Voices from the Field:
Why Does Middle Level Matter?

As we prepared for this 25th anniversary issue of Voices from the Middle, we knew we wanted to celebrate the voices we’ve published in the past and to be increasingly mindful of the voices, places, and ideas we need to highlight in the future. We asked our readers to share why the middle level matters to them personally and professionally and why the work we all do with middle level kids makes a difference in the world.

Middle school students’ energy could power the universe. Channeling that energy to benefit their hearts and heads can be a challenge. Thank goodness so many teachers possess Merlin-like skills and are willing to share what they know with colleagues. The next generation of middle school teachers depends on this professional generosity!
—Carol Jago, associate director, California Reading and Literature Project, UCLA; NCTE Past President

So much of what is imprinted in our memories comes from those middle level years. We have the power as teachers to leave indelible marks on our students’ lives. Middle school teachers know what a special person it takes to teach students at this level because, frankly, people are always telling us so. “God bless you.” “I could never do what you do.” “Middle school, huh? That’s a rough age.” It is a rough age, but it’s also an exciting age. It’s an age of discovery and an age to see the emerging of young adulthood. We have the power to maintain our students’ enthusiasm for learning or shut it down. Will we turn reading into a chore or a place of joy and freedom? Are we only providing students with formulaic writing assignments or are we giving them opportunities to see themselves as evolving writers? Those long-term memories surely won’t store any recollections of any tests we give our students. But they will remember whether learning in our classroom was joyful or burdensome.
—Beth Shaum, eighth-grade English teacher, St. Frances Cabrini Catholic School, Allen Park, MI

I often get asked why I’ve chosen to set the majority of my novels (ten out of thirteen) in sixth grade, and the answer for me, is easy—because that’s the year I became myself. That is the year I came to a fork in a very rocky road. If I had taken one path—continuing to shoplift, getting in trouble in school (I had already been suspended for smoking cigarettes on the middle school track during recess), bringing home failing grades—then I’d probably not be writing this essay right now. Instead, I took the path offered to me by Mr. Thomsen, my sixth-grade language arts teacher, who, before handing back our corrected homework assignments, said he was going to read “out loud” the best one in the class. Mr. Thomsen, middle school English teacher, had no idea he had saved my life that day. But he did.
—Nora Raleigh Baskin, author/teacher Norabaskin.com, @noraraleighb

In middle grades students are creating their identities. They try on new personalities and new ways of being all the time. As teachers of literacy, we have the ability to help shape their future selves by providing safe ways of exploring issues of self and society. They read and say, “That’s who I want to be. That is who I am!” They write and say, “This is who I am today, and this is who I want to be tomorrow!” What a fabulous privilege to help guide them to that place.
—Amy Mancini-Marshall, director of curriculum, Grand Island Public Schools, Grand Island, NE

I cannot imagine my career as an educator without my ten years as a middle school teacher. I learned so much about teaching and learning during those years. I discovered students who had well-developed senses of humor, who could laugh and shrug off mistakes (most made by ME). They were not only eager to learn, they loved new experiences and approaches. Middle school was where I was able to hone my skills in book talking, in reading aloud, in taking recommendations of books from
Caught between childhood and adolescence, middle graders are exploring who they are and who they might become. It’s a time of soaring highs, crashing lows, anxiety, and questions. Writing books for middle graders is a privilege. It’s also a golden opportunity to encourage their natural empathy through story. We can give them a window into unfamiliar worlds where they walk in the shoes of characters with very different life experiences from their own. Or we can give them a mirror that reflects their own experiences and helps them cope with their problems and feel less alone.

—Cheryl Blackford, author; www.cherylbblackford.com

When students attend elementary school, they are enthusiastic about what they do in class every single day. It’s the world of discovery to them every moment with picture books, learning while playing, drawing, and active inquiry. We want to keep this energy and enthusiasm and continue exploring the universe and its mysteries without “killing” the desire to learn. This means that instead of always assuming that our students should be able to read this and to write that, to analyze and interpret, sometimes we need to step back and maybe reinforce some foundational skills again. Literacy abilities need to be developed consistently, and the middle school is a strong connecting point between childhood experiences and growing pains of adolescence, when every single failure may turn a child’s life into misery. Let’s help our children to succeed.

