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REVISING THE MYTH OF NORMAL: CREATING A SUSTAINABLE SECONDARY  
ACADEMIC CURRICULUM PREDICATED ON LEARNING DIVERSITY

by

SARA KAPLAN

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SYNTHESIS\*  
MASTER OF ARTS  
CRITICAL AND CREATIVE THINKING  
UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS BOSTON

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Advisor: Professor Peter Taylor

Abstract: In recent years, a paradigm of neurodiversity has emerged in secondary schooling that functions as a framework to meet the needs of all types of learners. Accordingly, as our understanding of students who learn differently shifts, we must consider and evaluate pedagogical overhauls that aim to meet the needs of all learners. This synthesis details my experience as a young, fairly inexperienced administrator who has entered into a new workplace environment and devised a curricular framework with the intention of supporting students with learning differences to become constructive and reflective agents of their own learning. In this narrative, the reader will learn and understand the process that I undertook as I worked to form an academic program that best enabled seventy-two adolescent students to find success in a post-secondary setting. The model that I describe within this synthesis combines traditional academic classes in core competencies, classes focused on social-emotional wellness and social pragmatics, a series of workshops focused on instilling “21st-Century” skills, and two types of assessments: narrative evaluations and grids that monitor

metacognition and critical thinking. Ultimately, I argue that this reproducible model embraces cognitive diversity through inclusion, and seeks to instill the skills necessary to supporting perceived cognitive “weaknesses” as it actively works to optimize student strengths by focusing on empathy and innovation.

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\* The Synthesis can take a variety of forms, from a position paper to curriculum or professional development workshop to an original contribution in the creative arts or writing. The expectation is that students use their Synthesis to show how they have integrated knowledge, tools, experience, and support gained in the program so as to prepare themselves to be constructive, reflective agents of change in work, education, social movements, science, creative arts, or other endeavors.

UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS BOSTON

# **REVISING THE MYTH OF NORMAL:**

CREATING A SUSTAINABLE SECONDARY ACADEMIC CURRICULUM PREDICATED ON  
LEARNING DIVERSITY

SARA KAPLAN

SYNTHESIS OF THEORY AND PRACTICE

PROFESSOR PETER TAYLOR

APRIL 1, 2016

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## Introduction

Picture a student sitting in the middle of a classroom, nibbling on his fingernail. This student--Kevin, let's call him-- appears, for all intents and purposes, quite disheveled. His dirty blonde hair looks greasy, he is wearing a pair of shorts even though it is snowing out, and his backpack bulges with heavy textbooks, random scraps of paper, and the detritus of a shredded pencil eraser. Kevin is anxious because he did not do his English homework. He is surrounded by twenty-eight of his third-grade peers, and his teacher is quickly approaching him as she checks off the homework of each student sitting in the row ahead of him. He has an instinctual urge to escape; at this moment, he would rather be anywhere than sitting in his cold, metal desk that he's carved his name into over the course of his semester as he tries, repeatedly, to understand the words in the pages of his book and becomes increasingly frustrated at his inability to make sense of the patterns that he glimpses.

Kevin does not know that he is Dyslexic, nor that he has an executive functioning disorder. He believes that he cannot read because he is not trying hard enough, since for two years his teachers have told him that he is not working to his full potential. His parents do not necessarily agree with his teachers because they so often see Kevin come home from school so seemingly defeated, but they have limited resources and do not have the tools to enable Kevin to get the remediation that he would so greatly benefit from. However, should Kevin receive proper accommodations, guidance, and positive reinforcement, he could very realistically achieve the academic success he so desperately wishes for. In fact, if his parents decided to contest his school district and were somehow able to successfully argue that his teachers are not able to serve his needs,

Kevin could receive the funding from town taxpayers to attend a school very much akin to the one that currently employs me.

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Kevin's story is one that I have heard repeatedly over the past ten years from different voices within different faces. Though the context constantly changes, the narrative never varies. As a listener, this story remains startlingly disheartening, but makes my work as an educator--and now administrator-- to students with learning differences seem all the more relevant. After spending nine years as both a History teacher and an English teacher in schools specifically geared towards students who learn differently, six months ago I was hired in a newly created position as an Academic and Curriculum Development Coordinator at a very young boarding school in Rhode Island. Indeed, during the interview process, the role was described as an amalgam of sorts, which was perhaps representative of the institution behind it: the job combined administrative work, through overseeing the entire faculty, with the inherent creativity designated to an individual who held authority over a school-wide curriculum. This opportunity was thrilling to me as a practitioner of creative and critical thinking. Here was an ideal chance in which to emphasize, within a school environment, concepts that are so important to me in the context of education: metacognition; critical thinking; creativity; good citizenship.

The school itself, now eight years old, currently serves high-school aged students in grades nine through twelve with diagnosed language and processing disorders such as Asperger's Disorder, Dyslexia, and Nonverbal Learning Disorder. It was, and remains, a perfect opportunity to demonstrate my passion for enabling students who learn outside

of the socio-cultural norms of education to find academic success. As I moved into the position, I realized that the school was lacking a very distinct element important to the cultivation of a well-rounded, neurodiverse learner: a holistic assessment set of grids or standards that examined a student as an individual *not* to be graded through standardized testing, but by a set of objectives relevant to their growth as an individual, especially in accordance with the tenets held so dearly by both myself and the founders of the school. I was able to create such a grid during my time spent in CrCrth 692: *Processes of Research and Engagement*, that was summarily approved by administrators. This new assessment allowed me to progress in my work and focus on phase two of my plan, which meant overhauling the academic day to ensure that students would have the tools during their academic day to focus on specific goals related to fostering and nurturing their own creative and critical thinking. Therefore, I have spent the last five months devising an academic program that will enable neurodiverse learners to be successful after high school. Accordingly, this Capstone Project details my experience as a young, fairly inexperienced administrator who has entered into a new setting and devised a curricular framework reflecting the tenets of the CCT program. This narrative details my work setting students up to become constructive and reflective agents of their own learning.

It is necessary to preface this narrative by stating this work is not complete, and the fact that it is in progress is inherently uncomfortable to me, especially as an individual who values a neatly packaged narrative containing a beginning, middle, and end. Nevertheless, my work on this Capstone project will be ongoing long after I finish writing this piece, and I relish the opportunity to continue with this work. This narrative, therefore, is written with the intention of providing you, the reader, with a solid



understanding of the steps that I have taken *thus far* in working to establish an academic program that is visionary in the sense that it is sustainable and does not require my presence to function. The framework I am creating is meant to function *without* me overseeing it. Accordingly, this narrative details how I have begun to create a sustainable model to both experiment and work from as I have now produced a curriculum guide, series of workshops, seminars, and professional development opportunities for teachers, all with the intention of supporting neurodiverse learners. I have devised an academic schedule premised on a neurodiverse philosophy of learning that combines traditional academic classes in core competencies with classes focused on social-emotional wellness and pragmatism, a series of workshops focused on instilling “21st-Century” skills, and two types of assessments: narrative evaluations and grids that monitor metacognition and critical thinking.

