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What Makes Middle School Meaningful: Student Voices

Linda Tribuzio, Mercy College, USA

Abstract: The study "What Makes Middle School Meaningful: Student Voices" was conducted in a large northeastern urban school system in order to explore three concepts: (1) Student, teacher and administrator ideas about what makes middle school meaningful to inform curriculum development, (2) Student narratives and how they will assist in initiating, expanding and articulating a personal framework of the meaning of middle school and understanding of self, and (3) How to support teachers in their quest to know how to engage middle school students. Results included reports by middle school students and educators highlighting the need for caring, committed teachers. In addition, the limited fund of language available to students to answer the research question suggests the need for language enhancement so that the middle school student might better understand himself/herself and his/her unique conception of the meaning of middle school through personal narrative.

Keywords: student narratives, middle school, commitment, personal narrative

Introduction

Curriculum planners in urban and other school systems have searched for methods to engage students who exhibit non-compliant behavior: avoiding homework, late to class, not participating in class or participating inappropriately, and inappropriate use of language. Various approaches: Behavior Modification (Skinner, 1971), Affective Education (Long, 1996), Applied Behavior Analysis (Alberto & Troutman, 1999), counseling (Toporek, Gerstein, Fouad, Roysircar-Sodowski & Israel, 2006), journaling/narrative/reflective practice (Bruner, 1986; Schon, 1991; Staratt, 1994), class meetings (Ervin, 2004; Larrivee, 2005), integrated curriculum (Beane, 2000), Classrooms of Choice (Glasser, 1998; Ervin, 2004), Differentiation (Tomlinson, 2001), planning for Multiple Intelligences (Gardner, 1999), and others have been used in an effort to foster a school experience that is meaningful to the student and that will engage students in the learning process. *Meaningful* is defined for this study as "full of purpose, significance or value" (Dictionary.com), "full of significance, value" (Dictionary.com – unabridged).

Although it is important to distinguish between the concept of making meaning (sense) of the world and self-meaning (who am I?), there are ways in which the two are intertwined regarding student understanding of himself/herself/him and his place in the world.

In the fall of 2005, this researcher asked a dean of a northeastern urban secondary school, "What engages the students?" He said simply, "Listen to the Kids" (Tribuzio, 2005). Bruner (1986) discusses the importance of narrative in creating one's personal concept of meaning: "If [the young person] succeeds in developing a sense of 'reflective intervention' in the knowledge he

encounters he will control and select knowledge as needed" (p. 132). Vygotsky (cited in Bruner, 1986) views "conceptual learning [as] a collaborative enterprise involving an adult who enters into a dialogue in a fashion that provides the child with hints and prompts" (Bruner, 1986). Ervin (2004), referring to the work of William Glasser (1998) posits, "One of the most effective ways to help people meet their need for power is simply to listen to them" (p. 110). Philip H. Phenix (cited in Jacobs and Kritsonis, 2006) says, "His [the student's] real longing is for meaning and whether he recognizes it or not, all his striving, whatever its apparent object, is directed toward the enlargement and deepening of meaning" (p. 92).

Inviting middle school students to talk about what makes school meaningful should be beneficial to the students' concepts of self and their ideas of what makes the school experience have substance and importance for them. "Language not only transmits, it creates or constitutes knowledge or reality" (Bruner, 1986, p. 132). "It is through narrative practices of all types that we eventually discern the character of our own self" (Muldoon, 2006, p. 10). "Narrative doesn't merely describe the self and meaning but helps form them" (Muldoon, 2006, p. 10).

Teachers in a summer 2005 class of this researcher in the New Teacher Residency Program in New York City reported that they were concerned about some students in their New York City public schools' middle school classes who exhibited the behaviors cited above. The teachers, eager to assist the students, stated that they were not sure about which strategies to use or personal approaches to take to help the students to engage in course material.

An overarching theme of this qualitative study is the recognition and acknowledgement of the voices of students and their teachers and administrators who have demonstrated an interest and commitment to the northeastern urban school system where it was conducted.

