

Oral History: Ronald L. Culbertson

Faculty 1973 – 2009

Head of Middle School 1986 – 2009

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Interviewed by Nancy Gilpin

Culbertson Discusses the Middle School's Talk Program

Culbertson: I really believe that's a great example of a program that is a perfect fit for middle school-aged boys. It began in 1976–77. Mr. Killebrew—I think that was his first year—and he asked Chip Tompkins to go up to a school in New Jersey. They were doing a program that involved a small group of kids talking about issues for middle schoolers. And that program was called Talk, and that's how we got the name for that program. Chip came back with all kinds of notes and together a group of us put together a curriculum for seventh graders. And perhaps that's why the program actually was—it was Talk Two, as in number two, since the seventh grade was the second year in the Middle School as well as the, obviously, the pun on the t-o as if we were talking to kids. So it was a seventh grade program.

In those days, most of our new students were seventh graders. There were very few new sixth graders, no new eighth graders. Almost all the new children were in the seventh grade. That's because sixth grade was usually the last year in elementary school. So, we received approximately forty new seventh graders joining the then-fifty sixth graders we had. We always had tensions between the new kids and the returning kids. So, we decided that seventh grade was a great place to put Talk.

The program involved talking about issues that middle schoolers—middle school boys—needed to talk about: everything from community building, to prejudice, discrimination, sexuality, gender education, and drug and alcohol education. We designed Talk to be in half-class-sized groups, so groups of seven or eight boys with a teacher, all year long. Usually, the boys developed a rapport, a relationship that made Talk class a safe place to have those conversations.

Interestingly enough, in the early 80s and through the 80s, most middle schools around the country started to develop advisory programs. We had always had an advisory program; that was one of the things Upper School had given us and we had incorporated into our program. Our advisory programs were cross-graded and they still are, the same way the high school advisories are. I think it's a brilliant idea because it allows the advisor to stay with the youngster all through his middle school career. It's fabulous that way; it's tremendous in terms of building relationships between parents, kids, and the advisor. But, because it was cross-graded, it didn't give us a good place to do the kinds of activities that were part of Talk. It wouldn't have worked. So it's great because we had this advisory program, which is also small groups, and now we have another place for conversation to happen, another adult that was going to be with the kid in a safe environment, talking about important issues with kids.

And so it was very shortly after that that the structure in the neighborhoods and the school systems changed; elementary school became fifth grade as their last year. Our admissions went from forty seventh graders to forty sixth graders coming in, and very quickly we expanded the Talk program to be included in all three grade levels. Now we have Talk One, Talk Two, and Talk Three, and they're still done the same way: small groups of kids, with an adult, all year long, that are talking about important issues with kids. It's not a fluff program, I don't believe at all. It's not a program that just sort of discussion—it's actually design units, design workshops involving different activities with kids that need to be addressed with them, that would never be addressed in your math class, or your science class, or your language arts class.

The cool part about Talk is that half the Middle School faculty is involved in that program. Talk teachers are math teachers, foreign language teachers, science teachers, history teachers, language arts teachers. Kids see that the kinds of things we talk about in Talk go way beyond lines of curriculum, way beyond what you do in the math classroom, because now your math teacher could be your Talk teacher. And it says, these things go way beyond the importance of what's happening in academics, that what we're doing in here is so important that we've got people from every area involved. Over half the staff is involved in teaching a Talk class at some point.