

# How to Thrive in the Middle

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My plan had been to teach high school English, but my practicum required a stint in a middle school, too. So for six weeks I apprenticed with a great teacher of sophomore and junior English, and then off I went to do my duty. I never looked back. Since 1973, seventh and eighth graders have been my milieu.

Young adolescents are on the verge of everything good: purposeful self-expression, serious curiosity about the world and how it works, a sense of humor and a sense of style, tolerance, compassion even, and their own identities. It is a privilege to lure them onto the terra firma of a productive, literate adulthood. Plus, whenever I'm with them, I get to laugh.

Although retired from my own classroom since 2013, I stay in touch with middle schoolers thanks to my current position as the writing support teacher at my K–8 school. When I stepped down, my daughter, Anne Atwell Merkel, stepped in as teacher of middle school humanities. On the mornings I spend with Anne's kids, I know I'll be surprised, mostly in a good way, by something one of them says or does—their unpredictability is that predictable. They're in the middle of so many changes—emotional, intellectual, physical, social—that all I can count on is a gamut of attitudes, interests, and levels of maturity. I loved that variability in 1973; I love it still.

Some of Anne's seventh and eighth graders give me spontaneous hugs; a few slip and call me Mom. In the winter they pull on snow pants at recess and sled down the hill behind the school. In fall and spring they compete at six-square-and-an-apartment, the ridiculous playground tradition established by their predecessors. When the school schedules its annual stuffy day, they

show up with well-loved bears, monkeys, and Beanie Babies and introduce them to their classmates.

These same kids try to get away with packing Red Bull in their lunchboxes. They show off ear piercings, black fingernails, and blue hair. They gab about *Saturday Night Live*, try to memorize the *Hamilton* cast album, and nail the weekly *New York Times* quiz [see *The Learning Network*, [http://learning.blogs.nytimes.com/category/news-quiz/weekly-news-quiz/?\\_r=1](http://learning.blogs.nytimes.com/category/news-quiz/weekly-news-quiz/?_r=1)]. They stream *The Walking Dead*, and they sing songs from Disney movies.

Middle school students are never boring. But there's a flip side to all this variability, their volatility. It can be unnerving, if not exasperating, to teach in a context that's a social and emotional roller coaster. Because bravado, confusion, restlessness, and the questioning of authority are all hallmarks of this stage of life, I understand why a middle school teacher's first impulse might be to focus on compliance—tamp down the affect, limit instruction to a question-reply-evaluate format, and assign everyone the same book, the same writing topic, the same seatwork, and homework.

The effective middle school English teachers I know take another course. They acknowledge and celebrate the nature of their beast by taking advantage of it. They structure their teaching so students can harness their volatility as energy and channel it as intentionality. Through methods that are generous and inviting, these teachers create a version of adult reality that attracts and makes sense to their students.

For me and for Anne, that methodology is a workshop, as pioneered by Donald Graves (1983; 1994). In a workshop,

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individuals develop their own ideas as writers and choose the books they read. The teacher supports their intentions and growth by conducting brief, pertinent lessons to the whole group and then conferring with writers and readers as they work independently.

When I first heard of the workshop approach, it struck me as heretical: the ideas and decisions of the English teacher were no longer the center of the classroom universe. I resisted it, hard. Then, for the good of my kids, I risked it. Finally, I embraced it, its impact was that immediate and miraculous. For the first time, students in my classroom were engaged in authentic acts of literacy, discovering what writing and reading are good for, right now, in their real lives.

When I advocated for the workshop in the first edition of *In the Middle* (1987), I recognized I was climbing out on a large limb, pedagogically. In the realm of secondary English instruction, this was a major paradigm shift. To buttress my argument, I tapped the research of sociologist John Goodlad, who, in the early 1980s, surveyed thousands of students from across the United States about their experience and perceptions of school. The book that describes his findings, *A Place Called School* (1984), painted a devastating portrait of life in middle school classrooms.