Hypothesis

Inviting middle school students, teachers and administrators to explore their perceptions of what makes middle school meaningful will assist curriculum planners in creating curricula that is meaningful to middle school students. Sonia Nieto (1999) says, "…learning begins when students begin to see themselves as competent, capable, and worthy of learning, One way that students begin to see themselves this way is when their voices and perspectives are included in the transformation of schools" (p. 123).

Given the opportunity to articulate what makes school meaningful should yield a further understanding by students and an investment in the curriculum. The invitation to speak their minds will result in enhanced self-efficacy when asked, "How does it make you feel to be participating in this study?"

The northeastern urban city teachers will experience support and will have information that may improve their practice as a result of their participation in the study.

Does a lack of language development hamper students in middle school from expressing their needs and desires regarding engagement in the curriculum? Is it a lack of expressive language or a lack of opportunity?

Given the opportunity to express desires and thoughts will promote student understanding and engagement with the curriculum. Will it foster creativity? How does the opportunity to answer the research questions help a student who is in middle school, between independence and dependence, to feel more inclined to engage in the curriculum?

Methodology

Interviews were arranged with two teachers who expressed an interest in learning more about "what works with middle school students." Four of their middle school students and five present and past administrators in the same schools were invited to be participants. Two of the administrators worked in the traditional middle school in the 1970s.

Originally, students who exhibited non-compliant behavior (defined in "Introduction") but do not have a special education diagnosis were to be identified for the study. "Non-compliant behavior, or oppositional behavior, means not doing what has been requested by another person" (Ysseldyke & Algozinne, 2006, p. 358). However, for the study, students were randomly chosen by administrators.

Procedure

Interviews were arranged by telephone. Each teacher identified two students and one administrator to be invited to participate.

Copy of Instrument

The Research Questions are:

1. What makes school meaningful? Is there anything that would make it meaningful?

   (If silence or questions about the definition of "meaningful" occur, a definition of "meaningful" will be verbally given to the participant and available in writing.)

   After the participant has answered question #1, she/he will be asked the following:

2. How does it make you feel to be participating in this study?

The study is a qualitative one, "as qualitative studies are well suited for the meaning people place on events, processes, and structures of their lives: their perceptions, assumptions, prejudgments, presuppositions and for check those meanings to the social world around them" (Van Maan, as quoted in Miles and Huberman, 1994, p. 10).

The Northeastern Urban Department of Education, Mercy College approval letters, and the sample parents, teacher and administrator consent forms are on file at Mercy College, Bronx, New York.

Significance

The significance of the study is threefold:

1. Student, teacher, and administrator ideas about what makes middle school meaningful will yield valuable information for the northeastern urban city curriculum planners.

2. Students' narratives will assist them in initiating, expanding and articulating a personal framework of the meaning of middle school.

3. The northeastern urban city teachers will experience support in their quest to know what works to engage middle school students; what makes middle school meaningful.

Results

The most prominent result of this study was the wide discrepancy between the sophisticated language in the answers of the teachers and administrators and the hesitance and much less extensive language use of the students. This researcher expected to hear the professionals speak in language with extensive syntax and semantics. The time lag between question and answer and the limited choice of words to answer the question was significant for some students. This was especially true in the Traditional Middle School (TMS).

Students, teachers and administers associated with the following two schools participated in the study:

TMS – Transitional Middle School
AMS – Academy Middle School

The themes of trust, safety, respect, connection, listening, and teachers or others who are authentic and caring are found in the results of the study. An additional theme is the impact of the ineffective use of language. When asked the research question, students in the TMS exhibited a 5-10 second lapse before answering with sentences with limited syntax (one or two words) or before the teacher filled in with a prompt or answer.

Some students seemed to be repeating phrases that were heard in the answers of their teachers or administrators. This would suggest that there may have been good faith prompting by educators in preparation of the interviews.

