

Conversations

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The Heart of Student Learning and Leadership: Relationships, Respect and Responsibility

by Amy Mednick

Rule by fear. Rows of desks. Last name basis. Eighth-grade teacher Lea Johnson picks these buzzwords to describe how she used to teach. “I’m not a touchy-feely teacher,” she says. Yet, over the years Johnson has realized that by establishing relationships with her students and understanding their needs, they become more motivated to learn.

During the December break this year, Johnson analyzed the latest scores of her reading class at Overland Trail Middle School in Brighton, Colorado. While some students’ reading levels increased by two grades, one-third of the students showed practically no growth. So, when they met in January, Johnson and the students openly discussed their progress, and she asked them for input on which of the first semester’s reading strategies had helped them learn and which ones had not. She told them that they were required to read four books in the first eight weeks of the semester. “How do you want to get there?” she asked. The students came up with a plan and, as part of the

plan, opted to continue doing journal writing, but made reading logs optional.

The next conversation was more difficult, and could not have taken place without a foundation of trust. Many of the 25 students read at third-grade level and have perfected “fake reading,” where they look like they are reading, but are really pretending to read, she says. “At the meeting, I called them on it and I challenged them to read at the top of their reading level,” says Johnson, a math teacher with one reading class. “They all went and picked books at the top of their reading levels. But I don’t think I could have done this if I hadn’t worked on classroom culture.”

When young adolescents find their voice and take ownership of their learning, they become engaged on individual, classroom, and schoolwide levels. Teachers and school leaders can promote that involvement by encouraging students to speak more in class, creating a classroom community in which students make choices about their learning, and setting up structures

By giving students a voice, teachers are responding to them developmentally and giving them opportunity to engage in powerful learning.

that allow students to take on leadership roles and make decisions that affect academics and not just the social life of the entire school. “When students have a voice in how and what they learn, they become more aware of themselves as learners,” according to the recently published Turning Points guide, *At the Turning Point: The Young Adolescent Learner*. “They become more motivated and engaged in their learning, thus making classroom interactions between teachers and students more productive and enjoyable. As active participants in schoolwide decision making, students become invested in helping to create a healthy school climate that encourages learning for all.” This kind of involvement is critical to young adolescents’ development. By giving students a voice, teachers are responding to them developmentally and giving them opportunity to engage in powerful learning.

In order to create an environment where students are active participants, educators need to follow the approach of teachers like Lea Johnson: listen to students, take their opinions and choices seriously, and develop relationships with them. Johnson has laid the foundation for students to feel motivated to achieve. She has built a community of learners in the classroom. Students in Johnson’s class have ownership over their learning because she allows them to make choices about what is right for them. It’s not perfect. This sense of responsibility does not necessarily transfer to the next class or prompt them to complete their work at home. “They might not always like my class, but they respect the time that they are in here and they respect me.

They’ve become more reflective,” she says.

In classrooms where teachers set such consistently high expectations for ownership and performance, and give students the support they need to achieve those standards, *all* students



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are capable of doing challenging work. Establishing relationships with students based on mutual respect is key. According to several studies, students of color and low income students have difficulty adjusting to impersonal classrooms, and they often become disengaged. “The main problem with disengaged students is that they lack a meaningful personal connection with teachers,” according to Michael Fullan in his book *The New Meaning of Educational Change* (Teachers College Press, 2001).

Disengaged students will be more likely to learn and master skills, and begin to tackle high-level thinking skills, when basic skills are embedded in a rich, complex curriculum that is connected to students’ lives, according to Mano Singham, in his article “The Canary in the Mine: The Achievement Gap between Black and White Students,” (*Phi Delta Kappan*, 1998). Focusing on remedial education that emphasizes drilling the basics leaves no room for teaching higher-level reasoning and problem-solving skills necessary for success in life, Singham writes.