When Goodlad asked kids in grades six through eight about the choices they made during their school day, two-thirds reported they had no say ever, about anything. When asked to name subjects they characterized as interesting or favorites, English was at the bottom of the list. And in answer to the question, “What’s the one best thing about this school?” 15 percent of students named sports, 10 percent referred to good peer attitudes, and, as the most frequent response, 36 percent said friends. At 8 percent, “nothing” outranked “classes I’m taking” (7 percent) and “my teachers” (5 percent).

The big picture revealed young adolescents disenfranchised from their own learning, discouraged—if not prevented—from assuming agency, and more likely to view school as a place to satisfy social needs than to identify and meet intellectual ones.

Three decades after the publication of the first edition of *In the Middle*, I was listening in at lunch one day as Anne’s seventh and eighth graders were comparing schools: ours, schools kids had previously attended, high schools where they were headed next. I remembered Goodlad’s study and wondered how they would characterize this place called school. With Anne’s permission, I polled the class. With one crucial exception, their answers describe a parallel universe to the one Goodlad uncovered.

In an anonymous survey, more than 75 percent of Anne’s students rated English as both an interesting

class and a favorite one. When asked, “What’s the one best thing about this school?” 35 percent named choices they were empowered to make, starting with books to read, ideas to write about, and topics to research in history, math, and science. Another 25 percent replied, “the teachers.” Other answers included “the sense of community here,” “big projects, like poet studies, field trips, building stuff, Shakespeare, and MathCounts,” and “I’m getting a good education.” Finally, 25 percent wrote, “my friends.”

The single thread connecting Anne’s students’ experience of school to the one revealed by Goodlad is the importance of friendship. Young adolescents are social beings, and school is the place where they get their social needs met. While middle schoolers everywhere seek and find opportunities outside the classroom to be with their friends—in halls and restrooms, at lunch and recess—at our school they rub shoulders all day long. Their teachers have learned to put the social inclination of middle school kids to talk-talk-talk to academic purposes.

In peer writing conferences, students respond to drafts of each other’s writing. They recommend books to one another, unpack poems together, quiz peers in spelling, establish criteria for genre studies in writing workshop, make plans, discuss, debate, research and create in collaboration, and teach one another across the curriculum. At the same time, because it has to be, a crucial portion of their schoolwork is independent and solitary: the effort that’s required when an individual thinks and acts as a writer, reader, researcher, or mathematician.

Something else Anne and her colleagues have learned is the power of intentionality. While choice didn’t even show up in the Goodlad study as a “one best thing about this school,” more than a third of our seventh and eighth graders wrote that making their own decisions as learners is paramount. Because their ideas, observations, and experiences matter so much to them, they are impelled. And because of the variability among middle schoolers, their teachers get to be impelled, too: teaching in a workshop is interesting.

As a writing support teacher, my job is to circulate among the classrooms and confer with individual writers. When I met with Anne’s students during a genre study of essays, I was struck both by the diversity of their subjects and the richness, especially in comparison with any essay subject, no matter how provocative, a teacher might assign to the whole group. Anne’s students use the genre to scratch real itches in their lives. They are learning what essays are good for.

Jolie, a vegan, protested the horrors of factory farming. Nicco gathered data for an essay about the

pay scale at Walmart and how the company counts on government assistance to make up the difference toward a living wage. Two other boys wrestled with issues related to feminism: Griffin wondered why men's sports continue to dominate ESPN coverage, and Lucas, "as a man who's a feminist," tried to separate out valid feminist concerns from what he viewed as petty complaints.

Emma, whose mom almost struck a pedestrian with her vehicle on a dark night, wrote about the lack of sidewalks in her town center; her essay became a letter to the board of selectmen. Katie was so incensed that students in other schools aren't allowed to choose their own books that she interviewed classmates who had transferred in about their experiences as readers and also reviewed the research about the benefits of independent reading. Hope, an actor, celebrated the trend toward ethnic and racial diversity on Broadway. And Kaleb pitched the idea of more Cracker Barrel restaurants. "There's only one in Maine," he told me. "My dad and I really like the Farmer's Breakfast special. Plus it's good for people like us to get exposed to culture from other places. And Maine is a popular tourist state, so it'll be healthy for their bottom line." His essay became an email to Cracker Barrel headquarters. If Maine gets another Cracker Barrel, the credit goes to Kaleb.

