

The School and the Child and the Child in the School

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Debra Eckerman Pitton

Middle school students are still open to new ideas, still undecided about who they are and what they will ultimately be, thereby creating a wonderful opportunity for teachers to be a part of their journey into adulthood.

Sitting in a meeting with a group of teachers who were discussing plans for the conversion of their district's junior high into a new middle school, I overheard one 8th grade teacher say, "I don't know about expecting all of this interdisciplinary teaching stuff and flexible scheduling to really make a difference. It was so much easier back a few years ago ... the kids listened to you and did what you asked. Now it seems that the kids don't care, they don't do the work, or they just aren't as capable. There is so much need for discipline and ..."

One of the administrators cut her off. "The kids who come in our doors are the kids we need to teach. The parents aren't keeping all the good ones at home. We have to find ways to meet students' needs, whatever they are, not pine for the 'good old days.' Yes, students are different today; our society has changed. With technology and the impact of the media, very little is the way it was 10 or 15 years ago, so why would you expect the students to remain the same?"

Unconvinced, the teacher just shook her head. I listened to the rest of the discussion, but thought for a long time about those comments. I am aware of the challenges involved in the process of moving a junior high towards a middle school philosophy, yet I wondered why this was so. I wondered if the difficulty of embracing a middle school approach was related to this perception that kids today are somehow not as capable and bright as their predecessors.

WHO ARE THE STUDENTS IN OUR SCHOOLS?

Behind all of the concepts espoused by middle level philosophy lies the premise that we need a different structure for children of this age because they are developmentally different from elementary and high school students. If teachers do not recognize the impact of these developmental differences, then they will not be able to respond accordingly. Eccles, Lord, Roeser, Barber, & Josefowicz (1996) state that middle school students require different types of educational environments in order to meet each individual's developmental needs at that particular time, as well as to help them continue to develop. Students at this transitional period, between grade school and high school, need schools and classrooms that help them move through this period of adjustment.

If we know that students of this age need teaching and classroom interactions that provide them with meaning and address their developmental issues, why do many middle school classrooms still reflect a teacher focused, content directed, autocratic approach? Perhaps it is because we, as educators, have not been willing to give any real credence to the insights provided by developmental theory. As adults, we know that we work harder on things we enjoy, we learn more when we choose to do something and are involved in the decision making, and we strive to do our work well when it



means something to us. Yet when we face a classroom full of young adolescents, it is easy to pull rank and dictate what we think is important, what we think is relevant and meaningful. Why is it so easy to tell young people what to do rather than to ask them?

As adults, most of us would never think of forcing another individual to follow our directives. We ask for input, we work in committees, we gather multiple perspectives and we build consensus. Even without reviewing the research on group dynamics (Johnson & Johnson, 1991), adults are aware that a higher quality work product is produced when individuals have a say in what is completed and how it is accomplished. At least here in the United States, it is a commonly held belief that if someone has a voice in a decision they are more likely to support it. Our democratic society demands active participation in making decisions that affect us as individuals. As research into group interaction and the effects of group participation identifies, being a part of group decision-making, rather than being dictated to, results in a more productive worker (or learner) and a higher quality product (Johnson, 1990; Johnson & Johnson, 1991). Well intentioned adults strive to positively interact and give everyone a voice in our communities, in the work place, and in government. So why does this not occur in many classrooms, when our purpose is to develop future citizens?

Perhaps teachers find a classroom of hormonally charged young people innately threatening, so keeping control becomes paramount. We know that all of the changes young people are going through at this time creates anxiety and often confusion and hostility. It is scary to think about unleashing all of that emotional energy in a classroom. It feels more comfortable to keep things under control, to manage all aspects of the classroom. Middle school philosophy suggests that teachers give up much of that control and begin to work with their students as they would other adults. This is asking for change that is too much for many teachers to handle. They are moving out of their comfort zones if they let go of their control of the curriculum and ask students what they would like to learn. Teachers let go of their control if they ask other teachers with differing perspectives to share in the development of curriculum. They let go of their control when they have to teach in areas that stretch them beyond current levels of knowledge and preparation. Finally, they let go of their control if they give the students opportunities to express themselves freely.

