

New From ACEI Publications:

Focus on Literacy: Effective Content Teachers for the Middle Grades

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The following is an excerpt from the most recent ACEI publication:

Characteristics of Effective Middle Level Teachers

Although teaching with an emphasis on literacy while delivering instruction in a content discipline requires a complex set of instructional strategies, teaching the young adolescents who inhabit middle level classrooms also places complex demands on teachers. Teachers of young adolescents ages 10 to 15 must understand the developmental characteristics unique to this age group. For instruction to be developmentally appropriate and effective, teachers must recognize and understand the physical, psychosocial, and cognitive developmental characteristics of the young adolescent (Manning, 2002). Effective teachers of young adolescents must consider the physical changes and diversity in development observed in middle level classrooms. They also must consider the importance of social interactions with peers and the preoccupation with self that is characteristic of middle school students. Planning effective instruction also requires consideration of cognitive differences. While some young adolescents are engaging in abstract thought by 4th grade, others do not begin to reason abstractly until much later (Manning & Bucher, 2005).

Effective middle school teachers who are aware of these developmental characteristics will address student needs by planning instruction that engages students in active

participation. Students in these classrooms will learn through collaborative and social opportunities. Knowledge of adolescent development will lead teachers to design experiences that boost self-esteem and build trust. Effective teachers will adapt instruction to consider students' varied learning styles and intelligences (Manning, 2002).

According to the National Middle School Association (NMSA, 2006), effective middle level teachers understand the interdependence of content and learning. Effective content area teachers realize that content can be learned through literacy-related processes, such as reading, writing, speaking, and listening. According to the NMSA, effective teachers address students' learning needs through the use of a variety of teaching and assessment strategies. These teachers realize that no one instructional method will meet the needs of all students. Effective teachers also develop close relationships with students. Students are partners in the learning process, and so opportunities for student voice and choice facilitate the acquisition of new knowledge (NMSA, 2006).

These characteristics of an effective middle school teacher were echoed by Chris Huber, a middle school principal in Lubbock, Texas. Chris also serves as Vice President of the Texas Middle School Association and exhibits a passion for effective middle level instruction. In discussing the hiring of effective teachers, Chris described his ideal teacher

as having vision, passion, and confidence. He also emphasized that the effective teacher must develop positive and supportive relationships with students and possess an "instructional toolbox that is full" (personal communication, 2006).

Vision, Passion, and Confidence. In his view of an effective middle level teacher, Chris emphasized high expectations. Quoting the motto of Southwest Airlines, he said that administrators need to "hire for attitude, then train for skills" through effective, ongoing professional development. Chris believes that "a teacher must be convinced that she or he is the determinant of success for the students in the classroom. That attitude, that passion, is what hooks students to the idea that they can be successful." In addition to a passion for success, Chris also asserted that effective teachers must have a passion for their content and a vision of success for all learners. A teacher who has this vision will set high expectations for students, and these expectations will lead teachers to seek the instructional skills and practices necessary to meet the needs of these learners. "Frankly," stated Chris, "passion for content and kids is the key to achieving high expectations."

This We Believe: Successful Schools for Young Adolescents (NMSA, 2003), the landmark position paper of the National Middle School Association, emphasizes this same point. According to NMSA, educators and students should hold themselves and each other to high expectations. This

vision and confidence can motivate students to tackle challenging learning activities.

Respectful, Positive Relationships. "R-E-S-P-E-C-T. Find out what it means to me." This refrain from the Aretha Franklin R&B standard could be the motto for middle school student/teacher relationships. Chris Huber would agree. "In addition to the vision and passion," Chris stated, "effective middle level teachers must be willing to develop positive relationships with their students."

The position statement on adolescent literacy drafted by the International Reading Association echoes Chris' words: "Adolescents deserve teachers who understand the complexities of individual adolescent readers, respect their differences, and respond to their characteristics" (Moore, Bean, Birdyshaw, & Rycik, 1999, p. 8). Powell (2005) described the effective teacher as having achieved a balance between sensibility and sensitivity. Such teachers can facilitate cognitive growth and learning while also meeting the developmental needs of young adolescents for close relationships within a learning community. Manning (2000) described child-centered middle schools as those where teachers provide adolescents with "educational experiences that demonstrate caring, concern, and nurturing" (p. 159). Chris Huber discussed these nurturing interactions by saying, "These relationships are vital. If middle level students do not feel safe and emotionally comfortable in the learning environment, then their learning is severely limited."

