



PRESENTS . . .

IMPACT

1998

*A publication
created for
middle level educators
as a forum
to present, examine,
and communicate
educational provocatives
which help build
valid, experienced-based
educational objectives
for the teaching of
early adolescents.*

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SPRING 1998

The Connecticut Association of Schools

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*“Trends,
like horses, are
easier to ride in the
direction they are
already going.”*

-- John Naisbitt

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S.C.O.R.E.

SCHOOL COMMUNITY OUTREACH FOR EXCELLENCE by David G. Kaplan, East Hampton, CT, S.C.O.R.E. Consultant

In 1995, a private foundation awarded four school districts, three in Connecticut and one in New York, challenge grants to build and strengthen community ties. Each grant provided growth — promoting programs for young adolescents during the high-risk, non-school hours and the summer months. Thus began the School Community Outreach for Excellence program, an intra-state and inter-state network of middle schools serving a diverse population. The initial grant to S.C.O.R.E. has given participants the opportunity for sustained full funding for two years and 50% matching funding for three years.

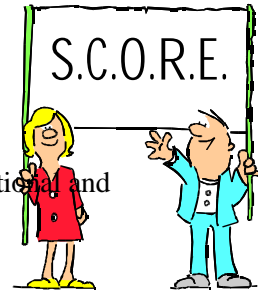
The philosophy of S.C.O.R.E. reflects the research and advocacy for middle school reform that has been recommended by the Carnegie Corporation of New York. The highlighted recommendations in the reports of the Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development: *Turning Points: preparing American Youth for the 21st Century*; *A Matter of Time: Risk and Opportunity in the Non-School Hours*; and *Great Transitions: Preparing adolescents for New Century* have become the basis of the S.C.O.R.E. program. According to the Carnegie studies, "Every student in the middle grades should learn to think critically through mastery of an appropriate body of knowledge, lead a healthy life, behave ethically and lawfully, and assume the responsibility of citizenship in a pluralistic society." This philosophy led to the mission of the School Community Outreach for Excellence Program: To increase

students' academic success and civic involvement by strengthening school, home, and community connections. The program provided year-round activities during non-school hours that give young adolescents meaningful opportunities to learn, grow, and serve.

The active network formed by the funded groups became a unique aspect of the S.C.O.R.E. program. This arrangement allowed participants to share information, assist with program design and problem-solving, and develop approaches for authentic assessment of S.C.O.R.E. achievements. The role of small-scale networks in supporting school change received much attention over the past few years. Providing other middle-level educators with information about S.C.O.R.E.'s activities and accomplishments through printed and electric publications and presentations to community and professional organizations constituted an important goal to the success of the program.

The S.C.O.R.E. network studied the Carnegie recommendations in light of local needs and identified common problems that could be addressed through universal solutions. The key outcomes sought through the implementation of S.C.O.R.E. are self-efficacy, positive self-esteem, consolidation of identity, and independence. These outcomes are accomplished through the following goals: increase student success and strengthen the education and life experience of adolescents; encourage and promote parental involvement in

the education and



leisure experience of their children; and develop outreach programs that engage agencies and businesses in the daily education and support of adolescents. These programs include the areas of remediation, academic enrichment, Community Service Learning, cultural enrichment, environmental awareness, hands-on creativity, recreational, social development, and critical thinking skills.

What does the S.C.O.R.E. program do? It provides for safe, growth-promoting settings for young adolescents during the high-risk, non-school hours when parents are not available to supervise their children. It assists in developing collaborative partnerships to implement positive change. It designs and delivers developmentally appropriate activities for young adolescents. It establishes links among schools, local youth organizations, community agencies, and businesses. It involves parents and students in practical, constructive, community-based programs. It develops frameworks for engaging local businesses in non-school and summer programs. It secures funding for non-traditional pilot programs that link school and community. It employs 4 full-time professional community coordinators. It implements site-specific programs while sharing common principles and goals. It provides after-school transportation for students and

S.C.O.R.E.

