



A MIDDLE LEVEL EDUCATION MONTHLY UPDATE

A MICHIGAN MIDDLE START PARTNER ORGANIZATION

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Questions Middle Schoolers Ask

Why Do I Itch? What Causes Me to Sneeze with My Eyes Closed? Questions Middle School Students Have about Themselves and the World

A few months ago, Michigan Schools in the Middle conducted a survey asking middle school students across the state two broad questions: "***What questions or concerns do you have about yourself?***" and "***What questions or concerns***

"I think that there is not anyone on this earth even remotely like me and that worries me."

do you have about the world?" This brief survey was sent to MSIM member schools. Approximately 1500 students responded to the survey. The survey questions were based on the work of James Beane, who contends that in order to make curriculum decisions, we need to elicit responses from students. Beane argues that the two broad questions listed above allow students to interpret and respond in their own ways.

As MSIM staff members reviewed these student responses, they noted the great diversity found in middle school students.

This diversity is, of course, reflective of the range of development found in young adolescents. Some of the responses indicate students' very concrete thinking while others are indicative of abstract thought. It may also be noted that some responses are egocentric, while others are fairly sociocentric in nature.

MSIM staff members grouped similar responses together and assigned category headings. Below you will find sample questions asked by middle school students.

Questions About Self: Self-Esteem/Identity

*Why am I invisible to some people?

*Do kids all over the world deal with problems like mine?

*Why do people make fun of my red boots and lime-green pants?

Body Image/Growth

*How come we only learn a little stuff about our bodies?

*Why am I so short?

*Why is it important not to be fat?

Personal Assessment

*Do I treat others the way I want to be treated?

*Am I a good kid?

*Do I try hard enough to fulfill my expectations?

School/Grades

*Will I ever get detention?

*What if a kid brings a gun to school and kills others or me?

*Can the school teach us more about being young parents?

Questions About the World: War

*How will the future be affected by wars?

*Am I the only person who doesn't understand about all this war and terrorism?

*Why don't we just not have war?

Global

*How round is the earth?

*Why does the world have to be so complicated?

*How big an effect can one person make on the world?

People/Relationships

*Why does there have to be racism?

*I am concerned about kids who do not have shelter or food.

*Am I the fattest and ugliest kid in the world?

Are these the responses you would have expected from middle school kids? How might you use these questions in developing integrated units? Do some of these questions relate to standards and benchmarks? For more information about these questions, contact MSIM at 989-774-7678





Leadership Lifeline

Misconceptions About Meetings

By Robert Garmston and Jane Ellison

10. Everyone should be present and seated before the session starts.

Start on time--regardless of who's in the room. Use interactive activities that make participants think about their prior knowledge regarding today's issues. For example, have subgroups report concerns about the first agenda topic, prime a discussion with an activity that releases feelings and creative thinking such as having subgroups complete a stem-- "developing assessment criteria will be like (ethnic food) because____," --or have pairs talk about ideas that should be brought forward from the last meeting. Soon, being on time becomes the norm.

9. A meeting is the place to read a memo to the group.

Meetings are to process information, not receive information. Test whether an information item needs to be on the agenda by the degree to which the group needs to talk about it to understand or implement it effectively.

8. What's urgent has priority over what's important.

There is always a fire. Performing as a fire crew avoids items that are difficult to address. If meeting agendas are mostly about reducing heat or fighting flames, ask what must happen to schedule items about student learning on the agenda.

7. Furniture arrangement and space don't matter.

They matter a lot. Meeting

space must be "just right" to provide comfort, visual focus, and interaction opportunities. Members must be able to see one another and be able to move around and speak with different people when energy lags, when the content is detailed and dense, or when the group needs consensus. Facilitators should stand, unless it is a very small group. Post recording sheets on walls to serve as a group memory.

6. The facilitator is solely responsible for a meeting's success.

Concentrate on developing group members, not just facilitators, by teaching group members their responsibilities. Encourage group members to ask "naive" questions like, "How much detail do we need to move this item?" or "Which process are we using now?" Teach members to be engaged, proactive participants.

5. Not much can be done about group members who are silent, vocally dominant, or negative.

Facilitators or group members can redirect unproductive behavior. Interventions should be simple, take little time, and be done in a way that promotes group learning and addresses an idea, the group, or an individual. *Adaptive Schools: A Sourcebook for Developing Collaborative Groups* (Garmston & Wellman, 1999) details a range of intervention principles and strategies.

