

## 3

# Challenging Curriculum

Curriculum is challenging, exploratory, integrative, and relevant.

*Chris Stevenson & Penny A. Bishop*

.....

One sunny, early fall afternoon, Chris left his office a bit early to catch the second half of a University of Vermont soccer game on campus. As he climbed into the sparsely filled grandstand, he noticed a row of seven or eight young adolescent girls and boys chattering among themselves while watching the game. Not one to pass up such a good opportunity for a “double feature,” he took a seat behind the middle of their row. This was an irresistible opportunity to unobtrusively check out a sample of adolescent culture while at the same time, enjoy some soccer.

The kids’ talk was wide-ranging, jumping quickly from topic to topic. Sometimes they seemed to agree, but more often it was as if the conversation was a competition for the most profound observations. Distinctions between fact and opinion blurred. Unable to detect any coherent theme from the center of the row, Chris eased his way to one end where Joe was attempting to explain soccer rules to Amy, who presented herself as earnestly attentive. An apparent novice to the sport, she struggled to understand and to reassure him that his tutorial made sense. Try as he might, however, Joe’s explanations of the offside rule in particular did not clear up Amy’s confusion. Although she tried mightily, it was apparent that she was just not getting it. Joe finally concluded his lesson with the reassurance that, “it makes a lot more sense when you’re doing it.”

We think Joe is onto something fundamentally important to our quest for middle level curriculum and pedagogy. Especially among young adolescents, “it makes a lot more sense when you’re doing it.” Joe understands that when one is 11, 12, or 13 years old, enduring useful knowledge is associated with firsthand engagement of the subject matter. While this truth is widely espoused among middle level educators, it is all too infrequently a primary focus affecting adults’ curricular decisions.

From the earliest beginnings of the middle school concept, the most steadfast rationale in approaching curriculum decisions has been a dogged emphasis on educational methods that complement “the distinctive nature of young adolescents” (NMSA, 2010, p.13).

Authentic learning leaves unmistakable tracks in learners’ talk with each other and with adults.

Somehow, however, our search for the composition of that curriculum inevitably has seemed reduced to discussions, debates, and proposals about “disciplines vs. interdisciplinary” or “subject specific vs. integrated” dualities. Interesting and often

entertaining, but irresolvable arguments have too easily diverted us from our espoused goal of creating successful matches between our kids and their studies. The issue is not whether life is inherently discipline-based or interdisciplinary, because it is both. We submit that Joe would have us seek and find our direction by examining more closely the interactions between the subject matter (e.g., soccer rules) and the learner’s derivation of meaning (e.g., his and Amy’s separate understandings). Authentic learning leaves unmistakable tracks in learners’ talk with each other and with adults. Consider some examples of students whose engagement in learning is self-evident. Who could dispute that the curriculum in these examples was challenging, exploratory, integrative, and relevant to them?

## Kids Genuinely Engaged in Curriculum

### Snapshot I

Brian and Amelia, eighth graders at a charter middle school in the Pacific Northwest, returned from their winter break filled with questions about the recent devastating tsunami in Asia. Questions and commentary about the tragedy rang through the halls while students jostled one another as they tried to fit bulky backpacks into their lockers. Informally debating the recent events on their way to class, Amelia argued, “I think it was an earthquake,” while

Brian asserted, “No, I heard it was a tidal wave.” Their friend Etienne overheard them as he scooted through the doorway at the last minute and interjected, “I heard more than 100,000 people died. My mom said that’s bigger than our city.”

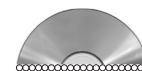
Although their first-year science teacher, Ms. Joyner, had spent most of her break carefully planning their next unit on forensic science, she recognized the teachable moment inherent in her students’ discussion. She decided that morning, therefore, to postpone the forensic science unit and turn to the study of tsunamis, capitalizing on her students’ obvious and intense interest. She began class by inviting students to share what they already knew about tsunamis and this recent event. As they spoke, she listed their thoughts on the white board at the front of the room. Their prior knowledge was based primarily on images from network news coverage and fell into three broad categories: scientific perspectives on how tsunamis are formed; a geographical knowledge of the region in Asia where the tsunami occurred; and widely ranging thoughts on the degree of the devastation, including the number of deaths and damaged or destroyed villages.



