

# Service Learning, Boys, and Fish Tanks

By Kristy VantLeven

"So Ms. VantLeven, you mean we're really going to do the fish tank?"

This question came from one of the young men with whom I worked for half a school year without feeling as though I had reached him. He had been one of my biggest challenges, and he was finally engaged in my class. He was attentive and excited to learn about different kinds of fish that we could have in our school fish tank.

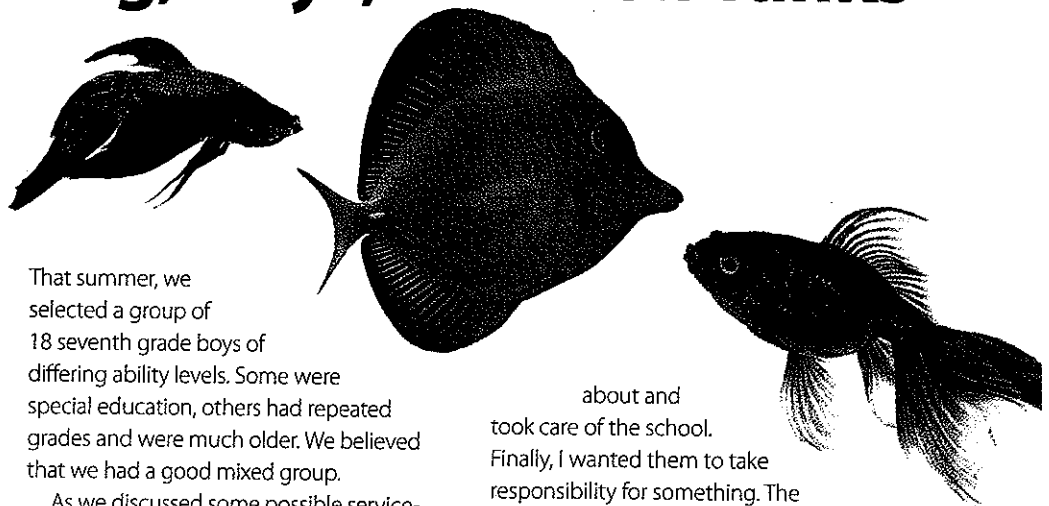
Like this young man, most of the boys in my class of 27 (all boys) were excited about the aquarium. They even volunteered to buy parts we needed and bring them in so we could get the fish sooner. I had started the project to get them more involved in their learning and I was finally starting to break through to them.

I have been teaching at Chattanooga Middle Museum Magnet School for five years. It is an urban middle school of about 300 students near downtown Chattanooga, Tennessee. The majority of the students qualify for free/reduced-price lunch. This school has been going through reform for the five years I have been working here. It was reconstituted; it adopted a magnet program; and it has been awarded several grants to strengthen literacy.

Through this reform, I saw my students achieve more and earn better test scores—except for some of my African-American boys. They fell further and further behind their peers. They were failing academically and had a higher number of referrals and suspensions. Two of my co-workers and I sat down and agreed that this was not a student problem, this was our problem and we needed to do something to help.

## Taking on the Challenge

As we were reading articles about struggling African-American males and best literacy practices, we came across some articles about service learning. We researched the idea of service learning, talked to other colleagues about this idea, and came up with a plan. For one year, I would teach an all-boy seventh grade language arts class and one of my co-workers would teach the same group of boys seventh grade science. We would link our curriculum through service-learning projects.



That summer, we selected a group of 18 seventh grade boys of differing ability levels. Some were special education, others had repeated grades and were much older. We believed that we had a good mixed group.

As we discussed some possible service-learning projects, we agreed that we did not want these projects to be just volunteer hours done after school. We wanted the projects to be guided by content and grounded in our curriculum. We considered starting recycling projects to correspond with the ecology unit and a blood drive at the school to connect with our study of cellular biology. Letter writing and research would be perfect ties to language arts.

We planned the schedule so that I could take my planning first block and teach the class second block, which would allow us to take the boys off campus for two-hour blocks to complete the service-learning projects. We would chart our progress by taking anecdotal records during class, maintain a journal about what we saw after class, and get together weekly to discuss observations. My co-

workers would also come in to observe classes and take notes.

## Planning Meets Reality

By the time August rolled around, we felt ready. Of course, this

is when the reality of teaching set in. My perfect group of 18 boys had grown to 27. The largest class size I had ever had was 24. We also discovered that transportation for our service-learning projects was not possible. It was time to improvise.

I brainstormed with the boys about some different projects that we could do for the school. I hoped that this would address several of my objectives in starting the project. First and foremost, I wanted to get the boys more engaged in learning. I also wanted to see a change in how the boys felt

about and took care of the school. Finally, I wanted them to take responsibility for something. The scariest part of this for me was letting the boys determine the curriculum. I was surrendering control.