4. Because everyone has been in the meeting, there's no need for

verbal closure.

People may hear and understand decisions differently. Have pairs rehearse what they might say to others about the meeting and check for alignment.

3. Meeting time should be devoted to topics, rather than reflection, processing, or group development.

Any group too busy to reflect on its work is too busy to improve. Routine self-assessments help groups become more effective over time.

2. The more items on an agenda, the more will be accomplished.

Use the rule of one-half. As you plan a meeting, list agenda items and then find alternate ways to address at least half of them. Block enough time for the remaining items for the group to understand, deliberate, and decide.

1. A meeting, unlike a lesson, can be done without planning

Meeting design turns out to be the No. 1 mechanism for effective meetings. For each agenda item, help the group be clear about goals, processes, and functions. Label items on the agenda with an action: (1) respond in order to clarify, inform, advocate; (2) dialogue to deepen understanding; (3) recommend; or (4) decide. Envision the process groups will use and allot enough time.

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Teacher Topics

Using Writing to Increase Understanding Across the Curriculum

Asking students to write might be the most valuable tool in our educational caddy. Writing is a powerful way to engage students and provide opportunities for individual thinking and consequent understanding. Writing almost automatically makes learning more relevant to students because it provides the opportunity to think about a subject as it relates and connects to their own experiences. It also provides teachers with a rich source of information for customizing instruction.

When fundamental writing strategies such as prewriting (clustering ideas around a central point) and revising (reflecting how best to communicate meaning) are combined with the reading strategy of KWL (what I **K**now; what I **W**ant to know; and what I have **L**earned) together they become even more potent in promoting critical thinking and achieving greater understanding of subject matter. The employment of this integrated strategy not only serves to activate students' prior knowledge (constructivism), but also accurately gauges their understanding of the knowledge they have gleaned as a result of participating in the activity (authentic assessment). Here are a few examples:

Science

One of the most exciting opportunities for students to improve their writing as well as clarify their thinking is to contact scientists via the Internet. Communicating directly with researchers in the laboratory or field adds an invaluable measure of relevance to classroom work. Students can be instructed to journal their exchanges with the scientists, but the act of constructing a written record promotes their ability to develop meaningful understanding by reflecting upon personally gathered data which they can then relate to their own world.



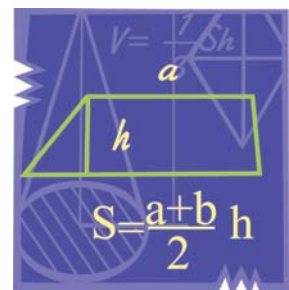
Social Studies



Rather than putting together traditional abstract reports on different countries, states, or historical figures, far more engaging assignments can be crafted by composing editorial on historical events, drafting memos to past or present historical figures, or even creating facsimile diaries, journals, or newsletters written in the style of the times. Completed by students either individually or in pairs, such projects offer opportunities to transfer a wide variety of classroom learning into a far more personalized context.

Mathematics

Few activities can better assess the degree to which students at any grade level have internalized essential mathematical concepts better than writing out equations in sentence form. An excellent technique for developing both critical thinking and problem solving skills at any grade level, word problems can be easily tailored to meet the needs of even the most reluctant learner.





Student Station

Write it Down

For centuries, people have kept diaries to record their thoughts, chronicle their daily activities, and leave a written record for the rest of the world to read. From simple notes jotted on scrap paper to pages of philosophical ramblings, journals and diaries can be a great way for people to express themselves.

One famous diary was written by Anne Frank, a teenager living in the Netherlands during the Holocaust. She recorded her thoughts about the war going on around her, as she and her family hid in an attic. Other teens also kept war diaries: in *We Are Witnesses*, Jacob Boas compiles the writings of three boys and two girls living in Germany during the early 1940's; and *The Diary of Dawid Sierakowiak* tells about the Nazi occupation of Poland in the words of a teenage boy. In 1992, 11-year-old Zlata Filipovic kept a diary recording her experiences when war broke out in her hometown of Sarajevo, in the country of Bosnia. *Zlata's Diary* describes how this typical middle-class girl's life changed as a result of the war.

