



PROFESSIONAL LEARNING & DEVELOPMENT

TEACHING IN WAYS YOUNG ADOLESCENTS LEARN BEST





ABOUT THIS RESOURCE

As part of the Remaking Middle School initiative, the Professional Learning & Development Design Team developed this resource bank as a resource for practitioners. The aim is to provide middle level educators with a variety of resources that are conveniently located in the same place that promote stronger connections with students, both academically and personally.

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This resource bank begins with a quick research background, and then the resources are organized into four sections:

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RESOURCE KEY			
	General Information		Report or Research Study
	Lesson Plan		School-Wide Initiative

BACKGROUND RESEARCH: 6 CORE THEMES

Students change as they experience the middle grades. Even though teachers expect these changes, they sometimes feel that there must be better ways to create connections with their students.

Anticipating changes and creating connections are the goals of this resource. Here are the key developmental needs we explore:

- Developing greater autonomy and independence
- Creating a stronger sense of self
- Feeling academically and socially competent
- Learning to think in new ways
- Fitting in and belonging to groups
- Understanding the wider world

As we reviewed research and resources, we were reminded of the wealth of good information available and the challenge of making sense of the complexity. At the risk of oversimplification, here are some insights that seem to matter most and some ways to use these insights to enhance our learning as teachers.

1. INCREASING AUTONOMY

When adolescents reach a point when they no longer want to be known solely as their parents' offspring, they feel the need to establish some distance from their families and from adults in general. Many of the stereotypes that surround adolescence (e.g. stubbornness, rebelliousness) flow from this need for autonomy. **How can we channel the need for autonomy into academic learning?** Just as with issues of identity, there are many strategies that can guide students in understanding the dynamics of social relationships and the processes of making good decisions.

2. CHILD-TO-ADULT TRANSITION

We don't know a great deal about how children grew into adults in the distant past, but we imagine that it has never been easy. As babies, we humans are born helpless. As adults, we are expected to take care of ourselves. In between, we go from being known as our parents' children to having our own identity. As children, we may have a clear sense of who we are, but as our bodies grow and change, we become less sure. We don't know how we will turn out. Will our adult selves be strong? Capable? During our adolescent transition, we try to sort this out. **How can we channel the search for identity into academic learning?** Fortunately, there are a number of instructional approaches that build on issues of identity and enhance our students' journey. We share some of these in this resource.



3. COMPETENCE AND CONFIDENCE

Closely related to our search for identity is our need to feel that we can accomplish important tasks and be successful in areas that matter to us. We want to be known for things we do well. "I am a good student." "I am someone who has good friends." "I am a talented basketball player." "I can compete in video games." School can be a place where adolescents feel accomplished, but it can also be a place where students don't feel like they measure up to others. **How can we channel the need for competency into academic learning?** With students who do well in school and see themselves as good students, the need for competency flows naturally into lessons. For those who have not yet developed academic confidence, this may be one of our biggest challenges as teachers. In this resource, we share some approaches to planning and instruction that are proving to be useful in connecting with students who have not previously been successful.

4. CHANGING BRAINS

As adolescents are searching for identity and distancing themselves from their families, their brains are growing and changing in profound ways. These neurological developments enable new ways of thinking. While sometimes these changes produce “a-ha moments,” at other times, they are confusing. **Classroom lessons can help students try out new powers of reasoning and learn to think more constructively about their thoughts.** In this section, we highlight instructional approaches that can bring energy and enthusiasm to these processes.

5. PEER RELATIONSHIPS

During early adolescence, our physical, mental, and emotional developments bring new intensity to relationships with our peers. Feeling a sense of belonging and maintaining our social connections can be one of our most pressing needs. Feeling that we don’t belong, or that we have been left out, can be almost overwhelming. **Guiding peer dynamics to support academic learning is challenging, yet possible, with instructional strategies designed to enhance social competence.** Many of the same approaches that support identity, competence, and autonomy also nurture positive social interactions.

6. COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

As children, we may be interested in learning more about our communities and the wider world. As young adolescents, we may be able to better understand people and places beyond our immediate surroundings. We may also be able to make more concrete contributions to those around us. **Engaging students in exploring their communities and making meaningful contributions is the essence of service learning.** This field is now rich with resources and opportunities.



IN SUMMARY...