*With assistance from their teachers, students develop curriculum which helps them answer questions about their world and themselves.*

— DVD, Maranacook Community MS, “Sled Project,”  
“Curriculum Development,” “Ice Fishing”

Next Ms. Joyner encouraged students to pose questions in pairs about the natural disaster. Students turned to a partner and began to list on notepaper the questions that had emerged for them as well as ones provoked by the initial class discussion. She then asked them to share their questions aloud, while she made notes on the white board for all to see. The questions included, what is the difference between a tidal wave and a tsunami? How does a tsunami begin? Can anything stop it? Has it ever happened before? How many cities and villages were hit? How many people died? Could the same thing happen here? What will happen to the children who have no parents? What can I do to help?



*In integrated curriculum, we each come up with ideas we want to learn about. We put them all on a poster and narrow it down to the top 10 ideas and vote. It is much more fun to learn about stuff you want to learn about rather than what you are give.*

— Maggie, Maranacook Community MS, “Curriculum Development”

The students’ questions formed the foundation for what turned out to be a three-week unit on tsunamis, the force and physics of water, soil salinity, and geography. Students helped

construct a wave pool with materials donated from a local plastics plant, and then they used the apparatus to reconstruct and analyze the force of water. As is often characteristic of young adolescents, they felt a call to action. Brian and Amelia decided to host a community-wide pancake breakfast to raise money to donate to tsunami relief, and they quickly earned the support of their peers. Ms. Joyner helped the class to think about and identify various jobs that would be necessary to sponsor such an event. They formed committees to handle the project: Public Awareness, Donations, Food Prep, Serving, and Clean-up. The team's teachers devoted their usual advisory time each day to planning the event. The Donations Committee solicited donations of ingredients from local grocery stores while students on the Public Awareness Committee busily prepared posters, advertising copy, and letters to the editors of surrounding newspapers urging citizens to donate generously.

When the designated Saturday morning arrived, the school's cafeteria was taken over by the Food Prep, Serving, and Clean-up teams, who enthusiastically rolled up their sleeves as they greeted and served their neighbors. The fundraiser was very successful, and they donated their proceeds to an established relief organization aimed at helping surviving children of the tsunami.

Ms. Joyner felt a lot of satisfaction in such a successful curriculum project that grew out of her students' concerns and questions. In observing their deep engagement in the subject matter, she knew without a doubt that the project was a great educational success. Students gained a new sense of personal efficacy as they learned about what was timely and relevant, and they gave to their global community from their local community in the purest spirit of "think globally, act locally."

## **Snapshot II**

Meg and Sara, seventh graders on the Harmony Team, attended an urban middle school. They had recently become best friends, prompted in part by a shared traumatic experience: legal separations and impending divorce by both sets of parents. One part of the curriculum provided by Harmony was comprised of independent studies called "Orbital Studies" that can be carried out by individuals or combinations of students who have a shared interest (Stevenson, 2002, pp. 162, 202). Meg openly wanted to know more about what divorce meant for her and her family, and although Sara tended to keep her feelings more private, she agreed with Meg that exploring divorce and its effects on everyone in their two families

was highly relevant and worthy as a focus for an orbital study. One of their teachers, Mrs. Redmond, was eager to support them, in part because she had been divorced for three years and was the custodial parent for her two children in elementary school.

Mrs. Redmond helped them get started by inviting them to compile three lists: things they already knew about separation and divorce; questions they wanted to answer; and issues and questions they wanted to discuss with their parents. She also helped them identify possible resources for their investigations: court-related children’s service providers, attorneys who specialized in family matters, judges, and published materials about divorce for children their age, of which they found very few. The girls were especially interested in learning about the experiences and opinions of other students whose families had split. Even before they finished creating a web of resources and expanding their lists of questions and issues—Harmony requirements for Orbital Studies—their investigation was well under way. Every couple of days they met with Mrs. Redmond to show her their progress, ask questions, and get her advice.

The volume students eventually produced evolved as a blend of personal stories, mostly from other adolescents, with information learned from people and community agencies dealing with divorce.

After less than two weeks, they decided on a culminating product: they decided to write a book for kids their ages about separation and divorce. Because they had found almost nothing written by kids for kids, Mrs. Redmond helped them see that they could address a literary niche. The material for the book would come from print and human resources readily available in their school and community, but the approach and voice would be uniquely theirs.

