

Inspiring or Tiring?

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I love teaching junior high students. How do I know? Well, I've taught every grade from K-10 and I know for certain that the most inspiring place for me is with all these often misunderstood teenagers or soon-to-be -teenagers. When you work with seventh graders, eight graders or ninth graders, you are bound to get sympathetic smiles, a slow shaking of the head or a red badge for your courage. I tease "my kids" that I was a hideous teenager so I have been banished to teaching junior high for the rest of my life. But truly, I find my work inspiring.

Why this particular group more than any other? Well, I believe that adolescence is probably one of the most influential times in a person's life. Talk to people, most of them can vividly recall the angst of these middle years: Gym strip, too tall, too short, picked last, late bloomer, early maturation, sometimes depressed, often lonely, great friendships, first loves, organizational disasters, overwhelming tomorrows. Practically everyone has a story to tell about junior high. At no other time in their life will they ever be cognizant of so many changes all happening at once, at breakneck speed or possibly turtle time.

This is where teachers come in; let your students know that this is all normal. Do the research, tell them scientifically or relationally what happens or what will happen. Tell them that it happens according to their body's own time schedule. How reassuring to know you are normal and that it's a temporary condition! When the information really sinks in, they learn to allow each other the same courtesy of being patient with these transitional times. One of the biggest compliments I receive from my graduating students is "Mrs. Bishop remembers what it's like to be a teenager."

Research continues on the development of the teenage brain. Dr. Jay Giedd of the National Institute of Mental Health in Bethesda, MD., together with colleagues at McGill University in Montreal say that their studies have found that the brain begins to grow again just before puberty (boys 12, girls 11). The area experiencing growth is the prefrontal cortex; this is the CEO of the brain. As this area "matures, teenagers can reason better and develop more control over impulses and make judgments better. In fact, this part of the brain has been dubbed 'the area of sober second thought.'" ¹ How exciting, let them know that they are on the journey to independence, they have responsibilities and opportunities that are totally new to them.

The sad part is that schools and curriculums often treat middle-schoolers as if they are just preparing for high school. We try to academically standardize these individuals that are not standard in any other way (spiritual, physical, emotional, moral, social, etc.) Our schools and teachers need to see that a new approach is necessary in educating the adolescent. We must help our "in-between-ers" know that they are competent, lovable, and normal. Help them find out who they really are. Now doesn't that sound inspiring?

We do a lot of talking in my class; we work on mutual respect and we explore what makes us unique. Reflective thinking and journaling are used in all of my classes; it's the

thoughts on paper that count not the grammar and spelling. How liberating for some students to feel the power of writing for the first time and perhaps even “meet” themselves for the first time. A self awareness portfolio is another favorite assignment in my health classes.

Most of all young people need time. I’ve had the privilege of working with all my junior high students over a period of continuous years. Time to build relationships, time to show patience, time to not take them (it) personally; they need it, just as much as we need it. When they slip up or act out, time to talk one-on-one, later, reflectively after the heat of the moment. They need time to ask questions and seek answers. This is a powerful time to meet Jesus as their friend and savior.

Do I love teaching junior high? Yes, I love the spirited and the bored, the stubborn and the compliant, the noisy and the reflective. I love the potential and the constant development that happens in a teenager’s life. Challenge them to meet their potential, but cradle them with acceptance that’s been built on the foundation of time and understanding.

Resources:

¹<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/teenbrain/work/adolescent.html>