



# Introduction

## Taking a Giant Step Forward

“We are *not* babies, you know!” exclaimed Adam. “We know a giant did not come into this classroom!”

“Yeah,” Brayden said. “We can see the staples [on the walls]. Besides, footprints are not made of paper, and how did he get his foot on the ceiling anyway? Did you lock the doors last night?”

Despite being outraged that they couldn’t figure out who or what had left behind so many odd signs at school, the students remained fascinated by the mysterious overnight visitor to our seventh-grade classrooms. The giant had scattered messages as well as evidence of where he had been. For four days, new clues appeared throughout the team area, providing further intrigue about the nocturnal hauntings. Students begged us for information about the intruder.

Our team of teachers feigned ignorance, but behind the scenes we continued planning and collaborating to incorporate the giant into the week’s lessons. Because each of us is responsible for a comprehensive required curriculum—it is prescribed down to the activities we must teach and the order in which we must cover them during a given grading period—we seized the chance to be creative.

Adam was right. Our students are not babies. But that doesn’t mean they don’t like to play. Young adolescents are capable of exhibiting mature behavior and deep thinking, but they still want to have fun. As they move through the transitions from childhood to adulthood, they need regular opportunities to become actively engaged in learning. So we tried to tie our required academic standards to an imaginative, energetic, and academically rigorous adventure suited to the unique persona of middle school students.

Throughout the week our students completed giant-related activities addressing curriculum requirements in each subject area. For example, they

read *Jack and the Beanstalk* in language arts and discussed the elements of fantasy and fairy tales. In math they measured the footprints and handprints left by the giant and used ratio and proportion to determine the creature's actual size. The drawings they made in math class cycled back to language arts, where students wrote descriptive paragraphs containing figurative language, including metaphors and similes, for the criminal lineup of potential giant suspects. In American history, students continued to learn about the Revolutionary War. Although we designed each lesson to address the curriculum objectives, we also tried to spark the students' natural curiosity through mystery and intrigue. Middle school students love to pretend, but make-believe activities in the classroom must include higher-level thinking to stimulate them intellectually as well as emotionally.

Finally, a few students noticed that a handprint was placed directly over a map of the thirteen colonies in the history classroom. They added this clue to others, such as the note on the board that said, "Fe, fie, foe, fum, I smell the blood of freedom."

"I think the giant is searching for something to do with the Revolutionary War," Regan suggested. "Do y'all think that could be it? I mean, there's the freedom message and the hand. Maybe it's King George! Could the king be the giant?"

The next day when students entered their history classroom, each desk contained a tea bag and a message: "Here's your tea, now where's my tax?" Immediately, students began to yell, "It is the king! We knew it!"

This activity could have been the death of the giant metaphor, but because of our extensive planning and collaboration, we had more in store for our students. History teacher Erin Babin, a member of our teaching team, revealed that the giant was indeed a symbol of King George III and the British government. The day's history activities purposefully guided our students to the discovery that when the American colonists overthrew the British government during the Revolutionary War, they beat the world's military giant and planted the seeds of freedom. Although the activities led students to this realization, they earned the knowledge themselves. Each student had successfully solved the mystery. At the end of the week, we distributed the "seeds of freedom" and some dirt in which to plant them. The students returned to school with the seeds after they had sprouted a few weeks later. We used the plants in a related science activity and later placed them in our team garden.

In Part II of this book, we will revisit the dynamics of curriculum integration in more detail. For now, the message we want to send is that energetic,

innovative, and collaborative teaching is alive in middle-level classrooms. And the secret weapon is teamwork.

Admittedly, providing interdisciplinary instruction in an era of high-stakes accountability can seem like a monumental undertaking. Like our colleagues around the country, we continually struggle with directives that threaten to suck the imagination out of our teaching. Although we understand the push for consistent results in all schools for all students, we don't believe in rigidity. Teamwork enables us to strike a balance—it provides the space to infuse our lessons with creative and challenging content as well as the structure to meet the requirements of state and national standards, benchmarks, and testing.

## Better Together Than Alone

Teaching can be a lonely profession. This might seem like an odd statement considering the continual parade of students entering and exiting our classrooms. However, when the bell rings, signaling the end of the school day, many teachers have to savor the successes and reflect on the failures alone. When most of our work occurs in isolation behind closed doors, we miss out on the collegial exchanges that can invigorate our instruction and help us evolve, professionally and personally.