—Leilya Pitre, visiting assistant professor of English education, Southeastern Louisiana University, Hammond

When middle school students arrive each day, they are either Dr. Jekyll or Mr. Hyde. They are as confused by all of the changes in them as the adults around them are. As teachers, we can use this quest for identity to engage and inspire self-discovery through literature and writing. Middle schoolers have a great sense of humor and love to be engaged in discussion and discovery. They have a unique view of the world through their “in-between” lens that can be eye-opening for their peers, but also for the teachers if we take the time to really understand what they are writing about. Teaching this age group is full of unexpected challenges and revelations. Every day is different. Every day is a chance to make a student feel valued, heard, and worthy. Teaching middle schoolers is not for the faint of heart, but the rewards greatly outweigh the challenges!

—KC Hopkins, eighth-grade ELA honors teacher, Woodland Middle School, Brentwood, TN

Middle graders are emerging. They’re figuring out that the world is more complicated than they thought, but they don’t yet have the tools to cope with the situations they encounter. They have to build those tools day by day, scar by scar, joy by joy. They work harder at simply being than many adults. Books saved lots of us in middle school—myself included. The chance to pay it forward and write books that might save someone else is one of the most profoundly rewarding opportunities I’ve ever had.

—J. Anderson Coats, author; www.jandersoncoats.com

Middle schoolers run the gamut from innocent children to distressingly savvy teens. Teachers have to be flexible, responsive, creative, and determined. There’s a reason we’re usually the rowdy bunch in the back at PD! A sense of humor and a touch of irreverence go a long way with our students. Their social lives outweigh their academic focus more than at any other life stage, but tap into their growing awareness of society around them, and these kids can set the world alight. Bore them, embarrass them, or misjudge them, and they might set it on fire instead. Reading and writing are powerful tools to create that connection and help them make sense of and engage with the world.

—Wendy Gassaway, seventh/eighth-grade reading intervention teacher, Neil Armstrong Middle School, Forest Grove, OR

The “middle” gets a bad rap; it is unglamorous, seen as a passage between the nostalgia of yesteryear and a promising future. From history interchanging the Middle Ages with the Dark Ages, the middle child’s lament, and the general disdain of the middle seat on an airplane, the middle is often seen as, well, unexciting. While middle school students may be amid childhood and adolescence, their position as learning, creating, and developing beings is arguably the most influential and exciting during this experience of in-between. Evidence in the science of learning research has found that because of the brain’s development and reorganization during early adolescence, the ability for our students to incorporate certain skills, both cognitively and socially, after puberty, would be more difficult.1 This means that teaching social, cognitive,

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and creative skills to our middle schoolers may be most important now; **that** is exciting.


Many, many years ago—back when the dinosaurs were still on the endangered-species list—I worked with the other founders to promote the Junior High/Middle School Assembly because we saw Middle Level students, and the Middle School experience, as something different and unique. The students didn’t need lessons and assignments; instead, they needed opportunities and adventures. They needed to be “bathed in language” and to have “conversations in literature” (Judith Langer). The best experiences were those in which the students’ own classroom talk was used as a vehicle for learning. Middle level educators understand that the answers to the most essential questions, “What’s worth knowing?” and “How do students learn?”—when asked of the Middle Level curriculum and instruction—provide important insights into this unique and fascinating and challenging phase of students’ emerging literacy and growing communication competence.

—Jeffrey N. Golub, emeritus associate professor of English education, University of South Florida, Tampa

The middle grades is a blinding chemical reaction of magic and reason, it’s a time when you are almost painfully open to the world while trying desperately to make sense of it. Ask any adult what their all-time favorite book is, and they will name a book they read in the middle grades.

