unkempt beard to suit/tuxedo, styled hair, and a trimmed beard) then discuss how the changes in attire and personal appearance supports the tourist's perspective of a successful fishing business.
4. Share the following quote from Dolly Parton: "Never act so busy making a living that you forget to make a life." and lead a discussion analyzing the quote as well as making the connection to the author's message in *The Fishing Lesson*.

Voices in the Park

The author, Anthony Browne, presents a simple story of several people taking their dogs to the park in a complex and multi-layered format. The narrative is presented in four distinct perspectives from a domineering mother, her reserved son Charles, a despondent and unemployed father, and his spirited daughter Smudge. The story requires close examination to recognize the embedded elements of perspective exemplified by each narrator. The mother, dressed quite formally for a visit to the park, leaves her stately home and manicured yard with her pedigreed dog. Upon reaching the park and unleashing her labrador, Victoria, she notices another dog she describes as a "scruffy mongrel" and a "horrible thing" that was "bothering" (Browne, 1998, n.p.) Victoria and chasing her around the park. Next, she directs Charles to sit on a bench. Although they are

only a few inches apart, they appear disconnected and are facing opposite directions from each other. The mother's red formal hat is prominent within each illustration. She notices Smudge's father and remarks, "You get some frightful types in the park these days!" (Browne, 1998, n.p.). She then notices Charles playing with a "very rough-looking child" (Browne, 1998, n.p.) and commands him and Victoria to come back to her so they can walk home in silence. The second voice belongs to the father, who decides he must "get out of the house" (Browne, 1998, n.p.) and decides to take his dog and Smudge to the park. The reader is greeted with a new font as well as a gloomy view of their apartment in a multi-storied public housing project. Upon releasing their dog to run around the park, they settle onto a bench and begin to scan the newspaper for employment opportunities. On the walk home, Smudge

chatted with him and raised his spirits as they walked past the same scene, now filled with light and happiness. Charles, the third voice, begins his story by explaining that he was often left alone and experienced boredom when his mother said it was time for a walk. As they reach the park, readers will notice the shadow of his mother and her symbolic hat looming over Charles, as well as hats adorning the top of each lamppost and in the shape of the clouds and a tree, indicating her overbearing presence. His spirits are lifted when Smudge asks him to play on the slide. He and Victoria are enjoying themselves when his mother “caught us talking together” (Browne, 1998, n.p.) and halted the interaction. His depiction of the events ends with a silent walk home. Smudge’s version opens with her walking alongside her father and Albert (the first time her dog is named) into a sun-filled park. She then describes the customary greeting between dogs involving the sniffing of backsides. The dogs didn’t mind, but Charles’ mom is depicted as heated with piercing eyes and her trademark hat lifted above her head, and is described as a “silly twit” (Browne, 1998, n.p.). Smudge notices Charles and begins a conversation with him that evolves into playing on the seesaw and laughing heartily when they see Albert swimming in the park fountain. Just as Charles gives her the flower he picked for her, he is escorted away by his mother with a sad look. Her rendition ends as she places her flower in a cup with water and makes her dad some cocoa. This book could easily serve as a seminal text for exploring perspective due to its many layers of symbolism and easily recognizable perspectives. In addition to the changing font representing each protagonist, readers are presented with varied vocabulary, different interpretations of interactions between Victoria and Albert, and two distinctly different depictions of a parent and child relationship. Anthony Browne’s illustrations also frame each character telling the story uniquely and are filled with nuance and subtlety that parallel the accompanying text.

The prominent aspect of perspective in *Voices in the Park* is identity, meaning the identity, personality, and character of each narrator is revealed through their telling of the story in text and illustrations.

The Catawampus Cat

J.C. Eaton’s story features a cat who walks into a busy town just slightly askew. The first to notice him was the grocer, Mr. Grouse, who tried to straighten him. The cat resisted and continued walking with a slight tilt, leaving the grocer and his wife to also tilt their heads in order to see the cat’s perspective. Their new perspective allowed them to find Mrs. Grouse’s wedding ring under a produce stand where it had been lost for years. As the cat walked through the town in his tilted style, he encountered a barber, house painter, librarian, and teacher along his way, and in each case, they began to view their job differently after being influenced by the catawampus feline. The mayor decided to hold a Catawampus Cat Day where all things were altered to be uneven, lopsided, and off-kilter. When the mayor proclaimed, “We’re all different now, just like you” (Eaton, 2017, n.p.), and asked the cat for his reaction, he blinked, stretched, and proceeded to straighten himself before walking back out of the town, once again catawampus. The message in *The Catawampus Cat* asks readers to consider looking at situations through a new lens or a different visual perspective in hopes of gaining new insights.

Interdisciplinary Connections: Literature/Social Studies

Historical events analyzed in retrospect often reveal perspectives and motives that were unknown or suppressed during the time they occurred. Social studies and ELA classes are an opportune time to introduce and study perspective through the lens of past events. Listed at the beginning of the North Carolina Standard Course of Study, social studies

standards for grades 6-8 are content-neutral inquiry indicators that "... can and should be applied within all content in the course" in an effort to develop "...critical thinking in social

studies." (<https://www.dpi.nc.gov/social-studies-6th-grade-standards-fall-2021-implementation/open>) Several of the most germane indicators are listed in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1 *Selected Inquiry Indicators - NCSCOS Grades 6-8 Social Studies Standards*

- I.1.4 Assess the credibility of primary and secondary sources using the origin, authority, structure, credibility, reliability, and context of the sources to guide the selection
- I.1.5 Identify evidence that draws information from multiple perspectives.
- I.1.6 Construct claims and counterclaims using evidence while pointing out the strengths and limitations of both based on multiple sources.
- I.1.7 Construct arguments consisting of multiple claims with evidence from sources and attention to disciplinary detail.
- I.1.8 Construct responses to supporting and opposing perspectives supported by evidence.
- I.1.10 Identify challenges and opportunities created in addressing local, state, tribal, regional, national, and/or global issues.

As previously mentioned, picture books can be an effective and efficient curricular resource to quickly introduce and engage learners on a topic.

Colonial Voices: Hear Them Speak

Winters' story details the events of the days leading to the Boston Tea Party through the perspectives of over a dozen inhabitants of the city. The first point of view comes from Ethan, the orphaned errand boy who works for a printer. Readers will be able to deduce his allegiance based on simple textual analysis. He reveals that the Sons of Liberty are counting on him to share a notice about the meeting at Old South Meeting House, and also characterizes the dialogue from Loyalists as tittle-tattle. Next, the printer, a widow who details significant elements of the story such as the Stamp Act, the Tea Act, and the occupation of Boston by British soldiers, introduces the viewpoints of the Patriots, the Loyalists, and "those who are in-between" (Winters, 2015, n.p.). The shoemaker, serving multiple patrons with differing views on the ships in the harbor filled with tea, notes, "I do not share my views. Don't want to lose my customers who differ" (Winters, 2015, n.p.), revealing a balance between profits and personal allegiances. Another merchant serving the

public, the milliner, declares the patriots should "...come to their senses" (Winters, 2015, n.p.), pay the tiny tax, and count their blessings. The basket trader, an indigenous individual, explains, "We will not fight their battle" (Winters, 2015, n.p.). She focuses on broken promises from colonists and the loss of hunting and fishing grounds. The slave from the blacksmith's shop comments on the hypocritical dilemma facing the enslaved; masters who plan for and fight for liberty while keeping others in bondage. The story concludes with the gathering at Old South Meeting House and the subsequent dumping of the tea into the harbor. Although Ethan and the other inhabitants are fictional, they represent a handful of the myriad perspectives regarding the American Revolution, providing students a chance to examine how different people were affected by the events of the period based on their occupation, citizenship status, and life experiences.