“Before I began teaming, I worked with colleagues, but only in the most superficial sense. We each worked at the same school, but we each did our own jobs,” Erin Babin said, reflecting on the benefits of interdisciplinary instruction. “Collaboration has allowed me to grow professionally in ways that could not have been accomplished by any other means. I see the big picture. This has impacted student learning more dramatically than any other accomplishment in my experience with teaching.”

Whether you are fresh out of college or a seasoned veteran, you will find that teamwork provides a powerful foundation for professional collaboration and high achievement. Through teamwork, veterans become energized by the exuberance of new teachers who are bursting with ideas for innovative curricular connections. Novice teachers, in turn, reap the benefits of working with experienced educators who can provide sound advice about instructional pacing, classroom management, and other fundamental skills they've refined over time.

As members of an interdisciplinary middle school team, our roles are often fluid. We respect each other enough to know that each of us has strengths

and weaknesses. For example, Amanda does not have great organizational skills, but she is very good at managing instructional time allotted for special projects, so we usually call on her to create schedules. Math is not Monique's forte, but she often critiques word problems for fluency. Neither Amanda nor Monique is good at keeping up with the various forms and records required of teachers. However, Kathryn fills this void beautifully. The strongest collaboration comes when we realize how much each of us can contribute to the greater good.

We were lucky to have found each other. Amanda and Monique both began teaching about fifteen years ago at Dutchtown Middle School in Geismar, Louisiana. Two people could not be more different. Amanda was reared in five countries on four continents. The cultural diversity she experienced ranged from small-town America to the Middle East. Monique grew up near Dutchtown, as did her parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents. Although we saw the world differently, we shared a common philosophy about learning, teaching, and children. Continual reflection on the teaching craft led Monique and Amanda to attain certification from the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards in 1999 and 2002 respectively.

Kathryn joined us during the 2005–2006 school year. Growing up in a military family, she also moved quite often during her childhood. When she found a job at Dutchtown after graduating from college, she was filled with purpose. Because of her background in special education, Kathryn helped us improve the way we assisted students with learning disabilities. Kathryn is such a talented, quick starter that she has been nominated as Dutchtown's Teacher of the Year each year of her employment.

Our enthusiasm for working together inspired us to take risks, analyze our successes and failures, and seek more opportunities to learn—the same qualities we want to develop in our students. In 2006 we received the Disney American Teacher of the Year award, the first time the top prize had been given to a teaching team instead of to an individual instructor. We were so grateful for the award and the professional opportunities that followed, but we most appreciated the recognition of our work together. Suddenly we had a national platform to speak about the power of collaborative instruction.

Although our teaming experiences have transformed our professional lives, every day doesn't sparkle. Choruses of angels do not break into song when we enter the classroom. We are not perfect, nor do we have ideal teaching assignments. We cry, sigh, shout, and feel overworked. We struggle to reach difficult students, and our interventions sometimes flop. We have survived the parent/teacher conference from hell that resulted in police officers being

called to school. One restraining order later, we decided our communication skills could use some work.

We also know that teachers can't always choose ideal colleagues. We've lost and gained team members over the years and encountered unsettling administrative changes that caused us to adjust our teaming methods to fit the distinct characteristics—good and bad—of each situation. Middle schools evolve year to year, and so must we. Change does not come easily to us. We all have days that make us wonder whether we should return for the next class period. However, what brings us back is the belief that all the stars eventually will align so that every one of our students will experience explosive learning. Such moments erase the pain of a thousand headaches. What we have discovered is that when we work together as a collaborative instructional team, success occurs much more frequently than when we work alone.

When we won the Disney Award, we were the members of a three-person instructional team. However, we have worked with various team configurations and have seen the addition and departure of several team members throughout the years. In the year following our recognition, Erin Babin joined our group. We are indebted to Erin and all of our previous team members. The professional relationships we developed with them have consistently strengthened us. The experiences we share in this book are the result of our work with these talented educators.

Our lives would be simpler if we would just bend to the state and district requirements and teach the curriculum in a lockstep sequence. We would not have to work so hard to find extra materials, create interdisciplinary connections, and change our initial plans because a colleague suggested a better approach. But then we would lose a valuable asset—our students' interest. We create cross-curricular links, like those formulated in our giant unit, to show students how ideas and topics connect across subjects and throughout our lives. Teamwork is the vehicle that drives this point home through fluid, relevant lessons that go beyond the basics.