Continued

The **S.C.O.R.E.** coordinators serve multi-dimensional roles. They develop and oversee programs, disseminate information on youth activities, seek funding sources, and act as liaisons among school, community, and home. They work non-traditional hours when not doing school duties and are most active after school, during school vacations, holidays, and weekends. Coordinators work with their principals, teachers, parents, community leaders, and agencies on a full-time basis. For the **S.C.O.R.E.** Network, coordinators from each school meet as a group regularly to share program development and progress on the **S.C.O.R.E.** vision.

The principals serve as **S.C.O.R.E.** leaders on a rotating basis with responsibilities for reporting, planning of the semi-annual meetings, and chairing the monthly meeting of principals. They help inform communities, school boards, and parents about all **S.C.O.R.E.** activities. **S.C.O.R.E.** participants are actively involved in the research, development, and the design of programs and activities.

Seen as a work in progress rather than a finished project, **S.C.O.R.E.** strives to encourage and promote students to take risks in education and is determined to model those behaviors and characteristics that create opportunities for self-development. Teaching students and families to learn to care and support each other through the school community is crucial to the

academic success of the early adolescents. With the help of all the members of the communities involved in the experience of **S.C.O.R.E.**, it is believed that students will strengthen the fabric of the future and be ready to successfully meet the challenges of the twenty-first century.

The four **S.C.O.R.E.** schools in Connecticut are East Hampton Middle School, Killingly Intermediate School, Kelly Middle School, and Teachers' Memorial School. The fifth **S.C.O.R.E.** school is Westlake Middle School, in Thornwood, New York. For further information contact CAS at

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MULTIPLE INTELLIGENCES

Part II

**by Dr. Steven A. Greengross
Professor, Southern Connecticut
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In the last issue of *Impact*, I discussed the theory of multiple intelligences and its relevance for middle grade education and suggested that this theory had the very real potential to significantly impact traditional beliefs about teaching and learning. In this second part, I will suggest areas where this may be true. I should emphasize at the outset that none of this is cast in concrete, but that all of it, in my opinion, warrants further investigation and study.

To briefly summarize, multiple intelligences states that there are seven primary intelligences or learning modalities: *linguistic intelligence* (the capacity to use words effectively, whether orally or in writing); *logical - mathematical intelligence* (the capacity to use numbers effectively and to reason well); *spatial intelligence* (the ability to perceive the visual-spatial world accurately and to perform transformations upon these perceptions); *bodily-kinesthetic intelligence* (expertise in using one's whole body to express ideas and feelings, and facility in using one's hands to produce or transform things); *musical intelligence* (the capacity to perceive, discriminate, transform, and express musical forms); *interpersonal intelligence* (the ability to perceive and make distinctions in the moods, intentions, motivations, and feelings of other people); *intrapersonal intelligence* (self-knowledge and the ability to act adaptively on the basis of that knowledge). The key point is that while all people possess all seven intelligences, each person has a specific primary intelligence, and that is that person's favored learning modality.

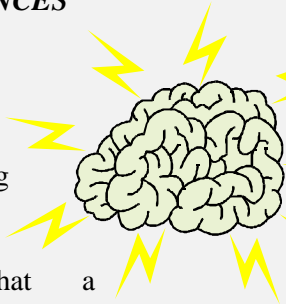
INTELLIGENCES

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So, what does all this mean for teaching and learning?

We know, for example, that a significant number of female students experience difficulty with mathematics once they begin to study higher forms of math such as algebra. Some schools have experimented with single gender math classes as a way to overcome this. While this has met with some success, the question of why this happens to some female students has been largely unanswered. I would suggest that the answer may very well lie in multiple intelligences. In other words, it is possible that there are students, both male and female, whose primary intelligence is not logical-mathematical, and who prefer to work in groups rather than alone. If that is in fact the case, students could be placed into math classes based on their primary intelligences with, for example, students who are logical-mathematical and intrapersonal in one class and students who are linguistic and interpersonal in a second. This might mean that a math teacher could teach the first class using traditional instructional strategies and vary instruction to include, for instance, more journal writing and cooperative learning in the second.