—Lisa Papademetriou, author/teacher, Lisapapa.com

Middle school is the most exciting place to teach because our students have so much possibility before them. Middle schoolers are fascinating people, a beautiful tangle of what is and what will be. As their teachers, we can harness their amazing creativity, their capacity for empathy, their burning questions that refuse to be silent, and their sense of justice, and use all of those things to spread hope and renewal far beyond classroom walls. By giving them choices about what to read and by writing beside them, we can gift them with autonomy and convince them day by day that they matter to us and that one is never too small or too young to make an impact on the world. Their reading lives are critically important, and the words that they write can make all the difference.

—Elizabeth Oosterheert, eighth-grade language arts teacher/theater troupe director, Pella Christian Grade School, Pella, IA

In the journey each one of us takes toward becoming the person we want to be, is there any stop more tumultuous, confusing, and awkward than those middle grades? When I write for that age, I’m speaking to all that is simultaneously vulnerable and volatile inside us. I write to be the voice I needed in those life-altering and life-affirming years.

—Melanie Crowder, author/teacher, www.melaniecrowder.com

I began my teaching career at a high-rated middle school in an affluent Virginia community. While teaching seventh grade, I came in direct contact with several misconceptions. The students were automatically labeled “spoiled” with “simple lives, everything going for them” and “no real concerns.” The reality (of course) was their lives were just as diverse and difficult as students anywhere. With many of their parents being government workers, businesspeople, doctors, and lawyers, the students were expected to be nearly perfect. Most students felt enormous pressure to consistently achieve at an A+ level and have completed two levels of high school math and foreign language by the time they left middle school. Now teaching high school, I help students manage time, organization, anxiety/stressors, and pressure. As educators, we must always remember to teach the whole child, not only academically, but as people—understanding that beneath the exterior, each individual has a story.

—Jason Paul Augustowski, Riverside High School, Loudoun County Public Schools; executive director, RiverHawk Productions, Belmont Ridge Middle School, Leesburg, VA

I love middle school because it was my middle schoolers who taught me how to be a better teacher. I taught eighth grade my first year of teaching and then I taught high school, but I taught sixth grade for two years before going back to graduate school. It was this group of sixth graders who taught me how to differentiate, how to be patient, and, most importantly, how to encourage a passion for reading. We had an independent reading day each Wednesday, and my students LOVED this day! When I graduated from my teacher preparation program, I pronounced loudly I would only be a high school teacher. However, looking back now, I identify more as a middle grades teacher, and if I went back to the classroom, I would return to the middle school students who taught me how to teach English language arts.

—Katie Caprino, @KCapLiteracy, University of Florida College of Education, Jacksonville
The middle school years are such an exciting time when it comes to literature. Books for the middle school age, especially those that deal with difficult social situations or painful eras in our history, open minds and hearts in new ways. For many, it’s the first time they’ll read a book that makes them sob, or feel outraged. For some, it’s the first time they read about true injustice. For others, it will be the first time they feel less alone because they discover a story that reflects their own experience. These are the books that foster genuine empathy. They inspire thoughtful discussions about the wrongs of the world and what might be done to right them. Whether it’s through humor, realistic fiction, historical fiction, or fantasy, books guide readers from “kid” to “young adult” with insight and light. I can’t imagine surviving my own middle school years without them.

—Jo Knowles, author; www.joknowles.com

When I first started teaching, I never thought much about my future or where my career might take me. Where it took me was being able to teach and help so many students make it through their middle level years. As an ELA teacher, I was fortunate to span the spectrum from teaching dropout prevention students to teaching gifted students who had intellects much higher than mine. What I learned about my students was that through literature, writing, and even grammar instruction we could have fun and do what we needed to do as well. I learned all that by being involved and coming to Convention and using NCTE materials and ideas; my students began to be avid readers and writers. And that’s why middle matters. Our students, past and present, need us to be prepared to accept them as they are and help them navigate those adolescent years.