The big idea of this resource is that middle level instruction can be rewarding for students and teachers when we plan lessons that channel the energies of adolescent development to fuel academic and personal engagement.

Each section offers resources we have identified as evidence-based and tested ourselves. Each section also features opportunities for you to add your expertise to these possibilities.

We look forward to continuing to seek possibilities for teaching in ways young adolescents learn best.



TEACHING TO PROMOTE AUTONOMY

“We were surprised by Sreeja’s request the other day when she asked whether she could download an app, which she wants to use for selling her photography to raise money for a concert she wanted to attend badly, but knew was very expensive.”

–Parents of Sreeja, 8th grade

LEARN WHY

Early adolescence is a time when many students crave more independence. In their efforts to be developmentally responsive, teachers should provide educational opportunities for students to explore and make choices in their learning. Teachers can support this by scaffolding learning experiences so that students can exercise choice related to who they are and what they bring to the table. In such learning environments, middle school students develop capacities such as executive function and metacognition by assessing their own learning, needs, and strengths.

Autonomy is a form of voluntary action, stemming from a person’s interest and with no external pressure. Social environments that provide meaningful rationale, acknowledge negative feelings, use non-controlling language, offer meaningful choices, and nurture internal motivational resources can promote autonomy (Nunez & Leon, 2015) among children and adolescents.

Today’s adolescents are digital natives and tend to engage naturally with technology as a tool for self-expression and learning, as well as navigating their interests, needs, and concerns. This has changed the demands placed on teachers and parents whereby they can provide the necessary supports to encourage responsible, autonomous actions among youth. Developmentally appropriate support systems can facilitate positive learning experiences and motivate adolescents to pursue and build life skills.

RESOURCES

Promote Student-Centered Learning



[360° Story Lab](#)

A resource to support youth to produce media through storytelling and immersive technologies to share their perspectives and communities and inspire positive action on issues they care about.



[APA Module](#)

Geared towards teachers, this module takes into consideration the holistic nature of individual student learning and the most effective practices for helping them develop into autonomous and responsible learners. Addressing the whole learner in developmentally appropriate ways includes establishing positive student relationships, and listening to each learner's voice in creating productive learning environments. By addressing student learning needs and negative behaviors from a place of trust and positive relationships, students are better able to make good choices both within and beyond the classroom. Learner-centered practices also help students and their teachers more effectively cope with negative social forces like peer pressure, bullying, and other challenges to the learning process.



[Digital Promise](#)

This blog offers a framework for teachers seeking to improve student motivation by promoting their autonomy in the learning process.



[PBLworks](#)

The Buck Institute for Education aims to help build the capacity in leaders and teachers to design and facilitate project-based learning. Their exclusive focus is supporting educators with quality PBL professional development.








[Planning a Project-Based Learning Unit](#)

This blog post introduces educators to four stages of PBL, walks them through those steps, and provides specific examples along the way.



[Applying NGSS... to chickens?](#)

For educators who want to see what project-based learning can look like in practice, this blog post provides a great example of eighth graders applying design engineering principles to build a chicken coop for their rural school.

	<p> <u>PBL meets the U.N Sustainable Development Goals</u> This blog post on PBL provides six examples of how young adolescents engaged with the U.N.'s Sustainable Development Goals to improve their school environment and community.</p> <p> <u>Thinkering Studio at Birmingham Covington School in Michigan</u> Thinkering Studio is an elective course that fosters student-directed learning and promotes intrinsic motivation by allowing students to take charge of their project-based learning. Students select the focus for their projects, create their own learning goals, and identify resources to support learning, both within and beyond school.</p>
<p>Promote Cognitive Self-Awareness (e.g. Exec. Function, Reflection)</p>	<p> <u>Student Reflection for Growth and Development</u> This brief essay highlights the importance of integrating reflection into the middle grades classroom, and provides sample prompts for teachers to try it out today.</p> <p> <u>Eight Methods for Reflection in Project-based Learning</u> This blog post walks readers through the role of reflection in project-based learning, provides examples of multimedia reflection strategies, and includes a video of student reflection in action.</p> <p> <u>Scaffolding Student Reflection</u> This short Edutopia piece introduces readers to four levels of scaffolding to promote reflection and offers 40 terrific questions to use right away.</p> <p> <u>Helping students develop EF skills</u> This Edutopia piece provides straightforward and useful ways to support executive function in the classroom regularly.</p> <p> <u>Four Guidelines for Goal Setting</u> This blog post offers readers four clear suggestions that work together to help middle schoolers set meaningful goals.</p>



TEACHING TO FOSTER BELONGING

“My daughter’s grades seem to be worse now that she has transitioned to high school, but she says the classes themselves aren’t harder. With her close friends now going to a rival high school, she just feels unsure where she fits in at her school, and her grades reflect that.”