The notion of struggle resonates greatly with me a practitioner of creative and critical thinking, and perhaps has a bigger impact on my work than my current role would suggest. My own high school trajectory was not entirely different from Kevin's, the fictional student described in the beginning of this narrative, who felt isolated from his peers and suffered from low self-esteem. I was diagnosed with Dyscalculia and a Generalized Anxiety Disorder at age fifteen, and had struggled in school for about as long as I could remember. Experiencing failure was a concept I was well-acquainted with, but it was primarily due to a support system consisting of my family and a few very patient teachers that I was able to find academic success (in the form of graduating from high school). It is relevant to this narrative to disclose that within the neurotypical model of secondary schooling, I was unable to learn effectively, and summarily dropped out when I turned sixteen years old. I *refused* to attend. It was only when I was granted placement

into a school geared towards students who “learn differently” that I was able to make significant strides towards achieving my so-called academic potential. This experience had a profound effect on me, and pummelled me toward my current position of self-described educational activist and agent of change.

This capstone project will explain the importance of the neurodiversity paradigm to my work, as well as illustrate the research that went into establishing a scope and sequence for this project. The narrative is written with the intention of clearly conveying that a comprehensive, neurodiverse curricular model in post-secondary institutions will have significant benefits on high-school aged students with diagnosed learning disabilities. From there, I will guide you through the framework that I have begun to create, and touch on the interviews that were so very important to me as I looked to gain feedback, understanding, and guidance in order to make gains on this work. Throughout this narrative, I will describe on the challenges that I have faced as I have attempted to create sustainable change within in my current role. Finally, this capstone project will consider future directions, reflect on the work itself, and evaluate future challenges. In reflecting on this work, I must take stock of what has been working well and what needs changing. Indeed, the gains described within this report are ongoing, continually in need of re-evaluation, and therefore worthy of critique, especially considering this project will continue for the foreseeable future. Nevertheless, before proceeding to Chapter Two, a discussion of neurodiversity remains necessary to ensuring a stronger understanding of the scope and sequence of this work.

## **On Neurodiversity**

The term neurodiversity refers to the diversity of brains and minds within our species (Baron-Cohen, 2014; Goodley & Runswick-Cole, 2015). Developed primarily through studies examining individuals on the Autistic Spectrum, the term neurodiverse operates under the following assumption: the idea that there is one “normal” or “healthy” type of cognitive functioning or mind is a culturally constructed fiction (Armstrong, 2015) and is ultimately debilitating to individuals with diagnosed learning differences (Fisk & Rourke, 1983). However, in order to receive specific accommodations and interventions that differ from the neurotypical paradigm of learning, an individual has to receive a clinical diagnosis of a learning disability. According to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), a specific learning disability is “a disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using language, spoken or written, which disorder may manifest itself in the imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell, or do mathematical calculations. Such term includes such conditions as perceptual disabilities, brain injury, minimal brain dysfunction, dyslexia, and developmental aphasia. Such term does not include a learning problem that is primarily the result of visual hearing, or motor disabilities, of mental retardation, of emotional disturbance, or of environmental, cultural, or economic disadvantage (20 U.S.C. 1401 (30)).” Studies have shown that many individuals with learning disabilities often struggle with underachievement and unemployment, have few friends, suffer from low self-esteem, and find themselves at greater risk for depression (Baron-Cohen, 2014). Therefore, “the cumulative effect of these studies suggests that a more judicious approach to treating mental disorders would be to replace a “disability” or “illness” paradigm with a “diversity” perspective that takes into account both strengths and weaknesses and the idea that variation can be positive in and of itself (Armstrong, 2015).”

By referring to this judicious approach as a paradigm of neurodiversity, the school in which I work has embraced such notions of inclusivity, and established a mission statement that seeks to instill the skills necessary to supporting perceived cognitive weaknesses, while actively working to optimize student strengths. Earlier, when I wrote that the school is predicated on a neurodiverse philosophy, I meant it literally. The mission itself states that our community is designed to develop students' academic abilities, intellectual curiosity, and physical and social-emotional development. Educators strive to create lifelong learners with increased independence and maturity that thrive in the post-graduate setting of their choice.

Nevertheless, while the school is an active proponent of the neurodiversity model, they do not use the term for fear of alienating potential students and parents who strongly align with the idea that diagnosed learning differences are, in fact, disabilities, and ought to be treated as disabled individuals. Accordingly, when working to create class groupings, my colleague and I place students in courses dependent on their cognitive profile, not by age or grade level. In other words, all students are given a neuropsychological battery of testing, prior to admittance, and depending on the scores they receive-- in conjunction with their personality styles-- they are grouped depending on neurocognitive factors such as full scale IQ, processing speed, verbal abilities, and visual-spatial IQ.

Figure 1 describes the procedure adopted in creating a sustainability model in which the neurodiversity model is manifested as a pyramid of skills, content, and learning outcomes that work to support and provide the foundations for the mission statement.

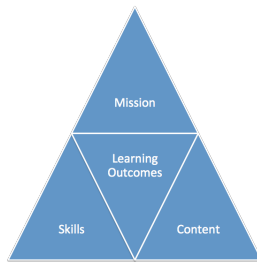


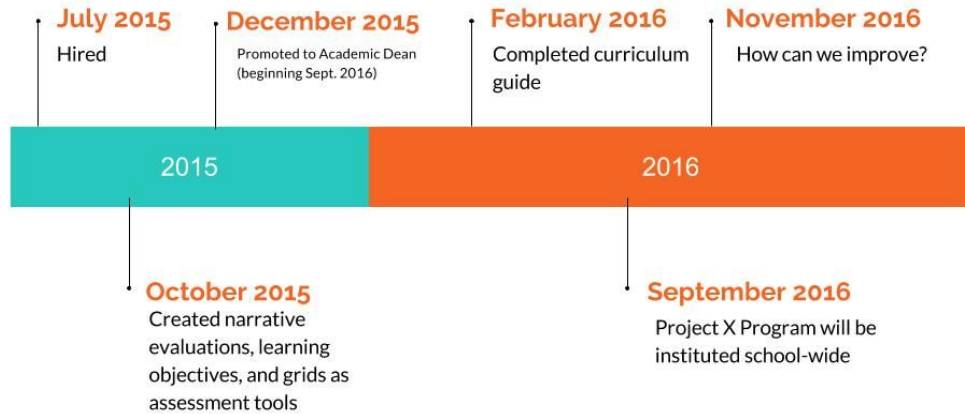
Figure 1 - Procedure adopted within the current report.

In a private school environment, a school philosophy is exceptionally important when attempting to convey the goals of the institution to potential students and parents, because it expresses the language that the school uses, is emphasized in all marketing material, and teachers are expected to abide by its tenets throughout the duration of their occupancy (Jorgenson, 2006). In following the neurodiversity paradigm, our philosophy was constructed and designed by the founders of the school with the intention of promoting the following ideals: to provide individually tailored academic instruction and social programs to students with learning differences in a supportive and caring educational community; to create relationships with teachers, peers and families to support students' academic, social, and emotional growth; to teach students to become more independent and self-aware learners who are prepared for success after graduation. "Sustainable" is the term I use for such an approach to students' learning. Consequently, emphasizing the importance of the neurodiverse philosophy of the school to this project is *paramount* to the construction of a sustainable curriculum model and academic program. Accordingly, as I began working to create a model, I wanted to ensure that each aspect of our mission statement was supported by a foundation of content, skills, and learning objectives.

In traditional neurotypical public and charter schools, a student must receive a specialized, state-approved 504 educational plan in order to receive academic accommodations. To receive such a plan, a student must meet the IDEA guidelines and have a specific diagnosis from a neuropsychologist. For purposes of this narrative, I spoke to the Director of Special Education at a local city charter school here in Providence, who referred to such accommodations as merely “good teaching practices” that ought to be put in place for any student, regardless of learning profile. Like myself, he considered 504 plans necessary to each child, whether or not an individual fell neatly into the clinical model. Nevertheless, a 504 plan provides a student with legal rights as a disabled individual.

