



# TRIANNUAL

## T.O.P.I.C TALK & CURRICULUM CORNER EDITION

### World Reality: Middle School T.O.P.I.C Talks...

### TOGETHER-OFFERING- PERSONAL-INSIGHT- CONTEMPLATION

By: Joy Mullaney, Ph.D. and Diane Henderson

Coronavirus, Covid-19, “the Covid,” masks, testing, vaccinations, school is virtual, school is in-person, social pain, social injustice, riots, looting, fear, unknown, political climate, job loss, economic dive, hope in Christ? What a year! How do our middle schoolers cope? How do they process and talk about this?

This year, at the middle school level, faculty intentionally planned and facilitated discussions around such difficult realities. Middle school teachers agreed to create a safe

conversational environment for their students. The Illinois Social Emotional Learning Standards <https://www.isbe.net/Pages/Social-Emotional-Learning-Standards.aspx> include concepts that encompass recognition of feelings/perspectives of others, development of positive relationships with peers/adults, and communication (verbal/non-verbal) in positive ways regarding conflict. The use of these standards to rally around difficult conversations and structured protocols that required students to think critically about their topics, proved to engage students in conversations.

Recognizing the need for students to learn to discuss controversial topics in a safe environment, middle school teachers worked with their students using various educational strategies. The objective was to facilitate difficult

**The Mission of Immanuel Lutheran School is to partner with families to equip children for life-long learning and service through a rigorous academic program in a nurturing, Christ-centered environment.**

discussions among middle school students. How could middle schoolers discuss contentious events in a safe environment? Students discussed their insecurities through a Hopes and Fears educational protocol. Students wrote on Post-it Notes what they would hope to happen in a debatable discussion, and on the flip side, what they were fearful of. Post-it Notes were then categorized by the students.

Hope categories included:

- Everyone talks and expresses themselves.
- We all contribute.
- We don't fight.
- We learn from these conversations.
- We don't get judged because of our opinions.
- We learn from other perspectives.
- We get comfortable talking through big issues.

Fear categories, on the other hand included:

- I might lose my friends.
- I might get laughed at for my opinions.
- People won't notice me or respect my opinion.
- Topics may be too sensitive.
- People might judge me.

- Some classmates will talk too much, and others won't get to talk.
- Some topics, like Covid will have no solution.

With this information, students were able to develop the classroom norms (rules) for the upcoming conversations. Norms for conversations covered the hopes and fears, providing the safety and structure for TOPIC TALKS. Norms were written on classroom posters and reminded students the following:

- Listen to each other.
- Everyone gets a chance to share.
- Nobody will laugh or judge.
- We will stay on topic.
- Nobody will talk over each other.
- We will respect the opinions and ideas of others.
- Students are to discuss and not argue.
- Classmates were to exhibit self-control.
- Students are not to switch attention to themselves.

Using these norms, and sharing with the middle school team, Mrs. Henderson selected topics to discuss

strategically so to ease into more difficult conversations. Educational protocols from *Engage New York* were used as a resource to construct structures for conversations. ([https://www.engageny.org/sites/default/files/resource/attachments/appendix\\_protocols\\_and\\_resources.pdf](https://www.engageny.org/sites/default/files/resource/attachments/appendix_protocols_and_resources.pdf)). This resource includes the educational protocols which were carefully selected for structured conversations; the activities were facilitated by the middle school teachers.

One such protocol was *Building Background Knowledge* (Expeditionary Learning, 2013, p 6-7). The purpose of this activity was to get participants interested in a topic, recognize background knowledge and to become more informed about the topic. It fostered curiosity and heightened awareness. Using an article by the Chicago Tribune, and adapted by the Newsela staff, Mrs. Henderson introduced the Hands of Peace program run by the Glenview Community Church: <https://newsela.com/read/israelipalestinian-coexistence/id/4562/>.

She introduced this as a topic of conversation through the *Background Knowledge* protocol. The article was provided to all students to read; students wrote down their prior and

new knowledge of the text and coded as such. Other expert texts were shared, and the activity continued. The outcome allowed students to learn about the topic so that there was enough to engage in conversations. Teachers, again were the facilitators and were able to surround the talks with a Christian worldview.

