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## Improving instruction in middle level education

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### Abstract

This paper deals with changing the American middle-level education system and covers three facets: The first deals with problems in teacher preparation programs. A second facet is recognizing certain characteristics and needs of young adolescents. The last covers interdisciplinary teams for the middle school programs.

# IMPROVING INSTRUCTION IN MIDDLE LEVEL EDUCATION

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Richard Elvin Clipperton

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This paper deals with changing the American middle-level education system and covers three facets: The first deals with problems in teacher preparation programs. A second facet is recognizing certain characteristics and needs of young adolescents. The last covers interdisciplinary teams for the middle school programs.

Researchers have been writing increasingly about the American middle school, one of the most interesting and challenging areas within the educational system. Teachers in the middle school are faced with the problem of providing a secure and safe climate for young adolescents and meeting their special needs. These young adolescents have been described as lonely and vulnerable, unique and often overlooked (Konopka 1973). They require understanding and an awareness of their special characteristics and their physical, social, emotional, and intellectual needs. Teacher preparation institutions and certification agencies have been unfortunately slow to establish specialized middle level programs (Alexander & McEwin, 1986).

Alexander and McEwin (1984) found that middle level educators have not been trained to recognize the unique characteristics and needs of the preadolescent. Additional practices are needed to aid new teachers to become part of a specifically educated group committed to middle level education through appropriate teacher preparation and certification programs. Middle school teachers need a strong program that will help prepare them for middle level education, yet the majority of teachers in today's middle level schools have had no training for teaching at this level, let alone middle level university courses (Valentine, Clark, Nickerson, & Keefe, 1981). McEwin and Allen (1983) also found that state departments of education usually waited until teacher education institutions established middle level teacher education programs before initiating corresponding certification program requirements. A cooperative effort toward reforming certification programs must come from teachers, educators, state departments, professional associations, and school officials (George, McMillian, Malinka & Pumerantz, 1975.)

In noting that special certification is tied to established middle-level teacher education programs, Alexander and McEwin (1982) reported that of the 162 institutions studied, 130 with middle level teacher preparation programs were located in states having special middle level teacher certification. It is important to note at this point that Alexander and McEwin (1984) suggested that at least the following four components are essential for dealing with middle school students: The first is a study of middle level learners, that is of preadolescents and early adolescents; at least two areas of academic concentration in addition to a comprehensive general education; curriculum and instruction focused at the middle level; and early and continuing field experience in a middle level school.

Woven throughout special certification programs must be a special emphasis on these unique aspects of adolescents which have particular significance, for Travers and Sacks (1989) found that professional preparation received at institutions must be increased along with student teaching experiences. For example,

middle level instructors should gain additional training in two areas of specialization, one in English and the second in social studies. This step is designed to give future instructors a variety of teaching strategies, along with skill in working with young adolescents. A greater understanding of the physical, social, emotional and intellectual needs and characteristics of the middle level student is emphasized throughout this approach (Roth 1989).

Merenbloom (1984) suggested that the middle school staff should be involved with planning on-the-job training dealing with these unique physical, social, emotional and intellectual needs. A rule of thumb, according to Alexander and George (1981), is to spend 90 percent of available training funds after staff inservicing and 10 percent before.

The recent growth in statewide instructional management and curriculum development has recently started holding programs accountable for the amount of learning taking place in the classrooms, a development with special implications for middle-level institutions. Henson and Saterfield (1985) studied the accountability factors that

forced many instructors at that level to become directly involved in the total school curriculum. They believe a curriculum should have classroom activities that are planned and coordinated with class goals and objectives. They believe this will create a cadre of middle level educators who will become experimenters, experts at changing adolescent learning and thinking skills, as well as exhibiting a commitment to the middle level student, all of which should ease the problems connected with the renewed accountability movement.