Structural changes such as teaming, flexible schedules, exploratory options, interdisciplinary curriculum, and advisory groups have been identified as critical elements in creating a supportive learning environment for middle schoolers. However, several studies indicate that teachers may need to adjust the way they interact with their students for these changes to be effective. Eccles and Midgley, (1989); and Eccles, Midgley, Buchanan, Wigfield, Reuman and Mac Iver, (1993), identified that despite awareness of the physical, social, emotional and cognitive changes occurring in young people, classrooms for students between the ages 10-14 often reflect strong teacher centered control and emphasis on discipline along with limited input from students in the way the class is run. Decisions about curriculum and learning opportunities are most often left solely to the teachers. Eccles and Wigfield (1997) refer to Mac Iver and Reuman's (1988) work which concluded that this mismatch between the emerging adolescent's need for self-management and the opportunities provided for them in the classroom results in the students' lack of motivation and interest in school. These studies point out that for many young adolescents there seems to be no purpose to being in school, nor any feeling that they are being allowed to develop and have a voice. Therefore, they choose to act out.



Middle school students are at the crossroads in their educational development, and for many, the sense that there is no purpose to their schooling creates a feeling of apathy and disinterest. This can result in failure or dropping out of school altogether. Teachers must recognize that adolescent changes cannot be downplayed. The incorporation of student choice and proactive accommodation for the young adolescents' myriad physical, emotional and social stresses must be included in every classroom. While many educators can recite a litany of young adolescent needs, their own reactions to the adolescents' push for independence and self-determination is often to try to squash the emerging sense of self with control and directives. It is easier to try and control the tensions and emotional ups and downs among students than to try and help them learn to deal with such issues. It often feels more comfortable for teachers to keep a tight hold on the reigns in their classrooms, yet it is only through the sharing of decision making that students will feel invited into the learning process. Extending an invitation to students to join in the educational process says that the teacher values them as individuals.

CHANGING PERCEPTIONS

Just as we know middle school students are going through an adjustment period and that they need support to accomplish a successful transition to adulthood, so too do teachers moving into a middle school concept need support as they move into a new dimension of teaching. Teacher preparation programs must provide more emphasis on the links between adolescent development and best practice in the classroom. However, McEwin and Dickinson (1995) reported that many issues, such as lack of program availability, interest, teacher resistance, and a dearth of advocates for the middle level concept has prevented widespread implementation of specialized middle school teacher preparation. Thus there are too few teachers who have studied to any extent the needs of young adolescents or the appropriate educational responses to those needs.

Atwell, noted middle school writing teacher, described an epiphany she experienced after working with a student who did not follow her prescribed writing program. Atwell wrestled with ideas from experts who suggested that she needed to let go of her extensive writing curriculum. At first she resisted, but after observing her students at work, she stated, "I saw that my creation (the curriculum) manipulated kids. ... Students either found ways to make sense of, or peace with, the language arts curriculum, or they failed the course." (Atwell, 1998, p.4.). Here was a teacher who had created a very thoughtful, detailed curriculum, and who struggled to identify what would make her teaching better. "I rationalized ... what I needed were even more creative, more open topics (for writing). ... I needed better students-kids who consistently made my assignments their own, ... who came to me prepared by their teachers to write well. I needed better colleagues." (Atwell, 1998, p.11).

I find it interesting that Atwell also complained about the students and felt that if only somehow the kids were different and their prior classrooms were more effective—she would be successful, just like the teacher in the planning meeting mentioned at the beginning of this article. The fact was that Atwell needed to change, just as many teachers have to change before they can truly help middle school students learn. Atwell went on to say "I didn't know how to share responsibility with my students and I wasn't too sure I wanted to. I liked the vantage of my big desk. I liked being creative, setting topic and pace ... taking charge. Wasn't that my job? If responsibility for their writing shifted to my students, what would I do?" (Atwell, 1998, p. 13).



Atwell articulated the unspoken fear that many educators hold—what will my role be if I no longer dictate every move in the classroom? We know what the research says about development and the needs of students. As teachers, we have to change our selves to be able to create classrooms and schools where students can learn. We need to let go of the image of what teachers used to do and what we *thought* kids were like. Our society has changed, and those kids who, as Atwell said, “didn’t make peace with the curriculum,” who used to leave school or fail, can no longer be ignored or pushed out. Society is demanding that all students be given the opportunity to learn. Standards are being set, and the expectation is that teachers can and must help students learn.

It is not easy to let go of the tightly held beliefs about teaching that shape educators’ perceptions about their role and responsibilities in a classroom. However, we cannot close our eyes to what we now know about how students learn. We need to overcome our fears about giving students a voice in their own learning if we want to enable all students to reach their potential.