Traditional Middle School (TMS)

When the Traditional Middle School students did answer, they spoke about future social and future reasons that make middle school meaningful: proms, graduating, getting successful jobs. There was an obvious change in affect (smiling, eye contact with each other, use of more language) when they spoke of the social events in particular. The only time they "took off" (used more age appropriate syntax) in spontaneous speech was when discussing the upcoming prom: dresses, preparation, etc. The events discussed by these students related to the future.

This researcher may have made the mistake of allowing the teacher to be present when asking TMS students to answer the research question. When students did not answer within approximately 5-10 seconds, the teacher jumped into the conversation with prompts such as, "You'll be preparing for high school, for being an adult, so when you get to high school you can handle the freedom…"

It could be concluded that this prompting did not allow the students adequate time to think about their answers. The following excerpt exemplifies the theory that the teacher, again perhaps in good faith, may have prompted the students with answers to t he research question.

When asked during her interview to answer the question, "What makes middle school meaningful?" from a student's point of view, TMS teachers said that students would say, "…get good grades, graduate [to high school]…pass classes."

TMS Student 1 hesitated often when answering, allowed the teacher to prompt, and said very little. But she did repeat the teacher's theme to a certain extent by talking about succeeding in the future and being successful, earning money for her family.

TMS Student 2 was also prompted by the teacher about the choice of high school. After 5-10 second of silence, TMS Teacher asked, "Did you get accepted into a particular high school?" TMS Student 2 replied, "Yes, Law. TMS Teacher asked, "What is the benefit of that?" TMS Student 2 answered that grades, graduation, future and earnings were the benefit. This answer was very similar to that of TMS Student 1 who had been interviewed the previous day.

Next, TMS Teacher took over the conversation, and this researcher observed and decided not to stop the discourse. This researcher realized that she had been mistaken in not telling TMS Teacher that a major part of the study was to listen to language used by participants. However, at this point in the interview process at TMS, it was too late to make the point about what was being observed. Now it seemed important to listen to how TMS Teacher was prompting the answer.

Cursing

The original idea for the present study came from a graduate class discussion of the etiology of cursing by urban middle school students. This researcher asked the participants at TMS: "What do you think about cursing in the schools?" A conversation about social skills and cursing began when both students were interviewed together. TMS Teacher was also in attendance.

TMS Student 1 spoke of the importance of the way "I speak to people, observe people to see if they are good people to talk to." TMS Teacher asked, "How do you feel when other kids get penalized for a whole class period for some student's cursing?" TMS Students 1 and 2 answered, "It's not funny." TMS Student 1 stated,

> When I was young, I would get a feeling in my stomach. Now, I'm kind of used to it. You shouldn't curse in front of teachers….It is disrespectful. I wouldn't like to hear little children curse. Parents use it, they call them names. They [students] hear it outside.

TMS Principal (in earlier interview) reported that she tells teachers not to focus on cursing, but to move on with the lesson at hand. She has teachers practice class scenarios in order to desensitize teachers to student behavior such as cursing.

Academy Middle School (AMS)

Academy Middle School (AMS) students interviewed separately from the teacher, made statements about student government, clubs, and interested teachers making middle school meaningful. It is interesting to note that present activities and relationships were reported, not future events as had been reported by TMS students. AMS students' answers were longer, and they used more age appropriate language and syntax (full sentences and vocabulary such as *opportunity*, *accomplish*, *encourage*, *worthwhile*, *challenging*).

The AMS Principal reported that social development is crucial in middle school. She stated that students need to be validated and that they are at a stage of needing independence and freedom. This response echoes the NYC BOE article, "What is Middle School?" (NYC BOE, 2002). Middle school students are in the "early stages of a conflict between their desire to be independent and the necessity to depend on others" (p. 1).

She continued on, stating,

> Administration must value and understand them; they should not confront them [students]. Administrators and teachers must be good listeners. Students need space, time, and a room where they can feel comfortable to scream. The challenge has to do with people who don't understand.

