The Joys of Teaching the Upper Elementary Grades

Effective teachers motivate students by helping them get hooked on learning, a habit that will satisfy for a lifetime.

By Steve Reifman

I just finished my 14th year as an educator. I have taught students in each of the elementary grades, from prekindergarten to 6th, and coached middle schoolers in several sports. I have deeply enjoyed and cherished my time with children at every one of these ages. In the upper elementary grades, though, I have found a home, with the last nine years of my career spent exclusively at this level. My job gets better and becomes more satisfying each year, and I hope to work with upper elementary age children for the rest of my career.

The joys of teaching at this level are numerous. What jumps out at me first are the positive, enthusiastic attitudes that upper elementary students bring to the classroom on a daily basis. With rare exceptions, my students genuinely like school, want to be there, and want to do well. Still sweet and impressionable, these kids haven't yet reached the age where they're "too cool for school." They care about learning, are willing to invest themselves completely in engaging projects and activities, and are eager to contribute their time and energy to worthwhile endeavors.

Last spring, for example, as part of our study of Native Americans, I announced to my 3rd-grade class that we would be creating a museum of artifacts that represented significant aspects of tribal life. Since I wanted students to assume as much responsibility for the project as possible, I asked them to prioritize our

■ *STEVE REIFMAN teaches at Roosevelt Elementary School, Santa Monica, California. He is the author of* Eight Essentials of Empowered Teaching and Learning, K-8: Bringing Out the Best in Your Students *(Corwin, 2008).*

Image: Artville/PhotoDisc

UPPER ELEMENTARY STUDENTS:

- Possess enthusiasm for learning and will contribute energy and invest themselves completely in worthwhile projects;
- Are ready to engage in and embrace higher-level challenges;
- Work with a greater sense of future purpose; and
- Can develop enduring habits of mind and habits of character — especially significant are those aiding students' ability to form and maintain strong friendships

list of researched artifacts so that no crucial items would be overlooked, gather their own materials, plan, and complete their pieces by a deadline.

This was the first time I had tried the museum approach, and I had no idea what to expect over the next week. When "letting go" in this manner, there's always a bit of a risk, but my students proved that I had nothing to fear. Each day, they brought more and more materials from home, and what they didn't bring, they found on the playground — leaves, twigs, anything that added authenticity to their artifacts. During our daily afternoon project time, the kids worked with great enthusiasm, showed tremendous focus, and came through like champions. On the night of our annual Open House, the kids couldn't wait to show family and friends their canoes, bowls, shelters, and other creations that made this attraction one of the highlights of our school year.

READY TO STEP UP

Upper elementary students are a joy to teach because they are so capable and so ready to step up and embrace higher-level challenges that require deep thinking and advanced problem-solving strategies. In my 3rd-grade class, for example, students progress at their own pace through a series of increasingly difficult math problem-solving menus, with each one typically consisting of four story problems. Sometimes, we will work on these menus for the whole math period, though usually students will move to their menus after completing the main math activity for that day. Taken together, the problems feature a variety of situations and call for a wide array of strategies, such as guess and check, work backwards, and choose operations.

Even after using these menus for several years, I continue to be surprised by how novel, imaginative, and effective students' strategies are. Occasionally, I wonder whether I need to eliminate some of the problems from the menus due to their level of difficulty for most of my kids, but their perseverance, creativity, and determination to dig into these challenges make me realize that I don't need to change anything.

In their quest to complete menu problems successfully, students often become more independent, more goal-oriented, and better able to plan ahead, three other positive qualities that often emerge in the upper elementary grades. With regard to the nine menus that constitute the entire set, students frequently come up to me throughout the year and share their plans for the future, telling me the menu on which they are currently working, how long they think it will take them to finish it, and how they plan to accomplish all nine by the end of the year.

In addition to embracing and succeeding at higher-level challenges, upper elementary students also work with a greater sense of what I call "future purpose" and can begin to understand on a deeper level how doing well in school can improve their lives now and in the years ahead. The first major project I ask my kids to complete each year involves creating our class mission statement. As part of this process, we discuss various reasons why coming to school each day and working hard are important. We talk about how doing well in school now can help us go to college, get the jobs we want, contribute to society, maximize our options in life, and benefit us in other ways. Once we complete our mission statement and review it for a few weeks, I see students begin to commit themselves to these larger purposes, even those that remain well in the future. I can see it in how they work and how they act.