Activities

Self-Evaluation of Personal Factors

Definitions of perspective often state that it is the process of how someone perceives an event, situation, or person. The perceptions of

individuals are an accumulation of their environmental experiences, genetics, social interactions, and other variables. One avenue to reveal the elements of students' identity that influence perceptions and perspectives is to identify and self-evaluate factors that may influence how they envision the world. Teachers may direct this activity through an initial brainstorming session where learners identify factors and subsequently categorize them (e.g., genetics - being tall or red-headed; environmental factors - raised in an urban setting/born into a wealthy family; other – birth order, religious upbringing, exposure to other cultures). Next, the teacher could ask students to rank these factors in terms of most to least impactful on a few topics. Students could then be asked to interview a fellow student on the reasons for their stance and seek to understand how different life experiences determine perspective on a given topic, event, or situation.

Language Bias in Internet Searches

An article on the topic, *A Perspectival Mirror of the Elephant: Investigating language bias on Google, ChatGPT, YouTube, and Wikipedia*, asks readers to consider how internet searches on topics (e.g. Buddhism, liberalism, colonization) can “yield results focused on a narrow set of culturally dominant views, and these views are correlated with the language used in the search phrase” (Queenie et al., 2024, p. 23). Instead of assigning this as a reading, teachers can synthesize the article and share key points to infuse in a discussion about internet searches. The authors contend that popular internet searches on popular platforms, including Google, YouTube, and Wikipedia, when submitted in English, can serve as a “...cultural filter to perpetuate ethnocentric views, in which a person evaluates other people or ideas based on their own cultural norms” (Queenie et al., 2024, p. 25). Additionally, they warn that searches using ChatGPT in English present Anglo-American perspectives as the norm. “Without critical examination, non-

English perspectives are silently dismissed, leading one to think that they are unimportant, irrelevant, or wrong” (Queenie et al., 2024, p. 25). An engaging activity utilizing the commonplace technology skills of middle school learners could include entering the same search term or phrase into platforms such as Google or Wikipedia in different languages to determine how the search results vary depending on the language used for the search. Translating the results back into English would allow students to compare results and identify discrepancies. Additionally, an explanation of Google's search essentials contains several key points regarding search results, including meaning, relevance, quality, usability, and context. Another link on automatically generating and ranking results (<https://www.google.com/search/howsearchworks/how-search-works/ranking-results/>) under the heading *How Search Determines Context* revealed “The language of your query determines how most results will be displayed - for example, a search in French returns French-language results.” and “Our systems can also recognize many queries have a local intent. So, when you search for “pizza,” you get results about nearby businesses that deliver.” Allowing students time to search for contemporary or historical figures, events, or periods in different languages will provide an abundance of data to review and analyze with respect to search results and their tendency to direct searchers to websites based on cultural, linguistic, or geographic indicators. Students who recognize that their searches done in English may contain bias or only a segment of the contextual information on a subject are more likely to seek other interpretations and strive to understand varied perspectives while abandoning an ethnocentric viewpoint.

ELA Lesson Outline - Perspective and Person vs. Person Conflict:

Students will *analyze how an author develops and contrasts the perspectives of different*

characters in a text using the picture book *Star of Fear, Star of Hope* by Jo Hoestlandt and illustrated by Johanna Kang. While the predominant conflict of this historical time period (the Holocaust) is person vs. society, students will be investigating a person vs. person conflict from this specific story and analyzing the individuals' unique perspectives.

In the story, Helen is a young girl living in Nazi-occupied France during the time of the Holocaust. She is not Jewish, as is her best friend, Lydia. At the start of the story, Helen is trying to understand the implications of the Jewish experience, such as the (involuntary) wearing of the yellow Star of David by Jewish people. As the story progresses, Helen is having a party and has invited Lydia to attend. At the last minute, Lydia can't attend because she is taken into hiding just prior to a mass roundup of Jewish people to be deported to the concentration camps. Helen never hears from Lydia again and remains confused and personally hurt by Lydia throughout the story. She deals with some internal feelings of guilt at the end of the story.

Students are challenged to approach this initially as a person vs. person conflict. At the culmination of this activity, students will apply this analytical process to another chapter book - either the class novel or an independent reading selection.

1. After providing appropriate and relevant background for text-sets regarding the Holocaust, read *Star of Fear, Star of Hope* aloud to the class.
2. Divide the class into groups of four and assign them: Group A: Helen, and Group B: Lydia.

3. Students in Group A will identify and analyze Helen's actions, thoughts, and dialogue in an effort to make an argument for her feelings of betrayal by Lydia.
4. Students in Group B will identify and analyze Lydia's actions, thoughts, and dialogue in an effort to justify her lack of attendance at Helen's birthday party.
5. Students will make notes on the graphic organizer below - including quotes from the book.
6. The teacher will engage students in a friendly debate/discussion from both perspectives.
7. Direct students to their own independent reading selections. Ask students to journal about one character's unique perspective regarding a person vs. person conflict and its impact on the plot of the book. Have them consider:
 1. How might the plot change if the perspective of the character were different?
 2. How would you feel if you were in the story? How might your personal perspective change the plot?
 3. How might the conflict change or come to a resolution if your perspective prevailed?
 4. Reflect on a time you have had a person-to-person conflict. Can you now consider the perspective of the other person? How might you react differently in consideration of their perspective?

Figure 2 *Associated Standards*

RL.7.6	Analyze how an author develops and contrasts the perspectives of different characters in a text .	Students examine how an author constructs and depicts differences between each character's perspective in a text. <i>In the Classroom:</i> Students look for attitudes toward and interpretations of events and other characters in a story. Students analyze what different characters do, say, and think throughout a text in order to determine how the author has developed and communicated his/her unique perspective.	analyze – to critically examine the components of a subject to understand its meaning and/or nature as a whole perspective – an attitude toward or outlook on something text – anything that students can read, write, view, listen to, or explore, including books, photographs, films, articles, music, art, and more
---------------	--	--	--

Figure 3 *Perspective and person vs. person conflict*

	Actions	Thoughts	Dialogue
Helen			
Lydia			

Don't Eat the Last Cookie!