In my current position as an Academic and Curriculum Development Coordinator, I work to ensure that each student receives all academic accommodations, interventions, and strategies regardless of learning profile. In my school, we have students with a primary diagnosis of anxiety, which would not meet IDEA guidelines. Nevertheless, we provide such students with all possible accommodations. I also recognize that the students I work with are extremely privileged, in the sense that 75% of my population comes from a demographic considered upper-middle class. Only 25% of my students have their placement paid by their town district, and in many cases, this is due to the family having the monetary means to afford a lawyer and educational advocate to fight the school district on behalf of the child. With all of this information in mind, before entering into the first chapter of this narrative, it is useful to demonstrate the trajectory of my work in this capstone project, in order to once again emphasize the fact that this project is *ongoing*:

## Milestones



## Chapter One

### Engaging in the Research and Process

Prior to deciding upon the direction I wanted to head in as I worked to create a schoolwide curriculum that incorporated metacognitive goals and critical thinking into a sustainable model, I realized that I needed to conduct a massive amount of research in order to have a stronger understanding of what other theories, models, and educators are doing. I wanted to learn if other high schools geared towards a similar cognitive population had a similar set of attitudes surrounding the notion of neurodiversity that may have resembled my own, and if so, what those models looked like in addition to understanding the reasoning behind them. I began, therefore, by conducting extensive research into various types of academic programs during October 2015 in order to differentiate between schools that focus on core-standards and schools that utilized a more holistic view of the learner. In doing so, I learned that standards-based objectives are most often considered beneficial to helping a student think critically because they

support constructivist-centered approaches in which the student is encouraged by his or her instructor to have agency over their own learning (Iamarino, 2015).

Encouraging reluctant learners to engage in learning for the sake of learning has been a consistent theme within my work in the CCT program, and I was greatly impressed by standards-based objectives that allowed a teacher to grade a student holistically. However, I was concerned that since our lessons have to be so differentiated within each class due to the discrepancies between individual cognitive profiles, I wondered if creating a new program would ultimately disservice the population. My concerns were assuaged, however, as I researched, sought out, and interviewed various educators and administrators at similar New England boarding schools: Franklin Academy, Eagle Hill School, Oxford Academy, and instructors from the now defunct Pine Ridge Academy. In speaking with various faculty members and policy-makers, I found that each of the schools utilized a program that incorporated tenets of pragmatism, wellness, and objectives by which to grade each student periodically throughout the year. Having been given verbal advice and encouragement by former colleagues, friends, and now, new peers, I was ready to present my findings to my supervisor, Dan Leventhal, and consider new directions from which to work.

In preparation, I prefaced our meeting by emailing Dan a set of topics that I wished to discuss based on my research: 1. skills versus content regarding neurotypical and neurodiverse learners; 2. class names and sequencing under measurable learning outcomes; 3. classes that we don't teach, but have potential to with our population; 4. whatever else Sara currently had on her mind. With these topics in mind, we brainstormed ideas surrounding a conceptual assessment model, and Dan gave me



some fantastic resources. He loaned me his copy of the book *A School Leader's Guide to Standards-Based Grading* as a way to break down this process into manageable pieces, and the text *Designing & Teaching Learning Goals & Objectives* because as I explained my goals for creating the model, Dan felt that the content of the text would help me to structure myself moving forward. At this point, I had the neurodiverse philosophy completed and a series of assessment methodology. That was nowhere near enough, but it formed the basis of my work in CrCrth692, a course on Research and Writing based on Taylor and Szteiter (2012).<sup>1</sup> I was ready to move on to the next phase of this work, which consisted of creating an academic curriculum that allowed teachers to scaffold lessons for neurodiverse learners while promoting metacognitive strategies that would enable students to become self-aware learners.

Accordingly, instead of being content-based, Dan and I decided that due to the progressive vision of the neurodiversity paradigm, in addition to my work in the CCT program, that our revised academic program needed to reflect our educational philosophy and be rooted in metacognition and critical thinking while still centered around concepts of self-advocacy, perspective-taking, organization, communication, and citizenship. At this point, I was excited, enthused, and ready to move forward and begin creating my sustainable model. As of this writing, the school is devised of seven academic departments: History, English, Math, Wellness (composing of a curriculum that combines both Physical Education and Health), Science, Social Pragmatics, and Remedial Language. During a typical academic day, each student takes a course in each of the seven departments. Classes last for forty minutes and teachers are expected to create their own curriculum in accordance with subjective assessments which are designed to

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<sup>1</sup> See Appendix A

measure proficiency within each content area through biannual narrative evaluations, letter grades, and a series of learning objectives that I created in December 2015.<sup>2</sup> Here is a current snapshot of the academic day:

Weekday Schedule	
6:50 - 8:00am	Wake-up and House Job
8:00 - 8:30am	Breakfast
8:40 - 9:20am	Period 1
9:25 - 10:05am	Period 2
10:05 - 10:20pm	Break
10:20 - 11:00am	Period 3
11:05 - 11:45am	Period 4
11:50am - 12:30pm	Period 5
12:30 - 1:05pm	Lunch
1:10 - 1:40pm	Language Skills Lab
1:45 - 2:25pm	Period 6
2:30 - 3:10pm	Period 7
3:10 - 3:20pm	Break
3:20 - 4:05pm	Student Study Hall

Students are engaged in academic work from 8:40am to 4:05pm, with another optional study hall from 4:00pm to 5:00pm. Classes are short (forty minutes), because due to executive functioning and attentional challenges, many students have trouble sustaining their academic stamina for longer durations. Since we have seven core academic departments, there is not a lot of room in the schedule for electives, so students engage in elective periods during their afternoon.

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<sup>2</sup> See Appendix A

For this CCT capstone, the first iteration of my process to revamp the pre-existing academic curriculum included a consideration of the course sequencing that students could engage in, as they progressed through a four-year curriculum at the school. In doing so, I needed to review the current course selections, consider how much the content related to the actual skills that teachers were attempting to impart upon their students, and compare what we, as an institution, were offering in comparison to other schools considered similar to us. When I say similar schools, I mean schools that also offered small classes, low student-to-teacher ratios, differentiated lesson plans, and academic accommodations dependent on learning profiles. This meant reaching out to colleagues at other schools in similar positions to interview them about what someone in my position ought to know as I worked to construct traditional academic classes and classes rooted in social pragmatics. However, I wanted this process to also include the salient concepts that I've gleaned through my work in the CCT program. In other words, while I wanted courses to focus on aspects of creative and critical thinking, I also wanted to approach potential modifications to the curriculum using strategies that I have learned from my CCT classes: cycles and epicycles of evaluation, action, and reflection and a willingness to give and take constructive feedback.

