

Middle Grades Review

Volume 4
Issue 3 *Educating for Equity*

Article 6


December 2018

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Recommended Citation

Marlatt, Rick (2018) "Walking the Talk: Promoting Middle School Philosophy by Embracing Student Voices," *Middle Grades Review*: Vol. 4 : Iss. 3 , Article 6.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.uvm.edu/mgreview/vol4/iss3/6>

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Walking the Talk: Promoting Middle School Philosophy by Embracing Student Voices

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ABSTRACT

This practitioner perspective responds to recent scholarship calling for reinvigorating middle level education by suggesting that the purposeful inclusion of student voices in collaborative learning activities can help educators champion the academic and social growth of early adolescents. The recent practicum experience of a preservice candidate who prioritized the voices of her students illustrates the promotion of democratic education, innovation, and social justice in middle level education.

INTRODUCTION

As a middle level teacher educator in English language arts (ELA), I work with many preservice teachers who feel pressured into a false dilemma between what they perceive as featuring student talk for the sake of middle school philosophy or stifling it for the sake of quality teaching. Carini, a student in my methods course, recently learned the powerful lesson that good teaching, middle school philosophy, and student talk are not mutually exclusive. Combined, they can help us meet current demands of accountability while still honoring our commitment to exploration and relationships. In this practitioner perspective, I present Carini's turn-around story of embracing student voices and argue that talk can help us reclaim our middle schools in the name of democratic education, innovation, and social justice.

The Problem of Silence

In the ELA methods course, I observe candidates teach periodically throughout the semester in practicum placements at local schools where they are paired with a cooperating teacher who supervises their lesson planning and instruction. Carini taught her first lesson in an 8th grade classroom where she introduced students to the work of Edgar Allan Poe. I was looking forward to finally seeing Carini in action, having helped her and her cadre workshop a number of lessons during the first few weeks of class. By all appearances, Carini fit the description of a promising middle level candidate. She loved working with young people and was eager for the

chance to command her own classroom. She had talked for weeks about wanting to engage her students with hands-on activities and invigorate their lives with a love of language and literature.

Carini had also established a strong foundation in constructivist learning principles, which was evident in her comments during class discussions on backwards design and cultivating multicultural classrooms. "I've never been so excited about teaching in my life," she had said. The energy with which she interacted with peers and discussed her unit was infectious. On the morning Carini was to introduce the unit, I signed in at the school's front office and made my way down the hallway, filled with high expectations. She was to kick off Halloween week with Poe, how perfect. I pictured Carini beatboxing lyrics as she had showcased in class. I pictured kids reciting spooky scenes in ghoulish voices. In my head I could hear the buzz of engagement. Yet, when I stepped into the classroom, I was struck by one sound: silence.

I sat in disbelief at the rear of the classroom. Students were seated facing the white board in perfectly aligned rows, peering down into opened textbooks on the right side of their desks. On the left side, an author biography worksheet lay atop a two-sided worksheet on figurative language, which covered a thick study guide packet. Carini stood at the front of the room reading Poe's biographical details from the textbook. Periodically, she stopped and turned toward the Elmo, where she recorded information on the biography worksheet. As her notes projected onto the white board, students copied them down on their own sheets.

Her cooperating teacher stood over students' shoulders, keeping them on task and maintaining strict silence. When the biography sequence was complete, Carini had students begin working on the figurative language worksheet, which they did individually, at their desks, without talking. Carini walked up and down the rows, collecting the biography papers. Halfway through the period, she collected the worksheets and began reading from the first selection, "The Raven." While she read, she again utilized the Elmo to write information on the study guide, which students replicated at their desks as they followed along. When the bell rang, students marked their pages with their study guides, shelved their textbooks and exited the classroom, followed by Carini and her cooperating teacher, who escorted them to the cafeteria for lunch.

