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Imagine a place where teaching and learning are inspirational: A decade of collected wisdom from the field

Some middle grades educators find ways to engage and inspire their students in an era of high-stakes testing and rigid accountability policies.

P. Maureen Musser, Micki M. Caskey, Linda L. Samek, Younghee M. Kim, William L. Greene, Jan M. Carpenter, & Jay Casbon

I love my job, I love to teach and learn. ... I will never give up the good fight for the rights of my students to get the best from me as a teacher. ... I sadly and strongly feel our current direction with assessment is the wrong way and that there are other acceptable ways to move forward [that] don't take away quality teaching and learning. I love the kids, but the picture on a student's face today, knowing he was the only one not to finish the test, brought tears to my eyes. (MS–U.S. middle grades teacher, excerpt of an e-mail to his school's principal)

After a decade of collaboration and research on middle grades education, the wisdom of dozens of teachers, administrators, and university faculty has led us to a compelling set of observations (e.g., Dalton, Samek, Olson, Greene, Caskey, & Musser, 2004; Greene, Caskey, Musser, Samek, Casbon, & Olson, 2008; Greene, Caskey, Musser, Samek, & Olson, 2005; Musser, 1998; Samek, Kim, Casbon, Caskey, Greene, & Musser, 2010; Samek, Musser, Caskey, Olson, & Greene, 2006). Teachers and principals know what is best for their students, value collaboration, and are passionate about teaching and learning. Yet, these educators also express deep concern stemming from the tension of trying to enact their heartfelt vision of teaching within a culture of standardization and accountability.

The purpose of this article is to share wisdom collected from the field and offer a view of meaningful learning, explore the tensions that exist in educators'

work, and invite conversation about the future of educational practice. The anecdotes and data come from a series of research studies conducted from 2001 to 2011 by a cadre of middle grades researchers—university faculty from public and private universities across Oregon. Over the past decade, we studied the perspectives of middle grades principals, middle grades teachers, university faculty, and district personnel directors representing distinct communities (urban, suburban, rural), disparate demographics (e.g., low SES to high SES), and varying school size (i.e., small to large middle schools). We guided each study with research questions such as: How are national policies affecting how teachers view the nature of their work? How does national policy affect the way middle school teachers balance the academic-cognitive needs of young adolescents with their social-emotional needs (Dalton et al., 2004)? How have high-stakes accountability measures based on yearly academic testing influenced teachers' curriculum, instruction, and assessment practices (Greene et al., 2008)? What are the perceptions of middle grades university faculty, classroom teachers, and principals regarding well-prepared middle grades teachers (Samek et al., 2010)? We used a variety of data collection methods including surveys, interviews, and focus groups to build an understanding of school and university perspectives.

What we learned is that teachers often find themselves caught between the expectations of external influences

This article reflects the following *This We Believe* characteristics: Value Young Adolescents, Shared Vision, Committed Leaders

and their responses to the deep needs and yearnings of their students. In the words of one veteran middle grades teacher, “I’m tired of my inability to do what’s best for my kids.” When teachers like this one act on their inclinations to do what is best for students, they may feel their behavior is subversive. Another middle grades teacher explained during a focus group interview,

I feel like I do it a lot more, but I feel like I kind of have to hide it a little bit. If I’m going to be talking to some kids about something real, authentic, something emotional, I kind of have to go shut the door, you know what I mean? (Samek et al., 2006, p. 28)

Although principals recognize the pressures placed on teachers, they are not positioned to question mandates because one of their roles is to enforce policy. As one middle grades principal concluded a few years ago,

The high-stakes testing environment of NCLB: (No Child Left Behind) and adequate yearly progress (AYP) have caused my teachers to work under a “mantle of fear” regarding curriculum. They feel like they have to take the safe path in curriculum even though best practice research suggests differently. (Dalton et al., 2004, p. 9)

Principals, too, are caught between competing needs and expectations. Amid the dilemma of determining purpose and goals in today’s school systems, the important question is: How can educators navigate the competing demands and eventually find a path that meets the requirements of standardized testing without depriving students of opportunities to explore deeper understanding through a rich and developmentally appropriate curriculum? At a time when classrooms are becoming more and more diverse, educational policymakers have chosen a very narrow slice of learning to assess; thus opportunities for students to learn and display their learning are becoming less and less diverse.