A middle school consists of the program and organizational arrangements for pupils who are no longer children and not quite adolescents. Alexander and McEwin (1983) found that a middle level school must provide a planned program for a range of older children, preadolescents, and early adolescents that builds upon the school for earlier childhood and is linked to, but different from, the school for adolescence. A middle school should have pupils ranging in age from 11 through 14, and include grades 6 through 8. That is an organized system that recognizes the biological maturation and characteristics associated with

this age group (Williams 1968). The building must be organized into specific areas for each grade level. This arrangement should put sixth, seventh, and eighth-graders in close proximity. A student will remain in this setting for all three years, growing and building close relationships with other students and teachers (MacIver 1990). Middle-school students should then be grouped according to their ability level by an interdisciplinary team. This new approach has the adolescent's self-esteem and physical development in mind (Alexander and McEwin 1986).

This pattern of organization of a middle school is clearly not the only factor in establishing a quality program designed to serve the needs of preadolescents and early-adolescents, but is very important. A middle level school, grades six, seven, and eight, must have a flexible organizational pattern that will allow creative time scheduling, grouping, and individual assignments or projects.

Exploration will cover such areas as art, business education, foreign language, music, home economics, physical education, and industrial education, allowing students to experience a

variety of classes. This exploration program allows each student personal growth and the opportunity to develop a special interest or talent during that growth. This approach will take advantage of the personal talents and training of staff members. An individual team member may use time on a project in which students learn how to print iron-on images from a computer class. Another team member from the music department might have the students create a musical score that would be combined with a social studies class creating a video for a class play. The day would be repeated with these opportunities allowing middle level learners to be active. The key is to recognize that interdisciplinary teams may cross into any subject area, thus using all members' talent.

Based on a study of the activities and teaching strategies in more than 1,000 classrooms, Goodlad (1983) concluded that a major portion of class time was spent in giving and correcting assignments, lecturing, and written assignments. This composite instructional picture is one of the teacher talking and monitoring seatwork, but the student is not engaged in active

thinking. Goodlad (1983) and Alexander & George (1981) dealt with the premise that middle level students should be active learners. Both authors stressed proper adolescent learning has great potential to produce thinkers. A change in vision about educating young adolescents to this end must start with the middle level student and must emphasize active learner roles for this student. A strong emphasis should be placed upon the young adolescent's self-esteem. This need must start with the sixth graders who are entering the system and the eighth graders who are leaving. Meeting the young adolescent's needs will increase self-esteem, and have a tremendous impact upon this age group. This concept of a transition stage allows the sixth graders a transitional year, the seventh graders a year to become comfortable, and the eighth graders an opportunity to become involved and take the role of leaders of the school. This three-stage program allows each group one full year for developing its self-esteem and adjusting to, and benefiting from, the middle school (Henson 1986).

The first integration stage deals with the sixth grade transition year. This phase must deal

with preparation for new and different experiences. This stage allows a middle level school to focus on a more gradual program and procedures to prepare students for new responsibilities and curriculum covering in-depth topics, social demands, and the beginning of abstract thinking.

The next phase concerns providing a safe environment. Safe environment must start with the middle school building itself. The middle level area should ideally have all grades, six through eight, in a separate wing or floor.

Parents visit the middle school site while their son or daughter is still in the elementary building. Parents then participate in a meeting which focuses on the changing adolescents and their needs. This gives the parents a first hand look into the middle level program. Here is where a middle level school might allow its eighth graders to conduct the tours for the incoming sixth graders and parents.

The last integration phase allows eighth grade students to talk with sixth grade students before they enter the middle school level. This experience helps smooth out the transition between

elementary and middle school. This eighth grade age group should develop leadership and a personal sense of achievement toward the middle school and their peers. MacIver (1990) found that a buddy or big brother / big sister program with an older student eases the transition into the middle level school.