Snack Attack, a short, animated movie on YouTube, is another chance to develop perspective in a medium that most middle school students enjoy. The movie begins with an elderly lady in an empty train station who decides to eat something from the vending machine while she waits for her train. After inserting her coin and selecting the last package of Cookie Swirls, the machine activates and begins to extract the cookies from the row, then the machine stops, leaving her snack dangling between the end of the row and the glass. After pounding it with her fists, kicking it, and finally launching herself into the machine, the cookies drop. Once outside, she settles onto a bench alongside a young man with a spiked haircut who is listening to his music and texting. She

opens the package of cookies, begins to eat one, and settles into reading the newspaper. As she reaches for another cookie, she is startled as the man on the bench is also reaching for one of the three remaining cookies. Perturbed with his poor social etiquette, she huffs and moves the cookies to her lap. Undeterred, he reaches over, grabs a cookie, and then proceeds to flick the crumbs from her lap. She responds by standing on the bench, yelling at the cookie thief, and shaking her finger in his face. The young man seems unmoved by her tantrum and continues to enjoy his music as the earbuds shelter him from her incensed tirade. Next, he takes notice of the last cookie and takes it from the container. She grabs for it as well, and a see-saw struggle ensues for the last Cookie Swirl. He wins and is about to eat his prize when she makes a last plea

for the cookie. He ponders briefly and decides to split the cookie in half. He pops his half in his mouth as the train arrives at the station. She appears exasperated at this behavior and responds by crumbling her half in her fist and dropping it alongside the cookie container on the bench. She then makes her way over to the train, takes her seat, and takes a final look at the man responsible for ruining her snack time. As he waves goodbye to her, the porter stops to punch her ticket. As she returns her validated ticket to her purse, she is startled to find her package of Cookie Swirls just where she placed them after buying them inside the station. As the train begins to pull away from the station, she takes another look out her window and sees him collect the cookie package, drop it in the trash can, and walk away.

Teachers may decide to pause the video and ask students to take the elderly lady's perspective just before she gets on the train, and then again after she discovers she was pilfering cookies from a stranger, not the young man who remained calm and shared his cookies. Additionally, a writing prompt could ask students how she could have handled the misunderstanding instead of yelling at him while standing on the bench or might involve writing an apology letter.

Conclusion

Activities such as those suggested in this article give teachers non-threatening and time-conscious opportunities to teach the importance of introducing and analyzing perspective within art, literature, social studies, and websites. Building a foundation for the remainder of their academic career and into adulthood in identifying, considering, and seeking to understand multiple perspectives will allow learners to refine many skills necessary for navigating contemporary society, including conflict resolution, critical thinking, making informed decisions, and building an appreciation for alternative viewpoints.

Considering and understanding the beliefs and positions of others also reduces bias, heightens empathy, strengthens communication skills, and allows for a deeper understanding of complex issues.

The discussion opportunities presented in this article can be expanded to explore how the analytical skills taught are applicable to understanding disagreements, interpersonal relations, and historical and current events. After engaging in these lessons, students may see that there are many ways to interpret a situation and begin to recognize and respect multiple points of view.

References

- Böll, H. (2018). *The fishing lesson* (E. Bravo, Illus.). Eerdmans Books for Young Readers.
- Browne, A. (1998). *Voices in the park* (A. Browne, Illus.). Dk Publishing.
- Burchinal, M., Foster, T. J., Bezdek, K. G., Bratsch-Hines, M., Blair, C., Vernon-Feagans, L., & Family Life Project Investigators. (2020). School-entry skills predicting school-age academic and social-emotional trajectories. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 51, 67–80.
- Caldwell, K. (2024). Teaching Multiple Perspectives through International Children's Picture Books. *Social Studies and the Young Learner*, 36(3), 4-8.
- Cigala, A., Mori, A., & Fangareggi, F. (2015). Learning others' point of view: perspective taking and prosocial behaviour in preschoolers. *Early Child Development and Care*, 185(8), 1199-1215.
- Deininger, T. [@tdeininger]. (2025, June 13). *Hawk Head Study* [Instagram post]. Instagram.
- Department of Public Instruction. (2021, February 4). *North Carolina Social Studies for Grade*

6. <https://www.dpi.nc.gov/social-studies-6th-grade-standards-fall-2021-implementation/open>
- Eaton, J. C. (2017). *The Catawampus Cat* (G. Gordon, illus.). Crown Books for Young Readers.
- Endacott, J. & Brooks, S. (2013). An Updated Theoretical and Practical Model for Promoting Historical Empathy. *Social Studies Research and Practice*, 8(1), 41-58.
- Hoestlandt, J. (1996). *Star of fear, star of hope* (J. Kang Illus.). Bloomsbury USA Childrens.
- Moschini, D. [@thenonmuseum]. (2025, June 13). *What if Hopper's Nighthawks Was Painted By...?* [Instagram post]. Instagram.
- Queenie, L., Puett, M., & Smith, M. (2024). A Perspectival Mirror of the Elephant. *ACM Digital Library*, 22(1), 23-47. <https://doi.org/10.1145//3670241>
- Rosenthal, A. K. (2009). *Duck! Rabbit!* (T. Lichtenheld, Illus.). Chronicle Books.
- Winters, K. (2015). *Colonial voices: hear them speak* (L. Day, Illus.). Penguin Group.
- Verastegui, E. (2016). *Snack Attack* [Video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=38y_1EWIE9I

Dr. Eric Groce is a Professor in the Department of Learning, Teaching, and Curriculum at Appalachian State University. His primary research interest is the teaching of social studies in K-8 classrooms. He can be reached at groceec@appstate.edu

Dr. Margaret N. Gregor retired as the Instructional Materials Center Coordinator for University Libraries at Appalachian State University.

Dr. Robin Groce is a Professor in the Department of Child Development, Literacy & Special Education at Appalachian State University. Her primary research interest is the integration of children's and young adult literature in the classroom.

ORIGINAL PAPER

The Missing Link in Student Success: Why Connection Matters Now More Than Ever

Author: Christopher S. Culver

Abstract: In a rapidly evolving digital world, human connection is more essential than ever for Generation Z and Generation Alpha students. This article examines the profound impact of relationships on academic, social, and emotional success, positioning connection as the foundation of student well-being and achievement. Grounded in psychological and developmental theories, it highlights how strong teacher-student and peer relationships enhance motivation, self-efficacy, and resilience.

Educational research confirms that belonging and engagement significantly influence student outcomes, often more than socioeconomic factors. However, rising digital isolation exacerbates anxiety and disconnection, underscoring the need for intentional relationship-building in schools. This article presents practical strategies—strengthening teacher-student bonds, integrating social-emotional learning (SEL), amplifying student voice, and leveraging technology to enhance, not replace, human interactions.

Prioritizing connection fosters environments where students feel seen, valued, and empowered to succeed. This work advocates for a cultural shift in education, recognizing connection as the missing link in student success and a cornerstone of 21st-century learning.

Keywords: Student Success, Connection in Education, Generation Z, Generation Alpha, Teacher-Student Relationships, School Belonging, Social-Emotional Learning (SEL), Academic Motivation, Educational Psychology, Digital Isolation, Peer Relationships, Student Engagement, Resilience in Learning, Cognitive Development, 21st-Century Education.