BECOMING RESPONSIVE TO YOUNG ADOLESCENTS’ NEEDS

Specifically, what can teachers do to move out from behind the desk and work with the students to develop appropriate educational experiences? The answer has always been out there—in the concepts proposed by the middle school model. Two primary areas to start with are the advisory program and the curriculum.

In their 25-year perspective on middle schools, McEwin, Dickinson, and Jenkins (1996) described research on the implementation of the middle school concept which indicated that teacher-based guidance programs had declined slightly from 1988 to 1993. For advisory programs that were in place, there seemed to be an increase of time allotted to them, although there was some question as to what was occurring during those advisory times. Again, lip service to the concepts of supporting young adolescent needs and creating strong connections between caring adults and adolescents seems to be the common experience. Advisory is a foreign experience for many teachers, and McEwin, Dickinson, and Jenkins’ work confirmed that teachers are often opposed to this role. Lack of preparation heightens teachers’ feelings of inadequacy when leading advisory activities, discussions, and lessons.

Teaching, which addresses new ideas, knowledge, and competencies that students need to develop into adulthood, is not static. Any job that makes one stretch into areas that are uncomfortable has the potential to make them a better person as they rise to meet the new challenges. Teachers will benefit from meeting this challenge.

So what should advisory look like? It is not a good option to simply use advisory time for a study hall or revert to an administrative home room model. Students at this age need opportunities to talk about issues they are concerned about, they need to feel a sense of belonging, and they need to connect with an adult who cares. If teachers view their students as emerging adults and acknowledge the needs and concerns of young adolescents, then it makes sense that the teacher’s role must also include facilitating opportunities for student discussion and skill building in the social and emotional areas. All of these things happen in a well developed and carefully facilitated advisory program.



Once middle school teachers have embraced the effective use of advisory programs to support their students, the other area where educators need to let go of their preconceived images of middle school students is in the area of curriculum. There are two important shifts that need to occur: Content has to connect to the lives of the students in order to be meaningful, and students need to have some voice in the decisions about what they will learn.

Inviting students to share in curriculum decision making is another difficult step for teachers. Atwell (1998), describing what she had learned about curriculum for young adolescents, stated "Learning is more likely to happen when students like what they are doing. Learning is also more likely when students can be involved and active and when they can learn from and with other students" (p. 69).

MAKING CONNECTIONS

Giving the students a voice in deciding what they learn is only part of the curriculum shift that must happen in middle school classrooms. Interdisciplinary or integrated curriculum is another way to make the learning meaningful, but it is another middle school concept that teachers often resist. Brazee (1995) stated, "While there are numerous arguments for an integrated curriculum, perhaps the most compelling one is that an integrated curriculum best addresses the unique needs of young adolescents, yet it is the least developed in practice" (p. 16). Another curriculum expert, Beane (1995), added "Curriculum integration begins with real-life problems as themes, proceeds according to the organic integration of knowledge and serves the purpose of enhancing self and world meaning" (p. 28). George, Stevenson, Thomason, and Beane (1992) suggested that middle school curriculum needs to begin by seeking out answers to young adolescent's concerns about their world, and that teachers must discuss this with their students as a part of curriculum planning. This is very different from the traditional curriculum developed and implemented by most teachers. However, while it may "hook" students and excite them about learning, it is a scary step for many teachers.

Many of us are fearful of going somewhere where we have not been before. Descriptions of appropriate middle school curriculum suggest major shifts from the way teachers have developed their lessons in the past. "The definition of who is learning in the school should be expanded to include teachers and other adults. ... Adults cannot simply provide answers to powerful questions, but must seek them along with young people" (George, Stevenson, Thomason, & Beane, 1992, p. 97). This echoes what Atwell proposed: that we must be involved with our students in their learning. But if a teacher does not have everything all lined up and ready to go in the classroom because she wants to ask students for their input, then there are many opportunities for the teacher to "lose control." This is the heart of many teachers' fears: that the students will overwhelm them with their voices and energy and the teacher will lose control in the classroom.

Teaming provides an answer—holding hands and going together makes the process more comfortable. Teachers who are developing new curricula and seeking connections to provide adolescents with relevant learning experiences cannot make this change overnight. Working together they can structure class discussions on curriculum development to allow for student voice and yet maintain a focus. School systems should provide scheduling that supports teaming and does not undermine efforts to link content and help students make sense of the curriculum.