The volume they eventually produced, *Kids Helping Kids with Divorce*, evolved as a blend of personal stories, mostly from other adolescents, with information learned from people and community agencies dealing with divorce. Conceptualizing and producing a volume of such magnitude not only was a giant stride for Meg and Sara, it also showed them a constructive way to deal with painful personal issues. Even during a time of their own intense personal struggle, the girls’ parents trusted Mrs. Redmond and the other Harmony teachers to help the girls with both their scholarly and personal needs over the several weeks of their investigation. Interest in their study by other adolescents and parents triggered the formation of a “Divorce Group” taught by the school’s counselors and made up of students across the

school who shared personal experience with separation and divorce. Meg and Sara's book became required reading. Everyone benefited from this experience of creating an authentic opportunity for firsthand inquiry and learning about an issue that matters to growing numbers of young adolescents. Meg and Sara learned about a difficult issue in their lives, and their study helped other kids going through the same difficult time. Mrs. Redmond and her colleagues also gained both personally and as teachers from the girls' work.

### Snapshot III

Casey was a sixth grader on an interdisciplinary team in a New England middle school. Afternoons on his team were dedicated to the integrated study of science and social studies called Life Studies. Students signed up for Life Studies groups based on their interests and

the state's approved standards that linked to their personal and academic goals for the month. In February Casey's Life Studies group focused on inventing new technology. The students were to select technology that is commonly used today, research the historical evolution of that technology, and speculate about how it might evolve 20 years from now.



*Knowledge is content put into action.*

— DVD, Maranacook Community MS,  
“Curriculum Development”

Because Casey loved working with computers, he became quite excited about this task. He contributed eagerly to the class, brainstorming various technologies on which they might focus.

He was, by self-admission, stubborn at times and, as a result, often found collaboration on projects a challenge. He was greatly relieved when his teacher, Mr. Edwards, told students they could choose their own partners. Casey teamed up with his good friend, Jared, and they excitedly moved to a computer to begin to capture their ideas.

Casey and Jared began talking about a friend who suffers from diabetes. They were interested in the fact that her “state of the art” insulin pump had already broken five times. They did not understand why it should break with so many filters on it to ensure that it was reliable. Mr. Edwards circulated around the room and crouched by the computer to listen to the boys' conversation. He encouraged them to pursue this important question and guided them to

several diabetes websites to learn more about the disease and various insulin pumps on the market.

The two boys spent three weeks learning about diabetes, the role of insulin in the body, and current biomedical technology. Their work culminated in the design of an implanted insulin pump that would be inserted into the body with multiple filters to automatically monitor a person's insulin levels. Mr. Edwards introduced them to new software that assisted them with multidimensional graphics and with which they were able to construct their new technology on the computer, finally uploading it to their own webpage. Casey and Jared felt a sense of competence and accomplishment in designing a tool that could respond to real needs in the world, as well as to the needs of someone they know and care about. Mr. Edwards especially enjoyed his role as a facilitator in the boys' work as he watched two capable and motivated students find real-world relevance in their learning.

## **Characteristics of Effective Curriculum**

What do the students in the middle schools framed by these snapshots have in common? Certainly they exhibit palpable engagement with curriculum that is challenging, exploratory, integrative, and relevant. None of these studies would have taken place without the support, encouragement, and guidance of savvy, learning-oriented teachers who perceptively and wisely guided their students' learning. In each case, students enjoyed rich and substantive learning because they first felt confident enough in relationships with their teachers to be able to express their ideas, interests, and questions.

When students find teachers indifferent to their ideas, then such ideas do not get expressed. These youngsters also benefitted from teachers who not only were open to the possibility of authentic student choice but who understood and valued the power of learning driven by strong personal interests. Showing eager learners how to plan and proceed, staying in touch with them as they progress, and helping them wrap up their study is the proverbial "piece of cake." It gives meaning to teaching in ways that transcend the usual.

### **Challenging**

The teacher's role in moving beyond mere coverage of content to curriculum that "addresses substantive issues and skills, is geared to (students') levels of understanding, and increasingly

enables them to assume control of their own learning” (NMSA, 2010, p. 18) is critical. The previous snapshots illustrate learning that is grounded in rigorous concepts and skills and that teaches developing young people how to take greater personal responsibility for their own learning.