Every middle school has students who are learning disabled, who have IEP's, and who receive specialized instruction. Three accepted characteristics used to describe a learning disabled student are daydreaming, fine motor skill problems when the task at hand is teacher directed, but



not when it is self-directed, and strong leadership qualities. Yet, a student whose primary intelligence is spatial also daydreams more than his/her peers, gets more out of pictures than words, and doodles frequently. The student whose primary intelligence is bodily-kinesthetic tends to frequently move, tap, or fidget when seated for a long period of time. The student who has a strong interpersonal intelligence often displays a strong will and may be a natural leader. This is not to suggest that all learning disabilities are better explained by multiple intelligences, or that there is no such thing as learning disabled. It does suggest, however, that the accepted practice of diagnosing and labeling a student who does have difficulty learning as being learning disabled may be incorrect. It may also suggest that some students' learning difficulties may be better explained by the fact that his/her favored learning intelligences are different than other students (spatial or bodily-kinesthetic as opposed to linguistic or logical mathematical). To be sure, there is no hard evidence to support any of this, but if our mission as educators is to serve each individual student's needs, it seems to me that further investigation is warranted.

In virtually every academic area, assessment of student learning is typically normative and traditional. In other words, all the students are assessed using the same vehicle (a test, a quiz, a research report, homework, etc.) and are assessed against a preset norm (a percentage based on the number of questions answered correctly, the number of points made in an essay, etc.). There always seem to be some students who, regardless of our best efforts, do not meet with success. In an

attempt to bolster these students' self-esteem, some teachers will inflate grades, soften expectations, or both. Yet, these efforts often have the opposite effect. I certainly agree with the importance of developing a positive self-esteem in all our students, but I believe that this comes not from grade inflation, but from challenging students and giving them a sense of achievement.

Does it really matter how a student demonstrates to a teacher that s/he has learned the subject matter? I would suggest that it does not. For example, if an English class is studying poetry, can a student whose primary intelligence is bodily-kinesthetic demonstrate his/her understanding of rhyme and meter by developing a dance that utilizes the same elements as poetry? Or, if a math class is studying fractions, can a student whose primary intelligence is music demonstrate his/her understanding of fractions by composing a song which utilizes whole notes, half notes, quarter notes, etc. If examples like this are true, and I believe they are, the whole issue of assessment needs to be re-examined, and students need to be able to demonstrate learning through performance vehicles other than tests, quizzes, and the like.

Cooperative learning has become, and justifiably so, an important instructional strategy in middle-grades education. The research states that frequent regrouping is highly advisable in order to give students the opportunity to work with as many different classmates as possible. While it is recommended that the groups be as heterogeneous as possible, heterogeneity should not

Continued

INTELLIGENCES

Continued

be limited solely to academic ability.

Multiple intelligences offers an excellent way to structure cooperative learning groups. Students can be grouped by similar intelligences or by dissimilar intelligences, depending on the task at hand. For example, in a peer editing grouping in an English class, pairing students so that linguistic intelligence is primary to one student and secondary to the other may be the way to go. On the other hand, in a long-range activity in which the learning objective is to create a group project, creating groups in which linguistic, logical-mathematical, spatial, bodily-kinesthetic, and musical intelligences are represented in each group certainly promotes

diversity. Finally, cooperative learning, as we all know, is a learning process as well as the production of a learning outcome. In other words, learning how to work in groups is just as important a goal in cooperative learning as the end product itself. We also know that some groups seem to come together, to gel much more easily than others, and many times we are at a loss to explain why. Perhaps the answer lies in the simple fact that for some students interpersonal intelligence is not a primary intelligence. If this is true, this presents another dimension to be considered when establishing groups.

To summarize, the theory of multiple intelligences offers new and exciting ways to look at teaching and learning. These are not limited to the

ways I have briefly suggested

in this article, for I have just scraped the surface. It would seem that more research is an absolute necessity, and this should begin with each teacher identifying the primary and secondary intelligences for each of his/her students. Examples of easy to use checklists can be found throughout the growing literature on the subject of multiple intelligences. Once this has been completed, issues such as the ones I have suggested can then be considered.

