

## MIDDLE SCHOOL CONNECTION

Linda Broughton, Editor

### No Quick Fixes

Two years ago I quit smoking. Had to—couldn't afford it, and goodness knows it wasn't good for my well-being. It's not an easy thing to do. There is lots of "special merchandise" to assist in this gargantuan effort. I accomplished my goal by using "special patches" and replacement of cigarettes with M&Ms. Now, it goes without saying that one person can consume significantly more M & Ms than smoke cigarettes. My method worked—I quit! I am smoke-free. I also gained mega pounds. It was okay—I knew that would happen. After my first year anniversary of non-smoking, I decided that (snap of fingers) it's time to drop the weight.

I began looking for a *super-duper-quick-as-a-flash-drop-those-pounds-scheme*. Piece of cake. I watched every infomercial. I needed something that would "erase pounds" in ten days. I tried everything on the market. Certainly those folks in TV land and all of the "certified experts" could offer me some instant gratification (even though it took over a year to slide right out of a dress size—or two). I finally faced the reality that I was going to have to do two things (actually three): eat less, exercise, give up M&Ms. I'm the expert here. I know that I can't have lasting effects with a quick fix, a *bandaid*, if you will. Nope—I have to devote time, effort, and lots of personal reflection to my goals.

As classroom teachers WE KNOW that learning and teaching takes time and gargantuan effort. Two of the most difficult language arts areas (and most frustrating) to teach and to learn are reading and writing. Actually, I prefer to call them *miracles*. No one can say absolutely how persons learn to do these. Through years of observation and theorizing it has been established that *the best way to learn to read is to be read to, be read with, and to read*. The *way to learn to write is to write*. I mean **really** write. So I would guess that the best way to teach these things is *to be* readers and writers. We also need resources that don't spout *instant remedy*. Because we are educated, "those on the outside" assume that we merely transfer our abilities to our charges. Hardly! We need pedagogy, we need resources, we need support, and we need time. Developing literate individuals while they are in the middle grades is always a work in progress. There are no quick fixes. We're in this profession for the long haul.

I have a few suggestions (resources) that might help, but be forewarned: they are going to require commitment and a great deal of effort. There are offers of programs circumnavigating our classes, hovering outside the curriculum developer's door, and lurking over the standard-test-maker's lounge. No amount of *you-too-can-do-these-activities-in-two-days* "training," worksheets, or computer programs will work. English language arts teachers bear the brunt of reading and writing instruction. What can be done?

We can read to our students – at all grade levels. Every-

one receives pleasure from being read to - warm fuzzies - *cool vibes*. Middle school students are no exception. Two names come to mind: Mem Fox (*Reading Magic: Why Reading Aloud to Our Children Will Change Their Lives Forever*. Harcourt, Inc. 2001) and Jim Trelease (*The Read-Aloud Handbook*, Penguin Books, 2001). **READING IS THE HEART OF EDUCATION!** Reading—being read to, reading with a reader, reading for meaning, reading to learn something . . . it's a joy, it's exciting, it's engaging, it's a necessary. Reading begins with reading. Individuals need to know that those "little black squiggles" actually mean something. Readers need to know that words have meaning and sounds BEFORE any phonics make sense. Many of our children have not been blessed with being read to as infants. Many young adolescents have not been afforded the opportunities of having books and printed materials in the home. Many children come to school not reading or realizing that words build meaning. No number of bandaids will provide long-lasting effects. We must read to the children—the adolescents—the young adults—the adults. We must share with our middle grades classes the joys of reading (all levels of it). We must offer our students reading material. We must give time to the pursuit (and hard work) of becoming readers. Mem Fox and Jim Trelease offer wonderful suggestions and ideas to incorporate reading into all content areas. It can become a part of our curriculum, NOT an addition to it. Both texts are wonderfully "teacher friendly" and down right *evangelical*. Trelease confirms with statistical evidence what REAL READING can do—not chapters, not excerpts, not worksheets— but books, magazines, newspapers, real reading in context with the readers' lives. You will become believers once you've read either text. Trelease has edited two other titles overflowing with *read aloud* materials that will interest and please all ages.

**Fuel real writing by having students engage in reading.** The reader recognizes that writing is done for readers AND readers like to read writing that is well done. Whew! Reading and writing cannot be separated. Both are works in progress. Both are begun (legally) at age five or six. These activities are assigned and overseen by educated, literate adults. We begin to measure youngsters (as young as eight or nine) by our adult standards and we become *error-driven* toward our charges. Why not share writing that is done well and discuss those qualities that make it good? What are the qualities of writing that beg to be read? These are tough questions. Writers have a way of comparing notes about "what they do." Yes, we DO the process. The question is, though, how do we talk about what we DO and how we can do it more effectively or creatively or convincingly? I'll bet fifty cents that we've all been assigned writing but when it came time to work with it, talk about it, and maybe readdress it,

we didn't have a vocabulary to talk with writers about writing. Well, I have another suggestion. I must warn you that this is difficult, especially for those of us who have been assigning writing, expecting novellas within forty-five minutes, and seeking out every error in the paper (in other words, grading). Been there, done that (too many times to fathom):

