



## Listening to Their Voices: Middle Schoolers' Perspectives of Life in Middle School

Mary Anne Steinberg and Erica D. McCray  
University of Florida, Gainesville, FL, USA

---

*This article examines middle schoolers' perspectives on their lives in middle school. Fifteen middle school students from three middle schools in the Southeast region of the United States participated in a basic qualitative study using focus groups at their schools where they were asked the central question, "If you could change one thing at your middle school, what would it be?" Findings show that students' desire caring teachers, students want active classrooms, and students' technology use impacts attitudes towards learning. Implications are that middle-school learning can increase relevance by teachers demonstrating care for students as individuals; structuring opportunities for students to interact with them and each other around real-world problems; and incorporating technology into learning in ways adolescents already use it. Keywords: Middle School Experience, Student Voice, Perspectives on Teaching and Learning, Technology Use, Basic Qualitative Study*

---

"Bringing student voice front and center can nudge us toward education owned, at least in part, by those it claims to serve." (Doda & Knowles, 2008, p. 32)

The United States Census Bureau reported that in 2007, over three million students dropped out of school. This number translates to approximately seven thousand students dropping out of school every day with 1.2 million students per year failing to graduate from high school (U.S. Census Bureau, 2009). This disengagement from organized schooling will lead to poorer earning potential and life outcomes. Not surprisingly, students who drop out of school can expect to earn about \$260,000 less during their lifetime than those with a high school diploma (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2009). These startling statistics lead us to question how we, as educators, can keep students engaged in our school systems.

One approach to keeping adolescents engaged in their education is to include them in decision-making. Cook-Sather (2002) claims that secondary students desire to be active participants in the learning process. Students need to feel that they are not only a part of the school community, but that they also are competent individuals who are in control of their learning. Therefore, students need opportunities to make decisions about their learning and to work toward those goals. Students who are involved in decision-making processes in the classroom, co-create educational goals with their teachers, and who work collaboratively with their teachers to reach these goals are more likely to achieve academically (Certo, Cauley, & Chafin, 2003).

The problem addressed by this study is that students' levels of achievement may be determined by the relationships they have with their teachers and how students feel about their schools overall (Cassidy & Bates, 2005; Ding & Hall, 2007; Knesting &

Waldron, 2006; Meece, 2003), which could also be the case for middle schoolers in one district in the Southeastern United States. Their perceptions about how they are performing and if they are accepted are critical. These can be determining factors in whether or not students persist in school or exit prior to graduation (Knesting & Waldron, 2006).

### **Listening to the Voices of Students**

Adolescence is a critical developmental period, as the minds and bodies of children are transformed into those of adults. These students are beginning to become more and more responsible for their own learning as they leave elementary school and transition into high school. Adolescents are striving toward independence during a time in their lives when physiological and psychological changes are occurring rapidly. The rapid changes and desire for independence can make adolescents more self-conscious about their bodies and their emotions (Peterson, 1988).

Because adolescents become more aware of themselves, their own thoughts and feelings, and their relationships with others, researchers interested in this age group often solicit the students' perspectives to gain a more complete understanding of their experiences. Demir (2007) conducted a cross-cultural analysis of middle schoolers' perceptions of school. Using metaphors, students described school and how they experienced it, themselves, and others. Demir (2007) found that students characterized school as wild, chaotic places they had to survive, on one hand, and caring, family-like settings that were essential to their well-being on the other.

Several studies have been published in recent years that examine what students desire for their education and how they perceive their educational experiences (Certo et al., 2003; Cothran et al., 2000; Cushman & Rogers, 2008; Doda & Knowles, 2008; Intrator & Kuzman, 2009; Shaunessy & Alvarez-McHatton, 2009; York-Barr et al., 1996). Students want opportunities to talk with adults about their education. They feel empowered when they are viewed as knowledgeable participants in the educational process (Cook-Sather, 2002; DeFur & Korinek, 2010). Through listening to student voices, we allow students to think meta-cognitively as well as critically about their education (Cook-Sather, 2002).