–Mother of Amanda, 9th grade

LEARN WHY

Teachers should build relationships with each student as an individual, while also explicitly building a learning community within the classroom. These learning communities foster strong teacher-to-student and student-to-student relationships in which students feel respected and valued.

RESOURCES

Promote Teacher-to-Student Relationships



[SEARCH Institute Resources](#)

In this report, the Search Institute summarizes their studies of young people's relationships and how those relationships affect who they are, the choices they make, and who they are becoming.



[Building Positive Relationships with Your Students](#)

Join two members of the AMLE On-Site Professional Development Cadre as they discuss specific strategies to motivate young adolescents. They examine the importance of building positive relationships with students and how teachers can truly impact the lives of young adolescents.



[From Students to Relationships: Transforming Your Classroom](#)

Check out this podcast with a sixth grade English teacher and author of the AMLE Magazine article, "From Students to Relationships: Transforming Your Classroom." Listen in and get valuable insights about how to make relationships work in the middle level.



[SEARCH Institute's Relationships First](#)

This 20-page report summarizes the SEARCH Institute's Developmental Relationships Framework and offers strategies for strengthening support for young adolescents.

Promote Student-to-Student Relationships



[Tch Tips: Is Peer Teaching on Your Classroom Menu?](#)

This Teaching Channel blog post provides a "menu" for teachers to try peer teaching in their classrooms. The author describes a range of approaches that vary in implementation complexity from "low lift" (appetizers) to "heavy lift" (entrees), including:

- [facilitating peer learning](#)
- [peer-to-peer tutoring](#)
- [peer conferencing](#)
- [peer review](#)
- [student discussion leader](#)
- [expert groups](#)
- [transform the test](#)
- [student-created podcasts](#)



Pirate Helpers

Peer tutoring is an effective way to foster positive student-to-student relationships that can also result in positive academic and social-emotional outcomes. In Baldwin County, Alabama, Fairhope Middle School has an effective peer tutoring program called Pirate Helpers that is organized and led by school counselors.



4 Ways to Foster Positive Student Relationships

The author of this Edutopia article describes four easy-to-implement strategies for fostering student-to-student relationships, including: two-minute talks, class playlist, mix and mingle, and gab and go.



Effect of Relationships on Societal Involvement of Students

This paper considers the importance of both teacher-to-student and student-to-student relationships on students' societal involvement.



The Classroom Observation Project

This website provides an observation protocol to assess the student-to-student interactions. It also provides suggestions and rationale for helping students work more collaboratively in the classroom.



The Building Blocks Collaboration: Partner and Small Group Chats

This resource focuses on facilitating effective student discussions. While this talk is focused on academic learning, it also will provide opportunities for students to build relationships with one another, thereby promoting other positive outcomes.



Memory Collections and Community Building

This website provides a guide for teachers to help students get to know each other by sharing and collecting memories. While it was created for elementary teachers, it is easily adaptable to middle school. The article also provides rationale for this activity.



Cooperative Learning in Middle School: A Means to Improve Peer Relations

Cooperative learning has been shown to enhance student engagement and achievement in prior research. This paper supports that cooperative learning should be a permanent, sustainable component of teacher training and school culture.

Promote Student-to-World Relationships



[Service Learning 101](#)

This blog post introduces educators to service learning as one way to connect students meaningfully with the world around them and offers helpful tips for getting started in their own classrooms or schools.



[Community Exploration Builds Connection](#)

This blogpost about middle schoolers studying their own community (and community identity) illustrates the powerful intersections of community-based and project-based learning.



[Meet the Humans of Burke!](#)

This multi-media blog post about community-based learning features students talking about what it's like to learn from and about the members of their community.



[iLead: A Model for Service Learning and Leadership](#)

This resource offers a model for channeling student interest into meaningful positions around the school. It also walks educators through the process of establishing a similar program in their own schools.



