



Chapter Seven

“Everything Is Related”

In October 2006, we attended a week-long professional development institute sponsored by the Disney Corporation. We were nervous about leaving our students for so long and consequently left behind hefty assignments so they would not have time to misbehave.

When we returned to school the following week, we were surprised by our students’ reactions.

“You gave us busy work,” they complained. “We never do busy work in here. We always do real stuff.”

“We can do the hard stuff, you know, even if you aren’t here.”

“Please let us do real work next time. Don’t you trust us?”

Ouch. That was not the message we had intended to send. Instead of giving our students a chance to demonstrate their increasing maturity and respect for our team values, we had let fearful teacher logic sneak into our planning. We had assumed that without our physical presence acting as a deterrent our students—or at least a few difficult characters—would give the substitute teachers a hard time.

As we reflected, we realized how similar our views were to those expressed by colleagues over the years. Often, when other teachers consider our approach to curriculum integration, they cite fear of student misbehavior as one of the biggest obstacles to overcome.

“My students won’t be able to do this because they are too disruptive,” some have said.

“I’d love to do all those cool activities with my students, but Johnny won’t be able to handle it,” others have mentioned. “He’ll get everyone all riled up.”

We can understand their reluctance to change. Let's face it: misbehavior in the middle grades is like a cold germ just waiting for a chance to infect healthy cells. It hovers around classrooms and looks for an opening. A few determined troublemakers can spoil a good lesson plan before the ink dries on your planner. And who are the students with the best attendance rates? Class clowns and miscreants tend to dominate the list. They rarely seem to miss a day of school, which means our peaceful kingdom can come under attack at any moment. Trying to predict whether their antics will throw off the team's equilibrium can prompt premature panic and cause teachers to retreat to familiar terrain.

Sometimes keeping disruptive students confined to their desks seems the only solution to averting chaos. Limiting these students' freedom prevents the contagion from spreading, or so we tell ourselves. But a closer examination of the causes of misbehavior suggests another approach.

We have discovered that the students with the greatest discipline problems tend to be bright adolescents who get bored waiting for their peers to learn. Other major troublemakers have fallen behind in a particular subject or in multiple classes and disrupt our activities to deflect attention from their inadequacies. In other words, it's what they know or don't know about the content that typically causes adolescents to act out. And this is a symptom that good interdisciplinary teaching can cure.

Addressing the extremes in our school populations can be quite challenging, but in our experience, engaged students usually are well-behaved students. Team-based, collaborative planning is the best method we have found for providing developmentally appropriate instruction for all students. Discipline becomes self-generated rather than teacher imposed.

Thoughtful curriculum integration enables students to understand our lessons' relevance and actively search for connections between subjects. Because they are busy exercising their minds, they are much less distracted than when the instruction demands their rote responses. The impact of this different approach is demonstrated through the changing behavior of advanced students, such as Porter. Instead of resorting to his habit of acting out because he was bored, Porter began suggesting deeper questions for the class to explore.

"Hey, you know how in *Flowers for Algernon* they made Charlie smarter?" he called out one day. "I wonder if they can really do that now with genetic engineering. That's what we're studying in Mrs. Babin's class. Do y'all think we should ask her?"

Interdisciplinary teaching also provides a stronger structure to support our special needs students. Rather than being confused by their peers' attempts to engage in abstract reasoning, they learn how to contribute to intellectual conversations without fear of ridicule. Continual collaboration gives them greater confidence to try. Instead of a traditional classroom culture where a few students dominate discussions and seem to know all the answers, effective teams encourage everyone to wonder.

“Would you want intelligence to be increased in real life?” Andrew, a quiet, special needs student responded to Porter’s inquiry. “I mean, Charlie was still a freak to everyone once he was smart. Is it better to be really smart than sort of dumb? I’m not sure if genetic engineering could do this anyway. Didn’t Charlie have an operation in the story? That’s not genetic engineering, is it?”

In the old days, such sophisticated thinking from students with identified learning disabilities would have astonished us. Now it fuels our team’s growth and proves that young adolescents are far more capable than most adults assume. Many students have gaps in their knowledge and skills, and we still provide remediation on our team. But that’s not *all* we do. We don’t dumb down the curriculum for struggling students. We use integration to help them progress.

A Curriculum Wake-Up Call

By the second nine-week grading period, our students typically understand that we might address any subject in any classroom. It is not taboo to mention math in history or science in language arts. So when a student asks in language arts class about the probability of a certain character’s reaction or asks in science class how Chief Seattle might have reacted to the environmental issues discussed in the readings, we are ready to assist them in discovering the answers. With the supports provided by instructional teams, all students are capable of making deep connections to the content and experiencing academic success.

Consider the growth experienced by Earl, a special needs student who was so concerned about maintaining his cool reputation among his peers that he had been reluctant to let them think he might actually learn something in school. Consistent exposure to curriculum integration finally broke through his reserve.

In Monique's language arts class, students had been discussing symbolism. To make the concept more concrete, she introduced several American symbols and discussed the emotional connections people have to them. Then she referred to emotional symbols in literature. The chosen symbol for the day was the American flag. Students read about the flag's history, followed written directions to create a five-pointed star with paper, and wrote facts about the recommended care of the flag on each of the stars.

As Monique was hanging the stars on the bulletin board, Earl looked up sleepily from his desk and said, "Hey . . . I know why we're doing this. We're about to have a court case about the American flag, aren't we?"

Monique was taken aback.