Needless to say, I left the school dumbfounded. Where was the excitement and risk-taking I had come to equate with Carini's ideas about curriculum and instruction? Where were the sounds of active learning? Drilling definitions and prescribing responses may have resulted in students reproducing correct answers, but in consolidating the discourse, Carini had problematized opportunities for diverse analysis or alternative perspectives. Though Carini's theoretical ideas about teaching in the preservice setting were justice-oriented, her classroom practice had been oppressive, due to the silencing of student voices. Despite her wonderful intentions, Carini made choices for students that were neither innovative in design nor democratic in function. With a week until her next lesson, I set out to empower Carini by helping her reestablish the roots of what it means to teach and learn alongside middle school students.

Literature Review

The middle school movement began in the mid-20th Century when subject-centered junior high schools were restructured into learner-centered environments focused on the unique needs of adolescents in grades 6 through 8 (George & Alexander, 2003). In the decades that have followed, a framework for teaching and learning in the middle grades known as the middle school philosophy has come to include a number of identifying characteristics (Alexander & McEwin, 1989; AMLE, 2012). Schools enacting a

middle school philosophy feature interdisciplinary teams working to serve students beyond academics by offering emotional and social learning opportunities (Edwards, Kemp, & Page, 2014). Middle schools have embraced active, real-world learning activities that sustain academic engagement while developing citizenship skills through verbal interaction (Bailey, 2017; Smith & McEwin, 2011).

Efforts to educate the whole child have transcended institutional borders, strengthening family and community involvement and supporting collaborative partnerships between schools and universities (Biddle & Mitra, 2015; Hurd & Weilbacher, 2017). By promoting developmentally appropriate instruction and integrative curriculum, middle schools prioritize empathy and flexibility in an effort to help adolescents construct pathways to become productive, lively members of society. The voices of students and their contributions to school through academic and social discourse is an essential component of these objectives. Talk between and among students, facilitated by teachers, helps us actualize the middle school philosophy.

In recent years, demands associated with the accountability movement have disrupted schools' efforts to perpetuate middle school philosophy into the 21st Century (Watts & Seed, 2010). Bolstered by No Child Left Behind, measures that gained steam in the early 2000s have introduced two major developments impacting middle level education: standardized testing and teacher evaluation. In response to critiques of underperforming students and ineffective teachers, schools have undergone a number of changes in policy and practice. Most have adopted uniform standards and curricula, implemented high stakes testing, and overhauled instruction with test-prep approaches. These shifts have complicated schools' abilities to support the development of the whole student, especially through opportunities for talking (Huss & Eastep, 2011). As educators, if we are truly committed to middle school philosophy, then we are obligated to allow students to talk and move and co-construct competencies through collaboration. Preparing students to be successful on standardized tests and supporting their social growth is not a zero-sum proposition. Renewing

our commitment to the voices of students can help us impact both scholastic and social growth, and these integrative models should comprise teacher education. Not only are students' conversations important to their personal development and academic success, their voices reflect the dynamics of the middle level phenomenon. Too often, the instructional methods of practitioners and the school-wide policies of administrators seek to stifle this valuable, developmental interaction. Teacher educators should impress upon candidates that the more they know about their students—their cultural identities, literacy practices, and learning preferences—the better positioned they are to actually reach them at depths that will produce achievement.

The Solution of Voices

When we met to debrief her lesson before our class the following day, Carini expressed disappointment in her teaching, calling it “a sorry disaster.” When I asked what she meant, Carini said, “I had really fun things planned but got scared at the last minute and changed everything the night before. I wanted to impress my cooperating teacher, so I basically taught like she would. I didn't want to overstep my boundaries.” I stressed that she had nothing to be ashamed of. For preservice teachers committed to making good impressions in their practicum, establishing their own pedagogies can be a daunting task, especially when they perceive a clash of teaching styles. In Carini's case, she feared rebuke for her talk-friendly approaches from her superior, who Carini described as an “old-school lecturer.” Though she felt discouraged that she was unable to be the kind of teacher she wanted to be alongside a mentor whose approaches did not feature student voice, I tried to help her see her situation as an opportunity for growth.