Mrs. Redmond, for example, began by working closely with Meg and Sara to help them identify questions and locate resources. She gradually transitioned into more of an advisory role, interjecting advice or questions when needed, but allowing Meg and Sara to direct their work and learning in accord with their own inclinations. Similarly, Mr. Edwards skillfully guided Casey and Jared toward resources for their study and taught them to use new software. At the same time, he ensured that they addressed their substantive questions and controlled their project. Casey and Jared’s project also represents the opportunity for challenging curriculum to reduce the gap between students’ in-school and out-of-school technology lives. Such work can capitalize on young adolescents’ affinity for technology and deepen their acquisition of 21st century skills. In all cases, the concepts under study were challenging for young adolescents, and the tasks were achievable.

## Exploratory

National Middle School Association (2010) urges middle level educators to consider exploration as “an attitude and approach, not a classification of content” (p. 20). For too

For too long the term “exploratory” has referred to unified arts or other classes thought to be outside the realm of the “core” academic areas such areas such as technology education or family and consumer science.



long the term “exploratory” has referred to unified arts or other classes thought to be outside the realm of the “core” academic areas such areas such as technology education and family and consumer science. We argue that all curricula for

middle grades students must involve exploration. Surely, no teacher or parent can deny that young adolescents are by nature inquisitive. A rich middle level program capitalizes on that intellectual curiosity by opening up young people’s potential for future career interests and recreational pursuits. It enables students to investigate beyond their immediate realm, regardless of gender, social class, ethnicity, or life circumstances, and to consider limitless possibilities. As they empowered their students to become authors, scientists, human service advocates, and inventors, Mrs. Redmond, Ms. Joyner, and Mr. Edwards created activities

that broadened students' views of the world, themselves, and their futures. These teachers embody exploration as an attitude and approach, regardless of their specific subject matter specializations.

### **Integrative**

Often defying arbitrary subject boundaries, integrative curriculum “helps students make sense of their lives and the world around them” (NMSA, 2010, p. 21). In each of the three snapshots, students were deeply immersed in grasping concepts that by nature crossed the

lines of subject-specific disciplines. In the study of a tsunami tragedy, for example, Brian, Amelia, and their peers acquired and applied map reading and other geography skills to contrast world regions affected by the natural disaster. They used scientific methods to design and conduct their own investigation of the connections between the earth's crustal plates and the force of water. And they honed persuasive writing skills as they carefully composed and revised their letters to

the community, ever aware of the authentic audience. In each case, students made ongoing and meaningful decisions about their learning, critiquing and modifying their approaches along the way. Without Ms. Joyner's willingness to ground curriculum in students' questions, or her ability to see the possibilities beyond her own academic discipline, the students' investigation would have been limited to a relatively conventional science class. Instead, their eyes were opened to the rich and inherently interdisciplinary world in which they live.



*When students gather plant and animal specimens from the school pond and study the ground water system, they learn science in the context of their region's ecology.*

— DVD, Jefferson MS, “Prairie Curriculum”

### **Relevant**

“Curriculum is relevant when it allows students to pursue answers to questions they have about themselves, content, and the world” (NMSA, 2010, p. 22). Unquestionably, the Asian tsunami, divorce, and diabetes were content of momentous personal relevance to these students. Based on their own questions, excellent curriculum and meaningful learning emerged from their earnest desire to understand new concepts and world events. Helping others is a common theme evident through each of the snapshots: designing an implanted

insulin pump to help a friend, composing a book to help kids get through divorce, raising money to help victims of a natural disaster thousands of miles away.

In each case, students found personal relevance in following their own lines of inquiry to understand the world around them. Their increasing needs for relevance were addressed by

Young adolescents long to make a real and felt difference in the world, and they love to be recognized for their intelligence and budding expertise



service learning initiatives, heightening their personal involvement in academic and civic life (Allen, 2003; Chiaravalloti, 2009). It is encouraging to see more and more service learning opportunities in middle schools. These snapshots meld service into academic learning, drawing together the best of both worlds. Young

adolescents long to make a real and felt difference, and they love to be recognized for their intelligence and budding expertise.