### **Phase One: Building a Curriculum**

My first step was to gather course descriptions from our faculty. A major complaint that I've heard since beginning my work was that teachers felt they did not have any scope or sequence for their classes. Instead of asking them to put one together, which I felt would ultimately do me a disservice as an individual new to the position-- I would be asking a lot of work from people who were not completely

comfortable with me in my role-- I decided to dig into the archives and find descriptions that were written during the inception of the school, in 2008. After finding descriptions, it was immediately apparent that the narratives were not reflective of the actual work that the teachers were doing; neither content nor skills were indicative the current coursework. During my multiple discussions with faculty members, it was explicitly stated to me that having a course description would behoove the instructor in the sense that it would provide a rough outline for their course trajectories. Accordingly, I researched graduation requirements at similar small boarding schools and began to create course descriptions reflective of our school values in six out of seven of our departments: English, History, Mathematics, Science, Social Pragmatics, and Wellness. In writing the course descriptions, it was important to me to integrate my knowledge and perspective from my CCT courses into my own inquiry and engagement. Therefore, each course description was written to demonstrate the importance of knowledge and integration of critical and creative thinking skills, processes, and strategies. An example of this can be found in the newly formed Perspectives class, an advanced History elective:

Perspectives is an advanced History elective unique to Middlebridge School, which is focused on an in-depth analysis of historical events and current global issues. Students study topics ranging from diplomatic relations between countries to human rights issues. As they research and analyze historical, geographic, and political science issues, they are guided to think critically about the information they gather and work to define their positions on each topic through written analysis and discussion. Using facts, theories, and concepts throughout history, students defend their positions by engaging in debates, writing essays, and giving speeches to their community. The course emphasizes supporting opinions with facts, articulating ideas clearly to others, questioning frames of reference, and taking new perspectives.

After writing the course descriptions for approximately twenty-five classes that we will offer beginning in September 2016 (and will be demonstrated in the following chapter detailing my product), my next step was to present the descriptions to my primary stakeholders: the faculty. A running theme throughout this narrative is *support*; be it from family, colleagues, friends, classmates, or acquaintances. I knew that it would

benefit me to receive guidance from people in similar positions, so I called Eric Stone, an Academic Dean at a boarding school in Massachusetts for students with diagnosed learning differences. Eric has been working as a Dean of Students for the past nineteen years, and his extroverted nature has allowed him to have many positive dialogues with constituents resulting in institutional change. His advice to me was to schedule individual meetings with key faculty members. A key faculty member would be considered an individual who currently holds some type of leadership role at the school. After doing so, he suggested having a conversation in which I kindly and directly stated my goals, while making sure to ask faculty for input due to their expertise in the content matter. In taking his advice, I was able to put together a series of course descriptions, enlist the help of some faculty members, and increase my communication with my constituents by involving them in my process. I also made sure to communicate to the faculty members in our meetings that I was not attempting to impede on their lesson plans; our instructors' sense of autonomy over their classes are paramount to the act of demonstrating a sense of passion and excitement of course content to our students. Over the course of three weeks, I slowly gained faculty approval and trust. I was ready to progress to Phase Two.

## **Phase Two: Finding the Holes**

At the school, language-based, multisensory instruction is a fundamental component of the academic program. Classroom instruction, activities, and output assignments are designed to incorporate visual, auditory, tactile, and kinesthetic modalities (Newman, 2002). In keeping our neurodiverse population in mind, a language-based classroom offers highly structured activities, which can alleviate anxiety

and foster a comforting sense of repetition (Retsinas, 2987). Indeed, structure and predictability ensure a sense of consistency within the classroom, supported by highly organized materials and clearly stated directions. Within classes, information is presented in an organized, sequential, and cumulative manner, and language and conceptual confusions are addressed immediately with direct and explicit instructions (Kiewra, 2002). Teachers use a high degree of repetition and paraphrasing, and they model appropriate use of language. Teachers also regularly revisit previously learning material to assess learning and the acquisition of skills and knowledge. Presentations and lessons are presented with the students levels of comprehension and reading levels in mind, so that students are able to do what is asked of them but are also continually challenged.

Nevertheless, despite a strong pedagogical foundation predicated on differentiated and scaffolding teaching within the classroom, I felt that there were still gaps within the curriculum. During my time in the CCT program, I had been taught to look at problems as opportunities to facilitate new avenues of participation. As a newcomer to the school, I was able to observe student participation in the classroom and compare that to engagement during guided social experiences (in the dining hall, the student lounge, etc.). I noticed that our students were not demonstrating traditional signifiers denoting a willingness to learn in the classroom. After observing a series of classes in each of our departments, I began to feel that students were reluctant learners; many individuals had difficulties engaging in activities requiring a high degree of written output, and seemed unenthusiastic about participating in discussions requiring critical thought. Knowing our population, who have experienced failure in neurotypical schools, auditory processing difficulties, and low academic stamina, it would be easy to dismiss

these issues as mere learning challenges. However, in watching students socially, I realized that the majority of the teenagers were often texting, on the internet, utilizing social media, and engaging in impassioned conversations with their peers. I needed to do more research.

## **The Project X Program**

In *The Global Achievement Gap* (2008), Tony Wagner writes that there are five primary markers of a 21st century student: a student is accustomed to instant gratification and an “always-on” connection; a student uses the web for 1) extending friendships, 2) interest-driven, self-directed learning, and 3) as a tool for self-expression; a student is constantly connected, creating, and multitasking in a multimedia world-- everywhere except in school; there is less fear and respect for authority-- students are accustomed from learning from peers and want coaching, but only from adults who do not “talk down” to them; finally, students want to make a difference and do interesting and worthwhile work. This resonated for me as a student in the Creative and Critical Thinking program. In considering my own academic trajectory, I have always felt most engrossed and enthusiastic during classes that enabled me to engage in inquiry-based learning; perhaps that is why my undergraduate experience was nontraditional in the sense that I never received grades, and my curriculum was individualized and self-directed. It also reminded me of my work in the CCT class *Thinking, Learning, and Computers*, which discussed the differences between digital natives and digital immigrants (Prensky, 2001). The majority of students that I work with are digital natives, and as educators, we need to adapt or risk a loss of interest. At any rate, with this knowledge, I needed to know and understand what other schools have done to cultivate

a “growth mindset” (Dweck, 2007) in their students, using Wagner’s assumptions as a basis for my research.

By utilizing my network of colleagues at other schools from my work in CrCrth692, I was able to find a unique program at the Louisville Collegiate School in Kentucky. The school offers an experiential program to its students called The EDGE, and is essentially four seventy-five minute blocks of time worked into the schedule each week for administrators to teach non-cognitive skills to their students. Non-cognitive skills are centered on improving character, grit, and self-regulated learning strategies (Zimmerman, 2002), and are taught by the Louisville Collegiate School administrators. Excitedly, I realized that these types of skills, in combination with our academic classes, could elevate our program and engage our students. If we, the administrators, were to teach these seminars to the students, we could form relationships that would better allow us to understand and identify with an individual, as well as give our faculty more planning time and thus demonstrate that we recognize how hard our faculty work. The main problem was that the schedule<sup>3</sup> did not allow for such seminars unless I could convince my stakeholders otherwise.

Using my support network, including my CrCrth694 writing group, classmates, and professor, my supervisor Dan (who immediately agreed with me and needed no convincing), and Eric, I realized that perhaps the best way to begin to introduce the Project X program, as Dan and I began calling it, was twofold: create a proposal, and send out a Google survey to faculty asking them to supply feedback about how they believed we could enrich the culture of the school. Since all of our teachers already had a Gmail address, it was quite easy to create a survey in February asking questions such as,

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<sup>3</sup> See page 14 of this narrative.



“If we were to create time in the schedule to work with students on concepts relating to leadership, collaboration, and metacognition, how would that support the culture of our school?” Answers were overwhelmingly positive, and there was surprisingly no pushback from the seventeen teachers who responded.<sup>4</sup> It was time for me to create a document detailing the program itself. I looked extensively for time in the schedule to implement the program and decided upon the Language Skills Lab time: thirty minutes after lunch in which we could rotate students in and out of seminars and workshops.

