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A Common Chord in Our Beliefs

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As a school librarian who has embraced the 2007 AASL *Standards for the 21st-Century Learner*, I often see their connections to other areas of learning and to life. I especially note how the nine Common Beliefs resonate with our fellow educators and, when studied, are familiar to people in much the same way as the pentatonic scale. The what? Pentatonic scale?

At one of the most dynamic sessions of the 2009 World Science Festival, singer Bobby McFerrin included an audience participation exercise using this well-known and very old scale common to Native American flute music, African American spirituals, Appalachian folk songs, and traditional American blues, as well as traditional Middle Eastern, Eastern Europe, and Western and Southeast Asian music (Wikimedia 2010). With little repetition, the

audience was able to determine the tonal pattern laid out by the artist without use of instruments; the sequence was familiar, as if members of the audience were pulling from prior memory. The title of the session referred to a search for the common chord. According to McFerrin, "Regardless of where I am, anywhere, every audience gets that" (Science Festival Foundation 2009).

Our Common Beliefs, like the chord that "everybody gets," thread through the formal and lifelong learning of our audiences, whether they are classroom teachers, parents, school librarians, or administrators. Articulating these beliefs can help our audiences hear the common need to plan together for student accomplishment and achievement, to become a common chorus.

There are numerous examples where this common chord is applied. One example is classroom teachers and school librarians planning collaborative lessons. The common chord starts to ring through when the classroom teacher and the librarian tweak the methodology to guide the students through the process for gathering and organizing the information needed for completing the assignment—and then again when the students are able to access the information quickly, confidently knowing what resource to use and where to look within that resource for the information needed. The common chord rings even louder when the students connect with the skills they've gained from that lesson and can apply those same skills to another learning situation both in and outside of school. This kind of knowledge transfer is a life

skill—a skill that has been formally taught, but can technically be transferred to lifelong learning.

My personal contribution to helping my audiences discover and utilize this common strand is implemented through a knitting circle that I started this fall. I wanted to use the group as a catalyst to help change the culture of my school, a school in which many students showed no understanding of giving back to their community. Students seemed to always expect everything to be given to them, and it seemed as if they felt their teachers' pockets were bottomless financial pits that were supposed to supply students with everything from lunch money to daily school supplies.

I soon came to understand that many students didn't realize they had something they could give back. They didn't realize they possessed strengths that could play positively in other's lives. The students had been made aware only of their weaknesses. They didn't realize that their own level of abilities could allow them to contribute harmoniously to their community through efforts such as:

- visiting and running errands for the senior citizens in their communities
- rounding up all the children in their neighborhood and having clean-up-the-yard competitions, or green-up-the-neighborhood-competitions, and in my case,
- learning how to knit—not only for yourself, but for those less fortunate than you

I used Learning4Life (L4L), which had been created by AASL to promote and market the new standards, as my inspiration and called my student knitting circle "Knitting4Life" (K4L).



Several Common Beliefs connect to our circle and to the rest of the students' lives.

The rule for being a part of the circle is that each member must knit four items of whatever it is we're knitting. The first well-made item goes to the less fortunate, the second item goes to a friend, the third well-made item goes to a family member, and the final item goes to oneself. If the student does not have a friend or family member who can use the first three items, they are contributed to needy groups. To date, we have contributed fifteen scarves for distribution to our town's homeless as part of holiday presents.

Currently we are working on a winter-hat-making project for the local women's shelter. The girls want to make three sets of hats: a set for infants, a set for toddlers, and a set for adults. When the students' knitting skills are advanced enough, they must hone their reading to understand the patterns, a new "window to the world" (AASL 2007, 2).

I am amazed at how quickly circle members produce items, how fast they soak up skills, and how proud

they are of their work. Their interest motivates them to learn more and become better learners. The process they are using can be applied to any activity or subject. In perfecting their skills at knitting, they use the wise old approach that my grandmother used to constantly chant, "Knit and rip!" When they see their stitches becoming uneven, or they knit the wrong stitch in a pattern for forming ribbings for their hats, they backtrack by unraveling to the point where they made the mistake and build back up with the correct pattern of stitches.

This kind of problem-solving approach to their mistakes through revision and attention to detail is a connection to the common belief that "inquiry provides a framework for learning" (AASL 2007, 2). And, as another Common Belief states, "the continuing expansion of information demands that all individuals acquire the thinking skills that will enable them to learn on their own" (AASL 2007, 3). The K4L group has grown to the point where members have gained control of a life skill that has not only helped to develop their higher-order thinking, but has also empowered them to help others.

One mother told me, "I am not going to buy another store-bought hat or scarf. I will patiently wait for my daughter to knit them!" When I heard those words, I experienced what Bobby McFerrin does when he improvises with his audiences using the pentatonic scale. Her statement not only validates the direction toward which I have geared my knitters, it also confirms that we have struck a common chord with the broader community.

For these knitters "learning has a social context" (AASL 2007, 3) not only because they are working and learning together to accomplish these projects, but because, through their efforts, they are able to make someone else's life better.

Sabrina Carnesi, a school librarian at Crittenden Middle School in Newport News (VA), is regional director for the Virginia Educational Media Association (VEMA), state coordinator for AASL's L4L, and AASL representative for AAUP and AASL/ALSC/YALSA Joint Committee on School/Public Library Cooperation. Raised by loving grandparents in northeast Arkansas, Sabrina learned to knit, crochet, sew, can food, make preserves, sing parlor songs, look for poke salad in the woods, and, as her grandfather would jokingly say, learn anything else that a person would need to survive in nineteenth-century America—traditions she lovingly passes on to her students.

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