What Every Middle School Teacher Should Know
Dedication

To those middle level educators whose students know you care through your concern, support, and encouragement for their overall growth.

D. F. B.

To Rachel, who has the heart and soul of a middle school teacher.
I love being your mom.

T. K.
Contents

Foreword by James A. Beane xi
Preface xv
Acknowledgments xix

1. You Want to Be a What? 1
   Who Are Young Adolescents? 2
   Becoming a Middle Level Teacher 5

2. Understanding the Young Adolescent’s Physical and Cognitive Growth 10
   Physical Development 12
   Cognitive Development 26

3. Who Am I? The Social, Emotional, and Identity Trials of Young Adolescence 37
   Social Development 38
   Moral Development 48
   Emotional Development 50
   The Search for Identity 52
   Concluding Reflections 65

4. Designing an Appropriate Middle School: Influences from the Past to the Present 67
   A Typical Day 68
   Emulating the Factory 70
   The First Junior High Schools 74
   The Promise of a New Design 76
Contents

Support for Genuine Middle Schools 79
The Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development 81
Content Standards Influence the Middle School 84
Concluding Reflections 89

5. Creating a Safe Haven for Learning 91
Middle Schools and Student Stress 92
Establishing a Caring Environment 94
The Dangers of Bullying 102
Encouraging Risk Taking 105
Recognizing and Responding to Diverse Learners 107
Sharing Decision Making 108
Creating Collaborative—Not Competitive—Learning Environments 110

6. Student-Designed Curriculum 113
What Is Curriculum? 115
Beliefs About Middle Level Curriculum 116
Basic Approaches to Curriculum Organization 121
What Students Want 129
Curriculum Integration Model: A Different Way of Thinking About the Curriculum 131
Curriculum Integration in the Middle School Classroom 135
Concluding Reflections 151

7. Facilitating Meaningful Learning 152
How Learning Occurs 153
Collaborative Learning 159
The Teacher’s Role 161
Culturally Responsive Teaching 173
Living with Content Standards 177
Concluding Reflections 179

8. Assessment That Promotes Active Learning 180
What Is Assessment? 180
Connecting Assessment to Curriculum and Instruction 189
Alternative Assessment 190
Students’ Roles in Assessment 190
Authentic Assessment Leads to Meaningful Learning 195
Performance Assessment 196
Student-Led Conferences 200
Contents

9. Real Teachers Using Genuine Curriculum Integration 203
   Revisiting Scott Clark 203
   The Alpha Team 204
   Soundings: An Eighth Grade Curriculum Integration Experience 216
   Starting with Our Little Corner 220
   Concluding Reflections 223

10. Altering School Structures 225
    Teaming—The Heart and Soul of the Middle School Concept 226
    Advisory Programs 235
    Alternative Scheduling 243
    Exploratory Curriculum 249
    Looping 251
    Concluding Reflections 251

11. Being an Advocate for Young Adolescents 253
    Misunderstanding the Middle School Concept 255
    Support for the Middle School Concept 257
    Supporting Young Adolescents 260
    The True Middle School 261

References 265
Index 287
As anyone who's ever done it can tell you, teaching middle school is a very tricky business. Whether it’s good or bad depends largely on how you see things. Young adolescents are in a real serious life transition and they bring the ups and downs of that to every teacher they meet. If teachers see those ups and downs as a problem or inconvenience, middle school teaching can be very frustrating.

Worse yet, as parents and guardians see the dependence of childhood slip away and the press for independence get underway, they often expect teachers to influence their children’s lives in ways they cannot seem to themselves. So the so-called “problems” posed by young adolescence end up compounded by their family’s expectations that teachers can do what they can’t. Meanwhile education authorities and policy makers who may never have actually taught middle school make demands about what and how to teach. Too often those demands assume young adolescents have nothing but schoolwork on their minds and can’t wait to move from one piece of content to the next. Now the whole business of teaching is buried under the weight of being expected to teach a group of “up and down” young people things they do not want to know as prescribed by authorities who never tried to do it themselves.
On the other hand, if you see what young adolescents bring to your classroom as a promise rather than a problem, middle school teaching can be one of the most exciting and satisfying things you will ever do. The fact is that young adolescents have tons of questions and concerns about themselves and their world, and their imagination and curiosity work around the clock. They love new ideas if those ideas shed some light on topics that are personally and socially significant. They love to explore and debate issues of fairness and justice. They love to learn new skills that will help them do something they want to do or think is worth doing. They love to dig deep into projects that are about big ideas or problems. And if you see young adolescents this way and learn how to teach like that, along the way they will learn more and learn better than if you see who they are as a problem you have to solve in order to teach them some abstract content that they, and maybe even you, don’t really care about. When this happens you really see that young adolescents can do well and you put yourself in a position to help parents and guardians see the same.