An Instructional Toolbox That Is Full. While passionate attitudes and caring relationships are crucial to the creation of middle level learning environments, Chris emphasized that skilled teaching is also an essential factor. "A knowledge of diverse instructional practices, or a toolbox that is full, is a characteristic of the truly effective teacher. Class-

room organizational strategies are important as well. These practices are what enable the teacher to bring students to the level of those high expectations." Studies of effective instruction agree that the key to achievement in literacy is instruction from a knowledgeable teacher (Braunger & Lewis, 2006). Topping and McManus (2002) suggest answering three questions that can guide teachers in the selection of instructional "tools" that will focus teaching on education for life.

- Are we guiding our students to know how to read, listen to, and view information that is presented to them?
- Are we guiding our students to write and speak appropriately for the tasks at hand?
- Are we guiding our students to learn for a lifetime? (p. 18)

Through the use of these critical questions, teachers can select appropriate "tools," based on student need.

Characteristics of Effective Content-Area Instruction

Reading and Writing To Learn. For many years, the phrase "every teacher a teacher of reading" has been applied to the teaching of literacy (specifically, reading) in the content areas (Gray, 1925). However, this phrase has often been misunderstood and just doesn't work for many content area teachers. A better model for the use of literacy in content classes might be that every teacher should be an enabler, one who enables students to think and learn through text. Vacca (2002) proposed that literacy should be both visible and invisible in all content class. Teachers should explicitly teach students how to read the texts of their disciplines (NCTE, 2004). At the same time, literacy instruction should be invisible, as teachers seamlessly combine subject matter learning with reading and writing.

In this way, literacy becomes a scaffold for students' learning.

Fisher and Ivey (2005) asserted that today's students can, and must, use reading, writing, speaking, listening, and viewing as part of the meaning-making process in their content area classes. In their words, teachers should "capitalize" on the use of reading and writing, rather than try to attempt to teach reading and writing in content classes. Literacy should be used as a way to engage students in the content through such activities as writing-to-learn prompts, the Cornell method of note-taking, reading aloud, reciprocal teaching, and exit slips. Through these activities, teachers can help students learn to read and write from the perspective of the discipline. Students might approach reading from the stance of a historian, identifying bias and examining how historical events are linked to the present. Or students might be engaged in writing as a scientist would as they complete data records and lab reports. Langer (2000), in her study of middle and high schools that were "beating the odds" for achievement, found that teachers in successful schools make these kinds of connections across subject matter, connecting lessons across content areas and throughout the year. Moje (2006) stated that content area literacy should move away from a focus on accessing texts to an emphasis on understanding how these texts are written in particular ways and how they represent different ways of knowing and doing in the different disciplines.

Effective instruction in content area classes makes use of reading and writing as often as possible. The use of literacy processes in content disciplines can lead to improved understanding and retention of content area knowledge. Through literacy strategies and instruction, students can come to know that knowledge is something that is created, not just passively received (Buehl, 2001).

Opportunities for Learning As a Social Experience. Knowledge of the disciplines related to academic content areas is constructed through human interaction (Moje, 2006). The most common way that humans communicate with each other is by telling stories or narratives about their experiences. Through the telling of stories, people make connections to prior knowledge that support the acquisition of new knowledge. It is through the telling of stories that we "bridge the gaps between what we know and what we might learn" (Johnson & Freedman, 2005). People are social beings, and these stories are a basic function of human communication. This social interaction is a necessary element of effective content area classrooms. Allington (2002), in reporting research that characterized effective reading instruction in elementary classrooms, asserted that the classroom talk observed in these classrooms was "purposeful talk, not simply chatter. It was problem-posing, problem-solving talk related to curricular topics" (p. 744). Similarly, Langer (2000) found that effective middle and high school classrooms "foster cognitive collaboration" (p. 14). She found that in higher performing schools, students participate in the kinds of social interactions engaged in by teams in the business world. Students in these classrooms worked in groups, and teachers facilitated the use of thoughtful dialogue to deepen the students' understanding of content. Students in these successful classrooms brought their personal and cultural background knowledge—their stories—to these discussions. She found that these students were given opportunities to question and challenge each other, as well as opportunities to share their ideas and responses to texts. Students in lower performing classrooms tended to focus more on individual work and thinking. Applebee, Langer, Nystrand, and Gamoran (2003) also found that