Early adolescence is a crucial time in a student's life. Academic expectations increase and planning for high school, college, and careers starts to take shape, all while students are changing physically, socially, and emotionally. Their need to belong and affiliate with peers often overrides their common sense. They get distracted and become erratic. They try on and cast off roles faster than improvisational actors, and they challenge authority and perceived unfairness with passion—but not always prudence. To steer them through the storms, middle grades teachers must be both compassionate and conscientious, seeking always to understand a young adolescent's desire for

a purposeful and engaging education. Interdisciplinary teaming provides an ideal framework for organizing important intellectual and life lessons.

Teachers who work on interdisciplinary teams discover that there is more than enough time to plan interesting, integrated activities, counsel students, contact parents, communicate with administrators, collaborate with other educators, and grow professionally. In short, teamwork makes it possible to wear the many hats required of teachers who interact daily with young adolescent learners.

Unfortunately, many schools and school districts quickly jump on the teaming bandwagon after limited preparation and, due to poor implementation, fail to achieve satisfactory results. Too often teamwork stops at the organizational level by placing teachers specializing in three or four core subject areas together in the same hallway of a school building. Effective interdisciplinary teams understand the job is much more complex than school structures alone. Effective teams are able to build relationships with students, families, and other professionals to advance student achievement.

“While changing and modifying organizational patterns and refining and strengthening curriculum and assessment are essential, they are not sufficient,” Williamson and Johnston (1999) remind us. “Teams are not implemented just to have teams. Grouping is not modified just to have practice. Such changes take place because they contribute to greater student achievement and success” (16).

## Creating a Masterpiece

We don’t consider school to be an August to May routine built on standardized tests and periodic report cards. We see education as a tapestry continually created by master weavers seeking to produce the ultimate artwork, a child who unfurls to his or her greatest potential. Our team is not just a collection of individuals who teach unrelated subjects to students who move among our connected classrooms. We see ourselves as three in one—the master weaver.

How do you create a school environment that produces such works of art? That is our challenge each day as we build a world where learning is infectious, standards are surpassed, and everyone has a chance to change the world.

Our classrooms may have walls, but these physical barriers do not stop the intellectual flow from one room to the next. In our interdisciplinary team we understand that each experience throughout the day has a common link:

the thread of the children. As the master weavers, we have discovered not only how the young adolescent brain learns but also that it will change and expand more from ages ten to fourteen than at any other period of life except birth to age two. Our short time with these students will have a tremendous impact on their development and their future. Therefore, we must maximize each moment to stretch them to their emotional, social, and intellectual limits while enabling them to feel confident and successful. We have no time for frivolous lessons that lack academic substance and require little cognitive engagement. On a daily basis our students must ponder difficult questions, often with no right answers. We believe in teaching them to think, not to echo us. Yet we understand that students at this age are still children at heart and our lessons must offer intrigue mixed with amusement in order to capture their attention and maximize learning.

We also understand that others surround our loom. Families, friends, administrators, school staff, and many others play a part in this creation. The key to our success is involving all of these essential people in shaping our students.

Unlike some other books focusing on adolescent development and middle grades education, we do not seek to share prescriptive activities and lesson plans or put people to sleep with theories that have few practical applications. Instead, we offer a view of teaming that is grounded in the everyday experiences of working teachers who know what it means to cope with state and federal mandates, at-risk learners, and constant scheduling changes due to a rapidly growing school. We plan together, strive together, revise together, and write together. This book is not a step-by-step method of creating an instructional team. We realize that, just as all children are different, each team is unique. This book offers critical concepts about teaming, young adolescents, and middle grades teaching that will require the reader to reflect, adjust, and grow. We share our story to encourage other middle school teams to share theirs. Our hope is that teachers and administrators who read this book will accept our invitation to continually examine their professional practices and create learning utopias in the midst of pressure-packed standards and accountability requirements.

Great interdisciplinary teaching is not a quick fix or an easy method of instruction, regardless of what some may suggest. Great interdisciplinary teaching is a personal commitment to colleagues, students, and families, not a checklist of duties. It is child-centered, not teacher-centered. We tell our students that success is excellence every day. This book is for those who expect high achievement not only from their students but also from themselves.

In the following chapters we will share our not only successes, but also our failures. Our achievements have brought us recognition, but our setbacks have made us more reflective practitioners. The underlying magic is not how we set up our team schedule or manage a meeting. It is the energy we bring to our collegial conversations and the expectations we have personally and for each other. Teamwork enables us to dream big and then deliver on that promise.