In closing, my fear is that, like so many revolutionary ideas that have appeared in the recent past, multiple intelligences will be relegated to the educational trash heap never to see the light of day again. My sincere hope is that multiple intelligences

EL NINO AND THE CONNECTICUT MASTERY TEST

by Joan Samuels Kaiser, Middle Level Consultant

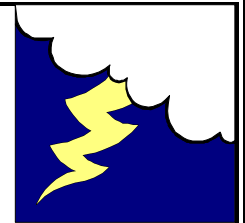
Meteorologists from New England gathered recently in Hartford to predict some striking effects from El Nino. They are positioning themselves to make some bold predictions leading from panic to thoughtful concern through-out the state. Meteorologists forecast brilliant rainbows and sunny skies over most wealthier towns and suburbs while most big cities and inner suburban ring communities are doomed for sleet, freezing rain, and sub-zero temperatures for the next year. These unorthodox weather patterns are unprecedented and shocking.

How cruel and unfair! How can El Nino create such weather patterns?

Why will some towns glory in the rainbows and other towns freeze in the cold? The Connecticut Mastery Test holds the answer. Public perception about the quality of each school system rests with the test results. Originally, the Connecticut Mastery Test was designed to help school districts assess strengths and weaknesses of curriculum and instruction. Based on test results, teachers developed diagnostic and prescriptive plans to help each student increase academic performance. Now, the fierce competition among state school districts has caused many educators to go against best practices to raise the scores from their towns. The Connecticut

Mastery Test, a measure of verbal linguistic and mathematical logical reasoning, is only one measure of school achievement. Yet, even El Nino has figured out it's the only measure that counts in our demand for educational accountability. Local newspapers and political agendas continue to stir the weather patterns so El Nino will have no problem creating happiness or havoc.

How has this weather condition gotten out of control? Does it parallel the public's lack of understanding of the test results? Does it parallel the school districts' thrusts to raise the scores any way possible? Look at



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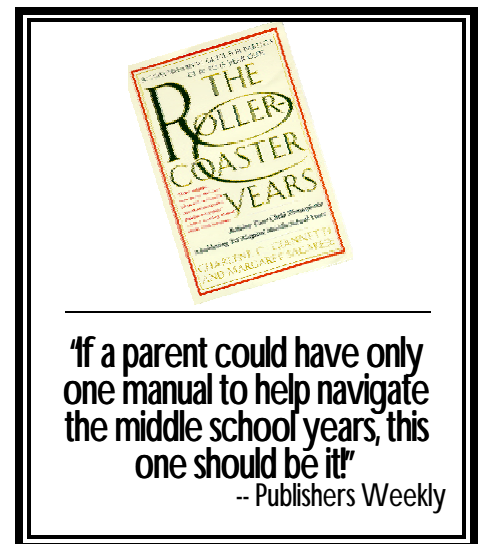
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EL NINO

Continued from page 4

Within the last few years, there has been an increase in the number of educators who present workshops on how to raise test scores. Do test scores always accurately measure achievement? At a recent conference, a nationally-recognized principal of his state boasted how his teachers could raise math achievement by three years in three weeks. Amazing! This was his school's method: all students were given math pretests that directly correlated with the state test. Then the computer generated a list of ranked objectives, from easy to difficult, that each student did not master. For the next month, each student was instructed through individual skill packets on the easiest objectives first, until mastery was obtained. Then the harder objectives were taught. They provided after-school tutoring too, for additional reinforcement to promote achievement on the state test. As this principal stated, his district was only interested in making sure each student obtained the minimal mastery level number. The magic number for public accountability! Students who take this state test will succeed through this type of focused over-learning and teaching. Is this real and in-depth learning? Will each student be able to apply these newly-learned math skills to real life problems and applications?

Another district has grouped math students according to their distance from the state goal of mastery. Because this district could not financially provide free summer school to all of the district students, only those students closest to the mastery level were invited to attend the free summer school. This measure will raise achievement and

school results to a degree for a short period of time. What are the long-term effects? What happens to those students who score significantly below mastery? Those students who are the most challenged by math also happen to be from the lowest socio-economic families in town. Will these students continue to be academically disadvantaged? Why are these students the "district losers?" While mostly upper middle class and middle class parents of the first group of students were pleased with the district offerings, the parents of the lowest-achieving students remained voiceless and silent. Have they lost faith in the system? Where is the equity?