In an ever-changing world, one constant remains: the foundational importance of connection. For Gen Z and Gen Alpha learners, who navigate a tech-driven, socially complex world, relationships and understanding are not just beneficial—they are essential. Connection is the key to fostering trust, engagement, and a sense of belonging, which research consistently links to improved academic, social, and emotional outcomes. This article highlights the critical role of connection in education, the unique needs of today's students, and evidence-based strategies for building relationships in schools.

Connection is a fundamental human need, as highlighted by Maslow's hierarchy of needs, which places belonging as a prerequisite

for self-actualization (Maslow, 1943). For Gen Z and Gen Alpha, growing up in a world dominated by digital communication and societal challenges has made authentic human connection even more critical. These generations face rising rates of loneliness and anxiety. A 2022 Pew Research study revealed that 46% of teens feel "online almost constantly," contributing to disconnection from real-world interactions (Pew Research Center, 2022). Similarly, Elmore (2019) found that students today spend over eight hours daily on screens, impacting their ability to develop meaningful face-to-face relationships.

This emphasis on connection aligns with foundational psychological theories. Sigmund Freud's psychodynamic theory suggests that

early relationships shape personality and emotional regulation, meaning that strong, positive connections in school settings contribute to students' psychological well-being (Freud, 1923). Similarly, Jean Piaget's constructivist theory posits that social interaction is essential for cognitive development, highlighting the necessity of relationships in the learning process (Piaget, 1950). B.F. Skinner's behaviorist approach reinforces that positive reinforcement in relationships—such as encouragement from teachers and peers—strengthens student engagement and motivation (Skinner, 1953). When students feel connected to their peers, teachers, and school community, they are more likely to thrive.

Research from Goodenow and Grady (1993) found that school belonging was a stronger predictor of academic motivation than socioeconomic status or prior achievement. Connection fosters trust, which in turn enhances engagement and resilience—essential qualities for navigating the complexities of today's educational environments. Connection directly influences academic performance. Students who feel valued and understood in the classroom are more likely to engage with learning materials and persevere through challenges. A meta-analysis by Hattie (2009) showed that strong teacher-student relationships ranked among the most effective influences on student achievement.

Key mechanisms behind this impact include:

- **Increased Motivation:** Feeling connected boosts intrinsic motivation, encouraging students to take ownership of their learning. Skinner's operant conditioning theory highlights how positive reinforcement—such as teacher support and peer validation—encourages sustained academic effort (Skinner, 1953).
- **Enhanced Self-Efficacy:** When students feel supported, they develop greater

confidence in their abilities, leading to improved performance. Piaget's work suggests that students construct knowledge through experiences and social interactions, making classroom relationships key to intellectual growth (Piaget, 1950).

- **Reduced Stress and Anxiety:** Connection creates a safe environment where students can focus on learning without the burden of social or emotional stress. Freud's work on defense mechanisms suggests that strong relationships can mitigate feelings of isolation and anxiety (Freud, 1923).

Beyond academics, connection is a cornerstone of social and emotional development. When students experience meaningful relationships, they build empathy, communication skills, and a sense of purpose. These skills are especially vital for Gen Z and Gen Alpha, who value a global perspective and a sense of belonging but often feel disconnected in traditional school structures (Haight, 2021). Ninety percent of today's generation prefers human interaction over a screen (Haight, 2021). Conversely, a lack of connection can lead to adverse outcomes. Students who feel isolated are at greater risk of depression, anxiety, and disengagement. Harding (2019) emphasized that loneliness—reported by 50% of adolescents—has health effects equivalent to smoking 15 cigarettes daily. These findings underscore the need for intentional efforts to foster connection within schools, as one in ten students report they do not have friends (Harding, 2019).

Strategies to Foster Connection in Schools:

Creating a culture of connection requires deliberate actions from educators, administrators, and the broader school community.

- **Build Strong Teacher-Student Relationships:** Research from Hattie (2009) identifies teacher-student

relationships as one of the most impactful factors on student achievement. Simple practices like greeting students by name, showing genuine interest in their lives, and maintaining consistent communication build trust and connection. It also increases student engagement by 33%.

- **Prioritize Social-Emotional Learning (SEL):** SEL programs, such as those outlined by CASEL (2021), emphasize skills like empathy, emotional regulation, and collaboration. Integrating SEL into daily lessons strengthens students' interpersonal connections.
- **Create a Sense of Belonging for All:** Allow students to take risks and be safe without fear of judgment or retaliation. Encourage them to be active, contributing members of the learning space (Forbes, 2023).
- **Foster Peer Connections:** Collaborative group work helps students build meaningful relationships with their classmates. Studies show that peer support increases both academic and social outcomes (Wentzel et al., 2016).
- **Encourage Student Voice:** Involve students in decision-making processes, such as creating classroom norms or having a choice in their assignments, and empowering students to contribute fosters autonomy and connection.

While technology has enabled unprecedented access to information and communication, it has also created challenges for authentic connection. Gen Z and Gen Alpha spend significant time online, often replacing face-to-face interactions with digital ones. To bridge this gap, educators can leverage technology to enhance—not replace—human connection.

For example:

- Use digital tools for collaborative projects, ensuring students interact meaningfully with their peers. When

working in collaborative groups, only one student should be given a piece of technology as the “researcher,” and other students should be actively engaged.

- Incorporate lessons on digital citizenship to help students navigate online relationships with empathy and respect (Ribble, 2011).

At the heart of fostering connection in education lies a set of core beliefs and values:

- **Belonging:** Every student deserves to feel seen, valued, and included.
- **Empathy:** Understanding students' perspectives builds trust and strengthens relationships.
- **Kindness:** Small acts of kindness create a ripple effect, transforming school culture.
- **Autonomy:** Empowering students to take ownership of their learning fosters confidence and engagement.

These principles are particularly relevant for Gen Z and Gen Alpha, who prioritize authenticity, belonging, and meaningful relationships in their interactions.

Connection is more than a buzzword; it is the foundation of effective education. For Gen Z and Gen Alpha, who face unique challenges in a rapidly changing world, connection provides the stability and support they need to thrive. By prioritizing understanding and relationship-building, educators can create environments where students feel valued, supported, and empowered to reach their full potential.

As schools strive to meet the needs of today's learners, fostering connection must remain at the forefront of educational practices. In doing so, we not only improve academic and social outcomes but also nurture a generation of empathetic, resilient, and capable individuals prepared to make a positive impact on the world.