In our search for a response to these questions, we revisited findings from our decade of studies with practitioners and identified three striking themes: (a) authentic connections with colleagues—speaking the truth to each other and to those who would hold them accountable; (b) passion for learning—acting on the professional and heartfelt inclinations that engage their own passions as educational leaders; and (c) education built on strengths rather than deficits—

providing as many authentic learning opportunities for as many different students as possible. Our descriptions of each theme encompass a specific area of tension that impacts the ability of teachers to create optimal learning environments. The wisdom embedded in these descriptions may serve to reconnect and empower teachers to navigate their own path without abandoning their deep commitment to their students.



A middle grades teacher seeks ways to engage students in meaningful learning, despite external demands to “teach to the test.” photo by Ken Clutsam

Authentic connections with colleagues

Principals and teachers agree that collaboration is central to their work. Our research revealed that teachers need authentic connections with their colleagues to achieve their professional goals and serve their students well. One principal noted, “Teachers need to ... share, collaborate, problem-solve. I think, at least in our building, there’s a great deal of collaboration and team planning and co-teaching.” We found universal agreement that collaborative practice needs to be a part of the school culture; collaboration leads to teachers feeling supported. Teachers consistently expressed how much they gain from collaborative interactions with their peers including learning what other teachers are doing,

excitement for the learning process, and being inspired by other teachers' practices and ideas. In collegial relationships that thrive, teachers listen deeply to one another. Teachers are energized by these interactions; their instructional practices improve, and their students benefit.

We also noticed a conundrum related to collaboration. While principals may actually support and encourage close teacher collaboration, they are often unable to provide organizational structures that offer time for collaboration (Dalton et al., 2004). A number of educators reported their schools are moving away from teaming and common planning time—a move that impedes collaboration. Without common planning time in the school day, collaboration and teaming rarely occur on any sustained basis. Collaboration must be a practice expected by the organization, and it must be valued and intentional. Collaborative approaches can promote school change that extends beyond individual classrooms. When teachers learn together, students in the school benefit (Darling-Hammond, Wei, Andree, Richardson, & Orphanos, 2009). Common planning time and professional learning communities are organizational structures through which this *can* happen. But organizational structures alone are not sufficient. For authentic connections among colleagues to develop over an extended period requires that participants find collaboration to be useful (Trubowitz & Longo, 1997).

Passion for learning

Are we—all of us—missing opportunities in schools to develop student potential? In the United States, we believe we know how to develop students' potential, but if the voices we have heard from teachers and building administrators are any indication, too many schools are not doing this effectively. Teachers spend more time on test-taking strategies and less time on meaningful curriculum (Greene et al., 2008). A middle grades teacher lamented, "All my curriculum is test-preparation based. I don't have much time for fun, creative lessons." By "fun," this teacher meant an engaging curriculum—one that is relevant and provides choices for students to pursue their talents and passions in the classroom with guidance from professional educators. We agree with Minato (2011), who noted, "We need to teach facts—but not at the expense of our students' hearts and souls. Not at the expense of their passion for learning."

"Teachers feel *caught in the middle* between what they know is best for student learning—active engagement—and the movement to passive instructional approaches" (Greene et al., 2008, p. 60). These shifting instructional priorities and the ongoing pressure to raise test scores lead to less student-centered instruction and leave teachers feeling much less satisfied with their practice. We contend that the high-stakes, winner-take-all testing environment and the large-scale return to rote teaching methods and scripted curricula devalue both the teacher and the learner. Preparing for standardized testing leads to passive learning and memorization instead of critical thinking, ingenuity, and creativity (Gross, 2005).

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"We are educating people out of their creative capacities," asserted education and creativity expert Sir Ken Robinson (2006). In an interview with Kerry O'Brien (2009), Robinson stated:

We're all born with tremendous creative confidence and abilities. Young children are full of great ideas and possibilities. But, that tends to be suppressed as we get older. And, it happens, in part, through this culture of standardized testing that, I think, is now a blight on the whole of education.

Students with restless minds and bodies—far from being cultivated for their energy and curiosity—are ignored or even stigmatized, with terrible consequences. Creativity, relevance, and active learning experiences can reignite students' and teachers' passion for learning and foster the conditions for what Miller (2006) called "timeless learning," wherein "students develop deep joy, wholeness, awe and wonder, and a sense of purpose" (p. 12).

