Foreword

During the first two years of my middle school teaching career, I also studied clinical psychology, and it was near the end of that course of study that I took a still memorable course, "Introduction to Projective Testing," a learning experience that fascinates me more than forty years later.

A basic principle in that course was the extent to which people may reveal themselves through their drawings and subsequent related commentary. For example, Buck's *House-Tree-Person* technique invites an individual to draw a house, a tree, and a person on separate sheets of paper. Although the drawn objects are ostensibly just impersonal sketches, the examiner approaches them as self-portraits. A follow-up interview protocol is designed to identify and explore consistencies in the subject's commentary about his or her three drawings. In that course, the clinical applications we observed with adults were fascinating because of the insights skilled examiners drew from this interaction. Although my single semester studying projective testing was rather cursory, I have remained curious and respectful of such efforts to better understand what people think and believe about themselves and their worlds through drawings and related discourse.

As my teaching career continued, I grew increasingly aware of and troubled by the disconnect between the curriculum I was expected to teach, the pedagogy of the day (which differed qualitatively very little if at all from that of high school and college teachers), and the prevailing evaluation and grading utilizing paper and pencil tests. However, the greater my experience, the more I had to confront the reality that so much of what I was doing was only occasionally relevant and useful to my students. I remember struggling with the reality that my efforts were so modestly beneficial to them.

Finally I dared to ask my students to tell me about themselves and their interests, concerns, and questions. I sought their candid feedback about how they learned best and what was least useful in my classes. Thus

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began a continuing practice of asking students to tell me about themselves, the curriculum they studied that was relevant and useful, the pedagogy that they believed was most effective, and their preferred modes for conveying their learning. After just a few years, my first substantial publication grew from the results of those inquiries, and my career changed profoundly as I discovered there were lots more teachers who shared my anxiety about our work (Stevenson, 1986, 2002).

I think my most revealing and instructive inquiry was a four-year series of interviews with young adolescents around the simple invitation to "tell me about yourself." These 10- to 15-minute interviews were videotaped annually, and once completed it was fascinating to observe a single young person talking about himself or herself at ages 10, 11, 12, and 13, all four vignettes compressed into one hour. Many of the cognitive, social, and physical changes known to occur in these transitional years were documented, but perhaps most intriguing was the extent to which youngsters' core values, expectations, and self-perceptions remained relatively constant. By now a university professor teaching teachers in undergraduate, graduate, and inservice settings, I found this material extremely valuable for grounding developmental theory and research concerning early adolescence.

Although this video interview inquiry was enlightening, it didn't occur to me that it would have been even more useful if I had also invited students to draw themselves and talk about their drawings. However, two savvy educators have seized that opportunity and now share it with you in *Reaching and Teaching Middle School Learners.* Penny Bishop and Susanna Pflaum have wisely and respectfully invited young adolescents to draw in relation to their perceptions of schooling with special emphasis on aspects of teaching they find engaging.

The authors make an important distinction between "engagement" and "pretend-attend"—the behaviors that are often observed in more common time-on-task observations. As part of the research reported here, students talk about their drawings especially in relation to curriculum and pedagogy. The reader will find their insights compelling, guaranteed. It is to be hoped that many others responsible for the growth and nurturance of young adolescents will follow the paths opened up here by Bishop and Pflaum. I have never known an era of educational history more in need of educators to refocus their goals and expectations based on the best knowledge they have and can get about their students. There are oceans of latent knowledge available to teachers who recognize this opportunity and are committed both to informing themselves and then to acting on their best knowledge of their constituents.

The modern middle school movement grew from widespread concern of teachers and others about the same kinds of mismatches between young

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people and schooling practices that provoked my early restive questions. Now the movement to reform middle level schooling is strongly established through national and state associations, teacher licensure in almost all of the 50 states, an abundance of research and professional publications, and numerous schools where exemplary practice can be observed and studied. In its latest policy declaration, the National Middle School Association goes on public record stating plainly and explicitly, "For schools to be successful, their students must be successful; for students to be successful, the school's organization, curriculum, pedagogy, and programs must be based upon the developmental readiness, needs and interests of young adolescents" (NMSA, 2003, p. 1).

The crucial point is this: it is impossible for anyone to know the readiness, needs, or interests of anyone else without the contribution of a trusting conception by the other person. In brief, if we truly want to know what it is like to be a 12- or 13-year-old, then we must ask the adolescent to tell us. While we can assume in a broad sense some developmental priorities in youngsters' lives, it is impossible to know any student's personal ideas, questions, apprehensions, fears, speculations, and so on without the kind of trustworthy inquirers and deferential context this book describes.

It is vital that not only teachers but also all people involved with middle level education—administrators, parents, community leaders, government bureaucrats—acknowledge this simple truth and commit themselves to drawing from the substantial knowledge that children already have about themselves and each other.

A powerful driving force that overshadows all levels of American education today tragically does not acknowledge this simple truth. The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 expresses and enforces politically derived demands called "standards" solely through increases in student performance using paper and pencil tests as the tool. The American public is misdirected away from pursuit of the fullest personal and educational potential of youth by a national neurotic obsession with right answers and higher test scores. Judgments about quality have been sacrificed for numbers, an act of naïveté that is to me almost incomprehensible and surely indefensible.

That so many presumably intelligent people can be convinced of the merit of such a limited measure of accomplishment is arguably an indictment of their own education. This diversion away from considering whole children individually in favor of inert scores has nothing to do with youngsters' perceptions except as they perform on such measures. All too often young learners come away from the evaluation experience imposed by NCLB with exaggerated and inaccurate perceptions about their personal strengths or deficiencies. I have interacted with numerous young adolescents who regard themselves as worthless because they did not

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score high enough. Further, since whole schools are also being evaluated based on their students' test scores, public opinion about school quality and teachers' credibility is also at risk.

The point of view advocated in this book is very much at risk these days, which renders it even more important to all of us. These times beg for perceptive educators who recognize the folly of this national neurosis about testing and who have the courage to explore the far richer and realistic world of possibilities for instructional practices informed by feedback from the learners themselves. Young adolescents generally are mature enough and concerned enough about their well-being to tell us what curriculum and pedagogy work for them, when they are truly learning, and when they believe they are being successful.

All of us who have faith in the potential of students to help us better understand their learning needs and experiences are in debt to Professors Penny Bishop and Susanna Pflaum for their wisdom and guidance as presented in *Reaching and Teaching Middle School Learners.*

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