There is a world of difference between seeing the promise in young adolescents and seeing them as problematic. Seeing the “promise” is at the center of What Every Middle School Teacher Should Know. From start to finish young adolescents are treated with dignity and respect, and their education is more an adventure worth having than a trial to be endured. In a way, saying what every middle school teacher should know may seem pretty pretentious, but what is offered here really does make sense. How can you be a good middle school teacher if you don’t know something about young adolescence, or effective curriculum and teaching approaches, or what middle schools are for, or how middle schools ought to be organized? And how can you be really good if you don’t see yourself as an advocate for the young adolescents you work with?

Teachers seem to work with one of two general theories. Some hold to the idea that, “if only the kids were different, we could do a great job.” But because young adolescents are who they are and cannot be someone or something else, this theory can only lead to frustration for both teachers and students, and more than a little conflict between them. Others believe that, “if only we did things differently, the kids
could do a great job.” In the end, it is this second theory that leads toward worthwhile experiences for teachers and students because teachers can shape and reshape classroom life so that young adolescents can do great work. What Every Middle School Teacher Should Know is full of ideas and information to support that second theory. And that is why every middle school teacher really should know what’s in this book.
Writing the first edition of *What Every Middle School Teacher Should Know* (2000) gave us an opportunity to listen to young adolescents and middle level teachers. We engaged in many hours of interviews with middle schoolers and were enlightened by their stories. In that first edition, we touched on young adolescents’ physical, social, emotional, and cognitive development, trying to emphasize that young adolescents are different from elementary children and high school students. We also addressed what was known by researchers in the field about effective middle schools at that time.

In the seven years since that first edition, much more research has surfaced on young adolescents’ growth processes. We now know that their brains are different from older adolescents and that this affects their behaviors and their learning. We know more about how their behaviors are affected by specific hormones. We’ve learned that specific instructional behaviors are better at meeting the learning needs of young adolescents than those we may have used in the past. Plus, we’ve witnessed middle school teachers using curriculum integration in democratic classrooms. It’s been an exciting and educational seven years.

Now we want to share with you what we’ve been studying, including the impact of how this information can improve learning for your students. Teachers armed with this information can provide an environment of care and support—two affective aspects of learning that are significant to all students. In this second edition, we’re still listening and adding more young adolescents’ voices. As important, though, are the new findings by middle level researchers on the components
of the middle school concept: teaming, advisory programs, flexible scheduling, exploratory curriculum, and looping. We also explain the power of democratically designed classrooms and student involvement in choosing curriculum. These middle level structures can and do make a difference in our effectiveness in meeting young adolescents’ varied needs.

Chapter 2 has been expanded. In it we discuss the amazing new findings of the differences in physical development among all young adolescents and between females and males. We’ve added sections on the impact of being an early physical maturer, young adolescents’ need for sleep, and appropriate diets. We’ve addressed the new cognitive development findings, in writing about the distinct differences between concrete and formal operational thought, brain wiring, why adolescents take the risks they do, and that pesky undeveloped prefrontal cortex and its impact on student behaviors that drive teachers crazy.

There is now a separate new chapter (3) on young adolescents’ social and emotional needs. We have expanded those sections, added the research on moral development, and tackled the ever present issues on young adolescents’ search for identities: sexual, gender, and ethnic, among others. We also describe the challenge of student self-esteem and how it is affected by the changes occurring during young adolescence.

No book on education written in the beginning of the millennium would be complete without noting the impact of standards and that federal legislation—dare we say it—No Child Left Behind. Chapter 4 examines these influences, where we’ve been in middle level education, where we are now, and how we arrived. We provide suggestions from the new *This We Believe: Successful Schools for Young Adolescents* (National Middle School Association 2003) and *Turning Points 2000* (Jackson and Davis 2000).

We explain in Chapter 5 how teachers can create a healthy classroom for young adolescents, with an expanded section on the impact and causes of bullying and teachers’ roles in preventing it. We’ve added a historical perspective on the theory and practice of curriculum integration in Chapter 6, with additional research on its effectiveness and value for students.
Chapter 7 discusses effective instruction expanded to include how teachers can help their students move from Piaget’s concrete to formal operational thinking, the power of knowing your students’ learning needs through kid watching, ethnically and culturally responsive instruction, and an explanation of the value of differentiated teaching.

The original chapter on assessment has been changed to include a major emphasis on student responsibility for self-assessment, including an explanation of student-led conferences and strategies for including students in their assessment processes. As well, we explain the problems associated with standardized tests and the significance of assessment for learning instead of assessment of learning.