However, while Louisville’s EDGE program served as an inspiration for Project X, it did not fully encompass the challenges that our population faced. In addition to focusing on soft skills, I wanted Project X to also teach students specific study skills related to improving their executive dysfunction, which I had learned about in great detail from CrCrth651: Advanced Cognitive Philosophy. Approximately 86% of our neurodiverse population is diagnosed with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) as a *comorbid* diagnosis, which means that in addition to being on the Autism spectrum, for example, our students are also often late, lost, unprepared, and very highly disorganized. While the school currently has a strong organizational system already implemented into the academic program, I wanted to create a very specific curriculum within the Project X program that would focus on study skills strategies. I again realized that this would require an immense amount of research in order to find the best types of strategies to teach such skills, and spent a week devoting a significant number of hours to reviewing academic literature in order to find what others have done before, either in the form of writing or action, that informed and connected with my vision. I came upon three scholars (Zimmerman, 2002; Newman, 2002; Kiewra, 2010) who had worked to increase

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<sup>4</sup> See Appendix B.

students' self-efficacy by utilizing the adaptation of self-regulatory learning within content-area disciplines. Self-regulatory learning (SRL) is a term developed that describes the act of helping a student to understand and implement appropriate strategies independently in order meet a goal. Oftentimes, in the context of the classroom, a goal could be to complete an essay, do well on an exam, or have the necessary materials for one's coursework organized. Achieving a goal, no matter how small, can be a powerful motivator. Therefore, teachers very often implement pedagogical techniques of self-regulatory learning to work with students as their "coaches" during the learning process. In other words, it is the act of providing support and scaffolding for autonomy and competence. This means not only teaching skills like note-taking, time management, organization, and modeling good study skills within a content area, but guiding students to understand why such strategies enable them to complete a task (Butler, 1995). By empowering students to become self-aware learners who generate thoughts, feelings, and behaviors that are oriented towards meeting a goal, students are taught to be proactive about managing their individual learning styles.

In the context of Project X, the process would evolve gradually. While exposure to one outlining strategy, for example, may work for one individual, it may hinder another's progress. Using a recursive process of informal assessment and conferencing (Newman, 2002), teachers would ideally work to monitor and provide feedback to students as they experiment with various skill-based techniques with the ultimate intention of fostering positive self-efficacy within our population. Knowing that, I felt it was important to once again involve stakeholders. Therefore, I met with each academic teacher-- informally-- over the course of a week to ask them what study skill they believed would most benefit their students. Four primary skills were repeated to me multiple times during the course

of my conversations: note-taking, organization, relating, and monitoring. Using Kiewra model of effective self-regulatory learning techniques (2010), I created the following format for any instructor to use during the study skills workshop time:

1. **Introduce** the strategy

- A. Model the strategy for students
- B. Describe how and why the strategy is useful

2. **Sell** the strategy

- A. Tell how it works

3. **Generalize** the strategy

- A. Describe where else it would be useful and contextualize

4. **Provide practice opportunities** for the students

5. **Reflect** on the strategies with the students

How might that look in practice? Perhaps a teacher may choose to focusing on taking lecture notes during the week-long note-taking unit. If the teacher has thirty minutes, the first five minutes would be devoted to describing the strategy and telling students why it is useful. From there, a teacher could play an audio lecture and pretend to be the student in front of the classroom for ten minutes, making sure to label behaviors for his or her students. Then, the teacher could spend time communicating to the students where else taking lecture notes would be useful in order to provide multiple contexts in which to work from. Finally, the last part of the workshop would be time for the students to practice with guidance and support. Homework would consist of an opportunity for students to reflect on how the strategy worked, and allow the individual to identify, at the end of the week, the strategies that he or she had found to be most effective. This would theoretically last all week, using different note-taking strategies

such as skeletal note-taking, instructor notes, lecture cues, and assistive technology. At any rate, by using the model, I was able to create a series of study-skills workshops that will be detailed in the following chapter: the product.

## **Chapter Two**

### **Putting It All Together: The Curriculum Guide**

This section is devoted to showcasing the product that I have been working on for the past five months, as detailed in the first chapter of this narrative. This work was not work I was required to do as an Academic and Curriculum Development Coordinator, rather, it was a project I chose based on the trajectory of my time in the CCT program in addition to the current work responsibilities. The curriculum guide details the robust combination of tools that a neurodiverse student can utilize, in order to best position him or herself for success following their high school graduation. As stated previously, this curriculum guide combines a philosophy of learning diversity, traditional academic course selections, classes geared towards social-emotional wellness, and the Project X program, which focuses on seminars predicated on creative and thinking thinking (in combination with workshops designed to enhance and expose students to various types of study skills).

In creating the “product” for this capstone work-- though it is arguable that this narrative is perhaps the real, more authentic product-- I wrote forty-six pages of material. I learned how to use the program Adobe Indesign through free Youtube tutorials, and reached out to my friend Cira, a part-time graphic designer, for help in creating the layout. She agreed to design a preliminary layout for me to work from, and from there, I was able to paste my content into the pages, insert photographs taken by myself and a

colleague with a school issued camera, and fill in the gaps of the curriculum guide to ensure that it was an even number of pages.

The curriculum guide will be published in an 8 x 11" full color format, and now that it is completed, the Head of School and Admissions Director have asked for it to be distributed to families, teachers, students, educational consultants, and potential students. Accordingly, it will be used for marketing purposes for the school; I therefore made sure to follow the style guide released one month ago by the marketing firm that published the school's new website (as of March 2016). Though the creation of the guide was not, initially, included in my job description, now that it has been completed I have agreed to update it each year moving forward. As of this writing, it has been wholeheartedly embraced by the Director of Education, Director of Admissions, and Head of School, who has asked for 700 copies to be printed.

## Excerpts from the Product



# A GUIDE TO THE GUIDE

The Middlebridge Curriculum Guide provides prerequisite and enabling skills that lead to learning grade-level academic standards. The curriculum guide can be used to assist students in learning content in smaller increments, catching up on content they may have missed in previous years, and/or reviewing content related to grade-level academic standards.

The authors of this guide have used their academic content knowledge and experiential knowledge related to students with learning differences to produce this resource for closing the gap between grade-level content and students' instructional levels.

Middlebridge School's academic curriculum is built on a foundation consisting of three sources: the Rhode Island Department of Education standards, national standards, and educator experience with students with learning differences. Classes are small, consisting of between 3-7 students per class (except Tutorial, which is 1:1) in order to individualize instruction and design lessons and activities based on students' unique learning styles. Classrooms are structured to be dynamic, multisensory, and student-centered. Instruction is focused on building bridges between concepts and settings to maximize student understanding, application, and retention of material.

Across content areas, courses are designed each year to specifically address the needs of the students within each class period. Thus, the exact scope and sequence of topics may vary from year to year within any given course.

In the spirit of Middlebridge's philosophy of teaching the whole child, the Curriculum Guide offers the complete range of academic offerings. Specifically, it includes descriptions of both required and elective courses as well as the sequence of courses students take on the way to graduation. More broadly, it is a road map with which students and parents can envision the full picture of their Middlebridge experience.