The dean at another high school in the city, independent of this study, stated, "Just listen to the students." When asked what was the best way to engage students (Tribuzio, 2005), this administrator gives choices (see William Glasser, *Power of Choice*). She talked about making the students part of the process, with student government, giving choices in clubs. She spoke of choice, voice, and accountability. AMS Principal stated that as students, they want to feel important.

AMS Principal continued to say that she thought students would report that the school (AMS) allowed different teachers more independence, travel, accountability for self and their own movement. There was a different type of teaching going on.

This principal of the Academy Middle School continued that there is a difference between elementary school and middle school. Developmental and social issues are crucial. They must be validated. Administrators must understand that the child needs help and support, but not by attacking and screaming, or embarrassing. They need time, space and choices.

These words were supported by the AMS Teacher who was interviewed. Hers was the most extensive interview with the following themes. Students in middle school are caught between being closed in and freedom (see proposal): "Some of my students don't have anyone who will help them believe that they can accomplish. My challenge is to challenge them, but not so much that they will shut down." For those who have trouble with language use, she finds that ELA writing is helpful.

She talked about the importance of having the students write. They need to write about who they are, and she often has to stop a lesson to extend a teaching moment on what is written.

AMS Student 1 shows evidence of a higher level of language use:

AMS Student 1:	I think middle school is worthwhile but sometimes it's challenging and there are struggles. Sometimes I know that I can accomplish anything. It's a great opportunity. I think I have a good chance of passing to college.
Interviewer:	What makes you think about high school and college?
AMS Student 1:	My teachers, my family encourage me.
Interviewer:	What do you think about cursing in school?
AMS Student 1:	It's very disrespectful and dishonest, if you curse in one class and don't in another. Out of school the cursing is worse.

There was talk about how cursing represents you.

AMS Student 1:	In student government, they tell us to make sacrifices, keep going and that we don't want to make the same mistakes [as others].

Former Administrators Weigh In About TMS

This researcher was fortunate to be able to speak to two former administrators of the Traditional Middle School, both of whom now teach at the college level. One, F.S., had been the principal at the TMS in the 1970s and the other, W.M., had been an assistant principal also in the 1970s. A bit of background will set the foundation for the answers that these administrators from the 1970s gave to the question, "What Makes Middle School Meaningful?"

S.F.

Dr. S.F. grew up in Harlem. He had been a counselor for the street gangs before becoming an administrator. As he said, he "talked the language." He was the principal of TMS in the 1970s. There was high violence in and around the schools. He began the job by visiting four major gangs in their basement "offices." "In the basement we weren't school officials" (S.F., Spring 2009). He went to gang meetings and mediated. An informal arrangement was made and there was no violent activity in and around the school after those visits. A former mayor helped in keeping control by enlisting former gang members to help control the atmosphere. There was a liaison from the commissioner to the gangs, a bridge. All came to the meetings. S.F. reported that he "talked the language and they [gangs] knew I was authentic." He used street language and he was willing to meet with the gangs. He met with them after school; he was a trained psychotherapist. He worked directly with the gangs and he knew their stories.

> My trust quotient went up. I talked with the kids, developed a rapport. Also, on four floors there were paramilitary guards. There were assistant principals on each floor. There were student patrols of former gang members. But you couldn't be in a gang and patrol. Assistant principals were in command.

When asked why the former gang members accepted this, S.F. said that the paramilitary stance replaced the gang hierarchy. At this point, graffiti tagging diminished.

One might ask what this has to do with making middle school meaningful. As Maslow and others contend, a safe environment is a basic need of all human beings.

S.F. continued that connections developed as a result of deep trust and increased networking. "What I did was to make the school more like a school. Over time, as situations resolved, academics improved." S.F. continued, "When I couldn't get [situations] to resolve, there was a failure in the academic areas."

> Interviewer: So, what makes middle school meaningful to students?
>
> S.F.: [It's meaningful] when they feel safer coming to school, the climate makes it meaningful. Bright kids can get what they have to because there are teachers who care.

AMS Principal had said something similar. S.F.: "I'd leave to go find a kid I knew in the neighborhood. I would shop and get haircuts in the neighborhood, in the [nearby] area. The kids would see me."