Education built on strengths rather than deficits

The current climate for defining learning gains and measuring student outcomes results in disproportionate attention on filling holes and fixing deficits. Practitioners are gradually pulled toward a new status quo of seeing their students as behind or lacking and away from viewing the vast array of resources each brings to the learning context. This cultural shift in educational perspective has challenged the philosophies with which many teachers and administrators began their careers. *How can we restore balance?* How can teachers be empowered to help students discover their strengths and use them, not only in the classroom, but for a lifetime? Can educators use their own strengths to enhance learning for all?

Yes, teachers and principals do contribute their strengths and talents to students. However, under the constraints of standardization, their professional expertise is, too often, not actualized. And, as illustrated in the opening quotation, teachers are frustrated with their inability to give students what they need to flourish as learners. As another teacher emphasized:

Middle level education should be designed to give young adolescents an opportunity to explore. They need to be guided in their pursuit of knowledge for personal empowerment. They should be exposed to the endless opportunities and exciting things life has to offer. (Samek et al., 2006)

We wonder: Why are teachers and their students not set free to imagine what can be?

Edith Dowley, founding director of Bing Nursery School at Stanford University, suggested that each child in our classrooms be treated as an honored guest (Hartman, 2004). Each child comes to us with strengths, including unique skills and knowledge about the way the world works. When we eliminate PE, music, drama, and recess from the school day, we limit the opportunities children have to discover and develop their full range of talents. How can we value strengths in students, who are diverse in terms of ethnicity, culture, home life, talents, and ways of seeing the world? Instead of narrowing the curriculum, let us design curriculum that views every child as gifted and provides multiple opportunities for exploration and wonder.

Integrating families and community with the school is another way to build on the inherent strengths of our students. Most children have someone who knows and cares about them, even in the most dysfunctional of homes. Broadening the circle of education to include family, community, and friends (e.g., parents or other relatives, scoutmasters, music teachers, church youth leaders) can provide insight and encouragement as we honor the children in their care and invite them to participate in the educational process (Musser, 1998).

In contrast to prevalent deficit-based perspectives on teachers and students, the field of positive psychology calls for strengths-based approaches that focus more attention on nurturing positive qualities and strengths (see Csikszentmihalyi, 1991; Korthagen & Vasalos, 2005; Seligman & Steen, 2005). Such strengths-based approaches are more holistic, valuing all dimensions of who we are and who our students are, and applying them in education will add a nearly invisible, but critical, voice to the national dialogue on education reform. We should not hesitate to integrate a perspective of inner vitality into schooling if we hope to retain what it takes to be our best and to do our “most inspired work” (Intrator & Kunzman, 2006, p. 28).

In summary, the knowledge base indicates that educators need to honor each child as an individual, embrace family and community as allies in learning, and nurture positive practice. The following accounts exemplify these principles and highlight how some educators continue to apply them, despite the competing demands.

Imagining a place

How can we build a passion for learning, authentic connection with colleagues and the community, and education built on strengths rather than deficits to provide a meaningful and relevant education for children—one that will allow them to thrive? The following examples highlight educators who are continuing to enact what they know is best practice. They are experiencing continued joy and renewal and seeing their students thrive despite the political tensions.

Holistic learning at John Muir School

Imagine a place where students are challenged daily in the safety of a holistic learning environment that taps into their physical, spiritual, emotional, social, and

intellectual potential. Welcome to John Muir School, where Marcia Ososke teaches a seventh and eighth grade self-contained class in which the strengths and unique gifts of each student define the heart of the curriculum. During a recent visit to Marcia's class, two authors' eyes simultaneously welled with tears as the teacher described last June's rite of passage for her 12 graduating eighth graders—a five-day, 40-mile hike along the Middle Rogue River. The rite of passage culminated in a five-mile silent hike during which Marcia invited students to contemplate their fears of the unknown to prepare them for their transition to high school. Marcia talked about how this experience, two full years in the planning, led to greater confidence, self-reliance, and empowerment in her students. In a particularly poignant story, she described how one of her boys appeared before her after the hike holding a long thin braid of his hair. "What happened to your braid, did you cut it?" she asked. The boy replied that it had been a part of his identity for so long, but now he didn't need it anymore.