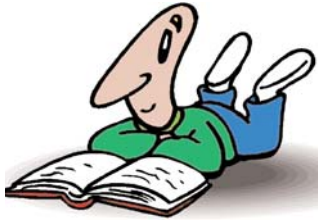
Of course, not all diaries and journals focus on war. Throughout history, adventurers and explorers have kept diaries describing what they did, saw, and heard. *The Voyage of Christopher*

Columbus and *The Travels of Marco Polo* chronicle the experiences of two early explorers. Later, Lewis and Clark included detailed notes, observations, and maps in their diaries as they explored the Western Frontier of the United States. And, in the 20th century, adventurers Steven Callahan (*Adrift: Seventy-six Days Lost at Sea*) and Lute Jerstad (*Everest Diary*) kept journals describing their experiences.

Other people keep diaries to record their efforts to find their own unique places in the world. *New Kids in Town*, by Janet Bode; *My Name is Seepeetza*, by Shirley Sterling; *The Diary of Latoya Hunter: My First Year in Junior High*; and *Real Teens: Diary of a Junior Year* all feature entries by teenagers writing about their daily lives.

So, what do you have to say to the world? Your journal doesn't have to be profound or life-changing - it just has to be **you!** All you need is a pen and a piece of paper; pick them up and get started today!





Student Book Review

A Proud Taste for Scarlet and Miniver

Author: E. L. Konigsburg

Eleanor of Aquitaine has every reason to be upset. For centuries, she's been patiently waiting for her husband, King Henry II, to meet her in Heaven. Luckily, she's sharing a cloud with some old friends who knew her when she and Henry ruled supreme. As long as they're together, they might as well gossip about old times... and soon all of Eleanor's adventures in the Middle Ages spring to life again.

Abbott Suger tells amusing tales about Eleanor when she was a headstrong girl -- recently orphaned, extremely wealthy, and betrothed to Prince Louis of France. And he asks Eleanor to explain to him why, after fifteen years of marriage, she divorced Louis. Eleanor replies that she had become bored with life in Louis' court -- but Empress Matilda, who is sharing the cloud with Eleanor and the Abbott, begs to differ. She tells of visiting Louis' court with her husband Geoffrey and her son Henry, the young Duke of Normandy. Matilda says that Eleanor fell madly in love with Henry, and that it was for him that she left Louis. She points out that Eleanor and Henry were married just two months after Eleanor separated from Louis. Eleanor does not deny Matilda's version of events. After Matilda's tale ends, an old knight, William the Marshal, picks up the story of Eleanor's life, relating how she was eventually scorned by Henry for a younger woman, and how she took their young sons to her palace in Aquitaine, where she quietly reared them to manhood... and to rebellion. Eleanor reminisces about the rebellion, and about being imprisoned by Henry for fifteen years after her rebels were defeated.

Finally, just when they have run out of stories to tell, Eleanor spots three men floating toward them. After all this time, could one of them be Henry? And, if it is, how will he and Eleanor greet each other, after nearly eight hundred years of separation?

This book is hilarious, whimsical, and lots of fun to read! If you enjoy it -- and you surely will! -- you might want to try more of E.L. Konigsburg's books: *The View from Saturday* is a great story about four students and a teacher who set out to win an academic competition; *Jennifer, Hecate, Macbeth, William McKinley, and Me, Elizabeth* tells of two girls who develop a special friendship, complete with secret messages and bizarre rituals; and *From the Mixed-Up Files of Mrs. Basil E. Frankweiler* tells the hilarious tale of a brother and sister who run away from home and camp out at the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Check out one of these great books today!





Family Focus

Tips for Reading Aloud

In last month's Family Focus, we talked about the importance of reading aloud to your children, and we passed along some hints about how to make time for reading and how to pick books, stories, poems, and articles that will interest both you and your kids. Maybe, in the meantime, you've already done some reading with your kids -- if so, fantastic! If you haven't tried it yet, it's not too late to start.

You may find that your kids often interrupt your reading to ask questions about the story. Actually, that's a great thing! It means that your children are listening and that they are interested in what you're reading to them. Answer their questions right away, and then pick up where you left off in the story. Even if it means that you manage to read only a page or two each day, answering your kids' questions helps to make reading enjoyable for them.

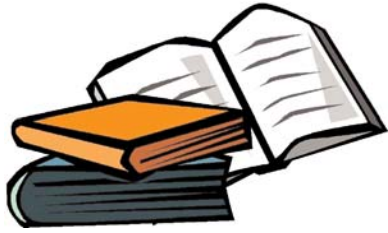
On the other hand, maybe your kids don't ask questions. Maybe they seem bored or distracted as you're reading; or perhaps they even interrupt with questions or comments that are not related to the story. Try to be patient -- it takes time for kids to develop the art of listening. Gently but firmly tell them to hold any unrelated ques-

tions until after you have finished reading. Then continue with the story. If your kids are restless and have trouble listening, it's okay to just read to them for a few minutes a day at first. Gradually, as they learn the art of listening, they will look forward to longer reading sessions.