El Nino will continue to sort weather patterns, rainbows, or sleet and freezing rain, as long as school districts continue to sort students' needs in inequitable ways. Another district's first grade teacher lamented that her first graders were being pressured to achieve for the mastery test several years away. Her curriculum was too focused and aligned to infuse creativity into the learning process. Every aspect of the day was so structured that there was no time for enjoyment and celebration. Only stress. Another elementary teacher recently complained that the school nurse's office is overloaded with students with unexplained headaches and stomachaches during the test review process. Is the pressure too much for the teachers and students at critical moments?

Writing and reading teachers are also raising important points. At a recent English department meeting in a middle school, the experienced and qualified teachers debated whether to continue to give more pages of DRP, degrees of reading power, skill sheets, or let students read more

content area books. This would not have been debatable if the current pressures to raise DRP scores were not a reality. Can 100 practice DRP exercises be more valuable than 100 pages of reading a quality content area book in social studies or science? The same teachers also debated the merits of providing instructional time for creative and expository writing. Since the persuasive essay is the main measure of accountability for the writing sample in eighth grade, the teachers felt obligated to re-teach the formulaic persuasive essays again and again. The public demands that accountability. Expository and creative writing could wait until October of the eighth grade year.

What role does the media play in enhancing the competition from town to town? Do the newspapers' data tell the full story? After all, there are educational conferences for newspaper writers, but can these writers articulate a cogent message for the general public to understand the tests and the results? Newspapers report year to year growth for grade levels within a school district. Comparing one class with the preceding one does not accurately reflect class growth. One needs to compare cohort groups. For example, Connecticut Mastery results from this year's eighth grade should be compared with the same class score from sixth grade in 1995, not the previous eighth grade class. Where are the improvements? Where are the weaknesses?

A variety of factors affect grade level test results when comparing cohort groups. The addition of several new low-achieving students in the beginning of the fourth, sixth, and eighth grade years can dramatically affect the test outcomes in small, rural school districts. New

EL NINO*Continued from previous page*

students in larger grade level schools do not produce the same effect. One needs to also understand the district's demographics. What are the recent patterns? Has there been re-districting of students? Does the district have an increase in children from lower socio-economic families with more educational needs? What percent of special education students take the test? Have there been appropriate modifications for these students' needs? How many English as a Second Language students are taking the test for the first time? How many students have had long-term sustained education in the district? These questions are all relevant when comparing data. One also needs to look for steady and gradual improvement each year from cohort group to cohort group when the conditions at the schools remain the same. Unfortunately, the media provides the information but can mislead the public in interpreting the data.

What can a parent do to ensure his or her child has the greatest opportunity for success on the test? A parent needs to advocate for his or her child all the way through the school system. Too many parents feel that their job is "done" after elementary school. Middle school and high school students still need your involvement and encouragement. When you receive the testing data, keep it. Do not accept the familiar refrain that your child is very bright but just doesn't test well. Ask questions. Keep a file of your child's work throughout the year to note his or her academic progress. Discuss the results with your child's teacher. Ask to see an

improvement plan. Spend some time visiting your child's classes. Today, everyone appears to be the educational expert, even if he or she has never walked in a school building in decades! Attend your child's school presentation about the test results. Understand all of the parts of the test and help to reinforce the skills at home, too. Become an informed partner with the school in helping to address your child's educational needs. Achievement problems, when addressed as soon as possible in the early elementary grades, can frequently be corrected before adolescence with the proper time commitment and reinforcement. A child's self-esteem is only enhanced when he or she can read, write, and achieve in mathematics. Self-esteem directly correlates with academic competence.

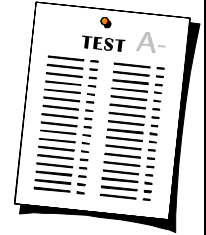
Also look for the balance in your child's instruction and curriculum. Is the Connecticut Mastery test the only focus of your district's curriculum? Are district decisions based solely on the Connecticut Mastery test? Or is your child provided with a variety of challenging opportunities and strategies to broaden his or her entire school experience? Do all of the fine arts, which highly correlate with academic achievement, continue to play an integral role in your child's school day? Or are they seen as frills to be eliminated? The answers to these questions can help determine your school district's commitment to high performance and educational excellence.