discussion played an important role in content area achievement. They found that increased achievement through discussion-based approaches occurred across a range of settings and among students with very different abilities and backgrounds, even in lower track classes.

Reading and writing are acts of communication. In order to make meaning through text, students must have opportunities to work together and collaborate through talk. Focused discussions about academic texts can help students acquire literacy-related skills as they learn more about a specific field (NCTE, 2004, 2006).

Modeling of Strategies for Learning New Words and Comprehending Complex Texts. Effective readers use a range of strategies to make meaning from text. Being an effective reader does not mean that the reader never struggles to comprehend, but rather that the reader has internalized ways of approaching difficulties and working through complex text. In effective content classrooms, teachers model reading, writing, and thinking strategies that allow students to access subject matter knowledge through text. In these classrooms, students not only learn the content, but also learn how to approach the work of that discipline.

In many ways, instruction in effective content area classrooms resembles coaching. Coaches know that verbal explanations (the pedagogy of telling) are not sufficient. They model the skills and strategies necessary for success, acting as knowledgeable experts, with students as their apprentices (Schoenbach, Greenleaf, Cziko, & Hurwitz, 1999). Current research shows that student learning is affected by teachers who explicitly model and guide students in the use of strategies for coping with complex materials (Allington & Johnston, 2002; Langer, 2002). These

teachers are aware of their own reading habits and behaviors and can make the use of these strategies visible to students. After thorough modeling and thinking-aloud, they then gradually release responsibility for the use of the strategies to the students, supplying prompts to scaffold thinking as needed. Teaching students the strategies for monitoring their own literacy practices and for drawing on their own prior knowledge has been found to increase student motivation towards literacy and help them to think deeply about content (NCTE, 2006).

Reading and writing are different tasks in different disciplines. Reading a scientific report is not the same as reading historical documents or novels. While similar literacy skills are needed across disciplines, significant variability also exists. Therefore, it is important for teachers in all content areas to teach students how to navigate the complexities of texts commonly found in their specific discipline.

Access to a Wide Variety of Print and Non-print Resources. Historically, content area reading instruction has focused on textbook reading and providing students with strategies for accessing difficult content area texts (Fisher & Ivey, 2005; Moje, 2006). However, many teachers (and students) find content area texts difficult and boring. This leads teachers to view textbooks as obstacles to learning in their classrooms, rather than as rich resources. They tend to avoid assigning textbook reading, rather than endure the often painful process of requiring students to read (Fisher & Ivey, 2005). In fact, findings from the 1996 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) indicate that a significant proportion of adolescents report reading five or fewer pages of school-related material each day, including both classwork and homework (Moore, Bean, Birdyshaw, & Rycik, 1999).

Expert content area teachers

realize that students will not be motivated to read or learn much from materials that are too hard for them (Allington, 2002). Even the best instructional strategies will not help students access texts that are too difficult. Effective content area classrooms are rich with multi-level instructional resources that go beyond the traditional textbook (NCTE, 2006; NMSA, 2001). Trade books, primary source materials, videos, Web-based resources, journals, magazines, and even student-generated materials all serve to link concepts and expand the curriculum (Wade & Moje, 2000). When students are seeking content knowledge, the text needs to be easy enough to allow the reader to focus on the information. Effective teachers do not rely on a one-size-fits-all textbook. In effective classrooms, lower achieving students often benefited most from the wide range of texts available. But higher achieving students benefited as well from having access to texts they could read and comprehend easily. In these classrooms, motivation to read was influenced by student success with readable texts found in the multi-source, multi-level classroom collections (Allington, 2002).

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