"What on earth are you talking about, Earl?" she asked, feigning ignorance of the integrated unit (explained in Chapter 6) that our team had planned to explore through several landmark U.S. Supreme Court cases.

"Well, Mrs. Babin just gave us our court-case notebooks back this morning, and suddenly we're talking about flags in here. I know we've been talking about symbols and all, but I think our next court case will be about the flag."

Monique smiled at Earl and marveled at his prescient observation. How had he figured out our strategy in his semiconscious daze? We had indeed planned to introduce an important court case the following morning. In *Texas v. Johnson*, the court considered the implications of the American flag burning to protest the Republican National Convention in 1984. Trying to keep a few surprises up our sleeves, we had not mentioned this to students. We had been busy setting the scene. But Earl had quite unexpectedly, quite marvelously jumped ahead.

"Shhhh . . . Don't tell anyone," Monique whispered as she pulled Earl off to the side.

Earl winked and smiled slyly, "Nah, who'd believe me anyway?"

We rewarded Earl's astuteness by giving him a lead role in the protest march reenacted in our classrooms the following morning. At one point, Earl bellowed, "I'm here in Dallas, Texas, to protest the Reagan policies . . . or something like that!" The class laughed, but they all remembered why people were protesting in 1984.

The curricular connections that our students make are rarely random. Rather, they result from the system of supports that we have put in place through interdisciplinary teaming. By working together, we can prop up the students who are wobbly, keep others moving steadily on course, and remove the training wheels for those who are ready to race ahead. Shifting

gears constantly and consciously is difficult in any classroom arrangement, but navigation gets easier when you have help from colleagues. On our team, including Kathryn as a full-time special education teacher provides an extra boost.

Visitors to our team are often surprised when they discover that about one-third of our students have identified learning disabilities. Most of our students also are unaware of these labels. Partly that's because Kathryn guides all students, not just those in the special education population. She doesn't draw attention to a selected group, and we don't alter our expectations that all students can produce high-quality work.

Every student participates in group activities and class discussions. Our special education students are never isolated from the general population. Kathryn both coteaches lessons and monitors students individually. She looks at instruction through the lens of confusion: What could be tripping up one or more students? Once she identifies a problem, she focuses on strategies such as visualization, summarization, or graphic organizers that can get students back on track.

Kathryn doesn't limit her outreach to students who qualify for special assistance, nor do we refer to her as a special education teacher. This would make it obvious to everyone that we consider some students deficient, and Kathryn's assistance would carry a stigma. Instead we call her our learning styles specialist. It might seem like a game of semantics, but it works. Students who are struggling for one reason or another don't hesitate to approach Kathryn for help. The groups she pulls aside for reinforcement include students with a wide range of ability levels. The groups are fluid and dynamic; membership is determined by need, not by a particular program designation. As previously mentioned, careful attention to students' academic needs also improves their behavior.

Every Student Can Soar

David's story beautifully illustrates this process. When David entered seventh grade, his academic future looked bleak. He struggled with basic skills in all subjects. We requested testing for special education services, but ultimately he did not qualify.

In the meantime, we subjected him to the full onslaught of our "You can do it" campaign by writing notes; saying, "You are so smart"; and using his best work as examples. We pulled him aside for extra help when we noticed his confusion or when he specifically requested assistance. David's

performance began to improve, and we withdrew our request for special education testing.

Throughout the school year, David participated in our Academic Success Plan, which required students to help each other while working in pairs or small groups. David still asked for help, but increasingly he also assisted other students with math problems or reading guides.

The spring testing period came and went. In Louisiana the high-stakes exam determines whether a student can pass to the next grade level. David was visibly nervous when the scores or the consequences were mentioned.

In May we were ecstatic to learn that all of our students had passed the exam, including every special education student. Triumphant, we marched into our classrooms and shouted, “What is our team motto?”

They replied, “No Martian will fail!”

“That’s right,” we told them. “No one did.”

Our students were stunned into silence. Then they began jumping and screaming as we passed out the proof. David stared at his score sheet and wept.

“Look at this,” he said and hugged us each in turn. “Thank you, thank you.”

Not only had he passed the test, he had scored in the eightieth percentile in both math and language arts.

David advanced to high school, and as a senior he served as president of the student government. He also went to college.

Integrated instructional teams give us the means to succeed with the other Davids in our schools, those students who will fall through the cracks without an array of intentional supports from conscientious and collaborative teachers. Filling in the gaps requires that we focus on our students as individuals and continually reflect on the global concepts that will help each of our students become productive citizens. Teaming helps us maintain our focus and assist our students in realizing that the concepts we study in class now will benefit them when they become adults. Unless we make the connections for our students in every class, they will not see how the themes they are studying relate to one another, and they will not grasp the abstract ideas that unify these topics. When our students begin to see the connections for themselves, we are satisfied that our teamwork has truly benefited them.

After we discussed *Texas v. Johnson* in class, Kathryn asked students why they thought so many people were upset that Johnson burned the American flag. Nicholas piped up, “Because, like, dude, it was, like, THE AMERICAN FLAG! Like, you can’t hurt something people have so much emotion about.”

An odd expression took over Nicholas's face as though he'd just made an extremely important realization. Then he blurted, "And, like, oh, it's symbolism like we were talking about yesterday! And, like, emotions matter, and . . ." Now he jumped to his feet. "Everything is related to something on this team!"

Yes! Everything is related because we are a true collaborative team. Working together helps make learning interesting, engaging, and relevant. Insights such as Nicholas's brilliant revelation confirm that our methods are working. These are the moments we wait for. Nothing inspires students and teachers more than success.