References

- CASEL. (2021). *What is SEL?* Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning. <https://casel.org/what-is-sel/>
- Elmore, T. (2019). *9 challenges facing today's generation*. Growing Leaders Publishing.
- Forbes, K. (2023). *The dual language impact: The role cultural proficiency can play in supporting all students* [Doctoral dissertation, University of Oklahoma]. ProQuest Dissertations and Theses Global.
- Freud, S. (1923). *The ego and the id*. Hogarth Press.
- Goodenow, C., & Grady, K. E. (1993). The relationship of school belonging and friends' values to academic motivation among urban adolescent students. *The Journal of Experimental Education*, 62(1), 60–71. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00220973.1993.9943831>
- Haight, J. (2021). *The anxious generation: How the great rewiring of childhood is causing an epidemic of mental illness*. Random House.
- Harding, K. (2019). *The rabbit effect: Live longer, happier, and healthier with the groundbreaking science of kindness*. Atria Books.
- Hattie, J. (2009). *Visible learning: A synthesis of over 800 meta-analyses relating to achievement*. Routledge.
- Maslow, A. H. (1943). A theory of human motivation. *Psychological Review*, 50(4), 370–396. <https://doi.org/10.1037/h0054346>
- Piaget, J. (1950). *The psychology of intelligence*. Routledge.
- Pew Research Center. (2022). *Teens and technology 2022*. <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2022/08/10/teens-and-technology-2022/>
- Ribble, M. (2011). *Digital citizenship in schools: Nine elements all students should know* (2nd ed.). International Society for Technology in Education.
- Skinner, B. F. (1953). *Science and human behavior*. Macmillan.
- Wentzel, K. R., & Caldwell, K. (2016). Friendships, peer acceptance, and group membership: Relations to academic achievement in middle school. *Child Development*, 77(3), 1031–1052. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8624.2006.00948.x>

Dr. Chris Culver (christopher@orangesparrow.org) is a dynamic speaker, educational consultant, and part-time college professor specializing in the Science of Kindness, school culture, and Gen Z/Alpha engagement. A proud product of Oklahoma public schools and former middle school and cabinet-level administrator, he now partners with schools and organizations nationwide to create spaces where everyone feels seen, heard, valued, and respected—and he's on a mission to make kindness go viral. He believes if you can't find the light, be the light!

From Chalkboards to Chatbots: A Practical Guide for Teachers

Author: Emily McEntire

In 2005, I walked into my first classroom filled with dreams and aspirations to inspire students. My tools were modest; a whiteboard, an overhead projector, pens, markers, a lesson planner and a few well-loved teacher manuals. After school and on weekends, I poured countless hours into crafting lesson plans and grading assignments—a true labor of love.

Over the years, my teaching tools have evolved. The overhead projector gave way to a digital projector, and I received my first laptop. But nothing prepared me for the buzz in 2022 around ChatGPT, an artificial intelligence (AI) platform rapidly entering education conversations. Is AI taking over? Will teachers be replaced by machines? Students are just going to cheat, right!?

Honestly, cheating has been around since the dawn of time, and it's highly unlikely that AI will replace the human heart that teachers bring to the classroom. AI is simply the latest tool to take the world—and education—by storm. I can only imagine the trepidation teachers felt when chalkboards were replaced by whiteboards and overhead projectors; eventually giving way to computers, which have become commonplace in modern classrooms. But the biggest shift came with the advent of the internet. Classrooms became globally connected—an exciting change, though it also brought fear of the unknown.

Every stage of technological advancement has brought both positive and negative effects; it's all about how we choose to view and use them. Personally, I have been excited for the advancements that technology has brought to education. When my school provided me with a laptop, I was able to communicate with parents faster (no longer needing to make phone calls after school to

quickly relay information), plan lessons more efficiently, and track student progress without having to manage loads of paper documents. The internet additionally allowed me to access teaching resources, complete professional development, and stay current with educational practices. The internet became a tool that aided my creativity and productivity as a teacher.

AI is the newest challenge facing educators. There is still much we don't know about AI's role in education, and new AI-powered tools seem to appear every day. This can be overwhelming for classroom teachers, making it hard to know where to start. To be honest, I was initially unsure about ChatGPT and basically ignored it for a while. Then, one day, my school's media specialist introduced me to Magic School AI, which piqued my interest in generative AI and opened up new possibilities for my teaching. Magic School AI's Raina (a chatbot) has been my teacher assistant ever since. In fact, she assisted me with writing this article. Raina assisted in creating an outline for the article, provided feedback on my writing, and edited the article to ensure its readability.

My interest in this new tool evolved further when I made a shift in my career from classroom to instructional staff. In 2023, I left my classroom to be an instructional technology facilitator. This new position provided me the opportunity to support teachers, who wear many hats beyond just teaching — counselor, coach, mediator, communicator, and planner, to name a few. I saw AI as a tool for teachers to lift some of that burden, allowing teachers to thrive, not just survive.

Diving headfirst, I've realized I've only scratched the surface of AI's potential in the classroom. I am learning new ways to utilize AI in education. My goal is to share what I've

learned to ease the concerns of both students and teachers, and to help move the modern classroom forward.

AI is everywhere. We can't escape it. Try Googling something—you'll get a list of web sources, but you'll also see an AI-generated summary. Or maybe you ask Alexa to play your favorite playlist while you work. Need help keeping track of your to-do list or remembering appointments? Digital calendars offer scheduling assistance and reminders. You get the idea.

Despite how deeply AI is woven into our daily routines, conversations about its use in education often spark worry and skepticism. But the reality is, our students need to be ready—not just for the technology we use today, but for the innovations coming down the road.

Additionally, as educators, embracing AI as a tool, not a threat, opens doors to time-saving automation, innovative teaching methods, and personalized learning. Just as whiteboards replaced chalkboards and computers reshaped classrooms, AI offers new opportunities for growth. It's all about how we choose to use it.

AI: The Teacher Assistant

Let's first look at AI for teachers. AI has the potential to support their work in many important ways—helping lighten the load and freeing up time to focus on what really matters: connecting with students and inspiring learning.

Take lesson planning, for example. AI can jumpstart the process by generating ideas, suggesting resources, or even drafting outlines. After all the countless hours I've spent crafting lesson plans after school and on weekends, I can say having AI as a helpful assistant feels like a breath of fresh air. It doesn't replace the creativity teachers bring but makes customizing lessons to meet the unique needs of each classroom more manageable. I have used Raina as a sounding board to flesh out ideas for lessons or had it make suggestions for lessons

based on content I am teaching. Raina has helped me turn my ideas into detailed lesson plans in half the time it would take to write them by hand.

Beyond planning, AI has assisted me in creating lesson materials like worksheets, quizzes, and multimedia presentations tailored to different learning styles. This makes it faster for me to adapt instruction for diverse learners—helping me differentiate without feeling overwhelmed. I can provide information about my students (no names or identifying information) and AI can use that to tailor lessons and materials to meet the needs of the individual students. It can scaffold a worksheet, create sentence starters or level a reading passage in a matter of minutes.

Grading is another area where AI really shines. It can speed up grading for objective assignments, provide immediate feedback, and even analyze trends in student performance. This doesn't replace the thoughtful, personalized feedback teachers provide; instead, it frees up time so they can focus more on engaging with students. I give AI my rubric and provide information on particular aspects I want the AI to focus on then it generates a summary for me of the assignment and several bullet points of feedback for the student. I then can compare the AI recommendations to my own; quickly providing the student personalized feedback on their performance. In the past I would second guess my judgment or struggle to write clear, focused comments for my 100+ students.

AI also tackles those behind-the-scenes tasks we all know take up so much time—scheduling, attendance, communication management. Digital calendars with AI reminders keep me organized, and AI-powered email filters make sure important messages don't get lost. These small supports add up, reducing stress and helping us not just survive, but truly thrive in our roles.

