Middle school. This word strikes fear into the hearts of many teachers who hear it. Educators picture rambunctious, hormone driven, and impudent kids running around school with no respect for people or property challenging teachers to punish them. In fact, incoming teachers view middle school as a last resort and would rather be hired at a high school or elementary school. However, what teachers fail to recognize is that middle school students are at a time in their lives when a good educational curriculum and a great teacher can have a profound impact on the student’s future choices and life decisions. Adolescence is a time for trial in the young adult and a good teacher can be an excellent model for the developing mental, physical, emotional, and social skills in the student (Rehage and Johnson 1980). Students in the middle levels of school need more than education about a particular subject, they need to be educated about life and how to behave in socially acceptable ways (Carnegie Council on adolescent development 1989). Since middle level students require an extensive structure of education it makes sense to have schools designed especially for their needs. This particular school would be called an “ideal middle school.” When talking about an ideal middle school many things come to mind. One could say that an ideal middle school should have curriculum that is challenging, integrative, and exploratory. Another trait of an effective middle school is: varied teaching and learning approaches, while at the same time having flexible and organized structures. Effective middle schools also have programs that teach good health with support services for students (Knowles and Brown 2000). The list above is a great starter for designing a school that meets the needs of developing adolescents; however, one vital thing is missing from the formula: a good teacher. A good teacher is the fuel that makes the middle school run. Without them the goals of the ideal middle school would not become a reality. Therefore the purpose pf this paper
is to discuss the characteristics of an effective middle school teacher: a good sense of humor, flexibility, and an undying energy to teach.

The first characteristic of an effective middle level teacher is a sense of humor. A sense of humor can lighten the mood and break the tension of an emotionally charged classroom. According to Willems and Clifford, middle level teachers need to have the “I’m wild and crazy” attitude of Steve Martin (1999). These teachers are not afraid to be fools and embarrass themselves in front of the class. When a teacher is willing to be outgoing, it eases the apprehension of the students. It lets the kids know it is alright to express themselves. Adolescents are so worried about what their peers think, so when they see the teacher acting crazy they will let go and not be as afraid to get involved in class activities. Teachers with a good sense of humor make the class more enjoyable by enhancing the material with their own personality. They have the ability to improve the students’ morale by creating a positive environment (Willems and Clifford 1999). Also these teachers can capture the attention of the students and make the most boring material interesting.

This style of teaching was observed at Indian Springs Middle school in Columbia City Indiana. Indian Springs is what many would call a “real” middle school. The teachers taught in teams and the class periods were ninety minutes long. The teachers used collaboration and would quite frequently design lessons that encompassed all the fields of study. While observing the seventh grade science class it was obvious that the teacher used a variety of fun and games to get the students motivated to learn. During one observation it was earth day and she dressed up as Mother Earth and performed a skit depicting how pollution can destroy the earth. As she described each pollutant the kids would throw that specific pollutant at her until she was covered with many substances. When that was done she read a story to the kids about the dangers of
continually polluting the planet. This whole activity tied into a research paper that the students were writing about specific pollutants and how they could damage the earth. This teacher was not afraid to go outside the box and be wild. She let the kids know that it was alright to be passionate about things that you believe in. She tied in fun activities with the lesson to get the kids interested and concerned about the problem of pollution. What could have otherwise been a boring research project turned into a fun way of finding out about our planet. As this example shows, a humorous and exciting teacher is able to make lessons enjoyable, while at the same time teaching the lesson at hand.

The second characteristic of an effective middle school teacher is being able to be flexible in their teaching throughout the day. Not everything planned in the lesson is going to go according to plan. A number of reasons including different class’ abilities, problems with students’ comprehension, and activity time constraints can cause a teacher to change the lesson at any time. An effective middle level teacher must be able to seamlessly correct the problem and come up with a solution within a matter of moments without the students detecting the problem. Effective middle school teachers can be compared to a gymnast. Gymnasts just like middle school teachers have to be flexible in order to get the job done. Flexible teachers can get off topic when appropriate and create meaningful discussions but also get back on topic when distractions come up. They also can sense student difficulties and adjust the lesson accordingly (Willems and Clifford 1999).

While observing a class at Manchester Junior High School the eighth grade science teacher masterfully demonstrated this skill of flexibility. During a lesson on velocity and speed he sensed the students were having trouble understanding the difference between the two because when he was asking questions no one was responding and the ones who were gave
wrong answers. Even though his lesson had him going past speed and velocity that day and on to acceleration, he took time and explained the material in more detail instead of moving on. This put him back a day in his lesson plan but he adjusted by combining acceleration with a fun lab that dealt with cars and motion. His quick thinking and sense of student problems saved them from having trouble on the test. Flexibility is a major factor contributing to the success of an effective middle school teacher.

The last characteristic of an effective middle school teacher is an undying energy to teach. These are the teachers who always have a positive outlook about their students and believe that all kids can learn. They truly care about their students’ well-being and go out of their way to make the students happy. Middle level teachers that have an undying energy to teach want to teach kids more than just the academic subject; they want to teach the kids about life. These teachers understand the physical, mental, and emotional changes associated with adolescence, and are patient with students’ problems. They are sympathetic when they notice a student in a bad mood and often offer help or advice. An undying energy to teach also means using different styles of teaching to get the students to participate in class.

Implementing Gardner’s multiple intelligences and Bloom’s taxonomy are great ways of reaching out to the students who learn differently. Since students at this age are beginning to think critically, effective middle level teachers challenge them to use problem solving skills and ask them questions that make them think about consequences for actions (Willems and Clifford 1999). When teachers empower their students to make decisions for themselves, it makes them feel as though they are contributing to the class.

While observing at Manchester Junior High School the eighth grade science teacher used his love of teaching to reach out to his students. It is obvious that his students respect and listen
to him; however, there is a greater connection to him by his students. Before each class there is always some interaction between him and the kids. He might ask the class if they had fun over the weekend or talk to a particular kid about how his football game went. It is apparent that he deeply cares for his students’ well-being if he knows and remembers different facets of many kids lives. Also when dealing with his students he treats them with respect and understands that each of them is going through a changing time in their lives. One day one of his students came in from another class angry. So angry in fact that when he asked the student if he had is notebook the student threw the notebook all the way across the class and screamed, “I don’t know why I need it anyway, nothing is right.” Instead of reprimanding the child the teacher calmly asked the student to sit down and continued to start the lesson. After class he pulled the student aside and asked what the problem was. As it turned out the kid was just having a bad day. Nothing was going right for him and he just could not cope with his stress. It helps to have a caring and proactive teacher in the class.

It is understandable that many things go into making an effective middle school. The setting, type of curriculum, and teaching strategies employed are all some of things help aid student development. But one must not forget the most important part of an ideal middle school: the teacher. An effective middle school teacher has a good sense of humor, is flexible, and has an undying energy to teach. This means that even though all the components of the ideal middle school need to be looked at, a good teacher is the essential part of the structure. They are the ones interacting with the students on a daily basis. Without the ideal teacher, we could never accomplish the goal of an ideal middle school.
Works Cited


Characteristics of an Effective Middle School

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