[Walking for Water: Empathy-Building Experience](#)

This AMLE *What's New* article describes a hands-on simulation in which students learn about the obstacles that people in developing countries face in pursuing a basic human need: access to clean water.



[Peace Jam Foundation](#)

Organized by Nobel Peace Prize winners, the mission of Peace Jam is to mentor youth to change the world. The organization's website offers a range of resources and opportunities for engagement.



[Leader in Me](#)

Leader in Me helps schools create well-rounded learners by attending to and developing the whole person.



TEACHING TO BUILD COMPETENCE

“Coach Jones told me today that Michael has a powerful work ethic in soccer. He devotes a great deal of time and energy to improving his skills and fitness. I wish I could help him apply that same effort to his work in my class.”

—Ms. Williams, Math teacher

LEARN WHY

Teaching to building competence in the classroom is grounded in a growth mindset: it includes both curricular and instructional choices that support academic and social-emotional growth. Ongoing, embedded, and consistent assessment and feedback with a variety of checkpoints allow students and teachers to view growth in a variety of ways. These approaches mitigate the negative impacts of tracking by strategically placing middle grades students in flexible groups to promote personalized learning approaches.

RESOURCES

Growth Mindset



[Video Introduction: Importance of a Growth Mindset](#)

This three-minute video from Jo Boaler’s “You Cubed” website introduces the distinction between a “fixed” mindset—the belief that we only have a fixed amount of an ability that determines how well we can learn something—and a “growth” mindset, which is the belief that we can improve our abilities through effort. With engaging examples, this introductory video shows how important a growth mindset is to achievement.



[Feedback That Feeds Forward Empowers a Growth Mindset](#)

“Feedback forward” is an instructional approach that frames feedback as more than just offering a learner’s progress: rather, it goes beyond general comments and is timely, specific, accurate, and improvement-focused. Incorporating this type of feedback also informs the design of lessons.



[Supporting Students Reading Complex Texts: Evidence for Motivational Scaffolding](#)

This study examines the effectiveness of interactional scaffolding, which is responsive in-person support that an expert provides to a novice reader in order to support comprehension during reading instruction. The study follows 213 young adolescents learning within a four-lesson small-group guided-reading intervention.



[Panorama Education](#)

This website provides information about interventions, progress monitoring, and social-emotional learning. It includes a variety of resources to support a school-wide focus on SEL. While there are options to purchase items, numerous resources are free to use once the user provides basic demographic information.



[Promoting the Educational Success of Children and Youth Learning English](#)








This study examines how evidence based on research relevant to the development of DLLs/ELs from birth to age 21 can inform education and health policies and related practices that can result in better educational outcomes. It emphasizes the importance of a growth mindset in enhancing socioemotional well-being of ELs, especially in motivating students to engage in school learning.

Iteration-oriented Pedagogies



[Partnering with Students in a Makerspace](#)

This blog post showcases the potential of student voice in building responsive makerspaces for adolescents.

	<p> <u>Project Invent</u> This website offers trainings, resources, and experiences to support educators in bringing real world problem- solving into the classroom. They offer resources and projects that utilize the design thinking process.</p> <p> <u>STEM by Design: Strategies and Activities for Grades 4-8</u> Anne Jolly is passionate about STEM and about education, but she has found that passion alone isn't enough. Teaching STEM takes knowledge, energy, and persistence. Her website and new book can help all students be successful STEM learners.</p> <p> <u>Learning Science in Informal Environments: People, Places and Pursuits</u> The Committee on Learning Science in Informal Environments was established to examine the potential of non-school settings for science learning. This report summarizes key aspects of the committee's conclusions, beginning with evidence that informal environments can promote science learning. They describe appropriate learning goals and ways to broaden participation in science learning.</p> <p> <u>Edutopia Resources on Design Thinking</u> Edutopia offers resources to help students engage in the innovation processes for tackling complex real-world problems in person-centered ways.</p> <p> <u>What is Design Thinking?</u> This 2-minute video explains the design thinking process in simple terms for teachers and students.</p>
<p>Formative Assessment</p>	<p> <u>Michigan FAME Project</u> FAME is a professional learning initiative sponsored by the Michigan Department of Education (MDE) that promotes teacher collaboration and planning for effective formative assessment practice. A cadre of Michigan educators serves as coaches for site-based learning teams of teachers and administrators in Michigan schools.</p> <p> <u>Formative Assessment: Debunking the Myths</u> In this AMLE podcast (1 of 2), Kate Garrison, manager of products and services for professional development with Measured Progress, debunks five myths about formative assessment.</p>



The Culture of Formative Assessment

In this discussion about formative assessment (2 of 2), Kate Garrison, manager of products and services for professional development with Measured Progress, discusses the culture of formative assessment.