Chapter 9 is entirely new, with in-depth thoughts from a few middle level educators—Meghan O’Donnell, Cynthia Myers, Mark Springer, and Gert Nesin—who have implemented and sustained curriculum integration classrooms. We’ve added comments from students and parents who have been fortunate enough to experience such dynamic learning.

In Chapter 10 we provide recent research that supports the middle school concepts of advisory programs, teaming, and flexible scheduling. Exploratory experiences and looping are also presented as new material in this chapter.

We believe teaching is a journey, one in which the challenges are often unpredictable and seemingly mountainous. Simultaneously, being with young adolescents daily provides one with an exhilaration that is rarely matched. We hope that the journey is satisfying and to that end have written this second edition in an attempt to provide you with the tools and knowledge to design an exciting world within your classroom. Enjoy your professional travels with young adolescents—there is no journey like it!

Dave F. Brown and Trudy Knowles
In 1997, when Trudy talked me into writing the first edition of this book, I embraced the opportunity. We met in Indianapolis for my first National Middle School Association conference and spent hours exchanging ideas and writing rough drafts. It was the process of writing—that is, those conversations—that helped me develop my philosophy on teaching in general, but especially on teaching young adolescents.

The most significant part of writing that first edition is the new doors that have opened into the world of researching young adolescents. Those “doors” have meant being able to have genuine conversations with teachers and students about what their lives are like in and out of school. After thirteen years of public school teaching, I thought I knew plenty about my students, but it wasn’t until I started really listening to the young adolescents we interviewed that I realized what I didn’t know about their lives. I thank all of those young adolescents who have been gracious enough to speak to us over the past five years. I wish to thank the students and teachers at Upper Merion Area School District for their assistance in completing this book.

When I try to describe to my younger daughter what I do every day, I simplify it by saying, “I teach teachers.” Actually, that’s a lie. Every time I start a new class, whether it’s with urban, rural, or suburban teachers, I end up being the learner! Teachers are actually teaching me through our conversations and, once again, through my listening to them. I want to thank all the teachers who are brave enough to spend an hour, a day, or a week in one of my classes. I am inspired by your energy, passion, and commitment to this business of teaching.
Many of the teachers whom I meet in my courses each year share with me a genuine commitment for adding to their knowledge of young adolescents and the middle school concept. I want to thank Maria Shollenberger and Janel Brogley, two of those teachers who shared their passion, understanding, and commitment for the middle school concept and in so doing taught me something new as well.

Some teachers have been especially helpful in the past six years in “schooling” me. I visit Mark Springer’s room every semester, and he invites me in as if I am family. Mark has been an inspiration to me since I’ve learned of the Watershed program and studied Soundings. Mark’s coteacher, Mary Canniff, is every bit as committed to curriculum integration and students’ voices as Mark. Thank you both for sharing your classroom as a shining example of how to engage students in learning. To Gert Nesin, Meg O’Donnell, Cynthia Myers, and Mark Springer, thank you for contributing to this book and making the theory and principles of student-engaged learning real.

My new colleague Heather Leaman has direct experience with teaching middle school and is an avid researcher who understands the meaning of listening to students and telling their stories. Thank you, Heather, for encouraging me and listening to my concerns about how to meet our university students’ needs and the needs of young adolescents.

Lisa Luedeke, our editor, has been extremely patient with us throughout this writing process. Thank you for taking us on, despite, I’m sure, your almost impossible professional schedule. We deeply appreciate and value your guidance.

The National Middle School Association Conference is an event I wouldn’t dream of missing for many reasons. It’s exciting to witness middle level teachers and researchers presenting what works, and I especially enjoy the conversations with colleagues. I thank Vince Anfara Jr., Dick Lipka, Jim Beane, Nancy Doda, Kathy Roney, Micki Caskey, Barb Brodhagen, Carol Smith, Gert Nesin, and of course, Trudy, for engaging conversations and happy times. Each year we meet, I walk away excited for the future of the middle school movement because of the energy and commitment that you all bring to it.

Trudy initiated this second edition—and as usual, she was right about the need to update and improve on our first efforts. I grow
Acknowledgments

professionally with every conversation we have. Trudy knows what young adolescents are like and what the true middle school should look like because she listens and she’s curious enough to ask the right questions. Thank you, Trudy, for your insights and your huge heart.