I encouraged her to share her feelings with her cooperating teacher, to rely on her own voice to highlight the person she was and the educator she was becoming. I reminded her that teachers' personalities and preferences vary as much as their learners', that being sincere is always a good course. We had a long discussion that evening about the realities of marrying theory and practice, that theory underpins the decisions we make as educators. I implored her not to concede her own philosophies for the sake of

compliance. I reminded her middle school is about the whole student—academic, social, and emotional. We spent the next several days exploring opportunities for student talk to support grade level standards such as literary analysis, citing textual evidence, and vocabulary acquisition.

Carini and I met a final time before her next lesson. She was delighted to report that her conversation with her cooperating teacher had been a success. Describing her quick change from anxiousness to exaltation, Carini said, “I was so nervous. Finally, I said I wanted to try getting the kids up and working together. I held my breath, sure she would chew me out. When she said, ‘that sounds awesome,’ I gave her the biggest hug.” Carini expressed “a huge weight lifted” by making her values known in how she talked about teaching as well as in her instructional design. As a young professional, Carini found that rediscovering the value of voice can help make difficult conversations among colleagues easier to navigate. As luck would have it, the other 8th grade section she would be leading was a full week behind the other class, which meant Carini had the chance to revamp her Poe introduction and redeem herself in her own eyes. Watching the excitement return in her demeanor rejuvenated my own commitment to middle level teaching.

Flipping the Script

When I entered the practicum classroom the next day, the atmosphere was completely transformed. Halloween had come and gone, but Carini's student-centered design had been reborn. Laser-straight rows of paper-covered desks had been rearranged into pods. Cooperative activity stations had been constructed throughout the room. The teacher's desk had been retooled with stacked crates to scaffold a small performance stage. There was no longer a prescribed structure of teacher-dominated transmission; the room had become a setting for discovery through autonomy. There was movement. There were props. Most importantly, there was talk. Perhaps best of all were the smiles worn by Carini and her cooperating teacher, who greeted students and helped them assemble their groups.

Carini handed out “Biography Choice” activity prompts to small teams of students. Group could

reenact a scene from Poe's life, compose a song in his honor with Garage Band, film an interview-style talk show with their smartphones, and more. The textbook was still a primary resource, but students constructed their own platforms for connecting with the author. Instead of reading definitions of figurative language and selecting multiple choice responses on a worksheet, teams alternated between stations where they practiced applying literary terms in minute-to-win-it-games, multilingual flashcard exchanges, and movie quote trivia challenges.

Students then read "The Raven" in groups, with members serving in various roles such as sound effect guru, study guide watcher, and timekeeper. Carini beamed brightly as she weaved between a chorus of bustling voices, offering high-fives and compliments. Whereas students were silent and restrained in her first lesson, they were now animated and engaged. Learners were no longer receiving and regurgitating arbitrary information; they were contextualizing their understandings by collaborating. Students were not merely participating. They were the doers.

Carini shared in our next methods class that while both lessons had aimed at the same learning objectives, the second go-around had been "lightyears better" because it emphasized the "voices of learners." Describing her thoughts on student talk, Carini stated, "When they talk about the content and their projects, they are working things out. They do it together. When they hear each other they think through their own thoughts then share out again. When they are talking they are learning." Carini added that she was "so not surprised" when students' scores on early unit assignments were higher than in the other class. "It's all about their engagement," she explained. Carini continued to design lessons featuring student talk as the primary vehicle for meeting academic standards throughout the semester, utilizing a number of strategies such as choral responses, give-one-get-one, think-pair-share, Socratic seminars, podcasts, and more.