Likewise, teachers who learn about and value the strengths, experiences and knowledge their students bring from their diverse backgrounds and home cultures, have students who return that respect and want to learn. Sonia Nieto, in *The Light in their Eyes* (Teachers College, Columbia University Press, 1999), writes that learning starts when students can view themselves as “competent, capable, and worthy of learning.” Knowing that adults are listening to them and including them in the school transformation process encourages students and even causes

Questions of Identity, Exclusion and Justice at the Center of the Classroom

Middle school humanities teachers Kathy Greeley and Susan McCray, at the Graham and Parks School in Cambridge, Massachusetts, collaboratively designed* curriculum, integrating theater and the arts, which draws upon students’ most pressing concerns and closest identities. *What is justice? Why does injustice happen? What is dissent? What role do individuals play in building a just society? When is dissent necessary and worth the risk?* These questions are the lens for examining democracy, the rise of Nazi Germany, and the evolution of change movements in the United States. They are also the lens for examining the lives of students and the conflicts that inevitably arise in middle school—particularly in an economically and culturally diverse community that includes recent immigrants and students across the spectrum of academic development.

“As time goes on, through our investigation of these questions, students become more conscious of their own actions and even call each other on conflicts and put-downs,” McCray says. “A common scenario is one student calls another ‘gay’ and expects a laugh. Eventually my students stop laughing and call each other on the behavior. What I love is watching the person who used the slur realize that they are not getting a laugh and apologize.”

McCray also sees the impact of this explicit emphasis on questions of justice and exclusion on Haitian students and others who might remain invisible in more traditional classrooms. “My Haitian students often become very animated in class because they realize their experience is valued. It’s not as though we are talking about their culture explicitly, but issues and questions that connect with their lives. The history we study gives all students a chance to step outside of themselves and enter into a common arena. At the same time, they engage with the content because the questions and issues are so pertinent to them.”

*Greeley and McCray drew upon the materials and resources of *Facing History and Ourselves*, Brookline, Massachusetts, in developing their curriculum. See <http://www.facinghistory.org>.

them to think critically about their education, Nieto writes. “Listening seriously to students is especially important to young people whose cultures and languages are invisible in the school setting and who may feel alienated due to their cultural, racial, social class, linguistic, or other differences.”

Building Relationships and Creating Trust

Turning Points coach Brooke O’Drobinak likens traditional middle school teachers to the wizard in the Wizard of Oz, in that they find it difficult to let their guard down. “We want them to share who they are as people. Teachers can be fearful that they are not omnipotent with bullet-proof armor,” she says. But once they open up, students will respect them more.

For the seventh-grade Red Team at Mt. Anthony Union Middle School, a rural city school on the Massachusetts border in Bennington, Vermont, the culture of caring begins between teachers on the team. “We genuinely care about each other as people, not just teachers,” says Amy Major, a social studies teacher on the team. This modeling is not lost on the students. They notice. They join in teachers’ conversations in the hallways. They offer their opinions during whole-team meetings.

The team motto “Not Just for School, But for Life” builds on this philosophy. Major says their goal is to help their 96 students learn the strategies and information they need to be life-long learners. At the beginning of the year, Major conducts team building activities with her students. During these problem-solving initiatives, students

must work cooperatively to achieve a goal. “The goal behind each activity is to promote an understanding of self-respect and the respect of each other. The reflection that follows contributes to the climate we need to be a classroom community.” After each activity, the class talks about what went well and how they could have attained the goal more easily. Then students come up with norms for the classroom. This sets the stage for students to feel comfortable taking risks throughout the year and, through those risks, become increasingly successful.

“It is a simple but profound concept: to teach our students most effectively we must know them.”

In middle schools, where students often shift teachers every 50 minutes, lack of time impedes opportunities for more personal relations between adults and children. To respond to this challenge, many schools have developed longer blocks of learning time. They have also transformed the traditional five-minute “homeroom” in which teachers take attendance and do other housekeeping into more meaty, advisory programs. These advisories, covering academics, community outreach, and social and developmental issues, allow a teacher to get to know a small group of students.

For the 350 young adolescents at CIS 303 in Bronx, New York (a sixth through eighth grade school in which over 90 percent of students qualify for free or reduced price lunch and 100 percent are students of color), everything stops on Friday afternoon for advisory classes.

A group of 30 students, facilitated by two teachers, takes the time to learn about themselves, says Julia Baly. Baly is the communication arts teacher, mentor program coordinator, and Turning Points facilitator for the school. Students decide what topic to address and often choose topics difficult to broach with their parents, such as peer pressure or teenage sexuality. Currently, Baly says, they are talking about “self-awareness” in which all participants reflect on issues around their personal life, friendships, and home life. “We (teachers) become involved as well, and we share. The connection builds and they realize we’re more than just teachers. It’s not necessarily about friendship, it’s about respect.”

