“Risk-taking is the major tool that adolescents use to shape their identities.”

the circle, saying what role we most often take on during the previous activity—captain, running any kind of leadership role; crew, working or helping the group to succeed; or passenger, just listening and going along for the ride.
The message I aim to send is that there is no value judgment on these roles—we certainly couldn’t be successful with 26 captains! Then, I ask the students in my classes to think about taking on different roles in future games. If they are most comfortable being a captain, I ask them to “try just listening next time. Let someone else take over. It might be hard, but it’s worth trying.” In the same way, I encourage habitual passengers to speak up and try out a more active role.
Finally, as educators we need to model healthy risk-taking for students. I’m relatively comfortable teaching in front of large groups, answering detailed questions about sexuality, and making a fool of myself playing games that sometimes involve choking like a chicken or howling like a wolf. However, I also perform on the flying trapeze, and my nervousness before shows can bring me almost to tears. Having this experience of straddling the line between stretching myself and full-out panic has made me more sensitive to the way students experience my class, and I make sure to share my own stories like this throughout the year.

We don’t all need to fly through the air or jump out of airplanes to demonstrate our willingness to take risks—we can be silly, sing in public, laugh at ourselves, and simply let our students see us try out new lessons we aren’t sure will work. Kids know when we let ourselves be vulnerable, and although it’s almost guaranteed that they won’t corrugate us at that moment, they will remember—and they will be more likely to let themselves be vulnerable in the future.

Providing Safe Places to Take Risks
Most of us have never mastered anything without practice. By providing spaces in school where teens can develop and nurture a sense of creativity, where they can be playful and innovative with their learning, and where we reassure them that it’s OK to be less than perfect, we are offering them a chance to practice risk-taking.

Embracing physical education class as a place where educators can scaffold activities to provide appropriate levels of physical, social, and emotional challenge to students may be a new approach in many schools, where the goals of physical education are more often structured around increasing student fitness, building skills in specific sports, or simply allowing students to burn off excess energy. But adolescents in the throes of emerging identities urgently need opportunities for healthy risk-taking.

Before self- and peer-assigned labels like “jock” or “geek” become entrenched in adolescents’ emerging sense of identity, we should challenge their notions of what they can and cannot do. Students should be learning not only how to build their repertoire of physical skills, but also how to interact with their peers in a playful way and how to practice safe ways to fulfill their developmentally appropriate need to take risks. As physical educators, we can cultivate an atmosphere in which students push themselves to new limits, both physically and emotionally, while feeling supported by their classmates and teachers.

References

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At this urban middle school, building a positive school climate is priority number one.

Wendy W. Murawski, Jennifer Lockwood, Abbie Khalili, and Adrienne Johnston

This is a Violence Free Abuse Free and Bully Free School.

Please show kindness & respect in your words & actions.

© HIME Charter Middle School (CCMS) was founded on the premise of diversity and inclusion. Our charter requires that 20 percent of our student body be comprised of students with cognitive, physical, social, or behavioral disabilities. Located in the Los Angeles Unified School District in California, CCMS is like other middle schools—students sometimes make fun of one another, engage in bullying, and otherwise act like middle school students. But our staff has actively and collaboratively addressed these issues through three practical sets of strategies. The results have been a decrease in bullying and an increase in positive behaviors.

Environmental Strategies
Signage
To set the right tone, one of our first actions was to post signs around the school promoting a safe environment. To ensure buy-in, we asked the student council and the school leadership committee to help make, post, and enforce the signs. A typical sign reads, “This is a violence-free, abuse-free, and...
bully-free school. Please show kindness and respect in your words and actions. When students, parents, or visitors arrive on campus, they know right away that bullying is not tolerated.

**Lunch Clubs**

At the secondary level, as the curriculum becomes more intense and students struggle with their identities, giving students choices and opportunities for social interaction—without sacrificing precision in-class content—becomes crucial (Lavoie, 2008; Murawski & Dicker, 2004).

One popular innovation that our faculty developed is lunch clubs. Students can choose a different activity every day—for example, dance on Monday, karaoke on Tuesday, movies on Wednesday, origami on Thursday, art on Friday.