The boys decided they would take care of the fish tank in the library. I would teach the standards required by the county, but would let the students choose what that would look like.

I was a bit nervous when they chose the aquarium project. I didn't know a thing about fish or fish tanks. This was going to be their opportunity to become the experts.

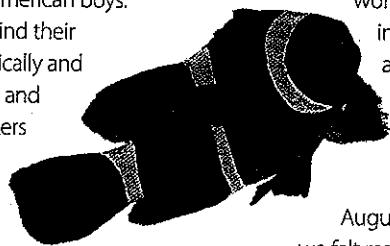
In most schools, teachers spend hours planning what they are going to teach and then turn in a lesson plan that reflects their planning. I was stepping into uncharted territory. I could not plan several weeks ahead. I could not even plan several days ahead. I was going to be learning with them and allowing their findings to guide where we went next in our curriculum.

So there I was with my boys, and we had started something new. The project blossomed from there.

I did not want the boys to just learn about fish tanks, as fun as that would be. I still had language arts standards that had to be met, so I chose short fiction stories and nonfiction articles about fish and aquariums to begin our unit. We also went to the library and the computer lab and researched different types of aquariums and fish. We read about tank management and fish compatibility. After they learned to write business letters, they wrote to different pet stores in the area asking for donations.

## Unexpected Developments

Some unexpected things happened while we were working on this project. For the first time, the boys stopped expending their energies by throwing paper wads at each



other every time my back was turned. They also stopped play fighting as much and began to work together.


When we went to the computer lab, there was a constant hum of voices. Students moved around, but not to thump each other on the ears. Instead, they were showing each other what they had found on the computers. Rather than arguing about who stole their pencil, they argued about what kinds of fish we should get for the tank. The entire tone of the class changed for the better.

Every day, a student would come in and ask if we were "doing the fish tank," and 26 other faces would turn to me in expectation. The other question that permeated the class was "Are we really going to..." The boys wanted to make sure we were really going to fix the aquarium, mail letters to businesses, and learn about fish. It was important to them that the learning we were doing was "real."

### The Spark of Learning

I learned more from this process than the boys did. I am a little more comfortable now with letting my students take control of where the learning goes. I have also learned that authentic learning is very important for boys. When I think back on my class before and after the fish tank project, I know that there is a huge difference in the tone of the class. When they could see the relevance in what I was having them learn they were much more cooperative with each other and with me.

Since the aquarium project, we have been working on units that haven't incorporated service learning and it has been a struggle to keep the boys focused on the schoolwork. For the population of students I work with, it is important that the service learning be integrated into part of the school day. Sometimes it seems hard to justify using so much class time on service-learning projects, but if they are taught using state standards and benchmarks it doesn't waste teaching time.

Not only that, the outcome of student learning is incredibly powerful. The boys continually talk about the fish tank and can remember everything they learned about it. 

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# Connecting with Kids

By Larry Taylor

As I enter my 27th year of teaching middle level students, I am seeing the light at the end of the tunnel of my career. For too many of us, it is time to dust off last year's lesson plans and go through the motions until retirement. But a funny thing happened to me on my way to checking my 401K every day during my planning period: I rediscovered the middle school kid.

I enjoy a number of things about my job at Centennial Middle School in Snohomish, Washington, but the number one thing I enjoy is the fact that my wife teaches language arts right across the hall from me. A couple of years ago, she started working on her master's degree, online, specializing in middle level education.

While peering over her shoulder, I started re-acquainting myself with the traits of young adolescents. No longer was I as concerned about test scores, curriculum alignment, NCLB, and all the other educational acronyms that we all face; rather, I refocused my main priority on connecting with students.

### Taking the Stage

I claim to be no better than most of us at connecting with kids, and the reason I was asked to write this article is because of the latest of technologies: YouTube.

The past three years I have gone out of my comfort zone at the end-of-the-year talent show, and apparently it has made me somewhat famous, for now you can see my performances, thanks to some crafty students, on YouTube.com.

The first year I dressed up and sang as Elvis, the next year I did the Napoleon Dynamite dance, and last year I got four other men to dance to an N'Sync song and we became The Backwards Boys. The students love all the performances—not because they were good, but because they know we care enough about them to go out on a limb and do

something a little bit off.

But you certainly don't have to dance at the end of the year to make that connection. I'm sure there is educational research data somewhere that shows that relationships matter, but we all know in our hearts that the old saying, "Kids don't care what you know until they know that you care" is true.

There are a number of ways to relate to students, both individually and as a class, and still preserve the respect and the teacher-student relationship needed to maintain a controlled learning atmosphere.

