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Foreword

Let me say this simply—teachers need this book. At a time when only test scores matter, when pedagogy means "hand out more worksheets so students can practice for the tests," when teachers are reluctant to select curriculum and teach in a way they know is better for their students, Rick Wormeli lays out a clear vision of what responsive middle-level teaching should be. This is a book for all reasons—help for the novice teacher to focus on the essential, support for the mid-career teacher wanting to improve her craft, and inspiration and confirmation for the later-career teacher as well.

But make no mistake, this book is much more than an exhortation to do better for young adolescents. Wormeli does a masterful job pulling together seemingly disparate threads—connecting middle school philosophy with standards; current brain research with multiple intelligences theory. Wormeli's discussion of differentiated instruction may be the most powerful section of the book for any teacher.

After a fast start in the 1960s through the early 1990s, middle-level education is now under ever-increasing criticism and scrutiny. While some school districts claim that middle school philosophy and practices have not served them well, other schools recognize an essential truth—the middle school teacher is the most important element in creating a successful middle-level classroom. In *Meet Me in the Middle: Becoming an Accomplished Middle-Level Teacher,* Wormeli shows how this is so.

Many books about teaching consist of long to-do lists—to be an effective teacher one must be willing to take risks, enjoy ambiguity, and have a sense of humor. Important, yes, but not exactly words to get us through next week! Rick Wormeli doesn't waste time telling us what we must do; rather he shows us what we must be to be effective teachers of ten- to fourteen-year-olds. His ideas on motivating young adolescents are less prescriptive dos and don'ts than ideas about forming connections with kids and building strong learning communities. This book is definitely more strategy than technique, as it should be.

Anyone who sees Wormeli in his classroom, hears him present at a conference, or reads his work, in this book or his columns in *Middle Ground,*

Motivating Young Adolescents 2

Some days I think I would have it made as a teacher if I could blend my grammar lessons with a surround-sound speaker system that played hot music tracks with vibrating bass lines. As students completed research projects, lasers would shoot through the backlit, mist-filled classroom, forming red graphic organizers that would hover in the air above their heads. One wall of the classroom would slide open, revealing a twenty-five-foot movie screen featuring filmed versions of students' narratives. We'd eat popcorn and pizza, and everyone would earn an A.

Getting young adolescents to pay attention and learn is 80 percent of our battle in middle schools. The rest is pedagogy. However, I believe there are ways to motivate middle school students short of turning our classrooms into multimedia playgrounds. I've heard the testimonials about zero brain growth in this age group, and I don't buy it. Young adolescents are moving through one of the most dynamic stages of development of their lives. As teachers, we might have to bushwhack through the hormonal tendrils on a daily basis, but it's worth the effort to find the gold inside each child.

If you want students to invest in your lessons, you need to be able to answer yes to most of the following questions:

Are you interested in knowing and being with your students?
Have you created a classroom where students feel safe enough to share their emotions?
Are your lessons vivid?
Are you enthusiastic about your subject?
Do you build suspense by giving them something to look forward to?
Do your lessons take into account the varied learning styles of students?
Can all students succeed in your classroom? Nothing motivates like success.
Is the material relevant to your students' lives?
Do your lessons maintain momentum?
Do you clearly communicate instructions and expectations?
Do your students know why they are learning certain concepts and skills?

A room such as my English teacher's that is decorated with miscellaneous objects is not only interesting, but a comfort. When I come into the room, I feel relaxed and prepared to enjoy myself. Being comfortable in a teaching room is important because it is easier to learn.
■ Kara, seventh grade

Are the assessments authentic? Do the students know how they're going to be tested? Do they get regular feedback from you?

Do the students play a role in the teaching and learning? Do they occasionally have choices?

Do your students have proof of your belief in their ability to learn?

If you answer no to any of these questions, your students will probably lose interest and lack motivation for learning. Think back to when you were in middle school—what would have worked for you? The next time you make an assignment, sit at an absent student's desk and complete the task yourself. Look around the room and ask what would make the assignment, the lesson, and the room more inviting.

Express Interest in Knowing and Being with Your Students

Do what it takes to learn about their cultures. Read literature with characters similar to them. Visit them at home. Such visits have never failed to open my eyes.

Satisfy their question, What's in it for me? as you begin each lesson. Demonstrate how content or skills have direct connections to students' lives. Ask a colleague about the relevance of the material if you can't find a connection.