# WEEKLY SCHEDULE

<b>6:50 AM - 8:00 AM</b>	Wake-up and House Job
<b>8:00 AM - 8:30 AM</b>	Breakfast
<b>8:40 AM - 9:20 AM</b>	Period 1
<b>9:25 AM - 10:05 AM</b>	Period 2
<b>10:05 AM - 10:20 AM</b>	Break
<b>10:20 AM - 11:00 AM</b>	Period 3
<b>11:05 AM - 11:45 AM</b>	Period 4
<b>11:50 AM - 12:30 PM</b>	Period 5
<b>12:30 PM - 1:05 PM</b>	Lunch
<b>1:10 PM - 1:40 PM</b>	Language Skills Lab
<b>1:45 PM - 2:25 PM</b>	Period 6
<b>2:30 PM - 3:10 PM</b>	Period 7
<b>3:10 PM - 3:20 PM</b>	Break
<b>3:20 PM - 4:05 PM</b>	Student Study Hall
<b>4:05 PM - 4:15 PM</b>	Prepare For Electives
<b>4:15 PM - 5:30 PM</b>	Electives
<b>5:30 PM - 6:30 PM</b>	Dinner
<b>6:30 PM - 7:45 PM</b>	Residential Curriculum/Laundry/Community Activities
<b>7:45 PM - 8:30 PM</b>	Residential Check-Ins/1:1 Meetings
<b>8:00 PM - 9:00 PM</b>	Social Time
<b>9:00 PM</b>	Dormitory Curfew
<b>9:00 PM - 9:30 PM</b>	In Dormitory
<b>9:30 PM - 10:00 PM</b>	Prep for Bed/Turn in Electronics/In Room/Quiet Time
<b>10:00 PM</b>	Lights Out

### Metacognition

Demonstrates an awareness of targeted processes to reach a goal  
 Assesses own adherence to targeted processes to reach a goal  
 Chooses appropriate strategies for assigned tasks  
 Implements appropriate strategies for assigned tasks  
 Can apply the above strategies to identify and achieve collaborative goals

### Executive Functioning

Is prepared with appropriate and necessary tools and materials  
 Keeps materials and personal environment in order  
 Transitions appropriately from tasks and activities and school environments  
 Accurately estimates time to complete tasks  
 Allots time relative to long, medium, and short-range tasks

### Expressive Language

Recognizes conventions of nonverbal language  
 Employs language relevant to the situation  
 Employs vocabulary relative to the context  
 Asks and answers questions clearly  
 Participates as a speaker

### Receptive Language

Demonstrates nonverbal listening behaviors  
 Listens and communicates with a purpose  
 Asks questions for clarification during a discussion  
 Synthesizes information gained from listening  
 Demonstrates understanding

### Critical Thinking

Recognizes that all thinking has a purpose, objective, goal or function  
 Analyzes and assesses the use of questions in others' thinking  
 Accurately identifies their own assumptions, as well as those of others  
 Accurately represents viewpoints with which they disagree  
 Enters empathically into points of view with which they disagree



# HISTORY

The MBS History curriculum aims to develop students' abilities to think creatively and critically, while presenting facts to support an opinion. Accordingly, instruction emphasizes differentiating facts from opinions, predicting consequences, and recognizing recurring themes across different periods of time, cultures, and locations. Students analyze primary and secondary documents as they practice their research and writing skills. Courses include Early Civilization, Modern European History, World History, United States History, Civics, and advanced electives including Perspectives.

## Early Civilizations

This course delves into the history of western civilization and begins with a study of early river civilizations. Students will cover topics such as Greece, Rome, the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, and the ages of Absolutism and Revolution. The course will conclude by looking at seeds of conflict and aspects of peace, while focusing on the cultural, political, geographical, and economic aspects of history. Students will improve their critical thinking and cartography skills, with a strong focus on the research process as they write essays and complete class presentations. Additionally, Early Civilizations will emphasize efficient note-taking procedures while promoting vocabulary, reading comprehension, and organization.

## United States History

In United States History, students will learn about the early history of the United States to present day events and occurrences. Topics include the Age of Exploration, Colonial America, the causes, battles, and consequences of the Revolutionary War, The Constitution, Westward Expansion, Native Americans, Slavery, the Civil War, Reconstruction, the Industrial Revolution, World War I, The Great Depression, World War II, The Cold War, and current events that include globalization and terrorism. Students will study each topic through inquiry-based approaches, and will work to take on the perspective of people living during each event.

## Modern European History

Modern European History is designed to provide students with a chronological and thematic survey of the development of Europe from 1800 to the present. The course

*(cont.)*

As students learn how to develop friendships, they will focus on accepting similarities and differences in others, as well as techniques related to emotional regulation. Additionally, through the process of self-exploration and career planning, students will learn how to match personal needs and expectations with satisfying career options.

### The Social Pragmatics Program Addresses:

**Emotions:** Understanding their own and others' emotions; managing anger and stress; and developing empathy and self-esteem.

**Communication:** Improving conversational skills, including active listening skills; understanding body language, facial expressions, context and setting; and encouraging self-disclosure.

**Self-Advocacy:** Recognizing a need for help, learning to ask for help, and building awareness of academic and social support.

**Learning Style:** Understanding multiple intelligences, identifying learning styles, and recognizing academic and social impact of learning differences.

**Relationships:** Making friends and maintaining friendships; understanding boundaries and relationships; engaging in appropriate conversations; developing trust; and learning healthy dating behavior.

**Social Media:** Setting boundaries, understanding need for personal security, identifying appropriate use of social media, and determining whom to trust when sharing information, understanding cause and effect of posting personal information online.

**Career Awareness and Exploration:** Through the process of self-exploration and career planning and awareness activities, students will learn how to match personal values, interests, skill sets, and expectations with satisfying career options

**The Post-Secondary Transition Process:** Designed for seniors and/or Postgraduate students to help guide, support, and prepare them for post secondary placement. For more information, please refer to the Transition aspects of this handbook.

*For more information regarding possible topics to be covered within the Social Pragmatics curriculum, please contact the Academic Dean.*

# PROJECT X PROGRAM

Project X is a series of weekly seminars and Study Skills workshops that are held during the Language Skills Lab period throughout the duration of the academic year. Project X seminars are led by administrative staff at Middlebridge, and are designed to teach students how to develop intellectual curiosity and self awareness knowledge that they can utilize independently within their content-area classes. Project X Study Skills workshops are led by experienced instructors, who provide skill-based guidance in the areas of time management, note-taking, organization, homework completion, textbook skills, and public speaking.

## PROJECT X SEMINARS

At Middlebridge, we celebrate our student's strengths, support their academic and personal growth, and encourage them to become self aware and independent learners. As a community, one of the values we hold most dear is our sense of belonging and becoming. Each student's path to Middlebridge is unique. This journey often requires our students to reflect, acknowledge, and embrace who they have been, who they are, and who they want to be as they strive to take ownership over their educational process. As we work to provide instruction, opportunities, and support for students with learning differences, we also look outside of the academic classroom, as we draw on our leadership team's experience to help instill some of these foundational and higher level skills on our students.

The two, weeklong rotating Project X learning seminars cover the following topics, and are divided into short, incremental units:

- Problem-solving and Critical Thinking
- Collaboration and Leadership
- Initiative and Entrepreneurship
- Flexibility and Self-Advocacy

Each thirty-minute seminar is predicated on a foundation of trust, positive attitude, inquiry, and evaluation. Project X Seminars are facilitated by Administrative staff and members of the Dean's Office, including the Head of School.



## MBS STUDY SKILL WORKSHOPS

The second component of the Project X Program is our Study Skills workshops. These workshops teach students positive self-efficacy by utilizing the adaptation of self-regulatory learning within content-area disciplines. Each daily workshop will introduce a study skills strategy, describe how it works to students, generalize and contextualize the skill, and provide practice opportunities for students to engage in. By exposing students to a variety of different strategies, skills and modalities, students will be provided with an opportunity to reflect on and evaluate the skills they have learned. They will then apply these learned strategies to their academic curriculum.