When asked by researchers what they desired from their teachers, multiple studies have found that students desire personal relationships with their teachers (Certo et al., 2003; DeFur & Korinek, 2010; Flutter, 2006). In a study by DeFur and Korinek (2010), one student shared that in a perfect class the teacher would know each student's name. Students desired caring teachers, who listened to them, were concerned about their grades, and were aware of their lives outside of school (Certo et al., 2003). Students felt their school relationships were ones of exchange. Exchange occurs when students feel respected and are provided with a safe and secure learning environment, which in turn allows them to work to their full potential and to take more responsibility for their education (Cook-Sather, 2002; Flutter, 2006).

Certo et al. (2003) and DeFur and Korinek (2010) examined the types of classroom learning situations desired by students. Students in these studies shared that they wanted their learning to be active; they preferring hands-on activities, discussions and debates, and role-playing situations. Further, they stated that the best classes were

often the challenging ones that involved them in real world activities and problem solving (Certo et al., 2003). The purpose of this study is to describe the middle school experience regarding instruction, student-teacher relationship, and technology engagement, as perceived by middle schoolers in one district in the Southeastern United States. The significance of sharing the findings of this investigation of middle school students' perceptions of school are the implications their thoughts may hold for educators. The findings will add to the growing body of literature that incorporates the middle school student voice, as well as a focus on literacy and the impact of technology.

### **Role of the Researcher**

Before the current study was formally undertaken, interest in the topic was generated through informal conversations with middle schoolers. These conversations were overheard in the kitchen of the first author as her children and their friends discussed their lives in middle school. The common interest encouraged conversation with the second author as a result of her professional experiences as a former middle school teacher and current research interests.

### **Methods**

This study began with a very broad question about how middle school students perceive their educational experience. Using a basic qualitative approach (Merriam, 2009), the researchers employed focus groups, seeking the voices of middle schoolers. Specifically, participants were middle school students in one district, who could and were willing to discuss their experiences as middle schoolers. The researchers were most interested in their perspectives on instruction, literacy, and technology engagement. The initial question asked during the three focus groups conducted was, "If you could change anything at your middle school what would it be?"

Focus group interviews have been used in various studies to collect data regarding the student experience and perspective. Shaunessy and Alvarez-McHatton (2009) conducted a mixed method study, including focus group interviews, to understand high school students' perspectives on their teachers' ethic of care (Noddings, 1992). They found that students were more motivated by teachers who were perceived as engaged in their teaching and with their students. In a similar study, DeFur and Korinek (2010) found that focus group interviews were appropriate for actively engaging middle and high school students in an open dialogue about their schools and education in general. Students were described as "expert witnesses" (DeFur & Korinek, 2010, p. 15) who could inform the policy conversation on effective instruction and school improvement. In fact, the researchers found the adolescents' comments to be in line with recommendations set forth by the National Association of Secondary School Principals (e.g., active instruction, shared decision making).

### **Participants**

In the spring of 2010, the first author obtained study approval from the university's institutional review board. Next, the local school board's research office was

contacted for permission to conduct the study and to contact the administration at all seven middle schools. The middle school administrators were solicited via a district-provided written request form requesting permission to collect data at their sites. Of the seven schools, three gave permission to conduct the research. Each school was located in a different geographic locale that could be described as urban, suburban, and rural.

Next, a meeting was held with each school principal to explain the nature of the study. Letters of invitation and parental consent and student assent were given to school personnel at two schools and directly to students at one school, because of relationships that allowed personal access. Students who provided parental consent participated in focus group interviews with the first author during times when students would not miss any academic instruction.

Before each focus group began each student gave verbal assent. In total, 15 students in three schools participated in the focus group interviews. Both of the students from the urban school were female, one African-American and the other Caucasian. Eight students participated in the focus groups at the rural school (two males, both Caucasian) and six females (five Caucasian and one African-American). Of the students who participated from the suburban school, there was one male (Caucasian) and five females (one Asian-American and four Caucasians).

### **Focus Group Interviews**

Focus group interviews, ranging from two to eight participants each, were held with students from three schools and lasted approximately fifty minutes each (the average length of a class period at the middle school level). During this time participants were asked broadly, "What changes would you make if you had the power to change one thing at your middle school?" The question was left intentionally broad, so as to not lead the students and to engender the phenomena of their experiences (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009).

