

Advisor Advisee in the language arts classroom

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Middle school students often seem trapped inside an emotional and social windstorm, leaving their teachers perplexed. Clearly, adolescents are often dominated by their social and emotional needs, leading Alexander and George (1986) to suggest that middle schools should focus on educating “the whole child.” For the past 20 years, educators have worked to develop schools that meet the academic, social and emotional needs of adolescents, and schools that have done this successfully are being recognized as exemplary (Schools to Watch, 2007). Caridas and Hammer (2006) examined high-performing schools and found that middle schools that developed “trust” as part of the curriculum had students who performed better, were more motivated, and displayed elements of mutual respect and support.

Developing trust begins with understanding the nature of adolescents. According to *Turning Points 2000* (Jackson & Davis, 2000) and *This We Believe* (NMSA, 2000), adolescents need teachers who support their social and emotional needs. When parents were surveyed, Ruppert (2007) found that they identified social and emotional characteristics most often when describing the changes their children made between elementary and middle school. Researchers agree that adolescents are more successful in middle schools if they have experiences that support their social and emotional needs (Alanis, 2004; Bernard, 2006; Brigham, Parker, Morocco, & Zigmund, 2006; Zhao, 2006).

To meet the social and emotional needs, teachers must get to know their students. This is a major theme in middle school literature (Alanis, 2004). An advisory program was one of the focuses of the early middle school movement and even today, middle school reform is calling for the use of advisory programs in middle schools (Camblin, 2003; Erb, 2001, & NC Dept. of Public Instruction, 2004). While advisor-advisee programs give teachers a way to know their students better (Powell, 2005), finding time for such programs in today’s middle schools is difficult. And while the research related to time-on-task supports more time for academics, middle school research on the social and emotional needs of adolescents cannot be ignored. Furthermore, countries such as China and Japan are currently focusing more on the development of creativity while the U.S. continues to focus on content (Zhao, 2006).

Through the language arts, teachers have the opportunity to help students get to know one another while developing their creative writing skills. One way to integrate academics with programs that meet the social and emotional needs of adolescents is to use advisor-advisee activities in the language arts classroom. Such activities can help establish a tone of acceptance and community, thus building trust (Brigham et. al, 2006). According to Caridas and Hammer (2006),

building trust in a school is associated with academic success, better morale, and a spirit of support.

The following activities were conducted with middle school students. Their responses give teachers an insight into how to respond to students' needs and build community.

My TimeLine

1. Have students prepare a time line covering their past, present, and future.
2. Each student is to draw a line and place 10 marks on the line.
3. Separate the last two marks from the original eight.
4. On each mark, record an event that has taken place in the past.
5. On the two marks past the first eight, record two things you hope for.
6. After completing this activity, have students share their time lines with one another. This can be done in small groups or individually.
7. Have students use this as a pre-writing activity. They can take one of the events and write about it.

When students participated in this activity, they most often identified past experiences such as gifts they received (I received a bicycle when I was six) and family events (My baby brother was born). Students' responses to their future most often included family (getting married). Students were able to choose an event and write about it. This activity gave us tremendous insight into our students' lives and gave them an opportunity to express themselves.



Constructing a timeline

Hall of Fame

1. Have students discuss what defines a hero.
2. Together, talk about the types of heroes that exist (sports stars, politicians, religious figures, family members, book characters, historical figures, writers, models,...)
3. Each student chooses five different types of heroes.
4. Students describe the characteristics of their heroes and why they have chosen them.
5. Students can then write letters to their heroes, or create a collage or mobile that includes their heroes and words that describe them.

In this activity, middle school students typically chose a sports star or a musician, followed by a family member. They described the superstars as being rich and well liked by everyone. Students appear to want to be rich. This activity could be conducted as a “kick-off” to a unit on heroes. Students read stories about heroes and compared the characteristics of the heroes in novels to their own real-life heroes.

Things I love to do... Things I hope for

1. Students divide a piece of paper into four sections labeled with these categories: “something I love to do,” “something I am good at,” “things I hope for,” and “how I reduce stress.”
2. Have students fill out the paper and then share something about themselves to a small group.
3. Look for similarities among students in the class.
4. A possible extension is to create a wall of “things we hope for” in the classroom.

This activity is designed to help students begin to look at their strengths, and it can be used as a way to set goals. Students can display the information in the form of a shield or family crest. Students can then take their ideas and develop one of their favorite sections into a paragraph. Some students liked to “sleep and eat pizza,” some liked to participate in sports. Others liked to read. Students talked about what they were good at, including particular subjects or sports. There appeared to be little difference between what they liked to do and what they excelled at. They hoped for world peace and they hoped to be rich. They hoped they could pass a test. When asked how they reduced stress, they were uncertain. This activity allowed us to begin to have discussions about how stress can be good and bad, and ways to control it.

So Long

1. Read the following paragraph to the students:

“If you were forced to leave your home and pack all your possessions in only ONE medium-sized suitcase, what things would you take along and why would you take them? These must be things you can pack in a suitcase. Think about the things that really mean a lot to you, things that you wouldn’t want to lose.”

2. Once students have their possessions listed, they choose the top three.

3. As a class, consider having groups of students create Venn Diagrams comparing similarities and differences.

This activity introduces the idea that decisions we make should reflect the values we hold. When middle school students participated in this activity, they wanted to bring clothes and toiletries. They also brought ipods and cell phones, their lap tops and electronic games. Some students brought stuffed animals. This activity was used at the beginning of the year to look for similarities and differences.

Each of these activities helps teachers get to know students and students get to know each other. The better we know our students, the more likely we will be able to build trust in the classroom. As teachers, we have the power to build trust in our classrooms and on our teams. Starting with advisor-advisee activities is one way to integrate social and emotional activities into the standards-based classroom. Having students reflect upon their own experiences and ideas can motivate them to write.

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