How would you briefly describe your general philosophy about young learners and language learning?

MH: Young learners should be taught as young learners. Their teachers should be able (and willing) to act like them, and recreate reality in the classroom on their terms. This is why I have always believed that the best teachers of English are not those who speak English better, but those who are more creative and imaginative, not to mention dedicated.

We have never seen a child just sitting quietly for long periods of time, so why would we design teaching activities that settle for having them “just sitting there?” Young learners are full of ideas, needs, opinions and interests, and any experienced teacher knows they are willing to share! Everything that is meant to happen in the classroom should be centered on those variables, driven toward the topics and themes of the curriculum. Students should learn English by building concepts based on what they want to say about the topic at hand, with their teachers as facilitators to help them cross the bridge from what they can say to what they want to say. Prior knowledge and our choice of themes are crucial, as that bridge can only be of a certain length, and come from certain places.

Young learners should always be busy thinking, doing and sharing what they have done or what they think. Therefore, lesson plans should go beyond content and book-based activities, and include interventions that highlight critical thinking, learning strategies, and the use of a wealth of materials, as well as technology components, all matching what currently appeals to the young learner’s age group.
It is well known that one of your core beliefs about English language learning and teaching is that of constructing meaning through interaction in social contexts. How has that developed or changed over the course of your career?

MH: Very interesting question! The only way we can say that students have actually learned English is if they can construct meaningful concepts. In order for their language to be meaningful, it must emanate from a natural situation, mostly associated in ELT with social interaction and social contexts. This social interaction has evolved, though. In recent years we not only have designed curriculum for students to be able to express themselves via oral and written communication, but oral and written “presentations” as well.

What this means is that today we can’t settle for them to just be able to communicate with others as they engage in conversations or share what they’ve written. We must also target students’ abilities to stand in front of their peers and others, and to deliver their production. This can be done either as the result of presenting a project or a report, or supporting a finding or opinion. The latter is totally connected to emotional awareness, which completes cognitive processes and physical reactions, forming what we know as an integral process. Constructivism at its best, which would make Piaget and his disciples proud!

What do you think are some of the things that have made Backpack and Backpack Gold so successful?

MH: It’s precisely because of the integral process I mention above. Backpack and Backpack Gold have a perfect balance of physical, cognitive and emotional dimensions. The fact that students are always busy doing and saying things “about themselves,” either because they are expressing their thoughts about something, or because they are impregnating facts with their reactions, issues with their feelings, and giving their touch to physical and creative activities, gives the process a personalized edge.

In Backpack, students have questions and answers to ponder, not just to remember. They have multiple opportunities for insights into how English works, leading them not to rules and memorization, but to think about how the language flows the way it does, and why. Students have both literature and content texts that allow them to feel good about how their knowledge of English permeates their regular class activities... an emotional must. Also, Backpack provides students with hands-on experiences that lead to communicating in English in a natural way. It showcases projects and activities that must be presented, games that involve discussion, assessment journals that give students emotional awareness....the list is endless!

Of course, if you add the fact that Pearson Longman has given the Backpack brand a flagship status, you get the most solid program every published for young learners. There is no component that the series doesn't have, and there is no academic service that isn't being provided. From story books to content readers, from stickers to cutouts, from grammar to sound and spelling handbooks, from digital technology to test generators, from teacher training to comprehensive companion websites... it’s all there!
**What features of Backpack do teachers seem to like best?**

MH: The series has already made history in the teaching of English to children. A Backpack teacher develops special skills. Through the years, it seems like a special caste of teachers evolved from Backpack and its predecessors, Parade and New Parade. I had always wondered what made Backpack teachers’ number 1 choice in the world, so I started asking. I got all kinds of answers, but most teachers mention the updated methodology, the sleek and plentiful component list, and how students enjoy their classes because they are always busy and learn in a motivating, fun way. When pressed to choose, though, many favor the project section and the pullout storybooks and magazines, but those teaching the youngest kids get a kick out of the cutouts, stickers and music… they can’t get enough!

**You visit schools and teachers in so many different countries around the world every year. What are some of the similarities and differences that you see in the ELT community in different regions?**

MH: Next time you hear that the world is getting smaller, believe it. When I started traveling around, I noticed tremendous differences in the approach that teachers gave to their lessons, and in their understanding of the teaching process. I even had to prepare different workshops to address local views and pedagogical perspectives. That’s practically gone. Although teachers around the world maintain differences at a certain level, when approaching the teaching process they now all share basic needs and interests.

In the past, while some teachers in Asia asked for more emphasis on vocabulary and grammar, others in Latin America wanted more songs and literacy. While teachers in the Middle East were sensitive to illustrations and character roles, those in Europe and North America wanted more content. Today, the common denominator spirals around phonics, content, certification, values and technology. To Backpack’s benefit, they all know a good method when they see one.

**There seems to be a big trend toward the incorporation of technology in schools all over the world. How does the Backpack series address this? How does technology enhance language learning?**

MH: Just as I mentioned above, practically everybody is now technology oriented. In some countries, even public schools have whiteboards, not to mention computer labs. Obviously the world’s leading series could not take a back seat when it came to incorporating technology into the curriculum. Backpack addresses this issue in a very thorough way. Although liked and demanded, CD-ROMs don’t impress anybody anymore. Now we are talking about digital technology to teach with the tip of our fingers. It still amazes me how one single fragile CD can hold every single page, sound byte and video of a whole level, plus bonus picture cards and other “beauties.” No more pointing at our distant Teacher’s Guide in front of our classes. Now we can enlarge images, start a video clip, highlight text, and sing along at the same time, its all at the tip of our fingers!

Of course, teachers also need technology behind the curtains, so test preparation with our incredible Test Generator, and downloading fun activities from our website, are just some of the extra perks teachers get and love. Technology is here to stay because it has proven itself useful to keep students motivated, allows classroom settings to catch up a bit with real life outside our schools, and helps obtain better academic results.
overall; not to mention the tremendous improvements made in administrating the process with interventions such as online platforms that allow homework and test grading, home-school connections, lesson plan and material deliveries, etc.

**So many teachers mention that one of the biggest challenges in the ELT classroom is assessment. How does Backpack support teachers in assessing language learning?**

MH: Today assessment is a very big challenge indeed, but we knew that ahead of time through our research, and prepared in advance. One of the reasons why Backpack leads the pack when it comes to assessment is because it addresses it in a holistic way. We know that it is not merely evaluation, but rather a consolidation process for students to review, confirm concepts, show what they know, and feel good about it. Learning a language is always a challenge, as the learner faces something foreign without feeling secure. The younger we human beings are, the more emotional we are in regard to motivation and success. With children, we need elements to reward and empower students emotionally. Holistic assessment allows it. Backpack has ongoing assessment, but highlights it in three processes that take place at the end of each unit. On one hand, we assess everything linguistic, either through review pages or testing items. On another, we assess oral communication and oral presentation skills. But because we end our units by having students playing communication games, and by being aware of their achievements (through journal activities,) then we also obtain the emotional impulse that feeling good represents. Students know they know and therefore feel rewarded and motivated to keep going.