Future Ready Students

This shift in the classroom mirrors a larger trend happening in the workforce. As employers move toward AI-powered productivity, they're increasingly seeking candidates who can navigate and utilize AI tools daily. Just as teachers need support, our students must be prepared for the realities of a world where AI is a key part of almost every industry. Our students won't be ready for these positions unless we equip them with these skills in the classroom.

As students acquire the necessary skills for future careers, AI can play a crucial role in helping them succeed—both in the classroom and beyond. Modern classrooms are filled with students from diverse backgrounds and with varied academic needs. This is where AI can be a game-changer. It has the potential to provide tailored support for each student—whether by translating materials, adjusting reading levels, guiding students through complex tasks, or sparking creativity. AI doesn't just support learning; it helps level the playing field, giving every student the opportunity to succeed on their own terms.

Practical Uses of AI in the Everyday Classroom

Now that we've established why AI is so crucial in the classroom—both for preparing students for the future and supporting teachers in their roles—the next step is understanding how we can start using it today. The good news? There are already accessible AI tools that can make an immediate impact. Whether you're looking to save time, enhance your lessons, or provide personalized support to students, there are practical ways to integrate AI into your teaching strategy right now.

Here's a few of my favorite AI tools for educators.

1. **Magic School AI:** This platform was created by an educator who understands the demands of the classroom and wanted to enhance the “magic” each teacher brings to their classroom. There are an abundance of tools on the platform which can be overwhelming. I recommend starting with a couple. My choices would be Raina, AI Prompt Assistant and Tool Recommendations. Raina is a chatbot that allows teachers to ask for assistance with any number of tasks or questions. The AI Prompt Assistant will guide teachers with developing powerful, concise prompts which will maximize the output of any AI tool. Tool Recommendations will make suggestions for the tools that would best fit your desired outcome; taking some of the guesswork out of which tool (of the nearly 100 tools available) to use.
2. **Brisk Teaching:** Brisk is a browser extension that provides a powerful tool for creating engaging, quality instructional materials. Once you add Brisk to your browser you can create anything directly in the browser and it will save to your Google Drive. For example: You are browsing a webpage on cytoplasm. You want to transform the information provided by the webpage into a lesson with interactive activities for students. In the past you would have had to spend time designing and creating materials. This might have taken hours. Brisk can create a presentation, make guided notes, design an escape room, and a myriad of other instructional materials based on the webpage in a matter of minutes. Freeing up your time to focus on delivery of the lesson and supporting student learning.

3. **AI powered gaming platforms:** Much to our chagrin, students love games. Digital/video games to be precise. So why not use this to our advantage. There are several excellent platforms that use the power of games and AI. **Kahoot** and **Quizziz** are two terrific examples. These two platforms have been around for a while, but recently they have gotten facelifts and harnessed the power of AI. Teachers can create more than just games with these platforms and they can do so quickly with the help of AI. Create engaging lessons, formative assessments, dynamic assignments, and build classroom communities with these tools.

AI Tools for Students

While AI tools for teachers can streamline classroom management and lesson planning, their true potential shines when applied directly to student learning. Teachers can create more personalized, engaging, and effective learning experiences for every student by incorporating AI powered tools.

Middle schoolers are beginning to develop more autonomy and independence. While we strive to give every student individualized attention daily, it's often not feasible with multiple classes of 30+ students. With AI chatbots students can explore topics, ask questions, and receive instant, personalized feedback. This kind of AI support helps students become more independent learners, building confidence as they receive timely guidance on writing and other tasks. It also helps level the playing field by lowering barriers—whether a student needs extra support or enrichment, AI tools adapt to meet diverse needs, promoting equity and inclusion.

By engaging with AI in a safe environment, students develop critical digital literacy skills and learn how to use technology thoughtfully, preparing them for the evolving

digital world. AI encourages creativity, personalized learning, and immediate feedback—key elements that help students grow and stay motivated.

Here's a few AI powered tools that teachers can use with students:

1. **Magic Student:** Magic School AI offers a student facing side where teachers can guide student interactions by setting up focused activities or providing rubrics and guidelines, ensuring AI feedback aligns with classroom goals. Teachers are able to monitor the conversations so that they can provide guidance, gain insight to students' understanding of content, and keep students safe online.
2. **School AI:** Here teachers can choose from pre-existing spaces or create their own. Spaces are customizable chatbots that students can use to explore various topics in a safe, controlled environment similar to Magic Student.
3. **Canva:** This creative space offers student access to AI tools that can be leveraged for designing presentations, videos, and graphics. Teachers can provide oversight and guidance as students utilize AI tools while allowing them to be creative.

AI Anecdotes from Real Classrooms

I've had the chance to witness firsthand how students engage with AI and the real benefits that come from it. In one social studies class, a group of English Language Learners (ELLs) would sit quietly every day, observing but rarely participating. The teacher, who I mentor, wanted to find a way to reach and engage the students with the content. Together, we decided to try Magic Student.

The teacher set up a Magic Student classroom featuring the translate tool and a customized chatbot designed to guide the students through the assignment. At first, the

students took it slow, but once they grew comfortable with the technology, the transformation began. They started submitting assignments that showed a growing understanding of the material, and their participation in class increased—they were no longer just quiet observers.

In another classroom, a teacher I coached wanted students to improve their ability to write strong claims. We created a MagicStudent classroom using the writing feedback tool. Students submitted their writing and received targeted feedback they could use to revise and strengthen their work. The final writing pieces showed clear improvement compared to previous assignments.

Another teacher used a School AI space to help students explore propaganda and create their own examples. This was a lesson she had taught for years, but students often struggled to grasp what propaganda really was or how to produce effective examples. With AI support, she noticed a marked improvement in the quality of students' final projects.

These experiences show how AI tools can empower students, support diverse learners, and help teachers reach their goals in the classroom. It's not about replacing the teacher's role but providing new ways to engage students, personalize learning, and foster creativity. When AI is thoughtfully integrated, it lifts both teachers and students—helping classrooms

thrive and preparing learners for the digital world ahead.

The world of AI continues to grow and evolve, and there's still so much to learn about this powerful tool. While AI holds incredible promise for education, it's important to acknowledge the valid concerns that come with it. Students must be explicitly taught how and when to use AI responsibly. Issues like cheating and misuse are real and must continue to be addressed thoughtfully and proactively.

At the same time, we can't ignore the growing presence of AI in our everyday lives. Preparing students to navigate this digital landscape is no longer optional—it's essential. Equipping them with the skills to interact confidently and ethically with AI will help them thrive in the future workplace and become productive members of society.

To fellow teachers, I encourage you to start small with AI in your classroom. Pick one tool that feels manageable, give it a try, and reflect on what you learn from the experience. Keep exploring, keep learning, and keep adapting. Just as educators once adjusted to whiteboards, projectors, computers, and the internet, we can thoughtfully embrace AI as a partner that supports teaching and learning. The journey with AI is just beginning. Together, let's embrace its possibilities and create learning environments where both teachers and students can truly thrive.