## Curriculum and Student Engagement

Savvy middle level teachers know from experience that the quickest way to find out how learning happens for young adolescents is simply to ask them. We do not refer here to occasional conversational inquiries, although such occasions may produce valuable insights. What we recommend is a foundational assessment that invites students on a regular schedule to reflect on current and recent experiences and identify factors that have been effective in helping them learn. Such inquiries require young people to become reflective and analytical about their progress as learners. Students learn about their strengths and their continuing learning needs, and these data inform their planning of subsequent studies.

Similarly, teachers improve their own practice by creating a formal time to listen to students reflect on what works and what does not. For too long, educators have underestimated or neglected entirely the knowledge to be gained from engaging students in self-assessment and formal documentation of their strengths and needs as learners. As Cook-Sather (2002) asserted, “We as educators . . . must seriously question the assumption that we know more than the young people of today about how they learn or what they need to learn in preparation for the decades ahead” (p. 3).

In order to understand how middle school students learn, and to help them come to know themselves well as learners, we have found the concept of *engagement* to be a helpful one.

Because we know that engaged students learn more (Valentine & Collins, 2011), inviting students to consider times of engagement and times of disengagement in learning can reveal powerful insights for learners and teachers alike. For example, interviews with middle schoolers from six schools (Bishop & Pflaum,

2005a, 2005b) revealed the critical role of relevance in curriculum just mentioned. When asked to describe any time in her schooling when she felt deeply engaged in her learning, eighth grader Amelia was eager to talk about her literature group's

recent discussion of Kafka's *Metamorphosis*. She described that this was the first time she had learned about the concept of alienation. Amelia explained, "I didn't know it was such a big issue and then I came into the course and then I realized that it was, like, pretty important. . . . Most everybody is alienated, so just, like, think how *you're* alienated" (2005a, p. 36).

For Amelia, finding relevance in a topic such as alienation engaged her deeply. Knowing that relevance can help engage her, therefore, increases her learning, Amelia can consider how to find relevance when designing her own learning. Her teacher can build on this knowledge to ensure Amelia makes connections between her studies and her life.

Students who are invited into a reflective dialogue about learning enhance their ability to set demanding yet achievable personal and academic goals for themselves.

Other students find they are most successful when working at their own individual pace. One fifth grader, Nad, explained that he loved sustained silent reading because, "I like going at my own pace. . . . Some kids in my group, they don't read with any expression. And they read really slowly, even though I understand that they can't read as well but . . . I really, I like to just, I really like to read alone" (Bishop & Pflaum, 2005a, p. 9). He contrasted that with a math class in which he was unsuccessful and disengaged, confiding that, "I don't usually get it in my head the first time he explains it" (p. 10). With these insights, Nad discovered the importance an individualized pace plays in his learning, and he can consider that when planning future work. His teacher gains important information that Nad might otherwise not offer, given the class-wide novels and whole-group math instruction that are the norm in his class.

We do not think there is a recipe to follow for engaging middle school students in challenging, exploratory, integrative, and relevant curriculum. On the contrary, young adolescents are constantly changing and are by nature a developmentally diverse group. Rather, students who are invited into a reflective dialogue about learning enhance their

ability to set demanding yet achievable personal and academic goals for themselves. They are equipped with growing self-knowledge. Amelia and Nad are two of many examples of youngsters involved in reflecting on their learning needs and on the curriculum in relation to these needs. Such opportunities enhance students' sense of personal efficacy; they enable teachers to reflect on their teaching and the inherent match or mismatch between their approaches and the youngsters in their classrooms.

## Curriculum and Adolescent Development

Looking comprehensively at young adolescents' healthy and enthusiastic learning would cause one to consider the curriculum in relation to the learner himself or herself. What should be the primary purpose of curriculum at the middle level? *This We Believe* posits that middle level curriculum must be "challenging, exploratory, integrative, and relevant" (2010, p. 17). It is fair to rejoin, "To whom?" Might sincere adults use such descriptors to justify any curriculum content or program or guide for any age students? If our focus is truly on young adolescent learners, then we will emphasize their challenging and being challenged by their schoolwork, *their* successfully integrating new learning into their continuously modified existing knowledge, and *their* exploring the ideas and questions that interest them.