—Susan Houser, former NCTE President

Middle grade is the place children come into their own as readers. For many, it’s the first time they are reading independently and selecting books of their choosing. These are the books that validate the experience of being a child, that show them their feelings matter, that they count now, not later when they’re teens or grown-ups. Think back on the books you loved with all your heart, the ones that helped define you as a person and transformed your world. I bet they were middle grade.

—Caroline Starr Rose, author; www.carolinenestarrrose.com

For me, middle school has always represented one of the most important of the transitional periods in a person’s life—expanding childhood to include the first adolescent and even adult thoughts, feelings, experiences, yearnings. The middle schooler is often faced with challenges that present deep conflicts of self. As a writer, I am fascinated by this brief time before the world explodes in front of a person. It’s a leak of what the world is, but not the full barrage. It’s a Dickensian time, in the sense of encompassing the full spectrum of thought and emotion, but with a still-limited palate of experience. To me, there is really no more intriguing subject to write about, and no more open and sophisticated young reader to engage with.

—Tony Abbott, author; #tonyabbottbooks

We all know the sympathetic look that immediately fills another’s face when he/she discovers we teach middle school. “I just couldn’t do it,” they cringe. “I just couldn’t not do it,” I reply. No need for sympathy. Instead, I celebrate the middle. Where else can you build personal and professional relationships with adolescents who still smile, laugh, dream, fear, and question? Never a dull moment, middle school involves excitement and engagement. We read, write, discuss, and aim to be change agents in our world. We ask questions that deserve answers. We consider if and how writing can make things happen, get things done. I think about those sixth and eighth graders I taught years ago. Those now-college freshmen who maintain that zest and zeal for living and doing. I still see their smiling faces in my middle level classroom, eager each and every day.

—Gage Jeter, ELA curriculum specialist, K20 Center for Educational and Community Renewal at the University of Oklahoma

I wish we would, as a society, spend more time capturing the energy, passion, humor, and curiosity of Middle Level students. Our country would be much better off if we would use our energy and money helping students find their way while they are in middle school. During this time, students seem to be more open to learning new ideas. They really care about their future. They have the energy and willingness to make a difference in their world. As an educator, I believe that when we speak into the lives of Middle Level students, we are truly making the most of an opportunity to make a difference in their lives and in the future of our country.

—Bonner Slayton, literacy specialist/instructional coach, Moore Norman Technology Center Norman, OK

Seventh grade was the worst year of my life. At least it felt that way. The hormones, awkward body, ever-changing “cool kid” rules I could never keep up with—it was the pits (literally and figuratively. #Deodorant). My seventh-grade English teacher, Mrs. Ekstrand, however, saw this shy kid as having something more. I barely spoke in class, but for some reason she thought pushing me into the Wisconsin
State Forensics Impromptu Storytelling Competition would be a good fit. She changed my life. This is Why Middle Matters. It is more than teaching content, it is shepherding amazing kids through the best/worst years of their school lives. It is seeing their magic, often when they don’t. In turn, we Middlefolk never leave a day without laughter, a few bruises, and boundless love.

—Christopher Lehman, NCTE Middle Level Section Chair and founding director of The Educator Collaborative

When I look at Middle Level students, I see children ready to make decisions about who they are and how they will impact the world. The rose-tinted days of elementary are behind them and they are ready to tackle important ideas, hard topics, and the injustices of the world. Middle level educators hold the highest honor in coaching students through this transformative time. They do so with compassion, empathy, and an unfailing sense of humor.

—Katie Muhtaris, instructional digital age learning coach, Barrington IL CUSD 220; author, @KatieMuhtaris

Middle school matters because it is a big figurative hug. Being an adolescent is terrifying and exciting all at once and kids that age don’t quite know how to manage that transition. So they need us for both the literal hugs and for the figurative cuddle that we try to wrap them up inside of as we gently nudge them along on their journey to adulthood.