### Tricks of the Trade

Some of the things I do to improve student connections are planned and some are not. Some take time, like learning how to do an act for a talent show, but some are as easy as saying hi.

With 150 kids a day shuffling through my five math classes, I still struggle with connecting with each kid individually, but I have found that by enhancing connections with a class in general, it paves the way for individual connections to follow. Two of the strategies that are most successful are telling the Joke of the Week, which is planned, and telling spontaneous stories, which happens, well, spontaneously.

The Joke of the Week started by accident, on the first week of school two years ago. I ended up with about two minutes left at the end of first period on Friday of the first week, and rather than have a free for all, I decided to tell a stupid joke. And rather than admit to not having anything planned the last two minutes, I made it sound like it was planned all along, and we'll do this every Friday.

Well, it has become a tradition, and now every Friday at the end of the period, for the last two minutes before the weekend, when in the past they have wanted nothing more than to leave, I have their undivided attention.



# Just Say Hi

They tell my jokes to their parents, and at fall conference time when I meet parents for the first time, one of the most recurring themes I hear is how they love (or hate) the jokes their kids bring home. While the jokes have nothing to do with math, at least there is the beginning of a conversation about their day at Centennial. The jokes are all old classics like "I had a dream I was a muffler and woke up exhausted" or "The lifeguard didn't save the hippie because he was too far out, man"—stuff like that.

Math teachers never seem to have enough time to cover all we are "supposed" to, and we are under increased pressure to raise our scores. I have decided, however, that for the last 5 to 10 years of my career I am going to have fun, and if I find something interesting or pertinent to the kids, we are going to take a few minutes out of our math time to talk about it. Not every day, never more than five minutes, but every now and then, and not necessarily with each class.

Every time we stray off topic a bit (and I tell them I am fully aware that we are bird walking and it is going to be short-lived), I never regret it. The relationships within the class get better, they see me in a different light, and I end up having a number of individual conversations with kids about topics I never would have dreamed could come up.

For example, I moderately sprained my ankle one night playing basketball and had quite limited mobility the next day. Rather than take the day off to stay at home and keep my leg elevated, I figured I could do that just as well at school.

After I answered the obligatory self-deprecating questions, such as how can someone my age jump high enough to sprain an ankle in the first place, we had

a little first aid lesson on what to do for a moderate sprain. I spent the rest of the day leaning back in my chair with my leg on my desk (I was injured, after all) and had the kids do all the writing on the board and anything else I would normally move around to do.

It was actually quite fun, and in the end they ended up having a better math experience than normal, which in turn helped me realize some things to make me a better teacher. Over the next couple of days, I noticed a few quieter students, those whom I hadn't really made a strong connection with yet, start initiating conversations with me about the state of my ankle. It's just a small hook, but for a few kids, it worked. A few at a time is better than none at all.

In addition, one thing that I have in my favor to enhance the personal stories are my own children. Students love stories about other families, and I have used the trials and tribulations of my older daughters and teenage sons numerous times. My youngest child just entered high school. Because he is close enough to their age, his own escapades have become legendary in my classroom.

## Cultivating Relationships

As far as getting to know my students better, I am finding it easier now than at the beginning of my career for two reasons: experience and age. Being older has its advantages, especially when it comes to walking that fine line about getting to know your students yet maintaining the respect needed to control a class and facilitate the learning that must go on. The age difference is so significant that I run no risk whatsoever of being the "cool teacher." The kids see me more as a dad or even grandpa, rather than the cool older brother, and they love to teach me the stuff only they know. When I told

them I was finally entering the world of text messaging, their eyes lit up and I had way more help than I could possibly use.

As my relationships with individual kids get better, they often start to initiate a conversation or greet me when I see them in the hall, and the boys typically want to "high five" me. I use this as an additional opportunity to talk to kids, because I don't "high five" just not me. What I do, though, is tell them I will shake their hand like a grown up, and then have a quick 10- or 20-second chat about how their day is going and which class they are headed to next. Fifteen seconds doesn't sound like much, but for some kids, that may be the only adult time they get that day.

The last year or two, I have made connecting with the middle school kid my number one priority. It trumps all else. And I'm not the only one. Our staff at Centennial believes the same way, and we have created an atmosphere in our school based on two-way respect, where we respect and understand the middle school students for what they are: young adolescents who are morphing into adults. In turn, they respect us as adults and leaders because of the way we treat and care for them.

Each teacher has to find his or her own way to connect with kids; we are as different as they are. For me, it's telling a joke or a spontaneous story, giving a handshake, or performing an end-of-the-year dance. But actually, it's as simple as saying hi when you pass a kid in the hall. That's how it starts, and it's that easy. **MG**

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