Marcia plans weekly and monthly special events for her students that help them learn how to stretch their personal boundaries. As a result, she says, they are more willing to stretch those boundaries in the classroom. Marcia manages to do this while integrating curricular standards and grade level skills. They rappel from the 65-foot-tall university stadium, take weekly trips to

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an outdoor education facility, hike, go backpacking, work in small groups, and engage in drama. They also collaborate with a local creek restoration project, the university outdoor program, Rogue Valley Farms-to-Schools, and other community organizations for stewardship, hands-on learning, and leadership opportunities. Eighth graders even complete a capstone experience, in which they either "leave their mark" in the school (art, building, and the like) or engage in a practicum experience with a local business.

One way Marcia helps students honor their strengths is by allowing them to propose independent projects aligned with their learning goals and interests. Marcia guides students, trusting them to work independently. "I know that if they see that I trust them, then they feel honored, and respect emanates throughout the year."

John Muir School is a public magnet school, so while Marcia engages in some exemplary middle grades practices, she and her colleagues are still held accountable for administering tests required by her district and mandated under NCLB. Her students, who represent diverse socioeconomic statuses, languages, and special needs groups, are consistently rated "outstanding" in the school's published results.

Passionate teaching in McMinnville, Oregon

In McMinnville, Oregon, creativity flows as young artists engage in serious design work and participate in open studio art in a middle school art class. Provided a theme, given access to supplies, and guided by mini-lessons, students are free to experiment. In this atmosphere, exploration and creativity share a reciprocal relationship; initial sparks of creativity ignite as students dig through materials, dialogue with peers, and experiment with their ideas. With pride and enthusiasm, sixth grade students shared their current projects, including tigers, birds, turtles, and bats constructed from cleverly chosen materials and exhibiting unique textures, colors, and shapes. "I've made a butterfly out of gum wrappers," one student explained. Articulating his passion, another student exclaimed, "What I love about this class is that you get to design everything yourself—you can do whatever you want with it!"

Passion for open studio art does not belong to the artists alone—this student-centered approach energizes and inspires their teacher as well. Three years ago, the art teacher noticed that the final art projects looked surprisingly similar. Although the quality was high, creativity was lacking. The desire for greater student engagement, creativity, and ownership led her to change her practice. Now, students are experiencing success at their own levels, and they are learning more about art. Additionally, students are learning problem-solving skills in the process of implementing their designs; the art teacher regularly provides guidance and scaffolding as students encounter obstacles. Writing is integrated authentically into the curriculum, as students write artist's statements; they are challenged to think critically

and self-reflect, as they analyze their own work and the artistic process. The teacher explained, “Although it may feel chaotic to someone walking into the room, it is highly organized, and the energy reflects engagement.” In sharing her story, the art teacher’s joy is evident. She has created space for creativity, empowered her students, and provided opportunities for authentic learning.

Upstairs from the art room, a language arts teacher passionately engages his students. “I come from a family of storytellers,” he explained, “and my job is to tell stories and inspire students to tell stories—all day, every day.” He continued, “Storytelling is a human activity—it is what we do, and students are full of stories.” He uses this medium to engage students and to teach them. “My stories are not frivolous; there is a point to [each] one.” Learning life lessons, creating a safe environment for students to share, building community, teaching academic skills and content—all of these things can be addressed through story.

The teacher gave an example of working with the concept of “hero.” As an introduction to the unit, he shared comic books from his childhood, a football jersey from high school, and a story of his grandpa receiving recognition for an accomplishment. From there, students were inspired to identify their own heroes and encouraged to share with each other in a safe environment. He set the tone; they laughed together, then they went deeper and talked about people and issues that matter to young adolescents. The teacher created space for authentic conversations and relationships to develop. In the process, deep learning occurred in a very positive affective environment.

This language arts teacher does not ignore standards or testing; he embraces them as a framework for his planning. He explained using the difference between a house and a home as an analogy. The house is the framework; when you make it comfortable and make it yours, it becomes a home. This professional educator knows the standards, but he also knows we have to play with the standards to make them ours. His classroom is a home where he and his students share deeply and engage in meaningful learning.

Similar stories could be told about teachers throughout this middle school. These professional educators are driven by authentic care for their students, deep knowledge of best practice, and a vision for successful students. They live their mission, and the positive climate of the school reflects their inspiration and commitment.