Hamburg (1993) stated well the primary purpose and nature of middle level curriculum:

What are the requirements for healthy adolescent development? In my view, it is essential that we help young adolescents to acquire constructive knowledge and skills, inquiring habits of mind, dependable human relationships, reliable basis for learning respect, a sense of belonging in a valued group, and a way of being useful to their communities. (p. 467)

Given the range of developmental diversity among children during these years, it does not seem feasible for any single curriculum plan conceived by adults in isolation from a particular

Perhaps the greatest challenge to educators is to summon the courage to form partnerships with students by which they share curriculum planning.



group of students and administered to all students at the same time to possibly accommodate everyone. Fortunately, such a single plan is not our only option. One of the great benefits of working with these students is their readiness to make responsible

choices as to what they will study and learn. The more choices they are able to make, the more seriously they are inclined to trust the choices adults are also making for them. Perhaps the

greatest challenge to educators is to summon the courage to form partnerships with students by which they share curriculum planning. Beane's (1993, 2005) works compel teachers to enter into just such coalitions, and student-maintained records of their work in portfolios enables teachers to more fully understand the extent to which curriculum is actually cultivating competence and responsibility as well as testimonials of affiliation, awareness, and ethical perceptions of themselves.

Middle level educators should focus on the ways students are growing and changing during these transition years between childhood and late adolescence. We know with certainty that they undergo distinctive changes from the ways of their earlier childhood.

We also know that there is a great deal of variability among them; differentness is the norm in early adolescence. Individuals change according to idiosyncratic schedules, and they also develop uniquely in terms of intelligence, disposition, attitudes and tastes, interests, work habits, and aspirations. It seems to us that the abundance of possibilities for children during this brief period of human life invites curriculum initiatives that complement individual differences and transcend established curriculum paradigms. This perspective does not demean those curricula; rather, it ensures that our focus on the growth and development of individual children is preserved. For this brief period of schooling, our abiding concern should be the effectiveness with which our children learn both how to learn and the disposition that they can learn successfully.

## **Curriculum and Personal Efficacy**

What if our primary purpose in planning curriculum is to ensure the healthy development of young adolescent learners? What are their predominant needs as learners and citizens? Three decades of interviews with young adolescent students and countless collaborations with middle level teachers point to some developmental needs that can be satisfied through curriculum designs that preserve learner efficacy as the focal point. Students who demonstrate personal efficacy in school and in their relationships with peers and adults exhibit some essential traits: competency, responsibility, affiliation, awareness, and ethical perception of self.

## **Competence**

Young adolescents care a great deal about being competent. Those few who have become alienated from their inner nature as learners are victims of bankrupt schooling. Successful students identify themselves by the things they do well, and they relish opportunities to do those things. Whether it is running, or spelling, or shooting baskets, or solving equations, a powerful need for personal expertise perseveres. It does not follow that individuals have to be the very best at their particular competency, that no one else is equally as good as they are. But it does seem to matter that one be somewhat set apart from others by this expertise. The very best of circumstances is when classmates and significant others, especially older adolescents and adults, also acknowledge one's competence. Good curriculum from students' perspectives assures that they grow steadily in competencies that they acknowledge as useful and worthwhile. When youngsters are failing to grow in competence in their own eyes and in the perceptions of others, a fundamental developmental need is being denied.

## **Responsibility**

A second attribute of young adolescent learners who seem to be thriving is their perception of themselves as accountable and responsible in ways that approximate adulthood. They know they are not yet ready for a more fully independent adult role, but they value taking greater responsibility for themselves and being recognized for evidence of greater maturity. Initiative, dependability, and resourcefulness are qualities they value in themselves and each other. They care about being at ease with planning and organizing learning, working either alone or with selected peers. They prefer to think of themselves as good choosers and fair judges, and their personally constructed academic portfolios exude personal accountability and self-awareness. Curriculum that matches well with these qualities cultivates the very self-reliance we know to be essential to successful learners and strong individuals.