Ellen Berg, who teaches sixth-grade language arts at Turner Middle School in St. Louis, Missouri, writes a weekly diary about her classroom for MiddleWeb.com (see Resources). At Turner 85–90 percent of the students are African-American, and 90–95 percent receive free or reduced price lunch. Berg writes that she has realized that she cannot assume that students will trust her just because she is a teacher.

“If my students do not trust me, how will they be able to take risks or believe what I say is important?” Berg has come to understand that getting to know students individually is one of the best ways to establish mutual trust. Often this can take place in brief and informal one-on-one interactions. In Diary #18 she describes situations involving three “labeled” students, including a “reluctant reader” and a “troublemaker,” in which brief, but personal communication

Ways to Get to Know Young Adolescents

- **Share: Don’t leave your concerns, passions, and stories at home. Students respond to genuine face-to-face interaction and personal connection.**
- **Listen: Make yourself available to students to listen to their interests, stories, needs, and dreams.**
- **Ask: Ask students about their families, their neighborhoods, their friends. Ask students what they like to do and what’s on their minds.**
- **Observe: Watch your students: how they work together and independently; how they socialize in the cafeteria and hallways. A lot can be learned from careful observation.**
- **Be flexible: Allow students’ interests and concerns to become part of the curriculum.**

Adapted from At the Turning Point: The Young Adolescent Learner

helped turn their roles around. She reminds the reader that students often get trapped in these roles, and that teachers often forget to look “behind the mask.” “It is a simple but profound concept: to teach our students most effectively we must know them. The nature of our relationship changes from adult to trusted advisor when we show students we think they are important enough to know and understand.”

For Johnson, of Overland Trail, earning the students’ trust has paid off in academic improvements for two thirds of her students. But most important, she says, is that they now see the possibilities in their own achievements. “Yes, my goal is to teach them to read and to do

When teachers set up a culture of caring that honors voices of children in the classroom, individual students feel like their opinions matter and they are inspired to take charge of their learning.

math, but I'm really teaching them to be lifelong learners and to love to learn."

Ownership in the Classroom

When teachers set up a culture of caring that honors voices of children in the classroom, individual students feel like their opinions matter and they are inspired to take charge of their learning.

Young adolescents who learn how to advocate for themselves in school will know how to navigate new situations. Susie Girardin, a middle level specialist who works with teachers at Mt. Anthony, says that students need to have three different types of choices available on a daily basis: free choice, guided choice, and no choice. *Free choice* allows them, for example, to choose working partners, to select their own novel for reading workshop, or even to pick the topic for their next independent project. In a *guided choice*, students might choose between carefully selected options. *No choice* is necessary when everyone needs to do the same thing, such as learning to write a literary essay.

Teachers at Taft Middle School in Boston, Massachusetts, are giving students a greater choice during reader's and writer's workshop, says JoAnn Rogers, the school's literacy coach. Students are strongly encouraged to choose their own novels for reading workshop. This is not simple. Students first need to learn how to pick novels appropriate for their reading level, Rogers says.

During writing workshop, teachers give students some leeway. If a class is working on poetry, students are immersed in many types of poetry

and then pick a genre or format when they write their own poems. In a school-wide unit on poetry, every Taft student wrote a poem and then the school held several poetry readings. Several readers volunteered for each assembly, she says. "The audience was very receptive and respectful. Every child had just gone through writing poems and they loved the ones the students read." The students were considerate at the readings because they felt ownership over their own poems and had empathy for those students who had volunteered to read.

"Put the cognitive weight-lifting on the kids, not the teachers," O'Drobinak says. "We ask teachers, 'Who is doing the thinking in this classroom?'"

Before beginning to practice a writing or reading workshop with a class, teachers take time to teach students how to critique each other's work, and to set clear norms and high expectations for behavior and academics. Ron Berger, who teaches sixth grade in Shutesbury, Massachusetts, purposely builds the vocabulary of critique in his classroom, he writes in his paper "A Culture of Quality" (Annenberg Institute for School Reform, 1996). "I like it" or "It's good" are unacceptable words during a group critique session (as are "I hate it" or "It's bad"). Rather, students are taught to offer specific words of praise and suggestion, as well as to ask questions about the work. As students perfect the language of critique, Berger observes that they begin to informally give each other editing assistance and suggestions.