Two additional options, Friendship Circle and The Art of Giving, support CCMS's important principle of accepting others. In these two clubs, students with and without disabilities are paired as buddies to support one another throughout the day.

Lunch clubs help students engage in positive friendships in a structured environment. Teachers volunteer to lead these courses once a week, giving up their personal time to share an activity they enjoy.

**Tolerance Activities**

To reduce teasing, name-calling, and social isolation, we participate in No Name-Calling Week, an annual event coordiated by parents, teachers, or 40 organizations. Beforehand, teachers use literature to talk with students about how name-calling harms young people who are targeted because of their race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, or mental ability. Students create posters and participate in a door-decorating contest. Throughout the week, we present lessons from the No Name-Calling Web site (www.teen renamed calling week.org). For example, in a lesson titled "I Was Just Kidding," students consider the difference between good-natured teasing and bullying by discussing fictional scenarios and reflecting on real-life situations. As a result, our students have become more aware of name-calling and less likely to engage in it.

As a schoolwide follow-up activity to No Name-Calling Week, we have celebrated the International Day of Pink (www.dayofpink.org). First established to support the rights of individuals with different sexual orientations, this event has become a way for schools to help students take a stand against all bullying, harassment, hate, and violence. The school sent home flyers encouraging students to wear pink to demonstrate their support for diversity. Many students, staff, and teachers participated. Once again, this activity enhanced both students' understanding of the importance of tolerance and the school's positive culture.

**Instructional Strategies Literature**

Research supports the use of literature as an effective strategy for helping individuals learn about acceptance and diversity (Smith & Johnson, 1995). However, merely reading a book about diversity is insufficient, especially for middle school students. Our English and social studies teachers collaborate to select curricular themes that promote diversity and support the goals of the unit.

Two specific books that have helped accomplish these goals are: The Mystic by James (2003) and Daniel’s Story by Carol Matas (Scholastic, 1993), which explore such themes as labeling, assumptions, bullying, and discrimination. In class discussions of these themes, we model acceptance, tolerance of ideas, and compassion. As students read the books, they write daily journal entries on prompts related to the themes. The culminating assessment for The Mystic unit is a three-page paper whose format students can choose from a variety of options: an essay about a social issue that is important to them, a letter to a government official, an interview of a teen or adult at school, or a discussion of a parent’s role in the life of an adolescent, a letter to a author of the book, or a summary of the book. We connected Daniel’s Story—which addresses such topics as discrimination, hate crimes, genocide, and the holocaust—with the 8th grade content standards in U.S. History. We ask the students to identify recurring themes from history through the lens of Daniel’s Story and themes from current times through the lens of The Mystic. This integration of literature, history, and real-life issues makes the curriculum more relevant to students.

Speakers from Diverse Cultures

Our state content standards require that 6th grade students study ancient civilization and their religions, such as Buddhism. Lessons on ancient civilizations, however, frequently don’t connect with students because they are just that—ancient. After discussing how to engage students while infusing a focus on diversity, teachers contacted a local Buddhist temple and invited the monks to visit the school. Students were equally fascinated by the monks’ informative presentations on Buddhism and their bright orange robes and shaved heads. These guest speakers made history come alive; they not only motivated students to learn about an ancient civilization, but also taught them more about respecting those who are different from themselves.

**Lunch clubs help students engage in positive friendships in a structured environment.**

**Video Discussion**

In their home teams, all students viewed and discussed the film Let’s Get Real, a documentary in which “actual middle school youth—not adults or actors—speak candidly and from the heart about their varied and often painful experiences with name-calling and bullying” (www.glen.org/cgi-bin/letters/allbook/ bookrecord/2274.html). Because the film includes strong language and difficult situations, a group of parents previewed a copy before it was shown and provided feedback.