—Laura Meehan, instructional digital age learning coach, Barrington IL CUSD 220, former middle school teacher; @laurameehan04

Devan, now a sophomore in high school, stopped in to have me write and sign a recommendation for her for National Honor Society. She talked nonstop as she wandered around the language arts classroom. “You know, I don’t think eighth graders can appreciate all the choices you give them until they get to the high school and realize they have few. I loved the fact the teachers worked in teams and knew each of us—the Living History days where we lived some of those moments in history, Pi Day, Outsiders Day, the writing we got to choose and the fact we were encouraged to send it to Scholastic and the New York Times—Letters about Literature—wow! Ailla’s letter to Dr. Seuss is incredible—the fact we got to choose what we wanted to read—that never happens at the high school—making the ROVs with the Navy engineers . . .” Devan stopped as she picked up and began reading more students’ writing posted on the boards and looked through the Heart Books stacked in crates. “Wow, I love this Heart Map and this double-page spread . . . are you going to put all their pictures in the back of the book the way you did for us?—I love that we did so much art along with the reading and writing and Megan won a Scholastic Gold Key and American Voices Award—that is really special . . . I really miss it here . . .” In the middle—so many reasons as to why it matters—the place and time where we have the unique opportunity of knowing our students well enough to help them, nudge them, to find their strengths in what they often think are flaws. In the middle—trying to find who they are and all they want to be. In the middle—encouraging them to build on and grow into the unique, responsible, articulate, happy young men and women they are becoming. Devan knows.

—Linda Rief, eighth-grade language arts teacher, Oyster River Middle School, Durham, NH

#BowTie Boys are a group of students in Loudon County Public Schools who advocate for change in schools, centering their efforts on helping students have a voice in their own education. They blog regularly with their teacher, Jason Augustowski, at jasonaugustowskibtb.blogspot.com and also maintain their own individual blogs. Why #BowTieBoys? They follow the example of their friend and mentor Lester Laminack, who never leaves the house without a bow tie.

Middle school is most often a turbulent time for students. For the first time (or at least more consistently), they are beginning to deal with social conflict. Kids are trying to show independence from parents and profess their individuality, while still conforming to popular trends. In middle school, more than ever, students need teachers willing to listen. Varying class structures and differentiating teaching are ways to make sure our voice does not get lost. It is important for educators to collaborate with kids; however it is arguably more beneficial to have real conversations with students— involving nothing about curriculum. Creating an environment where students feel comfortable to entrust teachers with information and ask for advice is a crucial way to build positive rapport. This creates an invaluable opportunity for educators to fully understand their students, help them through a somewhat chaotic time, and create a lasting bond.

—Sam Fremin, #bowtieboys, sophomore, Stone Bridge High School

#BowTieBoys cont’d >>
Middle school is important to a student because it teaches them skills that they will use throughout their lives. The most important thing that students learn in middle school is balancing more than one part of their life. In middle school, students are faced with the challenge of balancing school and balancing a life outside of school. Whether it is sports or just hanging out with friends, students have to learn how to manage both. This dilemma also teaches children how to efficiently study and how to manage their time wisely. When a student moves through life, they are faced with managing more and more. If these students did not have the opportunities to learn all of these skills in middle school, they would put themselves under extreme stress and falter in the real world. I believe this is the reason why middle school is valuable for every child.

—Jack Martinez, #bowtieboys, seventh grader, Belmont Ridge Middle School

If middle school didn’t exist, the transition from elementary school to high school would be near impossible. Middle school is the time where students can make the difficult transition from elementary school to high school. Most kids change the most over the course of middle school, so it is vital that during this change, the students are comfortable in the school environment. I would argue that the most change, whether it be physical, mental, or social, occurs in middle school. During periods of rapid change, comfort is vital. Change can be hard to deal with so having comfort with not only one’s friends, but also their teachers and peers in middle school is important to the development and well-being of a middle school student. Although middle school is only three years, shorter than both elementary school and high school, it is three important years that deserve special attention.