Assessment Crisis: The Absence of Assessment FOR Learning

If we wish to maximize student achievement in the U.S., we must pay far greater attention to the improvement of classroom assessment, Mr. Stiggins warns. Both assessment of learning and assessment for learning are essential—but one is currently in place, and the other is not.



7 Smart, Fast Ways to Do Formative Assessment

In this article, Laura Thomas discusses 7 effective strategies to administer formative assessments. Within these methods, you'll find close to 40 tools and tricks for finding out what your students know while they're still learning.



TEACHING TO CULTIVATE IDENTITY

"I must be getting old. I just don't get why Josie would shave off all of her beautiful hair!"

—Parent of Josie, 7th grade

LEARN WHY

Sometimes it's a challenge to understand the choices of young adolescents, especially if you've not been specifically prepared to work with middle schoolers. Yet appreciating that early adolescence is a critical time for identity development helps us make sense of how important those behaviors are. Many students this age are grappling with who they are and who they want to be. Experimenting with style is one small way to do that. Delving deeply into their personal and social identities is another.

A middle school curriculum should invite students to meaningfully explore their myriad identities and speak to the diversity of their peers. When teachers provide culturally responsive curricular experiences it allows students to better understand their racial/ethnic identity development, gender identity development, and exploration of post-secondary education, students have the opportunity to explore their own self-identity. These experiences can prompt students to see their own potential and consider options they might not have imagined otherwise. Middle grades educators have the privilege of helping students cultivate a positive sense of self and an understanding of others. Luckily there are lots of great resources to help us do just that!

RESOURCES

Identity as Curriculum



The Edge Academy: Curriculum Development Process

This two-page resource walks readers through four stages of developing curriculum based on students' questions about themselves and the world.



Identity and Community: An Introduction to 6th Grade Social Studies

The content and teaching activities suggested in these ten lesson plans explore themes of identity and community, while helping students and teachers build a productive, safe learning environment. They are especially appropriate for use in middle school classrooms, of any subject, at the beginning of the school year.



Understanding Identity

This 50-minute lesson focuses on two essential questions: (1) What is identity? and (2) What makes each of us who we are? In the lesson, students will identify social and cultural factors that help shape our identities by reading and analyzing a short story, and then creating their own personal identity charts.



Identity Charts

Identity charts are a graphic tool that can help students consider the many factors that shape who we are as individuals and as communities. Use identity charts to deepen students' understanding of themselves, groups, nations, and historical and literary figures. Sharing their own identity charts with peers can help students build relationships and break down stereotypes. In this way, identity charts can be used as a community-building tool.



Teaching Tolerance: Learning Plans for Engaging Identity

This link leads to a page featuring a variety of learning plans focused on identity development. Within each learning plan, the user will find suggested texts, media, lesson ideas/activities, and additional resources. These learning plans are focused on 6-8 grade.



Curriculum Unit: Identity and Exploration

This unit was written by 8th grade students in Riverside, CA. The lessons are written to guide students through activities that help them consider who they are, what they bring to the table, and how their identity shapes their perspectives on life. The overarching goal of this unit is to empower adolescents.



Getting Students Excited About College

In this AMLE *What's New* article, Brian Cook and Jolene South talk about the advantages of discussing college with middle schoolers. They also share about a unit in which they explored colleges with their students.



Futures Unlimited for Eighth Grade Girls and Gender Expansive Students

This is a one-day event at Oakton Community College to encourage 8th grade girls to look into STEM fields. This event requires coordination between the college and the sending middle school.



Career Cruising

This is a program for students to explore potential future careers based on their interests. It requires several class days to complete.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES FOR MIDDLE LEVEL EDUCATORS:

[Promise of Adolescence: Interactive Webpage](#)

[Remaking Middle School: Summit Working Papers](#)

[2012 Association for Middle Level Education Middle Level Teacher Preparation Standards](#)