The focus group protocol consisted of approximately twenty-four questions and was divided into the following topics: subjects in middle school, education delivery, reading, technology, school atmosphere and extracurricular activities. Some of the questions that were asked from the education delivery section were: "What are your thoughts about working in groups?" and "What do you think about homework?" From the technology section, students were asked: "What do you think about the technology that is used in your classroom?", "What types of technology do you use outside of schools?" and "What technology do you think would help you learn better?" Each focus group session was facilitated by the first author and recorded with an audio-recording device, so that the students' responses could later be transcribed.

Student feedback seemed brutally honest at times. As questions were presented, participants were given the opportunity to respond how they wanted and to discuss the topic among themselves. Participants were probed or asked directly when they were particularly quiet or displayed body language that suggested a comment was being pondered (e.g., a head nod).

## Data Analysis

The focus group conversations were recorded and then transcribed by the first author, yielding 35 pages of single-spaced text. As suggested by Creswell (2007), two coders (the authors) individually read and coded the transcripts, and collaborated on concept meaning where there were discrepancies in interpretation, which resulted in highly stable responses.

Concepts and subsequent codes emerged from patterns of students' responses. The readers analyzed each transcript twice to determine initial concepts, followed by more discrete codes. Each researcher typically assigned codes to the same units of text, but may have worded the code slightly differently, even if the essence was the same. For example, in one instance, the first author coded a student comment as "student behavior + decisions" and the second author coded the same unit as "students make poor decisions." These differences were discussed to ensure the thought process was similar and the essence was consistent to ensure stability of the coding scheme. Five categories emerged from the analysis. The five categories that were formed from clustering the coded data were teacher perception, teacher quality, class perception, technology, and reading. Under the category of teacher quality, codes for students' responses included items like help, teaching for understanding, modeling, and qualified to teach content. Looking at the codes clustered under the category of teacher perception, students' coded responses included items like help, expectations, quality, caring, and time. After these five categories emerged, both researchers met and determined that the five categories should be further reduced due to overlapping concepts/ideas (e.g., help). The categories of teacher perception and teacher quality were then combined (or collapsed) into the theme of students' perceptions of the role of the teacher. The remaining categories were then collapsed into themes during data reduction (Merriam, 2009). This process yielded three themes (Miles & Huberman, 1994): (a) students desire for caring teachers; (b) students want active classrooms; and (c) students' technology use impacts attitudes towards learning.

### Results: What the students had to say

As previously noted, adolescents have specific ideas about their educational experiences and the focus group interviews provided an outlet for them to share these ideas. The following sections provide the participants' thoughts in each of the three themes that emerged from the data.

#### Theme 1: Students Desire Caring Teachers

Most prominently, students desired teachers who cared about them and were willing to work with them as individuals. For example, Noel (a seventh grader) said, "Teachers in general, they need to be understanding and kind and care and everything! The whole package." This is similar to students in Doda and Knowles' (2008) study, in which students expressed, via written responses, that they wanted teachers who were helpful, kind and patient, and knew them as people. These quality relationships are the cornerstone of many middle schoolers' educational desires (Doda & Knowles, 2008). The

perceived role of a caring teacher is also found in the works of Shaunessy and Alvarez-McHatton (2009), who described caring teachers as those who had supportive and meaningful relationships with students. The students in their study indicated that they valued the care taken by educators to build these relationships. In the current study, similar ideas were voiced when a student shared, “We need positive encouragement to know what we are doing. It’s never creative criticism, it’s just criticism. They need to help you, support you and encourage you” (Lui, grade 7).

Ferreira and Bosworth (2001), on the other hand, stated that the students in their study characterized a caring teacher as one who simply helps with and clearly explains schoolwork. Students desired teachers who would help them understand the content. The students in the current study echo this sentiment. Jenna, an eighth grader, suggested that, “Teachers need to be more helpful and understanding and understand what we need. They need to remember what it’s like to be a kid and how we need to learn.”