—Joseph O’Such, #bowtieboys, ninth grader, Riverside High School

High School is the greener grass, and students are the goats that want to graze over there. But first, the goats have to cross a bridge. That bridge is Middle School. And the trolls that lurk those bridges are the tests that a student is given. For a goat to cross the bridge, they have to go through the trolls. Same with students. Middle School is one of the most important parts of a student’s life. It is so important because it’s the first real-world challenge that a student experiences in life. It is the first thing that sets up a youth to become an adult and enables each and every student to pick their courses for High School, which are like the different patches of grass that a goat can choose to graze on. High School is what sets you up for college. And college sets you up for life.

—Nihar Kandarpa, #bowtieboys, seventh grader, Belmont Ridge Middle School
The education system is like learning to ride a bike. There’s elementary school where the training wheels are still on and high school where one can comfortably ride without them. However, there is an awkward, but necessary stage in between where the student has to learn how to ride without training wheels. From sixth to eighth grade, the students start with having a lot of assistance and support and are slowly weaned off until it is possible to ride with but a few wobbles. If a student ever falls, middle school allows them to be able to get back up and learn from their mistakes. Middle school ensures that students can be prepared prior to the stakes getting too high.

—Bentley Chen, #bowtieboys, ninth grader, Riverside High School

Middle school matters because it gives students a chance to develop their base skills and help build any strategies that will help them later in life. The students are given the opportunity to get a great reading base, so they can build upon it later in school. They are shown how to struggle and then find out what to do when they struggle. Most of all the students should have lots of one-on-one conferences with their teachers, especially when struggling. These three years are necessary for students to build all of their basic skills and strategies because they will be added upon in their later years.

—Dawson Unger, #bowtieboys, ninth grader, Riverside High School

Middle school is so important because it is where you start to become independent. It can be an awkward time for students because they are learning how to do things on their own and starting to realize what it takes to live in the real world. Middle schoolers learn a lot of important things in subjects but kids are also learning how to be adults (in the early stages), how to deal with frequent conflicts, and how to manage their time. Middle school is a huge transition for all students and is an important stage where kids learn to be adults.

—Christian Sporre, #bowtieboys, ninth grader, Riverside High School

The reason middle school matters is that it is truly the “base” to a house that students will want to build with the passions they form and make by learning new things in middle school. This base is incredibly important to have because if the right teachers and curriculum teaches students in middle school, maybe high school wouldn’t have to retrace things students have already heard. Middle schools can help by ensuring teachers are patient with the current psychological levels of middle school students. These students don’t rely on homework for learning, the classroom does that. So having proper planning for a student’s day is how middle school can be improved.

—Bryce Bernier, #bowtieboys, ninth grader, Riverside High School

The importance of middle school is very often overlooked. Even though I am just one year out of it, middle school has had a major effect on my life. For me, middle school was easy but difficult at the same time. I had a fairly easy time in my classes but the introduction of lockers and having to keep track of work for multiple classes taught me how to be more responsible. Middle school was also where I built up my close friendships. The people I was good friends with in middle school are still very close with me. While these two aspects of middle school helped me a lot, the most important part of my middle school experience was getting a better idea of who I was. At middle school age, kids start to think more for themselves. This is why middle school is very important for students.

—Ryan Beaver, #bowtieboys, ninth grader, Riverside High School

Middle school is the most important time to lay groundwork and foundation that will help the student for the rest of their life. Students who do not possess grade-level skills face serious challenges as the rigor of academics intensifies. Middle school serves as a stepping stone toward high school and even college. It is crucial that skills and habits that are required for the educational and professional world are mastered during middle school. Skills like responsibility, study habits, and work ethic must be covered. As students continue through their educational career, it becomes clear who has acquired these skills and who has not. Nothing bad will come from students who put time and effort in during class. Success becomes one step closer during the learning process called middle school.

—Sean Pettit, #bowtieboys, ninth grader, Riverside High School