

MIDDLE SCHOOL CONNECTION

Welcome to our new Middle School Connection editor, Linda Broughton!

It's a Good Thing If You Get It

M. Linda Broughton

Being in the middle is no fun. I was a child in the middle. I was not cute, cunning, and cuddly. I was too tall, too lanky, too inquisitive, too nosey, too...too...too. I did not fit in with the little kids, but—more adversely—I did not fit in (or feel comfortable) with the big kids who took the high school bus. I was not a mini-high-schooler. I was too lanky, too inquisitive, too immature... What is a body (figuratively and literally) supposed to do?

Teachers who have decided to include literature that will build, rebuild, or develop lifelong readers, relevant to the age of those in (you-know-where), and who are determined to address the immediate concerns of life—from the vantage point of what it looks like to their middle school students—need some guidance and a few suggestions.

I've always been leery of classroom materials labeled 6-12. The psychological, emotional, and social abyss between seventh graders and twelfth graders is almost incomprehensible. Remember? What is good for the sixth grader is not necessarily good for the sophomore or junior and vice versa. This *one size fits all* label doesn't. A seventh grade child's needs are significantly different from that of a seventeen-year-old junior's. Just because a child can read words at the tenth grade level does not mean that same child is mature enough for a seventeen year old protagonist with seventeen year old social, emotional, and psychological interests. Children in the middle need to read texts that relate to them—speak to them. Materials that *rock their world(s)*.

As teachers, we do not have a great deal of extra time to do extensive research to discover all of the many resources that will make us more effective with middle school learners. Below are a few excellent, reader-friendly resources that offer advice, direction and guidance for the middle school teacher and learner. These resources may be read for new information by the person "assigned" to or who has elected to teach at the middle level, by the professional who needs specific suggestions and/or confirmation of pedagogical approaches. The professional who has been in-the-middle for a long time and is looking for new approaches and ideas to invigorate an already solid personal curriculum will also find useful information.

Resources for Hurried (and Harried!) Teachers

Remember your adolescent psychology text? It embraced the years between 12 and 20. Maybe three chapters related directly to early adolescents. We need more specific information. Rick Wormeli offers wonderful advice in his text, *Meet Me in the Middle: Becoming an Accomplished Middle-Level Teacher*. The entire text addresses the needs of the middle school child (and teacher). One particularly interesting chapter deals with the brain research applied directly to the middle school. He answered my many questions beginning with "Why do they do that?" He also addresses the possible/probable changes and extensions of our professional practices. Wormeli states that "the shifting priorities in our profession demand that we continually seek new ideas but also be savvy when practicing them. Find what makes you passionate and build on it" (XV). This text is reader friendly, teacher supportive and motivational. He offers innumerable successful strategies specifically directed toward 6-8 - not 7-12. Make sense? Ah, yes. This text answers questions not posed in the "secondary text." It offers wonderful information related specifically to the middle kid(s).

Of course, most folks reading this article are concerned with reading and literature and all of those disciplines associated with it. David Booth offers, in *Reading and Writing in the Middle Years*, strategies for connecting reading and writing by "behaving as writers ourselves and helping students to act as real writers who write because they have something they want to say" (17). He asserts that writing is not easy and not always fun. Writing can and should be satisfying and purposeful. It is an important aspect of living. Booth first addresses the processes of reading and writing and how they are interconnected. Youngsters need to recognize that we write from our reading: "we are always borrowing the bits of craft we remember from the books we have read" (91). He furthers states that it is important for "us to help young writers set up a system that enables them to experience the learning that helps acquire skills of handling information" (106). Youngsters need to see themselves as writers and readers. They need to be given the opportunity to make the choices that real readers and writers

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make. The premise of the text is that each child's potential must be honored and given the opportunity to developing as lifelong readers and writers. This text offers learning strategies that will can be set up in all subjects in every classroom. Further bibliographic references extend specific course-content implementation. Of particular importance are the many strategies presented to the teacher for learning how to model and demonstrate reading and writing strategies, conduct mini-lessons, and confer with students—middle school students (age and maturity specific concerns). This text supports the theory that writing can be taught and not just assigned. It's a keeper.