Periodically throughout the school year, students will be chosen to participate in the seminars and workshops. Students will participate in seminars and workshops 4-5 times throughout the course of the school year. Dependent upon the specific focus of the session, students may be grouped by their age, cognitive profile, and/or years at Middlebridge School.

**In summary, the Project X Program was created to compliment and reinforce content, skills, and community values taught both within and out of the Middlebridge classroom.**



## Chapter Three

### Looking Forward: Future Paths, Future Directions

At the conclusion of my work in 692, I wrote that there was much to do in the weeks, months, and years to come. I stated that aside from completing my research regarding proficiency scales, I had to utilize both the Research and Engagement model and the Action Research framework as I worked to present the model to secondary stakeholders: the faculty, students, parents, and educational consultants. I also stated that there were specific steps that I needed to take as I worked to meet my vision: I needed to create course descriptions that aligned with the with an academic trajectory that reflected the values of the neurodiversity model, I needed to create a detailed curriculum guide to give to parents, consultants and other educators that emphasized our progressive vision of education, and through it all, I had to detail the neurodiversity paradigm without specifically referring to it as a “neurodiversity paradigm”. This has all now been completed.

Nevertheless, based on my work in this capstone project, I now wish to design content-based learning objectives that will support the new sustainable academic program that promotes the principles of learning diversity that are so important to me in my capacity as a CCT student: a refusal to separate students into ontological categories based on designated disability, a willingness to consistently engage in an adhocracy in order to support the fluctuating needs of the community, and an overall focus on increasing an individual’s self-efficacy through metacognitive growth. I have spent a lot of time reflecting on the current academic framework, and I believe there are still many opportunities for growth. By working with faculty to establish course-specific guiding

principles and learning objectives, teachers will be able to utilize a scope and sequence as they design their curriculum. While flexibility is necessary to establishing an academic framework serving neurodiverse learners (Bumiller, 2008), many teachers do not create lesson plans or syllabi, and therefore find themselves anxious and confused about what content they ought to teach. Though we have overarching objectives that can be used academically and residentially, from conversations with faculty I have discovered that they desperately wish for content-area objectives that they can design their lessons around. Many instructors currently feel overwhelmed by having so much independence. It is a goal of mine, moving forward, to establish a regular dialogue with each faculty member in order to enable them to feel supported in their work as educators. My time in the CCT class *Dialogue Processes* taught me that those who want to both develop and value the art of thinking together must engage in the act of extended dialogue. Yet, as an individual working to become a lifelong learner, I have also learned throughout this process that the act of listening has been my biggest tool. I am a quiet and introverted person by nature; in engaging with my faculty, I worked very, very hard to provide a safe and nurturing space in which teachers felt comfortable confiding in me. I am going to work to continually reflect and evaluate on my progress through these conversations, and feel that my promotion to an academic dean is representative of the path that I am on to create and implement positive change within my career.

The goal of this project was to help my reader understand the steps I took to develop an academic framework to best enable neurodiverse learners function successfully after their high-school graduation. By exposing students to a curriculum that challenges them in a manner that enables them to understand and embrace failure, labels their learning style(s), and allows them to understand form close relationships with

faculty and staff, students are given more opportunities to find success. The model that I am working with here is similar to concepts surrounding Universal Design for Learning. According to The National Center on Universal Design for Learning, “Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is a framework that addresses the primary barrier to fostering expert learners within instructional environments: inflexible, “one-size-fits-all” curricula. It is inflexible curricula that raise unintentional barriers to learning. Learners who are “in the margins”, such as learners who are gifted and talented or have disabilities, are particularly vulnerable. However, even learners who are identified as “average” may not have their learning needs met due to poor curricular design.” Yet unlike UDL, this work does not assume that those who graduate will want to move on to post-secondary institutions of learning. The academic framework detailed in this narrative assumes that post-secondary success means knowing how to self-advocate, think critically, and embrace ambiguity.

Ultimately, I would like this sustainable model to be used as a framework in other schools with similar types of learners. I realize that I have specific advantages that many educators do not face: I do not work with Common Core standards, and I have an unusual degree of autonomy. I also work with a very wealthy population, so if there are resources that I need, I will most likely be able to procure them. With that said, I want to use this work to help me develop professional development geared towards school administrators with the overall intent of aiding them in reconsidering what it means to be “learning disabled.” I also need to read the literature that would support my theories surrounding this capstone project. I reached out to Dr. Matthew Kim, a disability advocate, at Eagle Hill School in Hardwick, MA, who recommended a number of texts for me to read that would better explain the language of (dis)ability and theories

surrounding a new rhetoric of difference. This will help me work with other members of my field by utilizing a common language.

Moving forward, my next step is working with our Director of College Counselling and Alumni/ae to begin tracking our alums after moving through our program in order to provide quantitative data that supports this model. I believe I can use this work as a basis to continue developing “Project X,” which, in conjunction with our Social Pragmatics department really sets our program apart from similar institutions. But, perhaps more so than any other goal detailed within this section, I want a student like Kevin, our protagonist from the beginning of this report, to understand that he does learn differently from some of his peers, but ultimately he can be taught to understand that he is just as creative, capable, and compelling as everyone else in that classroom, including his teacher. He just may have to work a bit harder (and so will his teacher).



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## Appendix A

Mass mailing to community members detailing the new assessment grids, April 2016:

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# MIDDLEBRIDGE SCHOOL

## Academic Update

### OUR MISSION

*The mission of Middlebridge School is to provide instruction, opportunities, and support for students with learning differences. Our community is designed to develop students' academic abilities, intellectual curiosity, and physical and social-emotional development. We strive to create life-long learners with increased independence and maturity that thrive in the post-graduate setting of their choice.*

### CONTACT INFO

333 Ocean Road,  
Narragansett, RI 02882  
[www.middlebridgeschool.org](http://www.middlebridgeschool.org)  
Phone: (401)-788-0800  
Fax: (401)-783-1266  
Email: [skaplan@middlebridgeschool.org](mailto:skaplan@middlebridgeschool.org)

**WELCOME TO THE 27TH EDITION OF THE MIDDLEBRIDGE ACADEMIC NEWSLETTER.** As an educational institution, one of our goals is to always be evolving and thinking of new ways to evaluate and measure success and growth with our students. Academically, faculty, remedial language staff, and administrators are regularly meeting to discuss individual student learning profiles, differentiation techniques in the classroom, scaffolding strategies, and ways that we can support and guide our students towards becoming more self-aware and independent learners.

Nevertheless, one of the areas that is constantly changing in education is the language that we use to describe how our students learn, process and organize information, and effectively recall and implement skills into their daily living and academic classes. Middlebridge School prides itself on its excellent communication between staff and students, and our sense of collaboration when it comes to discussing students' learning profiles.

Therefore, in an effort to create a similar language and framework of how we, as a staff, think about our students and discuss their learn-

*Continued on next page...*

ing process, we have created a set of innovative Learning Objectives that we feel best encompasses and captures the patterns of strengths and weaknesses that our student body experience in their daily living, both in and out of the classroom.

These MBS Learning Objectives are broken down into five categories, composed of specific learning goals that fall under the umbrella topics of **metacognition**, **executive functioning**, **receptive language**, **expressive language**, and **critical thinking**. All five categories have been carefully chosen and created due to extended conversations between faculty, students, parents, and consultants. These conversations have allowed the Academic Office to understand what core competencies that we, as an academic program, will focus on as we work to meet the needs of each of our students.

