

On the Minds of Middle Schoolers

Students in their first year of middle school talk about teachers, peers, homework, and stress.

Erika Daniels

You must be a glutton for... punishment. I could never do that!" This is how people react when they hear that I work with middle school students and their teachers. I teach 7th grade language arts and work part-time with student teachers in their middle school credential program at California State University, San Marcos.

In fact, interacting with this age group can be exhilarating. Adolescents are ready to work and achieve when they know that people care about them, that what they're learning matters, and that they possess the skills necessary to meet a given challenge. Effective middle school teachers are passionate about the learning of these young adolescents, and they recognize that if they do not meet their students' social and emotional needs, they will waste their content-area expertise. Students simply will not achieve academically when their affective needs go unaddressed.

When we ask students what they think about themselves, their schools, and their peers, they give heartfelt answers that provide key insights for their teachers. Their honesty, their belief that they are invincible, and their

desire to make a difference in the world are all characteristics that separate middle school adolescents from other age groups. A 4'10"-tall boy may be absolutely convinced of his future in the NBA while his classmate may be planning a "Save the Whales" campaign with the wholehearted belief that it will be an unqualified success. The sense of invincibility that many young adolescents exhibit is one of the traits that brings me back to the middle school classroom year after year.

The Insights of Self-Reports

As part of my Ed.D. dissertation, which focuses on student motivation in middle school, I recently interviewed students in two different schools about their experiences during their first year of middle school. The students were Hispanic, white, and Asian American. These young adolescents could clearly articulate their thoughts, beliefs, and desires and were not afraid to let adults know what they wanted and needed—as long as those adults appeared honestly willing to listen. Not surprisingly, the students know exactly who those trusted adults are and will not waste their time on people who do not



seem to value what they have to offer.

Self-reports of middle school students provide valuable insights into their social and emotional needs, which are remarkably similar across ethnic and socioeconomic lines. The student interviews I conducted taught me much about what these middle school students perceive they need from teachers to achieve success.

"I Feel Crowded"

For many young adolescents, the level of stress in their lives substantially increases on transition into middle school because of the heavier homework load, the social pressures of meeting new people, and hormonal changes. Students need assistance in learning to prioritize their school, family, and social commitments. In reference to the increased stress, T.J.¹ says, "I feel crowded, like I'm in a parking lot with everyone pressing against me."

Isabell has to care for her younger siblings after school while her parents



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are at work. While other students are participating in extracurricular activities or doing homework, Isabell is fulfilling a family obligation. Although she doesn't complain, she wishes that her teachers would acknowledge her additional responsibilities and help her manage them more efficiently.

Silvia is in a similar situation. She explains that sometimes she turns in homework late because she has so much going on at home that she simply doesn't have the time to complete it. She feels resentful because she's in school for most of the day, and then "instead of spending time with my family, I have more schoolwork to do at home."

Teachers must acknowledge the demands of real life. By doing so, they can help adolescents learn to balance multiple commitments and responsibilities while also showing them how to preserve part of each day for their own activities. Young adolescents are transitioning from the egocentrism of childhood to a group-centered way of

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thinking (Perlstein, 2003), and they often feel as though they are the only ones experiencing stress or facing a dilemma. When teachers share appropriate examples of their own stressors, students come to understand that everyone experiences stress and that they are not alone. This approach also helps students understand that it's possible to assert control over the stressful elements in their own lives.

Teachers can address the issue of stress by teaching students specific coping skills that they have learned through the years. We can model how to enter assignments and tasks in planners or calendars, demonstrate how to organize time to accomplish required work, and brainstorm with students activities that provide healthy breaks from the stress of homework and family responsibilities. By providing examples of perseverance and determination, effective teachers demonstrate that people *can* master stress and frustration and that success is a possible, even likely, outcome of an initial failure.

"Good Teachers Care"

Kelly points out that when the teachers "expect their students to do really well," students are much more likely to participate in class. Jimmy says that the best part of middle school is

having good teachers who care about my education. I got good teachers. They care about their job, and they make sure we understand everything.

When I ask him how he knows that these teachers care about their jobs,

Jimmy replies, "Because some of the teachers are funny, but they can be strict to get us to learn [the content]."

Young adolescents are not looking, then, for easy teachers who let them slide by with minimal effort. Instead, the students want teachers who care about student learning, hold high expectations for all students, and provide the necessary support. When teachers are clear about their expectations, Isabell says she is more likely to respect them. Jamie says she appreciates teachers who support her but who also demand her best effort. Jimmy explains that

If teachers didn't care about their students, they wouldn't try to teach them. Then I wouldn't enjoy going to school as much. Class would be more boring.

Conveying high expectations to students means using multiple assessments to identify specific learning needs, providing support and scaffolding on the basis of those needs, and allowing students to select multiple paths to the same outcomes. Students do not feel more motivated or better about themselves simply because teachers tell them that they are doing well. Instead, students want to know that they possess the skills necessary to meet the challenge at hand (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). By being honest with students when they fall short of expected achievement and providing specific, immediate feedback about subsequent steps, teachers convey the expectation that every student can achieve.

Adolescents want to feel as though they are a welcome part of the group. They also want to be unique and carve out their own place in the world.

"My Friends, They Help Me"

As students enter middle school, existing friendships tend to either strengthen or fade away because of diverging interests, class schedules, and other pressures. Not surprisingly, most students told me that developing and sustaining new and long-term friendships are crucial activities. Jamie points out that

If you don't have any friends, you just feel alone, like there's no one there who can help you. [With friends,] you feel like you're not the only person who's going through what you're going through. You can talk about it and how you feel.

In addition to reducing loneliness, "talking about stuff" with friends makes it easier to cope with pressure from peers, worries over homework, and concerns about family. As T.J. says, "My friends, they help me by supporting me all the way." T.J. relies on his friends to provide a support system as he negotiates the turmoil of adolescence.

Adolescents want to feel as though they are a welcome part of the group. They also want to be unique and carve out their own place in the world. When teachers recognize the burden that this dichotomy imposes, we can help our students navigate the new territory, thereby focusing their time and emotional energy on the instruction taking place in class.

For example, when teachers let friends sit next to one another in class and teach them to make appropriate



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behavioral choices after being given this freedom, we address not only valuable life skills but also students' social needs. Students can focus on the experience of learning instead of on the trauma of being in a group with the boy who "stole" their girlfriend or with the girl who spread a vicious rumor about them at lunch. When inappropriate relationships appear to be developing, talking with students about the positive and negative consequences of their choices has a more powerful impact than flatly condemning their decisions. Students usually live up to high expectations and demonstrate that they can make positive choices when teachers trust them to do so.

Hearing What They Say

We cannot ignore the affective needs of middle school students if we want to help them achieve academically.

According to Lumsden,

If students experience the classroom as a caring, supportive place where there is a sense of belonging and everyone is valued and respected, they will tend to participate more fully in the process of learning. (1994, p. 3)

Young adolescents' self-reports reinforce Lumsden's comments and yield rich insights into what these students want and need. When students tell their stories, they rarely complain. Instead, they yearn for teachers who are willing to listen and who really hear what they have to say. Expending extra effort to understand students' social and emotional needs will encourage them to respond with extra effort in the cognitive and academic realms. Then we all win. ■

¹All student names are pseudonyms.

References

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