Emily McEntire is an instructional technology facilitator and curriculum writer with a Masters in Curriculum and Instruction, specializing in Middle Grades. She brings extensive classroom experience teaching social studies and elementary grades, along with leadership roles supporting beginning teachers and leading professional learning communities. Passionate about integrating technology to enhance academic achievement, Emily actively serves as a mentor to educators and advances innovative teaching strategies in middle school settings. Her work focuses on supporting novice teachers and leveraging technology for engagement.

Lessons Learned Along the Way

Author: Susan M. Furr

I am currently a teacher of students classified as exceptional children with mild to moderate intellectual disabilities in a high school setting. I have twelve years of teaching experience in this county, and while I prefer teaching at the high school level, I enjoyed the five years I spent teaching in middle school. It was a great learning experience that has had a positive impact on my teaching. I have also been blessed to watch former students from my middle school days enter high school and progress through to graduation.

Enter: MG – A Former Student

One such student whose growth I've had the privilege of witnessing is MG (pseudonym). I have had the privilege of watching MG grow and flourish academically, socially, and in maturity from middle school to high school and on to graduation. MG has Down Syndrome and presents with mild intellectual disabilities, which meant that the majority of her middle and high school experiences were in a self-contained classroom. The curriculum focused on functional academics, daily living skills, and job skills. She was assigned to my class when she began sixth grade and remained my student throughout her seventh and eighth-grade years, as well as for three years after we both moved to the high school setting. At the end of that third year in high school, I became a co-teacher in regular education English classes and was no longer MG's teacher; however, I continued to maintain contact with her throughout her high school years.

MG has always known exactly what she wants and needs to be successful. She has never shied away from making her wants and needs known to those in authority. I reflect on my

student-teacher relationship with MG and understand that we were learning from each other. She was learning the skills she needed to live and thrive as independently as possible as an adult, and I was learning how to live life to the fullest from her. As teachers, I truly believe, we can all learn important lessons from our students if we take the time to truly get to know them.

Lesson One: Standing Firmly and with Boldness

One of the most valuable lessons MG taught me was the importance of standing firm in my beliefs. When she was sure that she was right, MG stood firmly and with boldness; her self-assurance made her a force to be reckoned with. For example, MG did not like sitting in her seat on the school bus. Her mother, the bus driver, and I worked diligently to help her understand that she needed to sit down to be safe in case the bus had to make a sudden stop or was in an accident. We tried talking to her, having the principal speak with her, posting a visual of her sitting in her seat on the back of the bus seat, and providing lessons about bus safety, but MG was determined to stand up. Finally, after many unsuccessful attempts, MG informed me that she was too small to see over the back of the seat in front of her without standing up. We talked about the alternative of looking out the window beside her seat and how that would be much safer. She never tried to stand on the bus while it was moving again.

From MG's many acts of bold confidence, I learned that standing firmly is necessary in my own life, both at work and in my personal life. For example, I have learned to stand firmly and boldly in IEP meetings and

other meetings regarding my students' needs, without fear of losing my job. Through trial and error, I have learned that if I can cite research-based evidence to support my proposals, I can usually get the other team members to understand and often agree with what I am proposing. In my personal life, MG's example has taught me to stand firmly in my personal beliefs without compromise, which has helped me be a better wife and mother. This is because I have come to realize that standing firmly without compromising my beliefs has greatly decreased my anxiety in social situations, which has often spilled over into my family life in the form of arguments.

Based on my conversations with colleagues, many teachers struggle with standing firmly and boldly in their careers or personal lives. I have often heard them express the same types of fears that I had to work to overcome. Taking the time to truly get to know our students and conduct research on their needs can have a positive impact on our ability to advocate for them. This can relieve the stress that fear and frustration can cause, benefiting both our professional and personal lives.

Lesson Two: Empathy and Compassion

Beyond her boldness, MG also taught me a profound lesson about empathy. For as long as I have known her, MG has demonstrated a love for the people around her. From the first time I met her, I noticed she has the ability to empathize with and show compassion for others. In middle school, I often observed MG helping her classmates without being asked. She would comfort students who were upset and seemed genuinely concerned for their well-being. As she progressed through school, I observed MG greeting everyone she encountered and inquiring about their well-being. If she saw that someone had dropped their things, MG would stop and help the person pick them up without being prompted.

My interactions with and observations of MG have taught me to lean into empathy and compassion for others and to respond more deeply with intentionality. As I observed her helping others, I realized that I need to be more aware of the needs of those around me and assist them, whether their needs are physical or emotional. Through her interactions, MG showed me that I need to approach my students and colleagues with understanding and love.

In conversations with colleagues, I have come to understand that it is hard for teachers to lean into empathy and compassion for others, especially our students. The reason is that doing so requires us to be vulnerable. Demonstrating this vulnerability is difficult for teachers because we often feel judged for everything we do. We also tend to work many hours outside of the school day, which interferes with our time with family and friends. We show our vulnerability by leaning into empathy and compassion with our family and friends in these relaxing, judgment-free interactions. However, if we are always working, we do not allow ourselves time to engage in these interactions, and this makes it more challenging to be vulnerable in the often-stressful school setting. To be teachers who are vulnerable enough to lean into empathy and compassion, we need to take time away from schoolwork to be with our family and friends. This allows us to practice being vulnerable enough to lean into empathy and compassion, whether at home or in the school setting.

Lesson Three: Enjoy Every Minute of Life

Most importantly, MG taught me a lesson about the sheer joy of living. As I have watched MG grow up, she has taught me to enjoy every minute of life, whether experiencing highs or lows. I have rarely seen her without a smile on her face. During her first year of middle school, MG wore a brace for hip dysplasia, but she smiled through it every day. She has consistently demonstrated enthusiasm

and determination for every challenge she has faced. MG loves to laugh, meet new people, and learn new things.

MG's demonstration of her love for life through her smiles, enthusiasm, determination, and laughter has taught me to look for a reason to smile through every season of life. She has helped me to understand that I need to let go of being too serious too often and allow myself to bask in the smiles and laughter that enjoying life brings—whether I have just heard a good joke, found forgotten money, my car breaks down, or I am just having a bad day.

I believe that we, as teachers, often become so engrossed in our jobs—even outside of the school day—that we forget to engage in activities that bring us joy and fulfillment. We become so focused on seeking perfection in our lesson planning, instructional processes, and grading that we forget to smile, laugh, and engage in activities with our loved ones or alone that bring us joy. As my colleagues and I have often discussed, we must take the time to enjoy life because teachers who smile, laugh, and engage in relaxing and fulfilling activities

outside of school appear to facilitate these same traits in their students, who typically demonstrate a greater love for learning than those students whose teacher is constantly focused on perfecting every lesson.

Conclusion

I believe my time with MG—from the beginning of her middle school years through her high school years and graduation—has helped me become a better teacher and a better person. She has taught me to stand firm in my beliefs, helped me lean into my ability to show empathy and compassion, and taught me to smile and laugh more often, enjoying life. As teachers, we need to seek ways to identify and develop skills related to standing firmly and with boldness, leaning into empathy and compassion, and living a fulfilling and joyful life. We also need to teach these skills along with academics to our students so that they can learn how to truly enjoy learning and live their lives to the fullest extent possible.