Students in the current study were able to clearly define a helpful teacher. Kaitlin (grade 6) characterized a helpful teacher in this way: “My teacher gives help, he helps with everything, he explains everything. He doesn’t go too fast, he makes sure everyone is caught up with everyone and he takes the time to explain everything.” Another student found teachers that allowed them the opportunity to improve their grades to be an asset, saying, “Ms. Y made me take a re-test when I got a bad grade, I got a 54 on a test, and I brought it up to a D [to a 65]” (Roger, grade 7).

However, not all students had this same experience. In some schools the students experienced teachers who were not perceived as helpful to students when they needed it. Mark (a seventh grader) observed:

She sits on the computer and prints stuff out. Like she is telling us to sit and do work when she is supposed to be teaching us, but we don’t know it! She just gives it to us and tells us to do it. She tells us to do it, and she tells us we are supposed to do it, but she doesn’t teach us it!

Another student provided a similar account of a teacher’s actions:

We raise our hands for help and he is sitting on the computer doing email. When we are supposed to be working and we need help and we raise our hand he doesn’t do anything. He just sits at his desk looking at his email. (Miyosha, grade 7)

The students’ comments reflect frustration with their current situations. What they did not share at the time of the focus groups was how they dealt with this frustration of not getting help when needed. However, at another school site Kaitlin (a sixth grader) did share the expectation for students who need help with class work. “My science teacher...gives us enough work to stay busy, but she don’t [*sic*] help us if we need help. She expects somebody else in the classroom to help.” This student shared later in the focus group that this particular teacher was teaching out-of-field.

The concept of teacher quality was touched on throughout the focus group discussions. Everything from hiring qualified substitute teachers to making sure teachers were certified to teach the subject areas they were teaching was brought up by these

middle schoolers. These students were able to clearly express what they did and did not want from their teachers in the way of caring and help.

Middle school students are developmentally ready for academically challenging work, but they are also becoming aware of the social aspects of learning. They would like to know that their teachers care about them as individuals, care about their learning, and care about the subjects they are teaching as evidenced by their enthusiasm (Shaunessy & Alvarez-McHatton, 2009). Additionally, students appreciate the teachers who are actively involved with their learning and recognize when they need extra help or a different type of assistance. These characteristics were not discussed as a menu of possibilities, but rather the students seemed to think this was a reasonable expectation for all teachers to be caring, engaging, and skilled in their craft.

## **Theme 2: Students Want Active Classrooms**

The second theme that emerged from the focus groups was that middle school students yearned for active classrooms. They desired an education that was student-centered, in ways that made them central or lead cast members and not merely receptacles for information or passive audience members. Students are averse to classes where students are expected to sit still and pay attention for long periods of time while teachers lecture or talk at them (Cushman & Rogers, 2008). Students have defined engaging teachers as those who do not talk too much and who also allow students to be active participants in class (Cothran & Ennis, 2000). One young man revealed the following:

I don't do the best in it, but my favorite subject is math. Mr. X, he's the best teacher ever to live! He makes class so much fun! He helps us. He does games and it is not just the textbook, and it is not just writing down notes, we do probability with M & Ms! (Keveon, grade 7)

Students enjoy science classes where labs are the norm and not the exception. Reading classes where students re-enact excerpts of books or scenes from plays are often students' favorite classes. Math classes where hands-on manipulatives and technology come together to aid comprehension of the subject matter are considered great places to learn. Billy, an eighth grader, summarized these thoughts quite succinctly, "Science, I like science. We *do* a lot of stuff in there."

Comments about active participation were not limited to science classes. Students were forthcoming about ways to keep kids involved in book discussions. Comments such as, "You could do more interactive things like writing a song about a book" (Kevin, grade 7), "We have done skits on our books, we acted them out" (Lui, grade 7), and "I loved acting out the books because it was fun and it really helped you remember what happened in the book" (Noel, grade 7) were examples of the desire for action consistently offered.

Another component of active learning discussed by the students was working in groups. Students felt group work allowed them to discuss their thoughts and to get feedback and support from peers as they learned new material. Mark, a seventh grader,

said, "I like group work because if you don't know something you can ask someone, you can ask other people."

