Middle School Philosophy Paper

I believe the joy and work of being a teacher is much like that of a mother robin. She believes her babies can fly and each one will do so at their own pace. She knows it takes support for them to become strong birds who can fly independently. She knows they have to value flying in order to put effort into learning it. Just as a mother bird wants to see her babies soar independently, as a teacher, I want to see my students succeed. I believe there are many practices that are important for middle school teachers to use in the pursuit of this goal, but there are three that I find most valuable; holding high individual expectations, scaffolding organizational skills, and teaching relevant curriculum.

A mother bird must believe her babies can fly. Without this confidence, she will be too scared to let them out of the nest and they will be dependent on her for everything. As teachers, we have to believe our students can succeed and not shelter them, but instead prepare them for the world that awaits them outside of school. It is necessary to clearly communicate these high expectations to the students so they too can believe in what they are capable of. If a baby bird did not believe it could fly would it ever jump from the nest? Carpenter (2004) advises teachers, “Students are not just evaluating teacher expectations based on explicit verbal communications, but a combination that also includes a myriad of implicit, non-verbal communications such as teacher attitude… Expectations must, therefore, be clearly defined and communicated” (p.67). It is crucial for all of a teachers’ actions communicate that he/she believes his/her students can succeed. A teacher must also remember that he/she is communicating that every student can succeed. Every student is not the same, but every student can and should be held to their own high yet individual standards based off of their prior achievement and capacity to learn. For a language arts class, this may mean that students read different leveled books and have different
requirements for writing essays. Not every baby bird will take off from the nest on the same day, they each develop in their own time and need their own support. What is most important in assisting baby birds in flying and students in attaining the high expectations we hold for them, is supporting them as they strive to achieve.

Baby birds are not born flying, and students are not born living independently. Both need support from older members who are already independent and can teach them, mothers and teachers. *Teachers use scaffolding to slowly transition students* from being dependent on them for everything, for example in tying their shoes and cutting up their food in kindergarten, to being independent, knowing due dates and manage multiple assignments simultaneously in high school. Middle school falls right in-between these two stages, and is therefore the most critical time in moving students towards independence through scaffolding. In her article “Teaching Organizational Skills in Middle School: Moving toward Independence,” Boller (2008) presents a common problem that arises during this stage. “Middle school students are assumed to be old enough to remember to bring books home, finish a project without nagging, and write assignments down” (p.169). However, students’ frontal lobes, where high process thinking takes place, are not fully developed, so they are not prepared to handle these organizational tasks on their own. Many students have also never been taught how to take notes correctly or how to break down a large project into smaller steps. Middle school teachers need to become aware of their students’ deficits and support them by teaching essential organizational skills. Boller suggests several practices teachers can implement into their daily instruction including: modeling, breaking tasks into manageable steps, providing visual cues to reinforce directions, and teaching planning, study, and time management skills (p.170-171). Teachers and mother
birds must instruct their students and babies, respectively, providing an example and step-by-step support.

Baby birds can have all the support in the world for flying, but if they did not want to fly, they are not going to fly. Similarly, a student can have a teacher who believes in them and implements all the supports above, but still not succeed if they don’t want to. So, what makes birds want to fly and students to succeed? Birds are motivated by their desire for worms; *students are motivated by their desire to learn something relevant to their lives.* “The best middle school curriculum is based upon addressing the personal and social concerns of young adolescents” (Bishop & Pflaum, 2005, p.7). In Bishop and Pflaum’s article, “Student Perspectives of Action, Relevance, and Pace,” several students were interviewed and said they were most engaged in lessons that were “linked to the world outside of school” and taught them application for their futures (p.7). An example of this linked relevance is part of the anit-bulling program at Wood Oaks Junior High School. The school uses realistic fiction text and journaling to fight the problem of bullying, but is also promoting real-life application of language arts material. “If students connect to the literature, identify with the protagonist, and relate the theme to their own experiences, they will achieve a higher level of comprehension” (Hillsberg & Spak, 2006, p.25). Reading texts the students can relate to engage students at a deeper level because it creates a more meaningful experience. Another strategy middle level language arts teachers should use is the teaching useful composition skills. It is important for students to understand when, where and in what capacity they will need to be successful writers in the future. Along with this, students should be engaged in speaking skills to gain confidence in their ability to voice information and their own opinions. To create more interest in students, reading, writing and speaking topics should be chosen by the student themselves whenever possible. Teachers
engaging students will motivate them to want to succeed, much like mother birds teaching their babies the importance and joy of flying. With the wind under their wings, they will see the value in their hard effort.

In order to succeed, baby birds and students need someone to believe in them and set in high individual expectations for them. In order to reach these goals, they need support through scaffolding and modeling. For a middle school educator scaffolding organizational skills is especially crucial. They also need motivation through relevance. Students want the curriculum to connect to their current and future lives. The mother or teacher is the main aid in all these, and many other, components. Being a mother bird or teacher is hard work, but well worth it when you witness the result of all that hard work soaring successfully and independently.

References