El Nino is preparing climatic events of rainbows and sleet and freezing rain for the last part of the month. How will this meteorological wonder affect your town? ■

CHANGING DIRECTION THROUGH ASSESSMENT

by Dr. Ann Richardson,
Principal
Strong Middle School, Durham

Analyzing the work students produce is key to helping educators



provide quality instruction in the classroom. Authentic assessment assists instructors to guide student learning much in the same manner as testing guides a medical doctor when finding a cure for illness. Unfortunately, some folks in the classroom do not look at student work in this manner. They would be quite content to hand out dittos and be called when the homework is done. This approach is likened to a medical doctor telling his patients to take an aspirin and call him in the morning. We cannot afford to take this traditional approach to learning in order to ready our students for the future.

Help for every student in the classroom is analogous with the teacher's ability to use the work that a student produces. Within this work are the answers to guide instructors to prepare the lessons that will reach the needs of all students. At Strong School, we are working on improving the quality of teachers' feedback to directly effect student achievement. Our restructuring effort is aimed at instituting a focus on teacher collaboration geared toward improving assessment. The staff is learning to incorporate a better quality of evaluation tools in order to improve student achievement.

Continued

ASSESSMENT

continued

The Strong School program design emphasizes the improvement of the quality of teacher feedback on student work. The staff is focused specifically on these goals:

1. Developing improved standards for quality feedback on student work within integrated units;
2. Creating and practicing a "Slice"* format providing quality feedback to teachers about student work;
3. Expanding the development of the standards for written and oral communication to be applied to students' culminating projects in integrated thematic units;
4. Developing rubrics to assess those standards;
5. Assessing student growth in written and oral communication skills through the application of these standards and rubrics;
6. Increasing frequent and sustained collaborative efforts among all teacher and administrators to support the integration of effective language arts skills in all academic subject areas;
7. Involving parents and the community in the areas of performance assessment and integrated curriculum;
8. Ensuring that all teachers receive effective professional development in these areas;
9. Collaborating between all teachers in an effort to offer feedback to the staff;
10. Sustaining the development of a supportive school culture aimed at increasing student achievement using collaborative methods.

* "Slice" is a sample of student writings

used for feedback to student learning. The collaborative teacher role was used to develop standards for student-integrated project work using rubrics to assess progress. Assessment of student work using these standards aids the staff in diagnosing areas of individual weakness in oral and written communication. The principal's role was to work with the teams as they developed these standards and improve the quality of their feedback on the student work.

To enable teachers to accomplish a change of traditional paradigms about assessment, release time to collaborate was provided. Staff development workshops on performance assessments were helpful ways to involve critical thinking activities. Workshops were necessary to examine the many ways in which teachers assessed student work. This model trained the staff to examine student work and query the level of learning required for student performance. Was the learning literal or elevated thinking that pushed students to reach conclusions? More over, the staff experienced a group dynamics process, which has helped them to formulate authentic assessment tools. These tools were focused on measuring the quality of student

learning on the higher end of Bloom's taxonomy.

An additional focus was to increase parent involvement when reviewing student work. Parents, guardians, and teachers collaborated as student work was viewed. The strategies for promoting parent and community involvement included a variety of activities, including a discussion meeting. Additionally, the staff established an integrated learning fair during the school year to showcase student projects. The fair was successful in displaying a variety of learning styles that occurred throughout the school year. Continually, the teachers published student work and organized recognition assemblies to honor the effort and excellence, that was observed in their students' work.

The Strong School project focuses on:

1. using students' work as evidence of students' learning and making it a centerpiece of the learning initiative;
2. having regular conversations between and among teachers and principals about students' work;
3. involving parents and the

WHAT TYPE OF STAFF DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMS WERE DESIGNED?

Throughout this year we were able to keep 12 teachers involved in this project on a sustained basis. They worked on conferencing and creating authentic assessments to support the improvement of teacher feedback on student work. The workshops that aided in the training of the teachers occurred several times throughout the year. Eight meetings took place: two sessions with parents and six sessions with the principal and teachers. Many of the conversations took place during the team tutorial time. The purpose of the conversations was to improve the quality of teacher feedback on student work. Additional growth came out of this experience. The more the staff met, the richer the dialogue. Teachers engaged in conversations about

ASSESSMENT*Continued from previous page*

that was authentic and not just busy work. As a result of the meetings, people asked for help from their esteemed colleagues; the teams bonded more closely because folks shared new ideas to improve curriculum techniques. Slowly, the teams began to embrace change as a positive thing.