While some students had positive experiences working in groups, others did not. Kaitlin (grade 8) stated that, "Everybody is talking, nobody is paying attention. My teacher, she puts me in groups with the boys, the bad boys in class and I'm in charge. I'm always in charge." Another student expressed their feelings about group work in the following manner:

My 3rd period class, we have groups now. Like, we switch groups once a week. We pick a color card and go to the desk with that color. I like groups, but a lot of people don't focus; a lot of people talk and stuff. Like in my group everybody talks and gets in trouble and doesn't pay attention. (Shauna, grade 6)

Some students said that their experiences working with groups depended on who was in their group. Roger (grade 7) expressed it in this way: "I like working in groups. But if I am assigned a group and I don't like the people I'm assigned, or if they don't work, or are really annoying... [I guess] it depends on who I'm with." Students realized that having friends as group members was not always in their best interest academically. A student remarked:

Instead of having a group where "hey it's my best friend" or having someone who is always focused like I am, I wouldn't want my friend because they would get off topic and my grade would come down. If I wanted a good grade, then I would have to do all the work. (Mark, grade 7)

Group work, however, was not the only way that students perceived themselves as being active learners. Many students mentioned that teachers who used technology while teaching added an active element to their instruction. The integration of technology into school settings is viewed as common sense by this generation of learners. A report published by The Pew Internet & American Life Project documented that 21 million adolescents use the Internet, with 11 million of those teens going online daily (Pew Research Center 2005), and 84% reported owning at least one personal media device (desktop computer, laptop, cell phone, Personal Digital Assistant [PDA]). Forty-five percent of those surveyed stated they owned cell phones and 33% used them to send text messages. The findings of this study shed light on the growth of technological usage by teenagers in this country, showing that more teens are utilizing technology as a means of communication. Chances are that the number of teenage users has increased since the report was published in 2005 due to the emergence of newer technology (e.g., mp3 players, cell phones with keyboards) and applications such as blogs and social networks.

A Kaiser Foundation (Rideout, Foehr, & Roberts, 2010) estimated that on an average day, 8-18 year-olds in this country use media for approximately seven and a half hours. Of this time almost 90 minutes is spent using a computer for purposes other than schoolwork, and over 70 minutes a day is spent playing video games. Students, at the time of the Kaiser study, were watching TV for over four hours per day and spending

over two hours listening to music. One student in our study affirmed the Kaiser Foundation findings when he shared the following: “I use game systems a lot, with multi-player gaming and I connect online and play games there too” (Billy, grade 8). Another student reported: “I use YouTube for looking up sports information and watching videos” (Roger, grade 7). Additionally, Noel (grade 7) stated that “We also have online blogs where we talk about books, I like it because is easier to type it and stuff on the blog and you can do spell check.”

Both of these studies point to that fact that the Millennial generation (children who have grown up since the advent of the World Wide Web and the related technologies) are in fact wired and connected to technology for large portions of their day. At the same time, advances in instruction using technology are increasing. It seems logical to students to connect the social use of technology to classroom practice, as can be seen in the following student responses: “Smart Boards are amazing! They let us go up there and move stuff around. It is easier to learn stuff on the Smart Board” (Jenna, grade 8); “We had to make iMovies and we learned how to use the computers to do more editing and production” (Lui, grade 7); and “It is good to learn how to use a Mac and a PC, because we are quickly becoming a technological society and knowing how to use computers from both companies [platforms] is a good thing” (Noel, grade 7).

Technology was also used as an assessment tool in several classrooms and the students appeared to be comfortable with this use.

In Mr. X’s class we use clickers, we had a test and it had 1, 2, 3 or A, B, C on it and you click the right answer. Then Mr. X could say, “Oh yeah, you guys got this or we need to review that.” (Billy, grade 8)

We have these clickers, we haven’t used them in a while but they are fun. They are active. Taking a test on it instead of using a pen and paper. I would like more of our classes to be more with the clickers... (Mark, grade 7)

In 2010, many American adolescents seem to be wired and connected at all times. The Pew Research Center (2010) reported that 83% of Millennials place their cell phones on or right next to their bed while sleeping. This need or desire to always be connected distinguishes this generation from earlier ones.

