Promoting Harmony: A Reflection

By Casey Lanier
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When many people consider the prospect of teaching in the middle grades or reflect on their own middle grades experiences, thoughts of dread or uneasiness tend to arise. Indeed, the middle grades experience has often obtained a bad stigma from both teachers and students alike. However, *Promoting Harmony: Adolescent Development and Classroom Practices* by David Strahan, Mark L’Esperance, and John Van Hoose seeks to dispel many of the negative perceptions that surround the middle grades years and shed light on the complex nature of young adolescents and how teachers can best educate them. Many worthy connections can be made between the NMSA-endorsed *Promoting Harmony* and the topics that have been covered in the Teaching in the Middle course at Campbell University.

To begin with, the authors of *Promoting Harmony* emphasize the significance of positive teacher-student relationships wherein teachers are sensitive to their students’ needs and work to provide relevant hands-on activities that engage students. In *the Teaching in the Middle* (EDUC 365), we have discussed the importance of establishing productive advisor-advisee programs, and that successful teachers are informed of their students strengths and weaknesses regarding learning, and they get to know their students as people as well (i.e. interests, hobbies, home-life). The child-studies that we completed as part of *Teaching in the Middle* illustrated the impact of positive relationships firsthand because most of the students we interviewed described their favorite teachers as those who were relatable and offered unique learning experiences tailored to the student’s interests. *Promoting Harmony* also emphasizes that positive teacher-student relationships are built on mutual trust of one another. In *Teaching in the Middle*, we have
discussed the importance of teachers being positive role models and keeping the lines of communication open with students so trust will arise. Both *Promoting Harmony* and *Teaching in the Middle* emphasize the importance of establishing safe, inviting classrooms. When students are made to feel valued and comfortable at school by their teachers, learning will take precedence rather than discipline and outside disturbances. *Promoting Harmony* describes successful classrooms as being student-centered; we have discussed this concept in *Teaching in the Middle* too. When students see that teachers are deeply invested in their success, they usually respond with increased motivation to learn.

Additionally, *Promoting Harmony* discusses the developmental realms that characterize young adolescents; *Teaching in the Middle* also deals extensively with this topic. In terms of intellectual and emotional development, *Promoting Harmony* suggests that students learn best when connections between topics are emphasized. We have discussed this idea throughout our course and have developed integrated curriculums to showcase how content areas can be intertwined so learning isn’t constrained by set class periods. Both *Promoting Harmony* and our discussions in *Teaching in the Middle* stress the need for teachers to use a variety of teaching methods in order to accommodate the variety of intelligence levels present in young adolescents. *Promoting Harmony* further highlights research that explains that the brains of young adolescents have not yet matured by the time they enter middle school. In our course, we have discussed the fact that young adolescents are often absent-minded and may act immaturely, so teachers should model appropriate behavior for students and give students’ leeway to make mistakes and learn from them. We have also discussed the importance of scaffolding instruction so students receive instruction that parallels their intelligence level and are not “left behind”.

*Promoting Harmony* also discusses the increased empathy that students develop during the
middle grades years. Through our discussions in *Teaching in the Middle* about how to create developmentally responsive classrooms, we have discussed the use of service projects as a way to channel students’ empathy into an educational experience. Service projects allow students to better the world and help those less-fortunate, while also using skills they have learned in the classroom out in the real-world.

In terms of physical development, *Promoting Harmony* explains that young adolescents show a wide range of physical development during the middle grades years and that they are often pre-occupied with their looks. We discussed this topic thoroughly in *Teaching in the Middle* as we completed our child studies. We discussed the sensitivity teachers must demonstrate with students during these transformational years so students’ self-esteem is strengthened. Additionally, *Promoting Harmony* explains that the middle grades years are often the launching point for poor nutritional habits and romantic relationships. In *Teaching in the Middle*, we have discussed the importance of teachers advising students about the importance of making healthy decisions in both of these arenas. The child studies we completed allowed us to interview students who attested to the prevalence of these issues related to physical development.

Additionally, in terms of social and moral development, *Promoting Harmony* explains that young adolescents are often desperate to fit-in with their peers and are increasingly susceptible to peer pressure during their middle grades years. In our course, we have discussed the use of teaming to help students establish a sense of belonging within the school environment; teams allow students to develop camaraderie with their peers without having to “change” themselves or participate in dangerous behavior to gain recognition. Both *Promoting Harmony* and our discussions in *Teaching in the Middle* touch upon the desire for independence characteristic of students during the middle grades years. In class, we have discussed the
importance of offering students choices about the types of assignments they complete and empowering them to take an active role in their education by aiding in their own assessments, leading conferences, etc. Moreover, *Promoting Harmony* explains that young adolescents are increasingly susceptible to bullying during the middle grades years. In our course, we have used our child studies to determine the presence and impact of bullying on students, and we have discussed the need for teachers to be aware of bullying in their schools and discourage such destructive behavior from continuing.

All in all, *Promoting Harmony* is a fascinating read that, in concert with the Teaching in the Middle course, dispels many of the unflattering portrayals of middle school and offers significant insight into the development of young adolescents and how to best meet their educational needs. Indeed, both *Promoting Harmony* and our course illustrate the importance of middle level education and each is of tremendous value to prospective teachers.

Reference