My sixth-grade teacher, Mr. Stanley, was an amazing teacher. He was such a good teacher because he was extremely fun and energetic. He would almost make learning entertainment. He would be very serious but funny at the same time, and I still don't understand how he pulled it off. Also, another reason why he was such a great teacher was because he would let kids be kids but still have the class under his control. He would be so energetic and fun he would have everyone listening to him without yelling or telling the kids to listen.
■ Stephen, eighth grade

Hand out cards at open house events and ask parents, What is important for me to know about your child? Or ask the students, What is it that you enjoy most about school? What can I do to help you learn?

Create an Emotionally Safe Environment

Students will attempt to answer a teacher's questions if they know they won't be ridiculed or considered slow by the teacher or their peers. Dr. Richard Lavoie, an education consultant from Boston, equates this to gambling with poker chips. A parent can build up her child's supply of poker chips with a favorite breakfast, a compliment, or words of encouragement as her child leaves for school in the morning. But one sarcastic comment from an adult at school ("What are you,

Brain Research Applied to Middle School

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I was in middle school in the mid-1970s when I first saw the film based on Isaac Asimov's *Fantastic Voyage*. Finally, I thought, I'm going to find out what the human mind looks like from the inside. Who cared that it was only Hollywood's interpretation of the brain's inner workings? The movie won an Oscar for special effects; that was good enough for me.

In the movie, scientists shrink a team of surgeons to microscopic proportions and send them in a submarine to the interior cavities of a critically ill patient. I remember watching the submersible *Proteus* maneuver through the brain tissue while little flashes of light moved along blue-gray strands surrounding it. One of the scientists claimed that the lights were thoughts traveling as impulses along neural pathways. How badly I wanted to reach in with some kind of scope and read those thoughts! To see the physical essence of the human mind, or even the metaphorical brain drawer in which the thoughts were held, would be the greatest thing in the world. All I had to go on up to that point was an illustration from an encyclopedia and what I could see of a pig's brains at the local butcher shop. Small, wrinkled, lifeless—those physical representations of the brain didn't seem majestic enough for an organ that has generated complex languages, created a method of space travel, and advanced medicine to such a degree that our life expectancy rates are double what they were one hundred years ago.

As we enter a new millennium, we have keener observations about the workings of the human mind than at any time in history. We have discovered more knowledge in the last ten years, for example, than in all of the centuries up to this point. As teachers, the flurry of brain research might seem overwhelming at times, but understanding it can help us improve our practice and develop new insights about adolescent learners.

Memory is the big issue for many teachers. Will students remember what they've learned in our classes? How can we get them to complete their homework, let alone recall President Hoover's dealings with big business during the Depression? It turns out that memory is a very coherent process, and it's an easy tool to use in our classrooms.

relax, and students no longer build those neural pathways. To prevent this, I often conduct a triad response:

1. I call on Casey to answer a question. He responds.
2. I call on his classmate, Kyle, and ask if he agrees or disagrees with Casey's comments. Kyle can add, argue, or clarify points with Casey. The second student must support or refute the point with evidence.
3. I ask a third student, Anna, to evaluate Kyle's comments and add her own opinions.
4. Casey gets the last word. He can revise his earlier comments, agreeing or disagreeing with his classmates.
5. If appropriate, I offer my response as teacher.

Because students never know whether a classmate will ask them to support, refute, or clarify their comments, they must keep their neural pathways open to the topic until the end of the discussion.

We can further extend processing along the neural pathways by increasing wait times. Research shows that the quality, complexity, length, and frequency of students' responses in the classroom increase in an atmosphere of expectation and patience. In each interaction, there are several possible points of waiting:

- The time between announcing a question and asking it
- The time between asking a question and calling on someone to answer it
- The time between calling on someone and requiring the answer
- The time between a student's answer to a question and the teacher's response to the question

Do we extend all of these wait times with each question? Not if we want to finish the lesson this decade. However, we should try to provide some extended wait time every day. It will improve students' responses and teach them the habit of thinking before speaking.

Recent research suggests that the brain continues to grow through puberty. During these years, the brain is hard-wired for tasks. To build on that framework, adolescents need engaging and relevant learning experiences and typically must repeat concepts and skills until the ideas become permanent additions to the basic structure. This brings up the idea of brain elasticity, which suggests that the brain changes physiologically as a result of experience. The more we learn, the more the brain adapts to receive the learning. In other words, the more we learn, the more we *can* learn.

Pat Wolfe and Ron Brandt, former editors of *Educational Leadership,* discussed this in a 1998 theme issue of the journal, "How the Brain Learns." I've found this theory in almost all the brain research books from the last five