Learning for LIFE in a rural community

Many practices that once inspired students and faculty are worth re-imagining and reestablishing for current students. One example is the Learning Is For Ever (LIFE) at a K–8 school located in a small rural community in Oregon. At the beginning of each term, the program facilitator met with students to identify topics according to their interests and passion for learning and, in small groups or individually, students chose projects to pursue. Each topic had its own volunteer teacher drawn from the community or the school. Academic content and authentic experiences were an integral part of this innovative program. For every topic there was a corresponding field trip, a written paper, and a class presentation to which the students’ parents and community mentors were invited. The LIFE program honored the students, brought parents and community members into the education process, and implemented a positive and holistic approach to teaching and learning.

Developing close relations with the community revealed amazing strengths that community members were willing to share with children. For example, one student chose to learn about birds of prey, and the custodian—who was a licensed bird rehabilitator—volunteered to teach him. The student not only learned about raptors, he had an opportunity to handle them.

In another case, four students chose to learn about aviation. The program facilitator found a pilot who lived in the community to teach the group. This project culminated in a field trip to a National Guard airbase where the students had an opportunity to sit in a fighter jet and use a flight simulator. Meaningful learning *can* happen, and it *is* happening in some places. Middle grades educators can provide a learning environment for young adolescents that will enable them to thrive.

Conclusion

Imagine educators and students experiencing joyful episodes of teaching and learning (Noddings, 2005). Imagine what can be done to foster and sustain powerful, inspiring moments of “soul education” in which “students and teachers no longer go through the motions but instead feel alive and nourished in what they do” (Miller, 2000, p. 4). Imagine how we can honor each child as an individual, embrace family and community as allies in learning, and nurture positive practice in all school experiences.

Perhaps a starting point for realizing such a vision is for teachers to discuss their hopes and dreams for their students in both informal gatherings and formal meetings (Palmer, 2007). Teachers in learning communities can read and discuss books by authors such as Sir Ken Robinson, Daniel Pink, and Carol Dweck for vision, inspiration, and practical ideas (see Figure 1). Using common planning time, professional learning communities, or data team meetings, teachers would have the time and opportunity to identify the unique strengths of each learner and to address progress toward learning goals.

Another starting point could be for teachers to connect learning experiences to nature, as Miller (2006) suggested. When they share their knowledge of the earth, animals, plants, and the intricate relationships of living and non-living things, teachers model an appreciation of nature, encourage curiosity, and promote a view of life as interconnected, authentic experiences. This kind of humanistic approach could lead students to engage in deeper understanding of the multidimensionality of human beings and discover a sense of purpose in their lives. Along with this approach, engaging parents and caregivers in the broader community as allies would enrich the learning experience for youth.

We also encourage principals to read (or reread) the tenets of *This We Believe* (National Middle School Association [NMSA], 2010) to revisit their own core beliefs regarding middle grades education and to strengthen their commitment to implement courageous, collaborative leadership in their schools. Principals could initiate positive, proactive, professional dialogue with teachers, in which they develop or return to a shared

vision of effective teaching and learning. Revisiting school and personal mission statements might refocus, reenergize, and inform these discussions. Inviting superintendents and other district administrators to participate in such conversations might build common ground across the district and allow teachers and building administrators greater voice in policy issues.

Similarly, policy makers could support collaborative exchanges among school personnel, families, and community groups (NMSA, 2006). Community forums, school board meetings, and professional development events could include dialogue among all stakeholders who value young adolescents. Authentic conversations such as these can empower educators to enact their ideals by re-creating a context for inspired learning.

In conclusion, we encourage teachers and administrators to resist teaching to the test, revisit their vision for authentic education, and implement what they know are exemplary practices. Given the current evidence-based culture, we also encourage educators to document the authentic learning that occurs—academic, physical, social, emotional, moral, and spiritual—as they enact their vision. While contextual data may offer support for practices, it will also empower educators to learn from their practice and refine their vision. Reflecting on examples of awe, creativity, wonder, deep learning, joy, engagement, and authentic connections can feed the soul of educators and energize them amid the competing demands of standards and students' needs. Professional growth from actualized mission can lead to deep satisfaction for educators; as educators share their stories, inspiration becomes infectious. Imagine, implement, share, inspire.

Figure 1 Recommended books for teacher learning communities

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