Weeks later, I observed Carini facilitate a literature circle activity in which students competed for points in a gameshow format by demonstrating their knowledge of various texts. Afterward, Carini stated that embracing student

voices had bolstered the classroom community so strongly that students at the start of the term who "did not even know one another" were now choosing to team together. Describing one group's work with the novel, *Brown Girl Dreaming* (Woodson, 2014), Carini said, "I had kiddos from totally different backgrounds and ethnicities in basically different languages tell almost the same story about their childhood inspired by Jackie in the book. It was an awesome moment of coming together." Carini showcased an increasing zeal for working with middle schoolers and a growing fervor for prioritizing their voices in curriculum and instruction. When our methods class ended, Carini was as fired-up as ever to begin student teaching. As a preservice teacher, she demonstrated tremendous growth, not only as a practitioner, but as a critically engaged pedagogue as well. Like the students she impacted, Carini benefited from the opportunity to talk with colleagues about how to improve her craft.

Discussion

In a recent essay on reinvigorating middle school teacher education, Podsiadlik (2016) states, "Middle school teachers need to have a sense of the expanse of possibilities that must be considered in order for instruction to be relevant and meaningful" (p. 5). Carini discovered the significant impact that allowing students to converse can have on making content relevant for adolescents. Basing learning activities around opportunities for collaborative talk expanded Carini's notions of what a literacy lesson could look like and emphasized processes of cooperation, teamwork, and citizenship. Talk allowed Carini to be innovative in how she facilitated her learning culture. The constructive conditions allowed her the mobility to respond immediately to student needs, check for understanding, and offer formative feedback.

Student talk helped Carini bridge a gap in her preservice development between theory and practice. By structuring talk as a primary component of curriculum and instruction, she actualized in practice the constructivist premise that knowledge is shaped through interactive experiences in social settings (Crotty, 2003; Kompf, 1996). Carini's students demonstrated understandings of literacy objectives by cultivating relationships, generating original

content, collaborating on projects, and making their voices heard. Talk allowed her middle school students to engage in a narrative process of discovery through collaborative storytelling, interactive literature study, text-based intercommunication, and more.

Teaching for justice involves inclusion. As Cook, Howell, and Faulkner (2016) attest, middle level educators:

Must be prepared to meet the developmental and academic needs of their students through preparation programs focused on understanding the historical, sociopolitical, and contextual demands of teaching and learning, middle level schools, and young adolescents. (p. 5)

We understand that our response to these myriad demands can be found in the roots of our philosophy, that a framework for reaching the needs of middle schoolers can be accessed through their social interaction. Embracing student talk helps us create forums where all voices matter, where all voices are invited to contribute to classroom discourse, not regardless of culture or identity, but as a direct result of their diversity. Talk helps define the value we see in our students' voices, which, according to Carini, reflect "the kind of teacher I want to be."

Conclusion

Talk is an effective method for discovering who our students are, lending learners a platform for interactive contexts they require as social beings. Talk-friendly pedagogies can be transformative, simultaneously supporting whole student development while affording academic impact (Turner & Greene, 2017). Striking that balance is imperative if we are to propel the middle school movement into the 21st Century, and embracing student talk involves more than simply allowing conversations to occur in school; it is a purposeful implementation of constructive interaction within curricular design. Middle school teachers face tremendous challenges and persistent obstacles, yet their task of providing opportunities for discovery and relevance for the development of young learners is vital in today's schools (DiCicco, Cook, & Faulkner, 2016). Involving the voices of our students in our pedagogical approaches can help us become

effective, justice-driven educators and position us to reclaim our middle schools.

Featuring student talk involves relinquishing control and democratizing traditional power structures in schooling. Does embracing student voices challenge us to be innovative? Can it disrupt our comfort zones? Of course. But middle school teachers have always been a special breed. A unique devotion is required to excel at the middle level. Teacher education programs and partnerships should be training teachers who are comfortable with the sounds of discourse and apt at channeling those dynamics toward academic achievement. When we embrace our students for the talkative, curious creatures they are, we unlock unlimited possibilities for learning and discovery. In our quest to carry the torch of the middle school movement onward, I challenge us all to welcome the noise and walk the talk of our middle level philosophies.

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