As in most new things, take it one step at a time, Turning Points coaches advise. When it comes to time, material covered, and simply “classroom talk,” the goal for teachers is to gradually release greater responsibilities to the students and begin to “put the cognitive weight-lifting on the kids, not the teachers,” O’Drobinak says. “We ask teachers, ‘Who is doing the thinking in this classroom?’”

In order to answer that question, teachers have to set high expectations and assume that students have something important to say, creating intentional places during class for students to have a voice, she says.

One relatively straightforward way for teachers to give students more ownership over their learning is to pay attention to who is doing the talking in class, O’Drobinak says. Is most of the talking teacher to student and student to teacher? How often do students address each other? At Taft, teachers have consciously embarked on a Power of Talk campaign to elicit more conversation from students (see sidebar). Recently, Rogers says she had the perfect opportunity to invite her class to “turn and talk.” The word “lottery” had come up in a story and suddenly the whole room was abuzz with lottery stories. “I told everyone to turn and share their lottery story with a partner.” This way, every student in the class got to tell a story. Then, “listening” students volunteered their partners who had good stories. Those volunteered then shared their stories with the entire class. Rogers says, “How many times have we heard that schools should be quiet?”

The Power of Talk

At Taft Middle School in Boston Massachusetts, teachers have devised a four-part structure that helps make students feel more comfortable “talking” in class. The initiative has also reminded teachers that conversation, whether it’s written or spoken, helps students learn.

1. Talk Back to the Book

Students have writer’s journals in which they talk to the characters in the book as they read, giving them advice and treating them like a friend or buddy.

2. Turn and Talk

When a teacher asks a question and every student wants to respond at once, the teacher will ask students to “turn and talk to your neighbor.” This allows every voice in the room to be heard before the teacher calls on one student.

3. Talk to the Text

While reading a passage, the student talks to the writer with written comments such as “I don’t know what that word is, or I think this word means...” in order to make sense of their own reading strategies.

4. Give Students Time to Talk

Teachers engage students in conversation about what they’re writing and reading.

Now we’re doing a full 180 and saying kids need to be talking. A noisy class can be a good learning environment.” (See *Teaching Literacy in the Turning Points School* for additional strategies.)

To engage students more in their learning requires that teachers take a step back to reflect on their own styles and approaches to instruction. When she coaches schools, Girardin uses a chart of five basic ways to deliver content: lecture, whole class discussion, cooperative learning groups, partnership, and independent work. Girardin says that she will often show the chart to teachers and then have them code

and graph their own lesson plans to reveal how much they use each modality. Lecture and independent work are the predominant methods in most classrooms, but with this new information teachers can plan a unit so that each modality is taught 20 percent of the time. “Once they’ve mastered that, then they can move on to think about where they offer choice,” Girardin says.

Involving Students in Goal Setting and Assessment

At The Turning Point: The Young Adolescent Learner stresses the importance of including students in the process of determining the evaluation criteria for an assignment. “Being able to articulate what constitutes high-quality work gives students information that empowers them to achieve,” the guide reads. “Making grading criteria public and explicit also allows for the establishment of equitable expectations for all students. Developing assessment criteria and rubrics with students helps build trust between teachers and students by creating clearly understandable grading parameters and learning expectations. It helps students see what they need to do to produce quality work.”

At CIS 303 in New York, teachers have started using rubrics much more consistently this year, Baly says. Students are more aware of teachers’ expectations and are more able to perform to that level when the criteria for grading are set out before them as they complete an assignment, she says. In Major’s social studies class at Mt. Anthony, students generate classroom rubrics in small groups. Students

determine how the entire class should be graded, and add their own details to make it clear. “I have learned that they can describe in their own words the exact standard that they need to meet,” Major says.