S.F. tells the story of a young woman student who had been missing for three days. Her worried mother called Dr. S.F. Dr. S.F. found the young woman in one of the gang hang-outs. A few years later, someone at a graduation ceremony at a New Jersey medical school called out, "Dr. F.!" It was this young woman who had just graduated as an M.D.

S.F. stated, “The major difference between elementary school and high school is that middle school is a transition zone where they learn to become adults and cling to protection [at the same time]” [Beane also said this.] Some of the challenges he saw were ELL students, different cultures, and the inability to use the language.

S.F. relates that when the other administrator who was interviewed was at TMS (1971), there was a political shift; political unions became involved and school boards shifted people around.

Interviewer: What do you think makes middle school meaningful now?

S.F.: There has been a shift toward responsibility; socially and intellectually. Cooperative learning/hands-on/constructivism. Curriculum is different—it’s diagnostic, prescriptive, invention oriented. It would appeal to me as a kid. You are able to excel, not compete but work together. You have individual testing, hands-on collaboration, and cooperation. Cultural groups are respected; there is interdependence.

W.M.

The Assistant Principal lists had no appointments for over a year. Finally, W.M. had two job offers. The school was overcrowded, built for 1400 and had 2700. They had to go to double sessions, classes of 28-30.

Students were tracked by academic ability. Students were promoted even if they were more than two years behind grade level. They would not be held back two times. W.M. grew up on Shakespeare Avenue in the Bronx. “I had special education kids in my class before inclusion.” [This was also before some special education legislation in the 1970s.] “Students with mental retardation were considered so with two deviations below the mean.” There was no clear mandate. Teachers did what they thought was best. All were accepted. New students were accepted and protected in the district which would accommodate people from Puerto Rico. We were in a remote area of the city. There were gangs in the 1970s. When S.F. was principal, he had sufficient clout because he grew up in the neighborhood. There was one guy; he was a nice guy. He was a war lord, chief fighter in the university area. He became a very successful wine distributor. He was a chess player. He grew to have a private label of his own. He would have backyard parties.

Researcher: What makes middle school meaningful?

W.M.: The personality [of the teacher]. Teachers that can relate to kids. They can identify with them. I was a “ball-buster” but I identified with them [i.e., cared, didn’t look down]. I remember when I was Assistant Principal and there were three teachers who the kids identified with, three lunatic teachers! I got them what they wanted. They worked as a team [collaboration]. There was this loony math teacher. He would dress in

> second-hand theatrical clothes. The '70s was a time of alternate dress. Then a brand new, extremely bright principal came in. In her first weeks, there was $100,000 worth of damage done to the windows. Schools like that needed to restore order. The kids couldn't identify with her.

W.M. spoke of the important of social studies and values clarification [now called advisories, class meetings]. "There was one teacher who would beat up his kids—punch them out to let them know that he was displeased. But every day he'd play ball with them."

Discussion

A major theme of this paper is the fact that people who genuinely care give students the "backing" and encouragement to achieve. This was evident over and over, in obvious and subtle ways. Students reported that what makes middle school meaningful is family and school professionals who encourage them. Interviews showed evidence of teachers caring enough to prompt or encourage interviewees with suggested answers. This may have been done to "look good," but there is a good possibility that the teachers wanted the students to engage in the interview in a meaningful way. In the 1970s, teachers and other educators came to the neighborhoods, dialogued informally and meaningfully, even outside of school, to engage students. Teachers who would play sports with them, visit their "clubs" and gang headquarters, or come to the neighborhood got the respect of the students.

S.F. reported that the "ability to use their language (vernacular) is what makes school meaningful. W.M. said that "teachers who can relate to kids" made middle school meaningful. A high school Assistant Dean said, "listen to them." Beane (1992) said that educators should go from "gatekeepers to meaning makers or facilitators" (p. 14). Simply put, that means authority in the class, to interpreter of knowledge, to stepping aside and watching the student do the meaning making. Again, Beane (1992) says, "Are educators willing to try to take the leap of faith—willingness to turn themselves over to young people?" (p. 14).