Teachers who struggle to let go of the control they traditionally have held over the curriculum and to shift their view of young adolescent learners need support. This support must come from school districts in the form of money and time. McEwin, Dickinson, and Jenkins state that the “lack of money to support two prep times for development of team teacher project(s) and no common planning time for teachers” (1996, p. 107) are major obstacles to the implementation of middle school concepts. Teachers need to discuss and reflect with their colleagues about their fears and frustrations as they work to move their classroom interactions in a new direction. Two prep periods give teachers time to plan for their own classes but also provide valuable interaction time for colleagues during team planning time. Common planning time underpins the concept of teaming and provides the opportunity for personal interactions that must be provided to teachers before they can model it for their students. Interdisciplinary curriculum cannot be generated and coordinated if the teachers involved never have a chance to talk. Districts that provide the financial means to support two prep times for faculty teams are doing their part to help teachers implement middle level concepts.

SUPPORT FOR CHANGE

With all that we know about young adolescents, why is it that despite 25 years of discussion and study on the positive effects of middle schools, some districts still refuse to provide the resources that will enable students’ needs to be met? A longitudinal study of middle schools involved in comprehensive school transformation identified that there was higher achievement by students in schools with high levels of implementation of the middle school concept (Felner, Jackson, Kasak, Mulhall, Brand, & Flowers, 1997). More than 15,000 students were involved in this study which showed increased levels of achievement in reading, mathematics, and language arts. The implication from this study is clear: Young people in schools that implemented middle school concepts at a high level “achieve at a higher level academically than those in non-implemented schools and substantially better than those in partially implemented schools” (Felner, et. al., 1997, p. 544).

Research such as this should not be ignored. We need to disseminate what we know about middle school teaching and learning so parents, teachers, and administrators are as aware of the best practices for middle schools as they are with medical research. As Felner’s study indicated, the more comprehensive the implementation of middle school concepts, such as those in *Turning Points* (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1989), the better the results for students. Indeed, “the presence or absence of a particular element of the program may affect the levels of implementation of other components.” (Felner, et. al., 1997, p. 543.) Middle schools and middle school teachers should not pick and choose which of the middle level components they want to use. All of the elements need to be present, especially those difficult for teachers to embrace—advisory and student centered curriculum. Time and money for teacher development and interaction are crucial to the effective implementation of all of the middle level concepts. Parents need to be informed that schools cannot simply consider what is efficient, but must find the resources to implement what is good for young people. Referendums that provide money to fund the operation of middle schools must be supported. In addition, those responsible for educational funding in our state governments need to be informed about the components of effective middle schools and their positive impact on young adolescents’ educational experiences.



MAKING A DIFFERENCE

For students to be supported in their middle school years, for them to be a part of the school, teachers need to be supported by district funding so they have the time, money, and other resources to develop their understandings of teaming, curriculum, and student centered learning. However, in describing barriers that can impede the movement towards implementation of middle school concepts, Lipsitz, Mizell, Jackson, and Austin (1997) stated that “A lack of individual will to persevere despite formidable obstacles has been the most persistent, albeit understandable, barrier to school reform.” (1997, p. 539). Ultimately, teachers must let go of their old perceptions of young adolescents, learn to enjoy and appreciate their students as young adults, and allow themselves to learn how to work in teams to implement concepts such as advisory and student centered curriculum.

Middle school students are still open to new ideas, still searching for answers and undecided about who they are and what they will ultimately be. This creates a wonderful opportunity for teachers to be a part of their journey into adulthood. But as with all adults, we cannot force the learning process, we must invite the students to join us on the journey. The children who are in our middle schools today are the best we have. There are none of those “perfect children” hidden away somewhere waiting for teachers to fill their heads with knowledge. Students today are a part of a world that is active, mobile, and ever-changing. We need to change our perception of students and help them deal with the issues they will have to face as adults.

This will only happen when we bring the child into our school, into our classroom, and make the school a place that reveals their world. Middle schools will never reach their potential until the human element, the teachers, stretch themselves and learn to focus on the students. Franklin D. Roosevelt once said “we have nothing to fear but fear itself”—a great quote for a middle school teacher. We cannot fear going forward, changing our world view, and inviting young adolescent learners into the classroom as partners. Through teacher commitment in the areas of advisory and student centered curriculum, coupled with district support, middle level classrooms can provide a meaningful learning experience for every child in the school.

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Debra Eckerman Pitton is an associate professor of education at Gustavus Adolphus College, St. Peter, Minnesota. E-mail: dpitton@gustavus.edu

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