The Booth text provides a nice transition right into Ralph Fletcher and JoAnn Portalupi's *Writing Workshop: The Essential Guide*. This is a wonderful "how to" book. It is, as it says, a guide. The neat thing about this text is that the authors suggest and offer *baby steps*. The teacher can take chapter by chapter and get the writing workshop working with a minimum of frustration. It's user friendly and each component of the workshop is addressed separately in each chapter but always with an eye toward the *whole* of the process. The writing workshop has proven to produce strong, empowered writers. Especially important is that this text will help new teachers begin this writing workshop setup significantly earlier in their careers. It's difficult for most teachers to *let go* of control as seasoned veterans; new teachers hold on and find writing instruction (in all disciplines) frustrating. This text takes the *whole*—investigates the parts/steps—and then *puts the parts back together into the big picture*—the workshop. This text makes the writing workshop work according to each individual teacher's needs, learning community, philosophy—and, yes, teacher comfort level (zone).

We've read the research. We've listened to our colleagues. We *know* that children learn differently. We try to offer and present materials in multiple ways to motivate learning. It's difficult to teach, think, and plan beyond our own learning modalities. We've studied Gardner's Intelligences. We've passed tests and quizzes on various and sundry qualities of his ideas, but, have we actually *built* activities and offered choices that affect learning of persons who think and comprehend differently than us? Hmm... it's so much easier said. *Using Young Adult Literature: Thematic Activities Based on Gardner's Multiple Intelligences* edited by Jacqueline Glasgow and contributed to by real-live-teachers, presents wonderful ideas and suggestions applying and synthesizing Gardner's Intelligences to popular and relevant (to students) YAL texts. Glasgow offers an in-depth overview into multiple intelligences, their importance, and some insight how to approach and use literacy activities to enhance them. The text is presented in two areas of concern to the middle school person: "Growing Up and Surviving in a Chaotic World of War and Work" and "Preservation of People, Places, and Planet." Under these umbrella topics are wonderful chapters addressing the middle schooler's concerns presented in a plethora of ways certain to engage even the most "stubborn" middle

*I remember a song sung by a famous
frog, lamenting his state of being green
and how it is not easy.*

school personalities. Note: each chapter offers titles at all levels with copious annotation and thinking aloud. It comes very close to the *one-size...* label.

The text that ties all of these texts together is a resource that will help the new teacher, the seasoned veteran, or the teacher looking for new materials, and new approaches of teaching. It is Lois Stover's *Young Adult Literature: The Heart of the Middle School*. Stover's text is part of Boynton/Cook's Young Adult Literature Series. It's a thorough resource that offers specific ideas and suggestions of using texts that are totally suitable for the middle school child. The texts offered transcend disciplines. Chapter one provides ample theoretical and research-based rationale for using young adult literature as the center of middle school learning. Chapters two through four present specific examples of setting up what she calls "transdisciplinary" planning and teaching. Stover feels that *transdisciplinary* (across) "better captures the idea of transcending traditional content-area boundaries, of exploring genuine problems from multiple perspectives with concern for content-area divisions" (15). In contrast, *interdisciplinary* planning "tends to be used to describe the situation that exists when teachers of different content areas

explore how a given theme plays out within the confines of their traditional disciplines" (15). Transdisciplinary thinking introduces the idea of inquiry-based learning (students and teachers investigate questions motivated

by the reading) compared to discovery-thinking. Here the teacher leads the students toward a predisposed goal. She goes on to present ideas that are pedagogically compatible with the *whole-student, whole language learner*. It is just loaded with ideas, 30 pages of annotations (by concepts), and possibilities that unite the entire model middle school curriculum.

I remember a song sung by a famous frog, lamenting his state of being green and how it is not easy. So too is the lament of the educator-in-the-middle. It's not easy. Think about it — if it were easy, everyone would be doing it. The middle school age child has specific concerns and interests and definite ideas on how and why learning should take place. We need to address specifically those concerns and interests. Labels like *grades seven - twelve* or *one size fits all* (or, as the latest label states: *one size fits most*) do not make it. You might consider adding these titles to the professional library in your school so that in-the-middle teachers in all disciplines can read up on, reacquaint, or revitalize their ever-challenging teaching environments.

Most of us are more than willing—actually—constantly looking for information, materials, and pedagogically sound ideas to spark new, exciting ideas for our students. We do have lives beyond the classroom, however. These texts are compilations of some of the most relevant approaches to instruction for the middle level. The texts cited offer a "whole" look at the middle school student. The resources mentioned are texts that address areas directly related to the plight of the professional who deals on a daily basis with "kids in the middle."

Works Cited

- Booth, David. *Reading and Writing in the Middle Years*. Portland, Maine: Stenhouse Publishers, 2001.
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