Topics were generated from confidential student input; students, on Post-it Notes; wrote down everything that was bothering them, especially in the news. All Post-it Notes were compiled and categorized into common concerns. Remember, this was in the fall of 2020, national unrest and social pain was widely reported; additionally, natural disasters were present. Students came up with topics including school opening safely, Covid-19, emotional/physical health, weather, politics, economy, education, social media, injustice, and safety. As a group, students and teachers prioritized the topics to decide which topics were prevalent and most worthy of discussion. See figure 1.

Figure 1

*Example of Hopes and Fears Used in the Development of a Topic List*



*Note: Middle School teachers participated in a practice run of the Hopes and Fears protocol. They had Post-it Notes with their own hopes and fears. Together as a group they categorized the topics and defined the topics that would be easy for students to discuss and those that would be more difficult for students to engage in. Left to right: Topics in Figure 1 are Weather, Politics, Covid/School, Covid/Politics/Economy, Education, Social Media, Injustice, Safety, Covid Safety, Mental/Emotional Health.*

How did we help students cope? Teachers were able to assist with the processing of conversations with middle schoolers. With tough topics in hand, teachers were able to configure

powerful conversations to allow questions, explore answers, and talk intelligently and emotionally without being judged by their classmates. This was a tough year in many ways. For middle school it was necessary for our teachers to walk their students through processes to engage appropriately about the ills of world reality.

## Curriculum Corner

By: Ruth Crimmins

### **Accreditation**

As an ongoing pursuance towards excellence, the ILS faculty maintains National Lutheran School Accreditation (NLSA); this accreditation process is evidence-based and objective. An action plan has been put into place; we are addressing goals including clarifying our mission and vision, updating our volunteer policy, and starting a new family mentor program. The Board of Christian School has reviewed and revised the policy handbook and our teachers have worked on reviewing curriculum. We hold our NLSA Accreditation until August, 2024.

### **Science**

In the 2019-2020 school year, teachers looked at best practices in teaching science. They agreed to use the Next



Generation Science standards as the basis for our curriculum. The science curriculum guides were updated and teachers reviewed materials and textbooks. From K-5 Teachers are using Mystery Science as a resource, as well as STEM activities. The 5<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> grade science teacher has secured materials from Generation Genius, Mystery Science, as well as textbooks and other resources. Teachers collaborated with each other to ensure scientific skills are introduced and built upon as student's progress through the grades.

### **Social Studies**

This past school year, the teachers evaluated the social studies curriculum and looked at best practices in social studies. A recommendation was presented to Board of Christian School to purchase new textbooks and curriculum for all grades for next school year.

### **Future Focus**

We are also working on the physical education curriculum this year and in the coming years, we will review math, language arts, health/social emotional, Spanish and religion.

### **Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE)**

In addition to National Lutheran School Accreditation, our administration also maintains recognition with the Illinois State Board of Education. We submit all the necessary reports and the application and then a site visit is scheduled every five years. After the site visit, a report is sent with results. If there are any compliance issues, we have 30 days to resolve these. Once recognition is awarded, a Letter of Recognition is issued by the State Superintendent of Education.



## Map Testing

Another tool our teachers use to evaluate curriculum and student learning is the MAP tests. MAP stands for Measures of Academic Progress; it measures student growth. Map tests are given three times a year – fall, winter, and spring. Grades 1 and 2 take the reading and math tests, Grades 3-8 take the reading, math and language usage test and Kindergarten takes the reading and math test only in the spring.

We use these tests to check for student growth and then determine what the class is ready to learn next as well as what differentiation strategies we need to use for individual students. This data has been especially helpful as we look at the effects of remote learning last spring. As we started this school year, experts were predicting there would be a decline in test scores. In our fall testing, we did not see a huge decline - many of our students stayed the same and several did improve.

After looking at the winter and spring scores, the results show that over 75% of our students in Grades 3-8 are performing at or above the norm

grade level score on all three tests (math, reading and language usage) and over 50% are performing at or above the 70% percentile rank. This means that over half of our students are scoring higher than 70% of all students who take the test.

In our end of the year meetings, teachers analyzed these scores to see if there are areas in the curriculum that we need to strengthen. As we begin the new school year, we will continue to collaborate on ways to adapt and modify our curriculum to meet the needs of our students. It was determined and supported by the MAP scores that in-person learning is more effective than remote learning.