It’s almost impossible to describe how families always provide the support you need, always knowing when you need it. I thank my dad and Betty for the example of responsible parenting that they always set and their constant support. For my siblings, Carol Ann, Bob, Brian, and Kenneth, thank you for reading all that crap I send you. Even if you don’t agree, I know you’re listening. You are all always in my heart despite the distance between us. I also want to acknowledge the encouragement I receive from my “East Coast family,” Sandy and Bill Shusta, and thank them for always being supportive of the work that Dana and I do.

For my daughter, Lindsay, I’ve missed you so and look forward to future conversations. For Taylor, you bring me joy every day with your excitement for life and your great questions—keep asking them. I so much love seeing you write, and I hope you’ll continue to add to my collection of your stories. Dana, my wife, I am happy to say, is my colleague, confidant, advisor, and the love of my life. Her teaching is an inspiration to me. I thank you, Dana, for always listening and standing up for what’s right for your students, the world, and for me.

—Dave F. Brown

When Dave and I first thought about writing a book for middle school teachers, we knew that we wanted it to be grounded in the voices of young adolescents. They are the ones who can lead us into developing schools that respond to their needs. The middle school students whom we interviewed for the first edition of the book are out of school now. They are in the world, being citizens, creating their lives. And yet their words speak to us today as they did ten years ago. Because of their willingness to share their lives with us, we were able to create a resource that comes from them. I thank them again for that trust.

I never thought we would be writing a second edition of a book that was so long in coming the first time. I am grateful that middle
school teachers and administrators have embraced this book and used it as a framework and resource for what they do every day in the classroom with students. I continue to be impressed with the thousands of middle school teachers who love their job and their students. I thank them for choosing to work “in the middle.”

My belief in the importance of and necessity for democratic classrooms drives all that I do. I believe that we must listen to what our students say about their lives and their learning. I am fortunate to have connected with amazing educators who share that belief and who spend their professional careers advocating for kids. They are at the heart of true middle level reform.

I first want to thank Jim Beane for his friendship, his words, his life, and his legacy. No matter what he says, he will never retire. I won’t let him.

There are a number of other inspirational middle level educators and colleagues who push me to the progressive edge but won’t let me fall. I particularly want to thank the four teachers who shared their stories for this new edition. Meg O’Donnell and Cynthia Myers from the Alpha team in Vermont, Mark Springer from the Soundings program in Pennsylvania, and Gert Nesin from the University of Maine are incredible educators who believe strongly in the power of democratic classrooms and spend their days making it happen.

And there are more. Nancy Doda is my friend and inspiration, an amazing middle level advocate. Carol Smith and Barb Brodhagen are proof that democratic teaching can become a reality and can transform the lives of young people. Ann Yehle is a principal who believes so strongly in every child’s right to quality learning. Her fight for justice inspires me. Dave Braun y Harycki and Bill McBeth are college professors who are opening up the eyes of future teachers to the power of democracy. Pat Clem is a principal who always pushes her teachers to do what’s right by kids.

A special thanks to Holly Pasackow, a parent from the Alpha team, who was willing to share her experiences and to the other anonymous students and parents who so honestly and eloquently were able to put into words what was in their hearts and minds.
Acknowledgments

I have to thank Dave. It was as much fun writing this edition as it was writing the first. Dave did most of the work on this edition and is still letting me have my name on the cover.

And always, always, always, I thank my family: my sibs, my in-laws, my nieces and nephews, my kids—Mellissa, Rachel, Robert, Ariel, and Austin—and my husband, Dan. They support me, are proud of me, and love me unconditionally.

—Trudy Knowles
Writing-Fluency Buddies: What Are They?

Writing-Fluency Buddy time provides collaborative opportunities for writers to co-compose quick, structured pieces demonstrating skills and strategies learned during direct instruction. It also allows for “mixing up” students, so writers work with many peers during the course of the year. Writing-fluency buddies typically work together for a brief period of time—usually a week—practicing a specific skill or strategy that has been explicitly taught to them at a particular time. Unlike most writing partnerships where students are paired for a longer time period or for the duration of a particular writing project, fluency buddies are paired briefly for short-term practice.

Missy’s Writers

On a mid-December morning, Missy Taylor’s second graders are co-composing acrostic poems about holiday traditions. Missy explains the activity, then writing

—I choose [to write with] a partner because you get more ideas. You prob’ly write longer paragraphs [when it’s] not just your ideas, [but] both. If you get stuck, you ask your partner instead of asking the teacher.

—Third grader

CLASSROOM CHALLENGE

How can I provide peer support for short-term writing projects and goals?
fluency buddies disperse around the classroom, decide who will scribe first, and begin completing their poems. I check in with Haley and Anne. Haley is scribing while Anne watches, offering ideas and editing suggestions. They have decided to switch scribing with each line of the poem. After several minutes of conversation and consulting a “holiday word list” Missy has distributed, Anne writes the first line, “T.”