According to the 2009 Horizon Report published by The New Media Consortium, the increasing globalization is affecting the way we work, collaborate, and communicate. Individuals and the work they do are no longer place bound. It is now common practice in business and higher education to work, collaborate, and communicate with people from around the globe synchronously, as well as asynchronously. Technological advances such as video conferencing, instant messaging, and course management and shared filing simplify collaboration. The workplace as we know it is evolving as global communication networks become commonplace (Selfe & Selfe, 2008).

Since this generation is as wired and connected as they are, it makes sense to incorporate technology into learning in the classroom and elsewhere. The findings in this study add to the existing knowledge base on adolescents’ use and preference for technology and how technology can keep them actively engaged. Educators,

administrators, and researchers now need to determine how to capitalize on their use of technology and apply it to their academic pursuits. Simply put, students can be taught how to use technology for more than status updates on social networking sites (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, or MySpace).

### **Theme 3: Students' Technology Use Impacts Attitudes towards Learning**

The third theme suggests that students' technology use impacts attitudes towards learning and what comprised other aspects of their lives. Students shared that their time outside of school was filled with technologies ranging from gaming systems to computers and laptops being used to access social networking sites and video sites, along with school and teacher websites. These students also reported that they use their cell phones to text rather than call people. Keveon (a seventh grader) confirmed this when he noted the following, "I text somewhat, but not that often. I can text. I enjoy texting better than a conversation, because you can change the subject quicker and you don't have that silence..."

An interesting home-to-school connection made by one student had to do with social networking sites and finding an author's purpose. Billy (grade 8) offered:

We don't have time [to read for pleasure outside of school]...we read so much during the day. I think Facebook is a good comparison of reading, because it is fun to think about what the author [the person who posts the comment] said. If someone says something [posts a comment on the site] you can find the author's purpose!

When discussing their lives outside of school, the majority of students stated that they did not read for pleasure. This comment was interesting and led to deeper probing, asking whether they went online and read online zines (magazines) or websites or went to social networking sites and read the posts of family and friends. The majority of the students said yes, but that they didn't consider those activities as reading. Noel (grade 7) explained,

Well, I mean in a way it's kind of reading because you read peoples' status and some of them are long and in-depth, and then sometimes it is not really reading, because you don't really make inferences and look in-depth into it like you would for school reading.

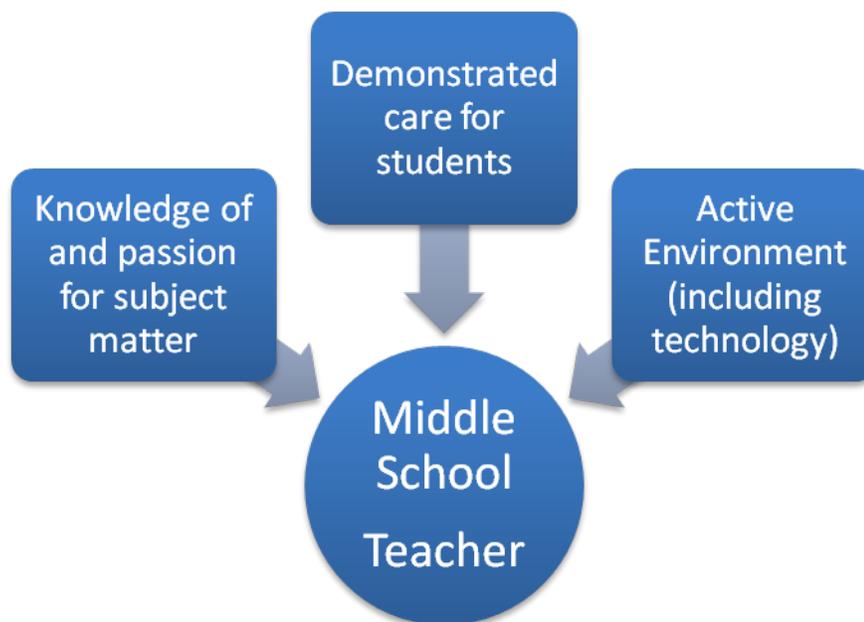
The nature of reading and accessing information is rapidly changing. Students seem less interested in reading textbooks or other traditional mediums. Yet, they read material online for a variety of purposes including information, leisure, and social interaction. Teachers who are willing to give students options for learning and incorporate medium that are of greater interest may find that students are less likely to shun reading and be more apt to engage in it enthusiastically. Tim, a seventh grader, stated, "You know, if we do it, we understand it, but if we just see it [read it] we won't remember it."

