

Fostering POSITIVE BEHAVIOR IN MIDDLE SCHOOL Classrooms

By Paul Barnwell

Middle level students need and want opportunities to show that they are capable of behaving responsibly and working collaboratively.

Activities that allow them to make decisions and manage their time empower them.

Even a classroom water dispenser is a symbol of independence and maturity.

If you listen to some adults talk about the current generation of teenagers, it would seem as if the apocalypse were upon us: our society is going to hell in a handbasket. Kids can't speak, listen, or write. Most of all, they display no respect! There are times when I share the same sentiments. Among other factors, questionable Internet content, such as social networking sites as Myspace and Facebook, video games, and other cultural developments add to the difficulty of educating young people and encouraging positive personal growth.

Middle level educators often witness the most unsavory adolescent characteristics and antics. Skirmishes erupt because her friend's sister said that my brother's cousin has a butt-ugly haircut. Something about these tumultuous years can bring out the worst in young people. I even remember being a bully at times during middle school. Can we do anything about this troubling—and very real—challenge?

Like many classroom teachers, I've tried countless strategies for classroom management. It is exhausting, thankless work to find new ways to prod, cajole, inspire, prompt, or excite students to be on task. The good news is that, after plenty of experimentation, my faith in middle school students' humanity has been restored. I'm no longer going to sit back and complain about how they can't work in groups, don't know how to communicate, can't learn, and can't be trusted to make good decisions. I believe many middle schools do not align their priorities and practices with what adolescents need and desire most as defined by human development theory.

If we educators want to help create effective, caring citizens, let's pause and reexamine what

we should do more of in our middle schools. We need to create meaningful, positive opportunities for students to interact with each other, build in student choice—despite content standard demands—and, as teachers, model collaborative work with our peers to display the benefits of working together.

Adolescents are driven in their quest for identity. Their peers often take precedence and are more influential or important than teachers and parents. They crave activity and opportunities to socialize—a desire that must be channeled in appropriate ways. They are prone to ask, Who am I? and Who do I want to be? They are willing and able to test out new behaviors, interactions, and roles.

Knowing the complexities of adolescence, educators must strive to create places in schools where students are encouraged by a variety of social, learning, and decision-making opportunities during these formative years. Students come from a vast array of backgrounds and home situations; sometimes school is the only stable, positive force in their lives. If schools don't try to provide a counterbalance for destructive or problematic forces in students' lives, then society will likely be complaining for years to come about how students don't know how to act.

I know that it is not the schools' job to parent. I believe, however, that we middle level educators can do a much better job of facilitating positive social growth. My outlook on student potential has changed this past year because of some changes I made in classroom structure and management, so I'd like to offer some of my strategies for increased positive interaction, communication, and student empowerment.



Early focus on community building. Over the first month of the school year, I integrate team-building and communication activities into the academic content. I don't care if the team-building focus is perceived as touchy-feely because the year-long benefits are worthwhile. Six months into the school year, I had yet to write a discipline referral.

Appointments. At the beginning of each semester, I have students draw a clock in their notebooks. They have 12 appointments to make. On my cue, students get up, talk to friends and peers, and set up 12 appointments. Throughout the semester, I provide structured opportunities for students to work with their various appointments on activities, including partner reading responses and grammar work to prompt interaction beyond their friendship circles.

Class break. Not only do students—especially boys—enjoy having movement built into the day, but they also stay more focused. I play a three-minute song in the middle of class. Students may get up to socialize, but if they aren't in their assigned seats when the song ends, they lose break for a week and must remain seated.

Structured movement. Sometimes I'll ask students to get up and find someone who is wearing a similar-colored shirt and work with that classmate. Again, it's a structured social or academic

interaction that might require him or her to work with a new peer.

Modeling collaboration. Whether it be with the librarian, seventh-grade teachers, or science or math teachers, I enjoy collaboration. I traded classrooms with a seventh-grade teacher, and she taught my students Windows Movie Maker. Students see and reap the benefits of adults working together.

Interdisciplinary projects. The collaborative model lends itself to opportunities for student projects. For example, a few weeks ago, a science teacher and I joined classes and allowed students to create science and language arts projects. They could choose partners and choose a form, including skits, posters, comic strips, speeches, and integrated science–language arts vocabulary projects.

Written discussions. Written discussions consist of papers being passed around in a small group of four to five students and are used for a variety of reasons, including activating prior knowledge, review, and brainstorming. The paper might have a prompt or two written on the top, and students reply to one another in writing. I compare it to a chat room or other technology-driven interaction, but it's on paper.

Prioritizing tasks and movement. About

once or twice a teaching unit, I set up six or seven stations around the room. Each station hosts a different academic task—perhaps some daily word work, a laptop activity, a partner read, or an artistic task. I ask students to prioritize which five tasks are most beneficial to them, and they make decisions to finish their work in any given order. So far this year, it has been a huge success. Students appreciate the freedom to move, interact, and make decisions about their learning.

Water dispenser in the classroom. If I didn't believe students could handle drinking water in the classroom, then my expectations for behavior might be too low. Students raised money to purchase a water dispenser and devised a protocol for water consumption during class.

Not That Bad

Some students became class videographers to document various classroom activities. Their goal was to capture a sense of what was going in my eighth-grade classroom. It was a completely student-driven project, with no grades, for those who were motivated. During one interview, a student said, "Mr. B, with our video I'd like to show people how eighth graders can act. We're not that bad."

Her comments reminded me of the famous 1971 Stanford prison experiment. Volunteers played the roles of guards and prisoners in a mock jail in the basement of Stanford University's psychology building. Within weeks, the volunteers had adapted to their environment and displayed some highly disturbing characteristics and actions. Prisoners revolted, and guards retaliated. Among the many conclusions drawn from the experiment was that it shed light on the powerful effect of situation and environment on human behavior. In general, educators too often judge unruly student behavior in schools to be irrevocable.

My student was right—eighth graders aren't that bad, but their teachers need to give them constructive opportunities to learn and practice interacting with each other. It took me several years to figure out this truth, and I look forward to continuing to model and practice positive interactions with students and staff members to create a classroom environment that not only attempts to address student needs but also brings out the best my students have to offer. **PL**

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