The topics developed by the rest of the kids were equally personal—social, political, and cultural problems they perceived because Anne invited them to look and showed them how. In contrast, David Coleman, an architect of the Common Core State Standards and champion of so-called objectivity in student writing, famously told an audience of teachers, "As you grow up in this world, you realize that people don't really give a shit about what you feel or think" (2011). But any authentic essay is subjective. Of course, pertinent information matters—essays require specifics that will engage and convince a reader. But an essay writer has to have a personal investment in the topic. Otherwise, why write about it?

The process for writing essays that Anne introduces to her students, described in the third edition of *In the Middle* (Atwell, 2015) and based on the work of Donald Murray (1999), is one they carry with them to high school, college, and the world of work. She teaches them how to gather, focus, organize, and craft information and opinions for a lifetime. Her students understand that writing is an act of thinking on paper as they generate ideas, marshal resources, plan, rethink, and communicate meaning to real readers who do, indeed, care about what they feel and think. In fact, what no one "gives a shit about" are canned, voiceless five-paragraph essays—not the writer, not the reader.

So far, only one former student of mine has become a full-time writer of fiction. Among the others, an overwhelming number craft exposition every day on the job. They write reviews, press releases, advertising copy, blogs, lectures, submissions to academic journals, legal briefs, closing arguments, petitions, grant proposals, research reports, position papers, website and Facebook content, ships' logs, curricula, progress reports, data analyses, business plans, recipes and menus, magazine articles, op-ed pieces, and nonfiction books. Whatever the job, their skills as writers are prized.

Colleen is one of them. Back in the day, she was an enthusiastic poet, storyteller, and reviewer—a child writer with a voice and an investment in self-expression—but also a typical middle schooler. Her stated ambitions at the end of eighth grade were to star on Broadway and marry someone famous, preferably Johnny Depp. Colleen wrote to me as a second-year law student about how the child-centered writing she composed at our school prepared her to write as an attorney:

In the spring, we were required to write an appellate brief, and the process included peer editing. I was astonished to see the drastic differences between my writing and that of my classmates—the errors, confusion, and clutter. I was taught from a very young age . . . to love writing and to practice, regularly and passionately. It wasn't only about teaching us how to write professionally and effectively, but also to bestow the deeper appreciation and satisfaction one derives from writing well. I approach writing today much the same way you instructed me, with an eye for creativity and analysis, and relentless dedication.

Colleen recognized that a school environment in which she was invited "to love writing and to practice, regularly and passionately" taught her how to write, period. None of her K–8 teachers was trying to prepare her for a career at the bar by back-mapping the language



arts curriculum. Instead, we showed a little girl how to express herself on paper about the ideas she cared about, and she became a writer, period.

Back in 1973, when I compared my two student teacher experiences, what I most appreciated about the middle schoolers was their lack of cynicism. At an age when they still know they don't know everything, they can display unrestrained enthusiasm—for books, poems, ideas, explanations, opportunities for expression. In the process of trying to figure out who they are, they also want to be seen and responded to as individuals, to have a say in what they are being asked to do, and to discover their own ends as learners. They are wide open to experiences they find credible. As ripe as they are to be hooked, I was just as ready, as a fledgling English teacher, to be inspired by my students.

I am still inspired by middle school students. It stirs me to sit shoulder to shoulder with them as they talk about books they've taken into their lives, as they craft stories and essays and poems that express their observations and convictions, as they gain self-awareness, perspective, and the confidence to raise their voices in the great big world.

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## CONNECTIONS FROM readwritethink

This lesson from ReadWriteThink.org asks students to position themselves alongside the writers of the picture and chapter books that they read in the classroom. In her book *In the Middle: Writing, Reading, and Learning with Adolescents*, Nancie Atwell suggests that “mini-lessons on leads help students internalize stylistic concerns.” Moreover, exposing students to different kinds of leads helps students see the importance of voice and how people respond to the literature.

<http://bit.ly/2cBMz6b>

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