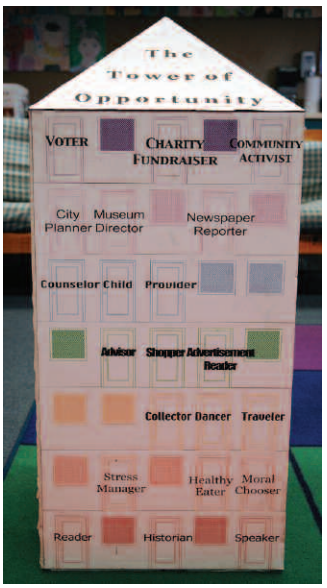
I also know that students are more aware of and more committed to the purposes of education when I hear what they have to say every Wednesday morning when we bring out the Tower of Opportunity. My architect friend Eric helped me create this seven-floor structure a few years ago when I was searching for a visual metaphor that would help my students connect daily learning activities to the higher purposes I was trying to promote as a teacher. Each floor of the tower features one of the seven life roles Dale Parnell defines in his *Why Do I Have to Learn This?* (1995), such as citizen, consumer, and lifelong learner, and shows examples of each role listed on small doors. The message of the tower is that education is the key that opens doors and that the more successful people are in school, the more opportunities they are likely to have in the future.

The Tower of Opportunity

As we discuss the tower each week, students talk about such things as the types of jobs they want, colleges they hope to attend, and contributions they want to make to their families and communities. When the kids talk about their plans for the future, they often connect something specific they are learning in the classroom to their larger goals. I have

Photos courtesy the author

always believed that the most important decision young people can make is the decision to commit themselves to education and make becoming a successful student their highest priority. Listening to students who have already made this commitment speak intelligently, thoughtfully, and sincerely about what they hope to accomplish as they get older is one of the greatest joys I experience in my job.



INTERNALIZE HABITS

Upper elementary students are also wonderful to teach because they are old enough to develop and internalize important habits that can last a lifetime. Specifically, there are two sets of habits I emphasize with my students: "Habits of Mind," which focus on dispositions that make students better thinkers and better people, and "Habits of Character," which pertain to issues of student behavior, attitudes, work habits, and social and moral development.

Emphasizing habit development first became a top priority in my teaching after I read Theodore Sizer's *Horace's Hope*, the final part of his well-respected Horace trilogy. Sizer's ideas helped me understand that my work with children involved far more than teaching content standards; it needed to focus on helping students learn to use their minds well. As he puts it, "Knowing stuff is nice. Being able to use that stuff makes sense. Being disposed to use it always, as a matter of habit, is the brass ring, the ultimate standard" (1996, p. 45).

Each day in the classroom, I strive to empower my students with various habits. When evidence emerges that these behavior patterns are sinking in, it is probably the biggest rush I experience. Last winter, for example, during our unit on citizenship, my kids and I read about different ways in which people could be great citizens. While discussing the topic of jury service, Christa raised her hand and said that when serving on a jury, she thought people shouldn't show any bias. Just a few weeks earlier, Bias was introduced as a habit of mind, and when defining the term, I shared that there are many times in life when we, as people, let our feelings about something interfere with our judgment. Christa's ability to understand that concept and then apply it seamlessly weeks later during a social studies unit was impressive.

I consider myself incredibly fortunate to have a job where moments such as the one with Christa happen regularly. I see it with other habits of mind, such as Viewpoint, where students are able to understand issues and events from multiple perspectives; Openness, when kids learn to admit mistakes freely and seriously consider the thoughts and ideas of their classmates; and Craftsmanship, when everyone pays incredible attention to detail and displays thoroughness when working on a big art project.

Our students may not all go on to become world-class scholars, but they can all become world-class people.