**Outdoor Activities**

Although structure is key in any secondary classroom, at some point routine may become boring. Once again, teachers collaborated to find a way to make content (in this case, math) more interesting. This time, field activities were the solution. For instance, to teach and reinforce the concept of pi, we had a pi party. We took students outside to participate in various stations—pi charts, pi survey, estimating pi from the area of a circle, measuring items in circular shapes using yarn and rulers, and creating a colorful pi chart. Because classes at CCMS are co-ed, teachers were able to actively engage students using a variety of coaching approaches (Munaweza, 2009). For example, one teacher gave oral directions for how students should rotate through the stations, and the other teacher wrote the guidelines on the board, providing visual support for those who needed it. At the end, students and teachers came back together for the culminating activity, the pi party (with real pies, of course).

**Interpersonal Strategies Involving Faculty and Staff**

To achieve a positive school culture, staff members must be on board and able to accept diversity and model tolerance for themselves. Each paraprofessional at CCMS participate in ongoing professional development through SafeSchools (http://safeschools.com), an online safety training and tracking system designed specifically for school employees. Courses cover such topics as bullying, sexual harassment, child abuse, and playground supervision. Another valuable resource is the professional development section of the Teaching Tolerance Web site (www.tolerance.org). In addition, professors from our affiliated university have provided us with information and strategies related to motivation, collaboration, and positive behavior support.

**Involving Families and Students**

The support of parents is key in any school, but especially in a school dedicated to creating a positive culture. We
encouraged parents to form an anti-bullying committee, which meets regularly, collaborating with the school administration to develop an action plan. Parents whose children have been bullied came to talk to paraprofessionals and teachers so that they too, would have a better understanding of what was occurring. We developed parent education nights to provide information on such topics as disability awareness, academic content strategies, and positive behavior support. The CCMS parent association brought in Candice Kenney, the author of Generation MySpace (DeCoto, 2007), to speak to students and their families. As a result, we changed our Internet policy to state that the school would get involved in any form of online bullying, if it occurred off campus. The parent education nights, which provide a forum for parents, teachers, and administrators to share concerns with one another, have helped us enforce such a policy.

Students themselves created another interpersonal strategy that improved the school culture—Warm Fuzzies. One 8th grade class came up with the idea of giving small gifts of encouragement to 6th graders, who sometimes feel intimidated as the youngest kids on campus. The 8th graders surprised a 6th grade class, giving each 6th grader a small gift and a card that contained a friendly message. This activity made the 6th grade students feel special, and it was even more positive because the idea, money, effort, and words came from the 8th grade students.

Addressing Negative Behaviors
Our goal is to create a school culture in which students focus on their similarities rather than their differences. As believers in positive behavior support (Marquart & Scruggs, 2007), we are convinced that preventive rather than reactive measures are most effective in creating such a culture.

We changed our Internet policy to state that the school would get involved in any form of online bullying.

But we are also realists. We know that no matter what we do, students will still engage in some undesirable behaviors that we will need to address. We have found three specific types of consequences to be the most effective in addressing negative or inappropriate behaviors: counseling and mentoring, lunch monitoring, and community service.

We have a part-time counselor on campus, and we also encourage counseling interns from our affiliated university to complete their fieldwork at CCMS. Counseling is confidential; the counselors share information with parents or administrators only if the student is engaging in dangerous behavior such as self-injury, suicidal thoughts, or drug use. Counselors also participate in team meetings with parents, students, and families.

Lunch monitoring means that a student who has misbehaved has lunch with a teacher and discusses what happened and what the student could have done differently. Lunch monitoring can occur on a one-on-one or small-group basis. Teachers or administrators refer students to lunch monitoring for one or two days. During lunch, students also engage in an activity that relates to the incident that occurred (for example, writing an apology letter). Students may also be assigned to do community service, which gives them the opportunity to give back to the community. For example, if a student defaces school property with graffiti or other forms of vandalism, he or she must do community cleanup or a beautification activity after school or on the weekend.

An Antibusling Community Commitment to change needs to come from all stakeholders. A few years ago, the school administrator received bullying referrals daily. Now, referrals are virtually nonexistent. How did we do it? By addressing bullying at a community level.

The environmental, instructional, and interpersonal strategies that CCMS teachers, administrators, parents, and students have created have resulted in a healthy and motivating school culture. Educators and students feel safe, included, and ready to learn.

References

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