Michael Middleton

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One of the first things that strikes you about Mike Middleton isn’t how much he knows—but how much he asks. That’s especially so when you consider his credentials: middle school, high school, and alternative school teacher; nationally-recognized education researcher and author; and academic positions at major universities.

Still, every day, Middleton wonders, “What motivates kids to learn? How do you know which approaches work best, and for which kids? How do you keep everyone in a diverse class motivated and participating?” Middleton’s fascination with these fundamental questions drives his research into educational motivation. It also inspires his students here, and long after they graduate.

“My evolution as a teacher parallels my evolution as a learner,” says Middleton, who joined UNH in 2001. “Some people say that good teachers are born to teach, but I would say that’s not necessarily true. It takes a lot of time and hard work to develop the expertise to teach effectively.”

Middleton’s students consistently give him the highest ratings, whether they are taking a first-year Discovery Program course, working in a master’s-level teaching internship at a public school, or tackling Middleton’s doctoral-level seminar on advanced psychology of human learning. One typical review summed it simply: “Mike is fabulous. Best instructor I have ever had.”

Middleton became interested in motivation when he landed his first job: teaching math at an alternative high school. Many of his students came to the school with a host of problems—and a fragile sense of their own ability to learn and achieve.

“The hardest challenge educators face is changing a child’s belief in their ability to learn,” says Middleton, who earned a combined PhD in education and psychology.

Recently elected chairperson of the Department of Education, Middleton is now researching the motivation issues faced by students from rural and indigenous cultures in New Hampshire, North Dakota, Belize, and Taiwan. He and his colleague Eleanor Abrams are particularly interested in how teaching techniques might be adapted to encourage science education among such populations. This fall, they will collaborate across campus to bring a regional conference on indigenous education to UNH.

—Jim Graham