**Teach "6 +1 traits of writing".** I learned about the "6 Traits of Writing" approach (see Culham, 2002; Spandel, 2001) during a presentation of a Fellow at the Mobile Bay Writing Project in 1999. I was bowled over. Why hadn't this been available to me when I had 180 students a day and tried to *squeeze* in one meaningful writing activity a week? I wore myself out by GRADING! Actually I was editing my students' work. I was pointing out errors instead of making them responsible for editing their own and their peers' work. I was expecting them to learn about revisions from my comments and suggestions—all of which came after the fact of their composing their essays. Good grief. The "Six Traits of Writing" approach offers a "working vocabulary" for writers (all levels of abilities—including the teacher/learner of writing). It's a wonderful opportunity to get our novice writers, ages seven through seventy-two, to do that which we insist upon but never know how to get them to do: REVISE. It is a wonderful tool IF (not only is there a but, there is an IF, too) they are internalized, understood, and woven within each individual teacher's philosophy and approach to teaching. There are folks running around offering two-day workshops on *everything-you-need-to-know-about 6-Traits!* Be very afraid. Too little knowledge can be dangerous to the learner and the teacher (of which you are both).

6-Traits is a model for teaching writing that's useful in middle grades classes. It is complex and complete. From this model you take what you need. The basic idea is that if something can be assessed, it can be taught. The neat thing is that you can help your writers develop the abilities to recognize good writing, evaluate their own writing, and do something about it BEFORE you have to "grade it." This takes time and a great deal of thought, preplanning, and perseverance. You need to take baby-steps first. You and your students need to try out these suggestions together. You need to begin to incorporate (one at a time) the vocabulary of writers into your classes. You need to share with students what good writing looks like and discuss - not tell - how and why it's good. You need to give your writers time to apply these qualities (little by little) to their own writing. Your environment must be turned into a readers' and writers' environment—slowly. This takes time, effort, lots of work - no *quick fixes*. Find a buddy or two, in or out of the English department (writers and readers come from everywhere). Read one of the basic texts. Discuss it, compare ideas, experiment, reflect, compare notes. Above all trust your own instincts as readers and writers. 6-Traits is "teacher grown," and like many teacher grown methods and ideas, it is a keeper. It is not a bandaid.

Logging onto [www.nwrel.org](http://www.nwrel.org) will give further history and insight to *6+1 Traits of Writing*. This lab is where this model began. Vicki Spandel (although a young person) is considered the "grandmother" of these potentially "doable" ideas. She has since gone to The Great Source, Inc.

In short, I suggest that you do at least these two things with your middle school students: read to and with them, and talk the talk of writers. Both approaches will make your life as a teacher, reader, and writer so much more joyful and fulfilling (and significantly less frustrating). Remember: *there is no instant gratification* when we teach reading and writing. The wiggle of a wand or the purchase of a prepared package, even with tons of work sheets, will not promise Prince Charming or instant Eudora Welty.

One more short story. Years ago as a young adult, I learned to sail. Sailing has a lingo of its own. I took a few courses with the Coast Guard. More importantly I sailed. I learned the language of the sailor by messing around with the boat. I learned the lingo as I learned how to sail. I had to learn the language in order to communicate with others on the boat and others in boats too close to my boat. My first important word and reaction to the word was JIBE. Ask a sailor.

As you probably can tell, I am passionate about helping our young people become life-long readers, writers hence learners. You can tell that the ONLY way to cultivate these areas of longevity is going to take TIME and mountains of effort. You probably can tell how strongly I feel that teachers are *the experts*. You probably can tell that I could go one forever, but alas, I have to get to the gym. Nothing that is worthwhile is ever easy. I've become healthier, less "weighty" but (there's always a but) alas... not M&M free. May you experience joy with your students as readers and writers.

#### Works Cited

- Culham, Ruth. *6+Traits of Writing: The Complete Guide Grades 3 and Up*. New York, NY: Scholastic, Professional Books, 2002.
- Fox, Mem. *Reading Magic: Why Reading Aloud to Our Children Will Change Their Lives Forever*. Orlando, Florida: Harcourt, Inc., 2001.
- Spandel, Vicki. *Books, Lessons, Ideas for Teaching the Six Traits: Writing at Middle and High School*. Compiled and Annotated. Wilmington, MA: Great Source Education Group, 2001.
- Spandel, Vicki. *Creating Writers Through 6-Trait Assessment and Instruction*. Third Edition. New York, NY: Longman, 2001.
- Trelease, Jim. *The Read-Aloud Handbook*. Fifth Edition. New York, NY: Penguin Group, 2001.
- Trelease, Jim (Editor). *Hey! Listen to This: Stories to Read Aloud*. New York, NY: Penguin Group, 1992.
- Trelease, Jim (Editor). *Read All About It! Great Read-Aloud Stories, Poems & Newspaper Pieces for Preteen and Teens*. New York, NY: Penguin Group, 1993.