**Anne**

[writes] *Trees whisper while the awtaments [ornaments] sway.*

**Haley**

My turn. [takes the pen]

Riding?

Yup, they could be on a sleigh.

Riding on a sleigh?

Santa comes to . . .

cheer the day!

[ sede Okay.

[writes] *Riding on a sleigh Santa comes to cheer up the day.* [hands the pen to Anne]

They spend several minutes discussing what they might possibly write for the letter *A*. They consult the holiday word list and classroom word wall and then scan the classroom walls. Finally, they ask me for an idea and I suggest they might start their sentence with the word *A*.

**Anne**

A snowflake!

Dances?

A snowflake dances and twirls around while listening to . . .

[sound] [writes] *A snowflake dances and twirls around while listening to the Christmas sound.*

**Haley**

What does it do?

and twirls?

What about “cheer up” the day?

[writes] *A snowflake dances and twirls around while listening to the Christmas sound.*

As I move away to observe other writers, Anne and Haley decide to skip D and work on *I* as Haley has suggested they write about “icicles.” After fifteen minutes, Missy brings the writers together to share their pieces.
Missy provided a quick explanation of the task, sent writing-fluency buddies off, and, when wrapping up her lesson, brought them together to share. This writing activity lends itself to instant or flexible grouping where the main purpose is to get children writing quickly and fluently. It is brief, the structure is clear, and it can be used with new or experienced writing partners.

**Steps and Procedures**

In general, writing-fluency buddies are paired for one week. While teachers will want to adapt this strategy to suit the needs of their program and students, a general sequence for writing fluency buddies might be as follows:

1. The teacher models and teaches a specific skill or strategy.
2. The teacher explains expectations for partner work.
3. The students work together for short periods each day (ten to fifteen minutes) with their writing-fluency buddy.
4. The students share their work with the entire class later in the week.

Again, the emphasis is on short, focused practice of specific skills. Writing-fluency buddies do not engage in long-term collaborations, but work together to practice and reach deeper understanding and facility with specific skills and strategies.

**Minilessons and Ideas**

There are a myriad of writing skills, strategies, and tasks on which a teacher might ask fluency buddies to focus. This is a framework that must adapt to grade-level curriculum and expectations. In a short, focused piece of writing, fluency buddies might work together to practice:

- varying sentence length
- using different kinds of sentences—statements, questions, and exclamations
- using appropriate text signals to signify meaning, voice, and tone
  - using punctuation—periods, commas, question marks, exclamation points, quotation (or “talking”) marks, semicolons, hyphens, dashes, colons, etc.
- using bold capitalized and italicized text
- using rhyme
- using repetition—experimenting with the effect of repeating a word or phrase
- creating unique voices for each character in a story
- showing, not telling
- recognizing each other’s voice and style
- experimenting with voice and style
- incorporating a particular text structure, or several such as cause and effect or compare and contrast into a piece
- writing a paragraph with main idea and supporting details
- writing like “an author.”

**Quickwrites**

Creating five-minute quickwrites (see Figure 11–1) exercises partners’ writing muscles and encourages spontaneous, fluent writing. Students can decide whether to expand their piece or use the quickwrite as a warm-up activity for a self-selected writing activity. Procedures for “quickwrites” are as follows:

1. Partners read the quickwrite prompt.
2. Partners check the timer (they may want to designate one person as the timer, but that person should also write).
3. Partners write their own pieces for five minutes.
4. Partners read quickwrites to one another and decide whether to expand one or both.

Since this activity is designed to encourage writing fluency, it is important that each child write. Teachers use many prompts for “quickwrites.” Some of my favorites come from Regie Routman (2000):

- Next year, I plan to . . .
- I remember when . . .
- One time I . . .
- Yesterday I . . .
- I never knew . . .
- A long time ago I . . . (this is my absolute; favorite; it elicits wonderful pieces from kindergartners and my college students!)
- I was surprised . . .
- I noticed . . .
Moving Toward Independence

Once a writer practices a particular skill or strategy with her writing fluency buddy, she can use it more confidently and comfortably when crafting independent writing pieces. Often teachers offer structures and guidelines when teaching a particular skill or strategy. These guidelines, outlining expectations and task criteria, can be posted on classroom walls or copied and given to writers to use in independent writing.
Suggestions for English Language Learners

English language learners benefit from access to many models of English speaking, clear expectations, and explicit structures for completing writing tasks. Short-term writing fluency partnerships provide continual access to all three. Additionally, writing fluency partnerships for English language learners should include visual reminders, and reteaching.
Thank you for sampling this resource.

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