### The Students Have Spoken—Now What?

A growing body of research shows students have clear and often astute understandings of their own learning and learning environments. Educators' willingness to listen and incorporate student perspectives, within reason, is not much different than businesses surveying their customers regarding how to improve their services and products. In the case of middle school students, if we wish to value young adolescents and be prepared to teach them, perhaps we should directly inquire of them how they feel they learn best and try to incorporate their preferred learning modalities and ideas into our classrooms. If we want to engage our students in active and purposeful learning, we should first determine what this learning looks like through the eyes of the students. In order to establish purposeful learning and develop meaningful relationships, students need to see teachers as accessible, open and willing to create relationships with them built on respect and trust.

As Noel (grade 7) aptly stated, educators must strive to be the “whole package” for their students. In other words, teachers who are the “whole package” are teachers who are understanding, kind, and care about them as people. Additionally, teachers can create active learning environments that incorporate students' strengths and interests, including technology (see Figure 1). Students at this age are capable of articulating what they need and want concerning their education; they just need someone willing to listen and act on their behalf as advocates for their academic and social endeavors.

*Figure 1.* Middle-school students' depiction of a good middle school teacher.



## **Implications and Recommendations**

The participants in this study suggest that educators can make simple, but purposeful changes in the ways they engage students to make learning more fun and relevant. Specifically, teachers can show that they care about students as individuals; structure opportunities for students to interact with them and each other around real-world problems; and incorporate technology into learning in ways adolescents already use it.

### **Demonstrating Care**

In an effort to show students that they care, educators might consider getting to know students on a personal level (Doda & Knowles, 2008). They should also reflect on and be cognizant of what it feels like to be an adolescent learner. Having developmentally appropriate interactions—mature yet supported—with their students is important as middle schoolers transition to late adolescence and adulthood. Lastly, corrective feedback should be provided in a way that is supportive and instructive.

### **Active Classrooms**

Students revealed, in this and other studies (Certo et al., 2003; Cook-Sather, 2002; Noddings, 2002), that they want active, hands-on classrooms that incorporate games and manipulatives, and allow for various modes for demonstrating mastery, including for example, writing a play or creating a drawing of the Battle of Bunker Hill, rather than exclusively writing a term paper about it. These types of activities allow students to “do” the curriculum and not just have it presented to them. Additionally, the integration of technology has also been shown to increase student motivation and prepare students for the global workplace that they will someday enter (Selfe & Selfe, 2008).

### **Technology Integration**

The second decade of the 21st century is a time period of great technological advancement. Personal technology is getting smaller, cheaper, and smarter. As educators and researchers, we would be remiss if we neglected to teach safe and effective navigation of the various forms of technology that learners access. Therefore, we should explicitly teach online safety and appropriate use and credit for online sources, model the technology use, and develop digital-age experiences and assessments, as suggested by the International Society for Technology in Education (2008).

The middle-schoolers, who were part of the current study desired teachers who cared about them, who taught using active methods and who modeled technology usage. Perhaps by taking these purposeful steps, educational experiences can be created with students instead of transmitted to students.