Deller (1984), Alexander and George (1981) and George (1983) all expressed the idea that middle schools should include vocational information, special interest presentations, small groups (home room), individual competition, and team concepts using classroom activities to balance group and individual competition. A teacher may use the classroom activity connecting the events of the French and Indian War by using a timeline of major events. Once timelines are completed, the teacher may then ask students to list critical outcomes beside each timeline date.

A middle level school must have an overall plan or philosophy aimed at the success, needs, and characteristics of transescents. This plan should include the high school and elementary staffs' input into planning the middle level program. This plan helps the student move from a

child-centered classroom to a subject-centered curriculum, allowing for a greater diversification of exploratory classes. The physical, intellectual, emotional, and social needs of the students help shape the curriculum for middle level students. Interestingly Dawson (1987) found that a higher number of at-risk students were reached using this middle level philosophy.

Interdisciplinary teams are the central nervous system that make this program functional. Interdisciplinary teaching teams should be composed of science, math, social studies, and language art instructors. Interdisciplinary teams are eventually composed of colleagues who teach different content areas, while sharing the same students. An interdisciplinary team could be comprised of four instructors taken from any configuration of classes. For example, one might be one from the social studies, one from English, one from math, and one from science. Nickle et al (1990) found that this concept ended the faculty isolation that many teachers feel by providing a group of colleagues a common planning time for discussing teaching units and solving mutual problems, since they share the same

students. Instructional strategies are the major responsibility of this team, strategies that address cognitive and affective growth and flexibility in grouping students for effective instruction. A middle level environment created this way may resemble an elementary program, but caring and understanding, as well as subject matter exposure, are very important at this level. These teams seem able to provide both.

Alexander and George (1981) found that "the interdisciplinary organizations are both the most distinguishing feature of a middle school and the keystone of its structure. In the presence of a stable interdisciplinary team organization, other components of the program function much more smoothly. In its absence they operate with considerably more difficulty, if they exist at all" (p. 35).

The middle school facility must have adaptable space, allowing an individual teacher or interdisciplinary team adequate room for large and small group interactions. This area should have a curriculum lab created by the interdisciplinary teams (Nickle, et al 1990). Creating this additional curriculum lab will allow middle level

teachers to draw upon their own particular expertise, that of their colleagues, and from others.

An administrator must find faculty team members who possess the following skills: understanding, teamwork, cooperation, and communication skills in dealing with young adolescents. The middle level staff must be able to work with a wide variety of learning styles and needs relating to characteristics of this new middle level grouping.

There are three areas of concern relevant to middle level school. The first concern deals with the training of middle level teachers. Junior high teachers today were often educated in institutions training secondary teachers. Yet these teachers were given jobs teaching in the Junior high and middle school level without receiving adequate training for that specific level.

In reality, this approach has extended the high school downward another two years. Teachers trained for secondary school all too often use essentially high school teaching strategies on the middle-level learner.

The next concern deals with a middle level teacher receiving hands-on training for young adolescents' social, emotional, physical, and intellectual needs. This sort of institutional training would allow middle level teachers greater insight into the makeup of young adolescents. A clear plan must be developed for the sixth, seventh, and eighth grade levels. This plan should deal with reorganizing a school system along age criteria, 11 through 14, aligning grades sixth, seventh, and eighth to form a middle-level school. This arrangement brings together a more homogeneous grouping compatible with what is known of the mental, social, and intellectual development of the middle level learner. A gradual leadership emphasis for sixth, seventh, and eighth grade students should be built in, as should an emphasis on helping middle level students to become more active learners.

The last area deals with creating successful interdisciplinary teams. The teams must be given adequate planning time, classroom space, and training for interaction among colleagues. Interdisciplinary teams share middle level students during the school day. Sharing middle

level students lead toward a support system for the middle level learner. This support system allows four teachers sharing middle level students all day a greater chance to recognize and solve students' problems and that, to a significant degree, may represent nearly the entire justification for middle school education. It is that level of schooling, perhaps more than any other, that must keep youngsters from "falling through the cracks". It deserves our serious attention.

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