Increased dividends came from the teachers' conversations. Along with changes in assessment came changes in curriculum and instruction. Specifically, the eighth grade team redesigned units to include the integration of all academic subjects toward an interdisciplinary focus. Years prior, this group of teachers had experienced working on some thematic units but not to the extent of this type of training. Several of the team members are now fully involved in the creation of student activities, which focused on blending all subject areas together to make learning more meaningful. The outcome of the students' work was often a performance assessment task, which included critical thinking skill development. As a result of this approach to staff development, a variety of assessment tools are presently utilized as predictors for student achievement.

Besides the typical adult learning sessions and group conversation meetings, the project allowed for creativity to increase the quality of teacher feedback. The focus was on ensuring and increasing student achievement. In order to ensure the best techniques to bring to our school, the staff agreed upon writing strategies. The specific needs were made clear by analyzing our student work. The staff began to actually change direction

through assessment. Again and again, we found that assessment guided us to provide further study for our staff about instructional approaches.

After much discussion, an in-house model was suggested by one of the teachers. We settled on an author-teacher-in-residence program, which enabled students and teachers to be exposed to new ideas. All of the members of the staff were given a scheduled time to view the resident working with students in the classroom. This skilled individual was hired to model new techniques with our students over a consecutive three-day period. Teachers were given extra time with the author in team planning sessions as well. A new view developed through this visit that helped the staff apply techniques which supported a change in student learning. The author-teacher in-residence program assisted the staff to reflect on the process of instructional practice that motivates students to achieve using work produced by the class.

Because of the group focus on the improvement of the quality of teacher feedback on work in the language arts, science, math, and social studies, teachers became aware of good writing. The "slice" method allowed teachers to respond collectively and to hear each other's viewpoints regarding student work. The requirements within the team were strengthened, as were the expectations for improved writing across content areas. Teachers' standards were more uniform and the skills for better writing were transferred to each discipline. The result produced teacher feedback that was improved and a student product that was better in quality than previously achieved. Using authentic assessment to guide instruction in the classroom is a valuable tool. Our school has found it to be an important ingredient

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**HETEROGENEOUS GROUPING:
RUSSIAN AT CAPT. NATHAN HALE MIDDLE SCHOOL**
by Regina Snyder, Capt. Nathan Hale School, Coventry



In recent years there has been much thoughtful debate over the relative merits and shortcomings of heterogeneous grouping of pupils in middle school. At Captain Nathan Hale Middle School in Coventry, CT, heterogeneous grouping has worked effectively - more effectively, perhaps than in other disciplines - in beginners' classes for language acquisition.

Our Russian language classes began several years ago as an adjunct to a family exchange program with a Moscow School. They developed from "survival Russian" training for host families into an elective class in conjunction with our "gifted" program. From the very outset the class was completely heterogeneous, including both adults and 6th, 7th, and 8th graders. The combination of age levels turned out to be an asset to our program.

If we consider language as initially a social skill (the ability to communicate verbally with another person) and a physical one (hearing and understanding spoken sounds, and then being able to reproduce them and be understood) and only secondarily as an academic pursuit (reading literature and writing), the rationale becomes clear. The fact that many class exercises consist of patterned conversations among individuals make the age of participants irrelevant. There is no need of a hierarchical model.

During the first session all students - adults and children - are reminded that by the time they began school

they already spoke English fluently. They are asked to remember how as infants they learned their native language, which was by listening to the adults around them and imitating the sounds they heard. The next task is to bring forth that tabula rasa of the state of pre-language: if the students can successfully imagine that they are infants again, they can, for example, RE-learn the names of things ("This is NOT a house, we just call it "house". Russians call it "dom"). This is just one of the strategies employed in the first weeks of class. The degree to which one can imagine and role-play is not particularly dependent upon one's age although pre-adolescents seem to have a good aptitude.