An equally important theme that emerged was the limited use of language on the part of some students when answering the question. Was this because they are at a loss for words? Do they not yet have the language skills to describe meaning? Would there be a difference in a non-urban setting? If "students need to know themselves, be social and construct their own meaning" (Beane, 1992) through their voice, what happens when their voice is hampered by a lack of language or their inability to articulate what makes their education meaningful? Are students resorting to cursing because they have limited language to use?

The Center for Research of Educational Diversity and Excellence promoted pedagogical standards for effective teaching and learning:

1. Teachers and students producing together
2. Developing language and literacy across the curriculum
3. Connecting school to students' lives
4. Teaching complex thinking
5. Teaching through conversation

If students are not proficient in language skills, how can they "develop language and literacy across the curriculum"? How can they be "taught through conversation"? How can they be "taught through complex thinking" in collaboration with teachers? Beane (1992) states that inviting students to pose questions "allows the student to make his own meaning" (p. 8). Muldoon (2006) states, "It is through narrative of all types that we eventually discern the character of our own self" (p. 10).

It is vital to consider the importance of the two major themes of this paper: (1) the necessity and value in having an authentic, caring educator to foster meaning in middle school and (2) the observation that some students have the limited access to language that will help them describe middle school as meaningful. Therefore, they are robbed of a means to strengthen concept of self.

The first theme of connectedness and caring highlights the importance of teacher training, evaluation and support. Hallowell (1999) speaks of the 12 important personal ties or "connections" that make meaning in life. The second theme of language development suggests that it is crucial to evaluate and enhance language skills from as early an age as possible. In this way students in middle school will have a means to create self and self-esteem through articulation of needs, desires, and through conversational relationships that use words other than the fall-back curse words that are so often heard in urban middle schools. In conversation with two experienced speech and language pathologists, this researcher asked what they believed would help students increase expressive language. They responded that assisting students in learning emotion words, the words to identify emotions would help students use language to explain rather than react. Also, the goal would be to use language to debate rather than physically fight. In addition, the speech and language pathologists suggested the use of small social groups to practice pragmatic (social) language (Tribuzio, 2010).

Further study will focus on the great need for high-level teacher evaluation and early childhood as well as middle school language development. Bean (1992) says that students need to pose questions. The AMS teacher expressed the same sentiment.

Further research related to the significance of the study may include interviewing participants of the original study and asking, "What did you think about after being part of the study?" This could be particularly significant if the questions were asked after a series of speech and language pathology created language enrichment seminars were conducted. The participants would again be asked, "What do you now think makes middle school meaningful?"

Language Enrichment Unit Outline

Format adapted from Backward Design, Wiggins and McTighe, (1998).

Big Idea: **We Know Ourselves and We Tell Others Who We Are Through Language**

Desired Results:

Essential Questions:

1. How does language help us to know ourselves?
2. How can the use of language help students to enhance self esteem and self knowledge?
3. How can language help students to identify their world and its meaning?

Understandings:

1. Students will understand that an extensive fund and use of expressive language helps one to know one's self.
2. Students will understand that an extensive fund and use of expressive language helps one to present his or her authentic self to the world.
3. Students will understand that language helps a person to make meaning of his or her world.
4. Students will understand that there are many ways to express one's self.

Acceptable Evidence

1. Students will create a play, poster board demonstration, or video that addresses the unit's Understandings.
2. Students will collect data and graph each other's use of new vocabulary.
3. Self Assessment: Students will record testimonials relating the personal benefits of acquiring and using an enhanced fund of language.

Planning Learning Experiences

Lessons will incorporate Wiggins and McTighe's, (1998) concept of WHERETO:

W- Where is the lesson going?
H-Hold the students' interest.
E- Equip students with tools and strategies.
R- Rethink the *Big Idea.*
E- Evaluate
T- Tailor the lesson to student interests and learning styles.
O- Organize for Learning.

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