Susan Furr is an accomplished educator with more than twenty-six years of experience spanning elementary, high school, and middle school classrooms. After beginning her career in South Carolina, she continued her professional journey in Union County, North Carolina, where she brings dedication and leadership to her work with students. In addition, she has also contributed to the field of higher education as an adjunct professor at Gardner-Webb University, where she helps prepare future teachers to serve diverse learners.

Susan holds a degree in Educational Leadership with a concentration in Curriculum and Instruction as an Education Specialist, a Master of Education in Special Education, and a Bachelor of Science in Special Education.

Ed.S. Educational Leadership: Curriculum and Instruction

M.Ed. Special Education

B.S. Special Education

COLUMN: COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS

Book Selection Challenges: A Growing Concern

Author: Michele Bost

In recent years, the issue of book challenges has escalated into one of the most pressing issues facing educators and librarians. In the United States, challenges to books have grown significantly; the American Library Association's (ALA) Office of Intellectual Freedom reported that it received 1,269 reports of book challenges in 2022, representing the highest number of attempted book bans in ALA history (American Library Association, 2023). Further, this number represented a nearly 50 percent increase over the number of book challenges in 2021. School libraries and classrooms must offer diverse, well-balanced collections that represent a wide spectrum of perspectives—including those related to contemporary and sometimes controversial topics. To ensure materials are both age-appropriate and educationally sound, it is essential that those responsible for curation are well-versed in established procedures of selection and collection development, as well as in the study of children's and young adult literature. It is equally important that school districts have clear instructional materials selection policies in place, media advisory committees, and procedures for handling book challenges.

Two categories of books have been disproportionately targeted in recent years: works addressing social justice and those featuring LGBTQ+ themes or characters. The number of individual books challenged by schools has soared to record levels according to *Banned in the USA: Narrating the Crisis* (PEN America, 2023). PEN America, a nonprofit organization that works to defend free expression, also finds that books discussing race, racism, LGBTQ+, and transgender identities continue to be targeted at consistently

high rates. These topics are the subject of book challenges due to several reasons, including opposing viewpoints on Critical Race Theory, gender identity, sexuality, our political climate, and influences from social media.

Unfortunately, individuals on both ends of the political spectrum, combined with inadequate understanding of proper selection processes and sensationalized media coverage, have fueled conflict and mistrust. The result has left many schools and public libraries at the center of controversy and scrutiny, further intensifying confusion and frustration surrounding this highly charged issue. As debates around critical race theory have continued into 2022 and beyond, certain books, such as those discussing systemic racism, became targeted by critical race theory opponents (PEN America, 2023).

The groups or individuals who present book challenges may often be misinformed, fueled by emotion, or extract passages out of context. Increasingly, efforts to categorically exclude—or, conversely, to universally include—all titles in these areas distort the purpose of school library collections. Such sweeping approaches undermine the educational mission of public schools by preventing students from engaging with literature that reflects both historical and contemporary realities.

This is precisely why securing certified media specialists and executing a clear district-wide instructional materials selection plan are crucial. Certified media specialists are professionally trained in collection development and materials evaluation; these specialists ensure that selections are grounded in sound methodology—balancing age appropriateness, developmental readiness, and student interest. In my own practice as a school library media

coordinator, I adhere to rigorous standards: consulting authoritative journals, studying current trends in adolescent literature, and carefully balancing diverse representation with developmental suitability. While our library includes titles addressing social justice issues and featuring LGBTQ+ characters, I am equally mindful of developmental suitability for middle school students. Some works in these categories are simply too mature for this age group, underscoring the importance of professional expertise in selection.

As a certified media specialist, I rely on Titlewave, one of the most comprehensive online tools for collection development and curriculum support for PreK–12 educators (Follett Content Solutions, 2025). Within the platform, I use the collection analysis tool to evaluate existing holdings, identify gaps, and make informed selection decisions. Titlewave integrates full-text reviews from authoritative sources such as *Booklist* and *School Library Journal*, ensuring that every addition to the collection is backed by professional evaluation.

The platform provides detailed information for each title, including synopses, interest level, reading level, and Lexile measure. Its robust filtering options allow users to refine searches by these criteria as well as by topic, making it easier to match books to the developmental and curricular needs of middle school students.

In addition to supporting individual title selection, Titlewave's analysis features allow me to examine the collection by copyright date, genre, and subject representation. This deeper analysis ensures that our library remains balanced, diverse, and reflective of a wide range of perspectives.

To further strengthen the collection, I draw from curated lists within Titlewave, including award-winning titles across multiple genres, works by popular authors, state award nominees, and newly released middle school selections. These tools not only streamline the selection process but also ensure that our

students have access to literature that is both relevant and engaging.

In selecting materials, I also utilize our media advisory committee, consisting of teachers from various grade levels and subject areas. According to our Board policy, the Media Advisory Committee assists the library media specialist in the selection process. Under the leadership of the professional library personnel, this group sets priorities for media to be acquired based on instructional objectives as well as strengths and weaknesses in the existing media center collection.

When challenges do arise, they often stem not from deliberate negligence but from a lack of training, information, understanding, or policy infrastructure. Every district should maintain a clear selection policy and prioritize the hiring of certified media specialists. Their role extends beyond managing the library collection—they collaborate with classroom teachers, provide instructional support, and help ensure that all instructional materials are aligned with both developmental needs and curricular goals.

At its core, the debate over book banning is not merely about individual titles but about the integrity of education itself. By entrusting school library programs to certified professionals, we uphold the values of intellectual freedom, developmental appropriateness, and educational excellence that our students both need and deserve.

References

- American Library Association. (2023, March 22). *American Library Association reports record number of demands to censor library books and materials in 2022*. <https://www.ala.org/news/press-releases/2023/03/record-book-bans-2022>
- Follett Content Solutions. (2025, September 23). *Titlewave*. Retrieved from <https://www.titlewave.com>

PEN America. (2023). *Banned in the USA: Narrating the crisis*.
<https://pen.org/report/narrating-the-crisis/>

My name is Michele Bost. I am currently in my eighth year serving as the Media Specialist at Cuthbertson Middle School in Waxhaw, North Carolina. Before joining Cuthbertson in 2018, I spent twenty years as the Media Specialist at Monroe Middle School. I am dedicated to ensuring that students and teachers have access to high-quality digital and print resources, and I work to cultivate a genuine love of reading among all students by providing a diverse, balanced, and current book collection.

I earned my Bachelor of Arts in English Literature with a minor in Secondary Education from Winthrop University in 1995, and in 1999 I completed my Master of Education in Educational Media. I am also a National Board Certified Teacher in Library Media. Beyond the school setting, I remain active in supporting literacy, currently serving as Acting Chair of the Union County Library Foundation.

I strive to build meaningful connections with students by valuing their thoughts, interests, and perspectives, and I am committed to creating an environment where they feel respected and inspired. Even after nearly three decades in the profession, I am just as passionate about my work and my students as I was when I first began. In my spare time, I enjoy reading, spending time with family and friends, and caring for my two dogs, Bilbo and Hugo.
