

### What's Your Mission?

#### ***The Big Question***

I am a first year teacher with a concentration in Middle Level education. I was involved in the CMLA organization at my university and attended some of the NCMLE state conferences. I have a concentrated passion for young adolescents, a passion—I acknowledge—is rare among aspiring teachers.

There's a certain dialogue that follows announcing you have indeed chosen a career in education. Prior to beginning my first full year of teaching, I had many people ask me if I was ready. Bubbling with the anticipation of a fresh graduate, I had perfected an excited "YES!" Following my eager declaration came the inevitable question about my area of focus. When I answered with the fact that I would be teaching young adolescents, I received a myriad of responses that can be summed up in one question:

**"Why?!"**

My answer to that question varies as my educational philosophy continues to evolve, but if I'm honest I never really knew why. That is, I didn't know why until I was asked, and then I realized it's because of the *reaction*. The disbelief. The disgust. Because they aren't going to.

Don't get me wrong, I believe that we are all blessed with special and specific talents. I would grimace at the thought of being a doctor or accountant, and I am so thankful I was not called to do that because blood and math are two of my least favorite things.

However, given the less-than-encouraging trademark responses to those pursuing a career in professional education, and specifically middle level education, I've tried to develop a comprehensive explanation of *why*.

#### **Innocence**

Adolescents still possess a childlike innocence. I want to preserve that innocence.

In a world of school shootings, rioting cities, and prejudice, we've grown numb and accustomed to hate. We mourn and move on because we have to and that's the way life works. But this type of detached, compartmentalized reaction should be the exception, not the rule. We've learned to look the other way, but young adolescents bravely venture head-on into the fight and ask, "WHY?" They push boundaries in a positive way. Young adolescents are not content with the rudimentary answers of how things have always been. They are bold enough to ask the tough questions and I want to encourage that curiosity. So often as adults we perceive this innocent outlook as naivety, but I earnestly wish we could hang onto the naivety a little longer. It might do our hearts some good.

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For more information on the NCMLE or to contribute to a future Musings, please contact Dr. Lora Roukema, editor, at [roukema@campbell.edu](mailto:roukema@campbell.edu)

## Middle Grades Musings

### Independence

Not only are they innocent, but young adolescents have a fierce desire to be independent. I want to inspire independence.

*PSA: The concept of one-size-fits-all does not exist: not in clothing, and definitely not in the field education. The assembly line works best when left to Henry Ford.*

Each student that sets foot in your classroom is different. Treat them as an individual who are equipped with individual backgrounds, talents, interests, and abilities.

### Insecurity

The ages of 10-15 are especially difficult with regards to physical, social, and emotional development. Appearance, peers, and self-image are critical contributors to the overall well-being of young adolescents. They have boding insecurities lurking in the shadows of their mind. I want to protect their hearts and minds from that evil.

The pressure of conformity is a constant temptation in life. I haven't reached the point where it gets easier (so if you have, please let me know when I can breathe again). Young adolescents experience a majority of the same feelings as adults, but imagine having to process those great, big emotions without adult wisdom. Imagine trying to sort through truth and lies without adult experience. Imagine trying to calmly control your reaction without adult maturity. It is our job as educators to these young adolescents to model adult wisdom and control using our adult experience to guide these delicate creatures to an appropriate adult response. Give them a little grace and maybe a compliment or two.

### Imagination

Remember the days of imaginary tea parties, playing cowboys and Indians in the backyard, and when playtime was really *Toy Story* reincarnated? Young adolescents have creative imaginations waiting to be unleashed. I want to cultivate that creativity. They are fearless. How dare we limit or laugh at their daunting dreams when we have been placed in the position to encourage those fearless dreams. I want to learn to dream like that for myself again.

### All that Other Stuff...

Young adolescents are candidly, and unapologetically, honest. I want to live that way. If you've ever wondered what you truly look like or what people think about you, venture into a middle school classroom. That pimple you've been trying to hide under your side-swept bangs? They see it. The bad hair day you were hoping to avoid, but unfortunately the dress code does not allow hats? They will call attention to it. They will make you aware of all your physical flaws, but deeply love you in spite of them.

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Young adolescents have the uncanny ability to see through a façade, no matter how much time you spend rehearsing. I want to be seen as genuine in their eyes.

Young adolescents are sassy, passionate, and vibrant. I want to teach them this way.

### **Relationships are like a bank account.**

Every child comes with the message that God is not yet discouraged of us, yet so often we become discouraged of them. I chose a career in teaching young adolescents because, in the words of Rita Pierson,

"Every child deserves a champion: an adult who will not give up on them, who understands the power of connection and insists they become the best they can possibly be."

People from the outside may see your career choice as a sacrifice, and they are not wrong, but I see it as more of an investment. Relationships are like a bank account: you give and you get. There is risk and there is loss, but there is also tremendous gain and glorious riches. The greater the risk, the greater the reward, and frankly, I can't wait for the return.

*The author of this edition, Ms. Elizabeth Phillips, is a proud graduate of Campbell University and holds licenses in elementary education and ELA middle grades. She works on a fifth grade team founded on principles of middle grades philosophies. She was the Campbell School of Education's Student of the Year and currently works in Moore County. She can be reached at [ephillips@ncmcs.org](mailto:ephillips@ncmcs.org).*

*As you continue in your school year, reflect on your answer to the question, "Why did you choose this career?" Over the years your answer will change and adapt, and that's okay as long as the change is consistent with your mission. Continue to remind yourself of your purpose before setting foot in your classroom. Do not be discouraged, friends; change starts with a small drop.*

### **It's time for some R & R (Rigor & Relevance).**

The 41<sup>st</sup> Annual NCMLE Conference is March 6-8 at the Koury Convention Center in Greensboro.

We hope to see you there!

To register: <http://ncmle.org/conference-registration/>

