

Book Review

Fires in the Middle School Bathroom:
Advice for Teachers from Middle Schoolers
by Kathleen Cushman & Laura Rogers
New York: The New Press, 2008

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Kathleen Cushman and Laura Rogers have provided an insightful look at the experience of middle schoolers and the issues that influence those experiences in *Fires in the Middle School Bathroom: Advice for Teachers from Middle Schoolers*. Kathleen Cushman is co-founder of What Kids Can Do, Inc., a national nonprofit organization. Laura Rogers is a school psychologist and lecturer. By delving into the thinking, attitudes, and the lessons learned regarding these very real issues, Cushman and Rogers provide readers with valuable insight into the experiences of middle schoolers. The purpose of the work is to show teachers how to use what we know, what we think we know, and what students tell us in order to better understand and meet the needs of middle schoolers. The key to understanding what kids think is multiple perspectives. The positive intentionality that the authors use to guide readers through these complex issues works in tandem with the appreciative inquiry questioning frame (Hammond, 1998) that they expose students to in order to elicit detailed thinking.

While the title leaves something to be desired, the content and perspectives offered are rich in value and flavor. Having the opportunity to hear how the language and actions of teachers influence middle schoolers, from the perspective of middle schoolers, is priceless to those who seek to offer effective support and guidance to this age group.

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The text is divided into seven chapters plus three additional sections that provide teacher educators, teachers, parents, professional development providers, after school care program leaders, and anyone else interested in meeting the needs of early adolescence students, with a wealth of information and reflective prompts on which to ponder. A strong element of the writing is accomplished through real student voices. These student voices reflect a diversity of learners. Forty student voices from across the country, representing five urban areas, offer advice for teachers. While some of the advice identifies specific steps teachers can take, there are other parts of the student conversations that illustrate their hopes, fears, and complexities of schooling, and life in general. Teachers are encouraged to read between the lines in order to understand what is needed and when it is needed.

The first section of the book consists of the preface and an introduction, both of which effectively “craft the container,” as Laura Lipton and Bruce Wellman, authors of *Pathways to Understanding* (2006) would say. In this section, the authors identify a brief history of how the research design was crafted. In addition, this introduction helps the reader become aware of the nature of the students’ experiences. The authors do not tell teachers how to teach, but encourage them to listen to their students in order to become more effective at meeting student needs.

In the first chapter, entitled “Everything is Off Balance,” the authors speak to the continuous need for students to calibrate and recalibrate themselves and their relationships. Relationships with teachers, parents, other students, and with themselves have an unstable edge at this age, according to Cushman and Rogers. Middle schoolers are unsure of who they are and/or who they want to be. Identity issues as they relate to how students see themselves socially, academically, and racially come into sharper focus as they establish their identities and learn how others perceive them. Cushman and Rogers speak from a “playground” viewpoint to a “high school” viewpoint that coincides with that of middle schoolers. Adolescents are eager to both hang on to what they already know and are comfortable with, yet they are racing toward the unknown and undefined. In the end, they find themselves in a zone of confusion, continuously recalibrating. This is where a teacher’s ability to listen, provide a safe learning environment, share personal bits and pieces of themselves, and offer encouragement will provide needed support to students as they navigate this zone of uncertainty. The list of “Some Things We Want to Know on the First Day” is provided in this chapter and gives teachers a starting point for support.

In chapter two, “A Teacher on Our Side,” Cushman and Rogers illustrate how thin the line can be between giving students room to

express themselves and knowing when to step in with some directives. The boundaries are susceptible to change, depending on the subject matter, the context, and the class composition. The student voices share 15 explicit ways that teachers can think about relationships, authority, trust, processes, responsibility, respect, and heart. Teachers are asked to pay attention to the nature of what, when, and how they intervene.

In chapter three, "Social Forces in the Classroom," the students share what they need within the context of the classroom to feel and be secure. It is within this arena that teachers' coaching skills, grouping strategies, ability to differentiate, problem solving strengths, and reflective capabilities are essential. Students identify what they need, what they want, and how teachers, and to a small extent, parents, can support them as they navigate the social pressures of trying to fit in. The students express the need for fairness, structure, and respect. They also acknowledge the value of having input into the process of teaching and learning.

Cushman and Rogers advocate for the value of multiple perspectives and for transparency, especially where fairness and respect are concerned. Students are keenly aware of racism, discrimination, bullying, and sexual harassment, especially at school. When positive role models, clear and fair processes, safe environments, and genuine relationships are in place, students are encouraged to take advantage of available supports as mentioned throughout this chapter.

Cushman and Rogers sort through what it means to be a middle school learner. Chapter four, "Helping Us Grow into Confident Learners," addresses the importance of strong relationships and of teachers being mindful of their classroom strategies. This chapter describes middle schoolers' desire to be given the opportunity to learn from their mistakes, their thirst for feedback on their work, their view of homework and grades, and how humor can be used effectively in the classroom. Cushman and Rogers' advice is manifested in the nine suggestions in the "How to Help Kids Learn" section.

Chapter five, "Using Our Energy to Help Us Learn," addresses the high energy levels of middle schoolers, especially boys and their learning styles. The authors offer a variety of suggestions regarding how middle schoolers' energy might be handled. Student suggestions highlight the need for teachers to use a variety of instructional strategies, to make subject matter meaningful, to consider pacing, and to teach strategies to enable students to cope with the high energy levels, which would assist them in maintaining focus.

The importance of relationships is a concept that continues to surface throughout this text. No relationship is more important than that between student and parent, according to the authors. Therefore, the

book would not be complete without some suggestions on how to enhance and support the parent and child relationship. Chapter six, "Make Way for Parents," describes the relationship renegotiation that happens between parents and children when children reach the middle school years and ways teachers can rely upon that renegotiation to support student learning. Students described how parent involvement in their education, while still very important, should include a balanced mix of support, freedom, trust, and compassion.

Chapter seven, "Our Transition to High School," provides advice and also captures a great deal of reflective thinking. The students describe the middle school experience in terms that are almost nostalgic. They highlight what may have made the transition from middle school to high school smoother and provide examples to enlighten future bridging between these experiences. Both authors as well as student opinion provide a perspective about what high schools could do in order to aid the transition process. There are nine detailed suggestions regarding how schools and teachers can provide strong transitional experiences and activities from middle school to high school.

In the epilogue, Cushman and Rogers offer some thoughts to refocus thinking about middle schoolers. Teachers are urged to be reflective practitioners who learn to look at students and situations through a kaleidoscope of multiple perspectives, listen to what students are saying, and approach each situation with compassion. To this end, Cushman and Rogers include powerful and reflective exercises in which teachers can engage to provide a baseline, gauge current perspectives, identify something personal that could provide a hook, and to offer a frame for considering the thinking shared by middle schoolers. Given the structure and content of the book, it would be particularly valuable for teacher educators to utilize the resources and thinking, as presented by Cushman and Rogers, to prepare teacher candidates interested in working with early adolescence students. I will certainly be using this text in the professional development of novice teachers in my district. This is a must read for anyone interested in offering effective support and/or guidance to middle schoolers.

References

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