In addition, these moments occur frequently with our Habits of Character. I believe my ongoing effort involving the Habits of Character is the most satisfying work I do and adds the greatest value to children's lives. Our students may not all go on to become world-class scholars, but they can all become world-class people. There is something truly special about interacting with kids who have developed the habit of saying "please" and "thank you," who work hard and never think of quitting, who treat one another with uncommon respect, and who generally conduct themselves in ways that should make themselves and their families extremely proud. With friendships taking on even greater importance at this age, Kindness, Cooperation, Service, and other habits that address the interpersonal realm play a crucial role in young people's development at this time and assist children with their ability to form and maintain lasting relationships.

INTRINSIC MOTIVATION TO LEARN

Upper elementary students will fulfill their potential only when teachers make a concerted effort to nurture the intrinsic motivation to learn and to grow that all students bring with them to school. As I describe in *Eight Essentials for Empowered Teaching and Learning, K-8* (2008), teachers accomplish this objective by eliminating the forces that destroy intrinsic motivation (e.g., fear, coercion, competition, blaming, ranking, and failure) and promoting those that nurture it (e.g., purpose, contribution, interest, challenge, success, inspiration, cooperation, trust, feedback, and recognition).

As Alfie Kohn articulates so effectively in his classic *Punished by Rewards* (1993), extrinsic incentives in a classroom appear to facilitate many positive student behaviors, but they actually serve only to thwart, undermine, negate, and interfere with teachers' efforts to promote worthwhile ideals. In the context of teaching in upper elementary grade classrooms, rewards decrease enthusiasm for learning, create disincentives for engaging in learning challenges, lessen students' sense of future purpose, and hinder the development of meaningful habits.

For those interested in articulating standards of developmentally appropriate practice for upper elementary students, I propose that motivation go to the top of the agenda. Using extrinsic rewards has become so prevalent that it is rarely questioned. In my experience, when teachers discuss rewards, the focus tends to be on the what, the when, and the how often, not the why. Over time, the broad umbrella of classroom management has been reduced to the narrow practice of offering extrinsic rewards to students for their obedience. Too many students in too many classrooms are paying too high of a price for this practice. Educators must shine a light on it and spread the word about the silent damage being done to vital educational aims.

In addition, the motivation issue is especially significant since we are living in a time when schools are asked to assume an increasingly greater societal role and fulfill obligations that once were the province of the family and other institutions. Schools are being asked to do more than at any other time in our nation's history. Not merely charged with providing students with the three R's or with the basic skills that will allow young people to enter the work force, schools are expected to empower students with a vast array of knowledge, skills, and attributes that will lead to success in a 21st-century, information-age, global economy.

In order to meet this mandate, schools must get students hooked on learning and become what William Glasser (in his 1990 book, *The Quality School*) calls "need-satisfying" places. Theodore Roosevelt once said, "Every child has inside him an aching void for excitement and if we don't fill it with something which is exciting and interesting and good for him, he will fill it with something which is exciting and interesting and which isn't good for him." Unfortunately, if students don't find satisfaction in schools, they are likely to look elsewhere to fill the void Roosevelt describes — to gangs, to drugs, to alcohol, to other places that will only lead them further away from a promising future.

In this competition to win over our students' hearts and minds and gain their full commitment to learning, schools need to maximize all the resources at their disposal and put their best foot forward every day. We want students to work with enthusiasm and purpose, embrace challenges, and develop habits so they can be wildly successful in school and fill their void with education, building their confidence and hope for the future and making it easier to say no to the dangerous temptations they may encounter. Extrinsic motivators lead us only backward and prevent us from enlisting the passionate commitment to learning that we want young people to make. Teaching upper elementary students brings many joys — but only when we, in the classroom, focus attention in the right places. K

REFERENCES

Glasser, William. *The Quality School: Managing Students Without Coercion*. New York: Perennial Library, 1990.

Kohn, Alfie. *Punished by Rewards: The Trouble with Gold Stars, Incentive Plans, A's, Praise, and Other Bribes*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1993.

Parnell, Dale P. *Why Do I Have to Learn This? Teaching the Way Children Learn Best*. Waco, Texas: Cord Communications, 1995.

Reifman, Steve. *Eight Essentials for Empowered Teaching and Learning, K-8: Bringing Out the Best in Your Students*. Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Corwin Press, 2008.

Sizer, Theodore R. *Horace's Hope: What Works for the American High School*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1996.