Here are some tips for helping your kids develop their listening skills and stay engaged in the stories you're reading to them:

- Stop before the end of the story. Ask your kids to predict what they think may happen next.
- If you're reading a poem, encourage your children to guess what the next rhyming word might be.
- After you finish reading, ask your children to think about how the story relates to personal experiences they've had.
- Ask your kids how they might have changed the story.

All of these strategies can help your kids to become "active" listeners who are engaged and interested in what's being read. And, the more interested they become, the more they will want to read!



Resource Review

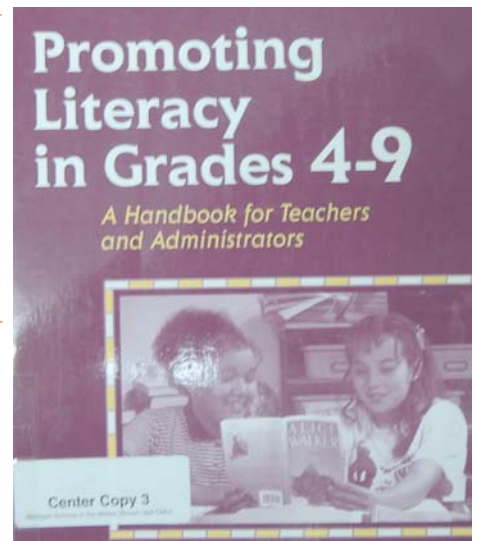
Promoting Literacy in Grades 4-9: A Handbook for Teachers and Administrators

This book provides a comprehensive look at the promotion of literacy as a driving force in middle-grades schools. Editors Karen D. Wood and Thomas S. Dickinson have organized twenty-nine chapters written by leading literacy experts into three sections which, together, provide a detailed view of literacy in the middle grades.

Part One, *The Literacy Program in the Intermediate and Middle Grades*, focuses on the roles of teachers, administrators, parents, schools, and communities in fostering literacy. In addition to detailing the roles of specific groups of stakeholders in students' literacy education, each chapter combines a review of the best research, the most effective practices, and the ideal setting for the successful promotion of literacy.

Part Two, *Literacy and the Intermediate and Middle School Learner*, focuses on the learners themselves, with insightful chapters on the needs and characteristics of young adolescents, on fostering motivation among middle-schoolers, on giving students a voice in their literacy program, and on effective methods for teaching students with learning disabilities, students for whom English is not their first language, and linguistically gifted students.

Part Three, *Promoting Literacy in the Classroom: Research into Practice*, presents sixteen chapters which combine the research presented in the first two sections into practical programs for embedding literacy into multiple aspects of the school environment. For example, one chapter discusses the promotion of literacy via integrated curriculum; another focuses on helping struggling learners to read and write; spelling, picture books, literature circles, technological literacy, and building critical thinking skills via literacy education are among the rich array of practical applications provided.



To check out a copy of this excellent resource, call MSIM at (989) 774-7678, and ask for resource number CAL-19



February Freebie

This month we have *A Guide to Authentic Instruction and Assessment: Vision, Standards and Scoring* to give to the first three people to contact us. (989-774-1198 or duval1p@cmich.edu)

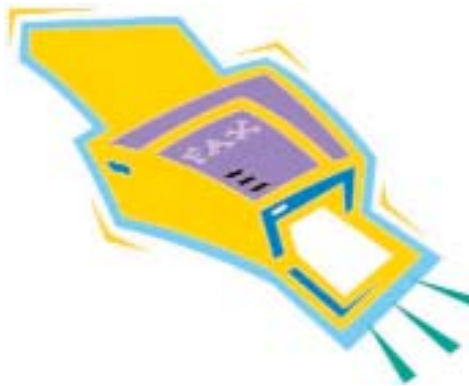
Last month David Ingham, Adams Middle School in Westland, Diana Kenworthy, Bendle Middle School, and Bev Skinner, Standish Sterling received the tapes.

Powerful Quote

"The deepest principle in human nature is the craving to be appreciated."

- William James

Contact us:



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