Student-Led Conferences

In Johnson’s reading class at Overland Trail Middle School in Colorado, students lead conferences to work on their reading progress. Johnson meets with each student for five to seven minutes at least every two weeks as the rest of the students read silently or write in their journals. The format of the conference—Read, Instruction, and Plan—allows students to read from text they select, explain their thoughts on the reading, and to discuss themselves as readers. At this time, Johnson might give individualized instruction. Each student then comes up with a plan of action for the next two weeks. As the students gain greater understanding and confidence in analyzing their reading, they become more proficient at creating a plan. This student-created plan of action guides the subsequent conference.

“Most of them want to come and talk and share and discuss and make plans. I think it’s empowering for them to make a plan.”

Most of the students in her class have increased two grade levels in reading over five months. While Johnson does not take all the credit, she says it has helped her students to be able to talk to her about their reading progress. “Most of them want to come and talk and

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share and discuss and make plans. I think it's empowering for them to make a plan."

Parent-teacher conferences led by students are another strategy for shifting more responsibility for learning onto the student. In these student-led conferences, the teacher advises the student on preparing examples of work and evidence of progress, and on leading the conference. Parents receive written guidelines about the structure of the 20- to 30-minute conference, which focuses on the evidence of progress through portfolio work and on goal setting. After the conference, students, parents, and teachers reflect on the format and the conference itself.

Student Leadership and Voice Schoolwide

According to *At the Turning Point*, young adolescents are capable of becoming trusted and respected partners in their own education, from giving input on classes being offered to being included in reform efforts. "Student involvement is not limited to planning the next school dance or decorating the hallways for a parent open house," the guide suggests. Students might have a role in discussing schoolwide issues such as improving teaching and learning, adult-student relations, school facilities, and school-wide literacy. "In all groups, student representation should reflect a broad range of academic achievement, different school cliques, and diverse backgrounds," according to the guide.

At Vikan Middle School in Brighton, Colorado, principal Doris Candelarie says the school has set up several

One Student's Progress through Student-Led Conferences

Students in Lea Johnson's reading class at Overland Trail Middle School in Brighton, Colorado, meet with their teacher every two weeks and lead a discussion involving their reading progress. For a few students, who are at risk of failing, this regular goal-setting covers their entire academic program.

According to Johnson, Rachel M. was having difficulty with eighth grade. She was constantly absent or tardy and making no attempt to make up her work. The teachers on the team decided that perhaps Rachel was not ready for eighth grade and should be recommended for alternative placement. Johnson asked the other teachers for four weeks. If after that time Rachel had not improved then the team would make the recommendation.

Johnson conferred with Rachel once per week. "During that time (10–15 minutes at first and then about 5 minutes at a time), we discussed Rachel's work in each of her classes and she set goals for each class for the following week. In the subsequent weeks we would meet briefly to discuss how she met her goals, and what her new goals would be. By the end of the four weeks Rachel had raised her grades in all classes by one letter grade. Her attendance also improved."

Johnson provided examples of her goals:

Week 2

Language Arts: Turn in all missing work by Friday (75% of goal reached by the next week)

Social Studies: Talk to Mrs. Heitman about lost book (Did not do this because she is afraid of the teacher)

Science: Test turned in on Monday (100%)

Reading: Turn in biography project on time (100%)

Math: Complete all homework assignments on time (100%)

Week 3

Language Arts: Finish spelling test (80%)

Social Studies: Talk to Mrs. H. about missing book (100%)

Science: Talk to teacher about makeup test (100%)

Reading: Use blue and pink highlighters to help with comprehension (80%)

Math: Catch up on makeup work (90%)

structures that honor student voice, including opportunities for building level conferences, advisory classes, daily enrichment/intervention classes, and a student advisory council.

“Students know that they are listened to in our school. They have rights along with their responsibilities. We speak to the students respectfully at all times, even when we are angry with a poor choice or decision they’ve made.” Candelarie has an open-door policy and is available to problem solve with the students.

Each advisory teacher selects representatives to Vikan’s Student Advisory Council. Candelarie asks for students who broadly represent the student body and who are not all from the National Junior Honor Society or Student Council. “I also ask students to join who write me letters or come to me with school issues,” she says. The council shares its opinions and thoughts with the principal on how the school operates, and offers ideas for school improvement. One student from each grade level also serves on the school improvement committee.