## References

- Alliance for Excellent Education. (2009). *High school dropouts in America: Fact sheet*. Retrieved from [www.all4ed.org/files/GraduationRates\\_FactSheet.pdf](http://www.all4ed.org/files/GraduationRates_FactSheet.pdf)
- Certo, J. L., Cauley, K. M., & Chafin, C. (2003). Student's perspectives on their high school experience. *Adolescence*, 38, 705-724.
- Cook-Sather, A. (2002). Authorizing student's perspectives: Toward trust, dialogue, and change in education. *Educational Researcher*, 31, 3-14.
- Creswell, J. W. (2007). *Qualitative inquiry & research design: Choosing among five approaches* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Cushman, K., & Rogers, L. (2008). *Fires in the middle school bathroom: Advice for teachers from middle schoolers*. New York, NY: The New Press.
- DeFur, S. H., & Korinek, L. (2010). Listening to student voices. *Clearing House*, 83, 15-19.
- Demir, C. E. (2007). Metaphors as a reflection of middle school students' perceptions of school: A cross-cultural analysis. *Educational Research and Evaluation*, 13(2), 89-107.
- Ding, C., & Hall, A. (2007). Gender, ethnicity, and grade differences in perceptions of school experiences among adolescents. *Studies in Educational Evaluation*, 33, 159-174.
- Doda, N., & Knowles, T. (2008). Listening to the voices of young adolescents. *Middle School Journal*, 39(3), 26-33.
- Ferreira, M. M., & Bosworth, K. (2001). Defining caring teachers: Adolescents' perspectives. *Journal of Classroom Interaction*, 36(1), 24-30.
- Flutter, J. (2006). This place could help you learn: Student participation in creating better school environments. *Educational Review*, 58, 183-193.
- International Society for Technology in Education. (2008). *The ISTE NETS and performance indicators for teachers (NETS\*T)*. Retrieved from <http://www.iste.org/standards/nets-for-teachers.aspx>
- Knesting, K., & Waldron, N. (2006). Willing to play the game: How at-risk students persist in school. *Psychology in the Schools*, 43, 599-611.
- Merriam, S. B. (2009). *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass
- Miles, M. B., & Huberman, A. M. (1994). *Qualitative data analysis: An expanded sourcebook* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Peterson, A. C. (1988). Adolescent development. *Annual Reviews of Psychology*, 39, 583-607.
- Pew Research Center. (2010). *The millennials: Confident. Connected. Open to change*. Retrieved from <http://pewresearch.org/pubs/1501/millennials>
- Rideout, V. J., Foehr, U. G., & Roberts, D. F. (2010). *Generation M<sup>2</sup>: Media in the lives of 8-18 year-olds*. Retrieved from <http://www.kff.org/entmedia/mh012010pkg.cfm>
- Selge, R., & Selge, C. (2008). Convince me! Valuing multimodal literacies and composing public service announcements. *Theory Into Practice*, 47, 83-92.

- Shaunessy, E., & Alvarez-McHatton, P. (2009). Urban students' perceptions of teachers: Views of students in general, special, and honors education. *Urban Review, 41*, 486-503. doi:10.1007/s11256-008-0112-z
- Smith, J. A., Flowers, P., & Larkin, M. (2009). *Interpretative phenomenological analysis: Theory, method, and research*. London, UK: Sage.
- U.S. Census Bureau. (2009). *High school dropouts by age, race, and Hispanic origin: 1980 to 2007*. Retrieved from <http://www.census.gov/hhes/school/index.html>
- 

### Author Note

Dr. Mary Anne Steinberg is a Clinical Assistant Professor in the School of Special Education, School Psychology and Early Childhood Studies at the University of Florida. Her current interests include special education, working with students who are at risk, technology integration for instruction, and adolescent and adult literacy

Dr. Erica D. McCray is an assistant professor of special education at the University of Florida, where she teaches courses at the undergraduate and graduate levels. Dr. McCray's research interests include teacher development and quality, and issues of equity and diversity in P-12 schools and colleges of education.

Correspondence regarding this article can be addressed to both Erica and Mary Anne at: University of Florida, PO Box 117050/1403 Norman Hall, Gainesville, FL 32611; Phone: 352.273.4264.

Copyright 2012: Mary Anne Steinberg, Erica D. McCray, and Nova Southeastern University

### Article Citation

- Steinberg, M. A., & McCray, E. D. (2012). Listening to their voices: Middle schoolers' perspectives of life in middle school. *The Qualitative Report, 17*(Art. 68), 1-14. Retrieved from <http://www.nova.edu/ssss/QR/QR17/steinberg.pdf>
-