In addition to supporting our students as they transition into a post secondary setting, the new grid of learning objectives allows instructors to tangibly track student progress and areas of challenge across disciplines. As we compare notes, instructors can modify their curriculum to meet the needs of the learner. For example, by focusing on a pattern of developmental gaps in the area of executive functioning, teachers can use specific strategies consistently throughout a student's academic day in order to increase proficiency and self-efficacy.

Our grids are meant to be utilized as a framework throughout the academic program in accordance with our philosophy and mission. The categories

are designed with the intention of ensuring that each student is addressing areas that will aid them in becoming more independent and self-aware learners who are prepared for success in a post-secondary setting.

Therefore, in addition to Middlebridge's academic reports that families already receive toward the end of January and the middle of June, beginning this April, families will receive the biannual Middlebridge Learning Objectives for each of our six core content areas: English, Math, Social Studies, Science, Social Pragmatics, and Wellness. Parents can expect to receive six grids in total, assuming that a student is taking a class in each of the disciplines. Students will not receive a grid for an independent study period or their tutorial.

At this juncture, it is useful to explain each of the categories in more detail:

### ***Metacognition***

Metacognition refers to awareness of one's own knowledge--what one does and doesn't know--and one's ability to understand, control, and manipulate one's cognitive processes (Meichenbaum, 1985). It includes the strategies that we use to think, study, and learn, especially as we work to achieve a specific goal, like completing a math problem or writing a five-page essay. Having the ability to accurately reflect on a series of strategies, in order to choose and implement the best method of reaching a goal, cannot be understated.



***Executive Functioning***

Executive functions are the skills that we use to organize and act on information. They are essentially a set of processes that allow us to manage our cognitive resources in order to achieve a goal (whether that goal be arriving to a class on time, have the necessary materials at the ready, or prioritizing an amount of time relevant to task completion).

***Receptive Language***

Receptive language is the ability to understand words and language. It involves gaining information and meaning from routine, visual information within an environment, understanding nuances of grammar, and accurately processing written information. Receptive language is important in order to successfully communicate with others, understand information properly, and sustain attention. It also includes recognizing conventions of non-verbal communication when engaged in conversations.

***Expressive Language***

Expressive language is the use of words, sentences, gestures, and writing to convey meaning and messages to others. Expressive language skills include being able to label objects, describe actions and events, retell a story, answer questions, and write effectively to convey a thought, emotion, or idea. Expressive language enables people to be able to express their wants and needs, thoughts and ideas, argue a point of view, and engage in successful interactions with others. It also means asking questions for clarification when a concept is not understood.

***Critical Thinking***

There are multiple definitions of critical thinking, but the one that perhaps resonates the most with many of us at Middlebridge is simply, "A means of making a reasoned judgement" (Beyer, 1995). Critical thinking is a disciplined manner of thought that an individual can use to assess the validity of something (a statement, an argument, a news story, etc.). It involves understanding that all thinking has a purpose or objective, the ability to define a problem, and understanding that ambiguities must be tolerated.

On the following page, you will see the new MBS Learning Objectives grid, as well as the competency scale that we will be using. Our competency scale is inspired by the Dreyfus Model of Skill Acquisition (Dreyfus & Dreyfus, 1980), which best reflects the needs of our community by encouraging continuous growth through vocabulary associated with positive reinforcement. Students will be assessed on a numerical scale of 1-6, which will be used as an indicator when assessing student performance.

We understand that you may have questions about the forthcoming MBS Learning Objectives, and are happy to respond to all inquiries. Please email [skaplan@middlebridgeschool.org](mailto:skaplan@middlebridgeschool.org) or [dleventhal@middlebridgeschool.org](mailto:dleventhal@middlebridgeschool.org). We will get back to as soon as possible, and we look forward to continuing the conversation.

***Until next week,***

Sara Kaplan

Academic and Curriculum Development Coordinator  
Middlebridge School



## MIDDLEBRIDGE SCHOOL

Student Name, Subject

### Middlebridge Generalized Learning Outcomes

Metacognition	Rating
Demonstrates an awareness of targeted processes to reach a goal	
Assesses own adherence to targeted processes to reach a goal	
Chooses appropriate strategies for assigned tasks	
Implements appropriate strategies for assigned tasks	
Can apply the above strategies to identify and achieve collaborative goals	

Executive Functioning	Rating
Is prepared with appropriate and necessary tools and materials	
Keeps materials and personal environment in order	
Transitions appropriately between tasks and activities and school environments.	
Accurately estimates time to complete tasks	
Allots time relative to long, medium, and short-range tasks	

Expressive Language	Rating
Recognizes conventions of nonverbal communication	
Employs language appropriate to the situation	
Employs vocabulary relative to the context	
Asks and answers questions clearly	
Participates as a speaker	

Receptive Language	Rating
Demonstrates nonverbal listening behaviors	
Listens and communicates with a purpose	
Asks questions for clarification during a discussion	
Synthesizes information gained from listening	
Demonstrates understanding	

Critical Thinking	Rating
Recognizes that all thinking has a purpose, objective, goal or function	
Analyzes and assesses the use of questions in others' thinking	
Accurately identifies own assumptions, as well as those of others	
Accurately represents viewpoints with which they disagree	
Enters empathically into points of view with which they disagree	

Score	Description
6	<b>Role Model-</b> Is a benchmark, sets new standards, and is able to demonstrate the next level of competence.
5	<b>Expert-</b> Encourages and influences others to display the skill, leverages expertise in this area very effectively.
4	<b>Strength-</b> Almost always demonstrates the behavior/skill. Meets role expectations.
3	<b>Capable-</b> Often demonstrates the behavior/skill, but not always.
2	<b>Development Area-</b> Sometimes demonstrates the behavior/skill.
1	<b>Learner-</b> Has not yet demonstrated the behavior/skill.

#### References:

- Meichenbaum, D. (1985). Teaching thinking: A cognitive-behavioral perspective. In S. F. Chipman, J. W. Segal, & R. Glaser (Eds.), *Thinking and learning skills*, Vol. 2: Research and open questions. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Beyer, B. K. (1995). *Critical thinking*. Bloomington, IN: Phi Delta Kappa Educational Foundation.
- Dreyfus S, Dreyfus H. (1980). A five stage model of the mental activities involved in directed skill acquisition. California University Berkeley Operations Research Center.

## Appendix B

A representative sampling of responses to the February 2016 survey, specifically the question about how Project X could support the culture, mission, and philosophy of the school:

"I believe it keeps students active and aware of their progress in classes. It allows them to have a deeper understanding of how they're doing across the board. Additionally, I think being reflective helps students see that we, as teachers are putting thought into how they do individually on a daily basis, and use that to improve our teaching practices as well as help provide them with strategies to learn better. It brings everything full circle."

"I think as a school that commits to individualizing each students' educational experience, having this potential time to outline expectations and goals for each student is a crucial part of this process. The fact that each student gets time with a school leader outside of a traditional classroom helps them to feel heard, cared for, and valued."

"It is an inherent fact that each student has challenges that they are working on improving. By setting goals with the support of an administrator, it reinforces the tenet that we as a community work collectively to support and that the student need not feel as though they are alone in facing these challenges. Also, small changes or improvements often lead to the big ones :)"

"Our communication is solid and these goals/challenges are reinforced by all staff, especially the Dean's Team. I feel that the system in place for students meeting the needs is remarkable."