Language learning is in large part a physical skill involving ears, mouth and facial muscles, tone of voice, etc. The language teacher resembles a coach directing "aerobics for the mouth" and exercising ears and lips to the subtleties of unfamiliar sounds. Russian is a "musical" language, inasmuch as it depends on rising and falling tones of voice for communication of meaning rather more than English.

Another strategy which helps to "level the playing field" is a "team" approach to oral exercises. When a student cannot think of a word or makes a mistake, it is the group rather than the teacher that supplies the correct information. This practice can be implemented within the first few sessions, when the more rapid learners begin to outpace the rest of the class. The result is a

camaraderie among learners and a non-competitive atmosphere, particularly when an older student can be seen at a disadvantage as readily as a younger. (The principal of our school, determined to learn Russian, participated in the class for two years, and was the source of both amusement and inspiration to the rest of the class. The time he failed to hand in a homework assignment became a joke of long duration.)

In the course of the very first weeks we address all four aspects: understanding, speaking, reading, and writing. Understanding and speaking come quite naturally, particularly for those who have come in contact with native speakers as have many in our community. The first day we count from one to ten, learn the names of half a dozen objects around the room, and master a few social expressions, notably "thank you" and "goodbye". (We reserve "hello" and "please" which are considerably harder on the American palate, for a later class!)

Reading the Russian alphabet poses less difficulty than one might think. Students are asked to imagine themselves as kindergartners again learning their ABCs. Most find this relaxing and interesting. It does, however, take patient repetition to sever connection with the English alphabet. The letters that are troublesome are not the unfamiliar ones but rather the ones that look like English letters but have a different sound. A simple alphabet game in which players gain points for

RUSSIAN*Continued from previous page*

Early reading skill is acquired through the use of English cognates. Many words in Russian such as "basketball," "tennis," "restaurant," etc. are so similar to English and so easily deciphered that such an exercise immediately inspires students' confidence in their own proficiency (which, of course, is half the battle).

Cursive writing in Russian is rather exacting and leaves little room for individual deviation from the norm: it requires patience and attention to detail. This is somewhat problematic for American students, and we have mixed results. Some students never get beyond printing the letters, whereas others take to handwriting with pleasure. We try not to allow poor penmanship to inhibit enthusiasm for learning the language. (Eventually, use of the computer keyboard may bypass this difficulty.) Writing on the blackboard is a good strategy to encourage pleasure in

writing. In any case, all are encouraged to be able at least to read cursive writing, since any letters from pen-pals will probably be written.

Teaching materials consist mainly of teacher-made exercises, notably dual-language worksheets (Russian sentence in left column, English in right), pattern drills, picture texts, and flash cards. The absence of a really satisfactory textbook for the middle-school level turns out to be something of an asset rather than a liability, at least at the beginner's level. Students keep notebooks of grammar sheets. Learning songs and memorizing lines of a simple play or skit also aid in developing fluency.

One of the real benefits of learning Russian or indeed any second language is acquiring a solid comprehension of grammar. It is easier for students to see the reason for learning grammar when they can

"step outside" of their native language and look at it as just one way among many of describing the world. Grammar then becomes a kind of road map, a means of learning any language.

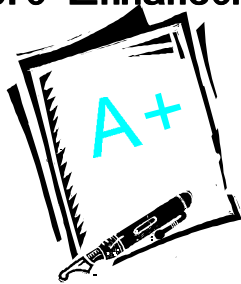
For two years, students attended voluntarily before regular classes (we began at 7:00 a.m. five days per week!!). Results were so positive that this year we were able to include it in the regular curriculum for the first time. The heterogeneous grouping has been replaced by two sections (one seventh and one eighth grade). Each meets three times per week.

One indication of the success of our program has been in the "popular demand" for continuation of Russian classes by graduates. Since our high school does not as yet offer a program of Russian study, those who left Capt. Nathan Hale School in June now meet one evening a week at

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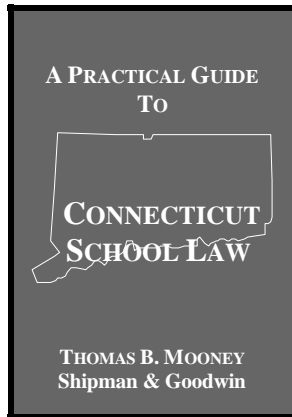
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