The student leadership group at New Mark Middle School in Kansas City, Missouri, focuses on projects that increase student achievement and attendance. The leadership group recently picked 27 students to attend a Community of Caring Spirit workshop, a daylong program designed to improve relationships among ethnic groups, says Nancy Pate, team sponsor. They wanted to make sure that the school’s students of color did not see themselves as isolated from the rest of the school population, Pate says. Two New Mark students interviewed about the

workshop say students worked on issues related to school safety. Seventh grade representative Steven Yung says, “We were actually solving the problems instead of talking about them and not doing anything about it.”

Eighth grader Blake McAllister says that while such opportunities allow students a chance to voice their concerns and suggest ideas for change, because of district rules, scheduling, and other conflicts, many of the students’ ideas do not actually create real change. In his experience, McAllister says, student leadership groups may have little actual power when it comes to school policy. But students should continue to give their input, he says. “I think eventually kids can change the school. It’s just hard to do now, especially in junior high. I don’t think student power or leadership will ever be perfect. Kids should be more organized and involved in schoolwide issues.” As the thoughtfulness of these comments illustrates, young adolescents are capable of giving real input and can see through superficial efforts. It is critical for adults in schools to give students the opportunity to truly voice their opinions in a forum where adults are listening and acting on their ideas.

The Student Lead Team at Lewis and Clark Middle School in Jefferson City, Missouri works on academic questions such as “How can we improve how students are doing in the classroom?” and “How can we make sure kids are ready and willing to learn?” The students on the team generate their own agendas. Two years ago, the team spent more than a year creating a rubric to guide students in doing oral presentations so that each

It is critical for adults in schools to give students the opportunity to truly voice their opinions in a forum where adults are listening and acting on their ideas.

teacher would follow the same criteria in grading them. The students compared many teachers' scoring guides, took common elements, and tried to explain the criteria more, making them more "kid-friendly," Marion Perrey, who sponsors the Student Lead Team, says. The rubric criteria were flexible so that it would be more demanding as students progressed from sixth to eighth grade. The students presented their scoring guide to the school's leadership group, revised it, and then presented it at a faculty meeting. Their presentation included a role-play in which the students gave two speeches, and the teachers scored them using the rubric.

"It amazes me when you say to kids, 'This is your school. What can we do to improve it?' they come up with ideas we would never think of."

This year, the Student Lead Team wanted to find a way to reward students for doing a good job, both academically and around two character traits. The students came up with an R&R certificate that rewards Respect and Responsibility. Any student can give a certificate to any other student, and they are presented at lunchtime in front of their peers. "We're hoping that by showing respect in the classroom, that will start to improve academics as well," Perrey says. Students are beginning to automatically praise each other for doing well. "It becomes a habit," she says. "It amazes me when you say to kids, 'This is your school. What can we do to improve it?' they come up with ideas we would never think of."

Ask the Students

In the end, teachers and administrators find that if we involve students and set high expectations for all of the students in the school—for how they perform academically, for how they take responsibility for their learning, and for how they contribute to school culture—they will amaze us. As Michael Fullan writes in *The New Meaning of Educational Change*, adults do not think of students as agents of change, rather as beneficiaries of change. "They rarely think of students as participants in a process of change and organizational life," he writes. Candelarie agrees. She says that in order to give students more responsibility in their learning at any level, teachers and administrators must be willing to invest time and energy. "I believe that the administration sets the tone. If teachers observe administrators talking with and counseling students instead of admonishing and reprimanding them, and they see student results, old patterns can change."

Above all, ask the students, and be fair: "Kids this age are all about fairness. Do not show favoritism. Involve all school groups; the skaters, the jocks, the readers, the drama stars, and the jokers all have something to share," Candelarie says. "When they tell you what needs to be changed, get them involved in the process, but remember to follow through or they will see your efforts as empty."

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www.facinghistory.org
Facing History and Ourselves offers many resources for teachers regarding the teaching of history and human behavior.

www.middleweb.com
This website, MiddleWeb: Exploring Middle School Reform, offers a large collection of resources for middle school educators, including weekly journals, e-newsletters, hundreds of articles and links related to curriculum, teaching strategies, etc.

www.sedl.org
The Southwest Educational Development Laboratory website includes descriptions of SEDL research reports and several on-line newsletters as well as many other resources.