## **Affiliation**

As longtime teachers of young adolescents and as observers of others who teach them well, we have noted that the best curriculum takes on something of a life of its own. There is a palpable "curriculum transcendence" through which students derive remarkable degrees of engagement and energy. Observe students preparing a drama production or doing a project together: they give lots of energy to such work, and, in turn, they are energized. Such

experiences become benchmarks of future learning, and students articulate intense feelings of affiliation with those learning events. Sometimes the significance of the experience comes from the value of the compelling working relationships with peers or with teachers in the school; oftentimes significant relationships are created while working with other adults in the community. At its very best, after all, learning is an energy loop: one invests energy in a process that, in turn, energizes that same individual. Whatever curriculum unit middle level teachers may choose to teach, if there is no evidence of student passion and ownership, enduring learning is not likely to occur.

### **Awareness**

No one likes to be taken for a fool, especially young adolescents. Perhaps because of the intensity of the identity formation process, these youngsters are especially sensitive about how they are perceived and treated. Note their language, humor, dress, and interactions with peer groups as evidence of their

need to be regarded by others as “with it.” Being involved, savvy, and “tuned in” are paramount. Believing that “I know what’s going on,” affirms a sense of worth. Insights



Young adolescents are especially responsive to inquiries designed to explain their perceptions about the dynamics of peer relationships, their school, and the community.

about one’s abilities and strengths give rise to reflections and theories about how things are and how things should be done. We have found young adolescents to be especially responsive to inquiries about the dynamics of peer relationships, their school, and the community (Stevenson, 2002; Bishop, Allen-Malley & Brinegar, 2007). Curriculum that serves these students well provides a climate and context in which they recognize the relevance of their studies and have ample opportunities to demonstrate their knowledge to others, especially parents, older adolescents, and community people.

### **Ethical perception of self**

Perhaps the most reassuring indicator of sound education and human development is evidence of our children’s natural inclination toward moral ideals. It is crucial for them to regard themselves as good people of high moral standing. Their growing interest in existential questions, concern about injustices, and readiness for activism in worthy causes signals the youngster’s need to believe in himself or herself as a good person, an individual of worth who is making a difference in the world. Advocacy for animals, stewardship of the environment,

and compassion for the needy and disadvantaged are natural causes they are eager to support as a matter of principle. As they grow in knowledge of the exigencies of political and economic systems, they come to recognize both the promise and vulnerabilities of democracy. A growing sophistication about how things work in a morally conscious and responsible community portends active citizenship that brings vitality to the school today and the larger community tomorrow. Any curriculum design that does not provide opportunities and support for students to do “right things” alongside the significant adults in their lives is sadly incomplete. Kids understand the value of being good through doing good.

## **A Caveat for the Bold**

Pressures on all teachers to adhere to prescribed curriculum are greater today than they have ever been. Under the illusion of “accountability,” school system policies vastly over emphasize testing that covers specific prescribed content, and the media extends this tragic illusion of “quality of education” by reporting test scores and comparing schools’ performance as an indication of “excellence.” As a result, teachers find it harder and harder to make time for more authentic means of assessment and evaluation. Further, most middle level teachers are licensed to teach only one or two subject matter areas, and this very designation can discourage them from teaching beyond their subject areas. Federal injunctions contained in the No Child Left Behind Act easily intimidate many administrators and teachers from deviating from assumed deductive, prescriptive teaching, and textbook-centered modes of instruction that have long proved inadequate and inappropriate to the experienced observer of young adolescents’ learning and healthy development.

We should not be surprised at these developments, given the extent to which politicians who have no experience with the actualities of children’s learning and development issue mandates about the content of curriculum and methods of evaluation. The general public remains amazingly gullible in accepting this falsification of high standards of education. Even more disappointing, most of these high-stakes tests do not assess the knowledge and skills our children will need to be active and productive citizens in the 21st century.

The good news is that there remain numbers of middle level teachers like Ms. Joyner, Mrs. Redmond, and Mr. Edwards who grasp early adolescence and who also have strength of professional conviction to trust both their understanding and their students to pursue

curriculum that is challenging, exploratory, integrative, and relevant. We know there are numerous other committed middle level teachers who are following suit, nurturing and building on their students' interests, ideas, and questions to pursue learning opportunities that effectively change kids' lives and advance far more valid definitions of "accountability" and "excellence." These are also the teachers we must seek out, learn from, and encourage; they are the ones who will preserve the wisdom of the middle level concept that provoked the reform movement in the first place.

Back in the earliest days of middle level reform a now long-forgotten source caught our attention with a persuasive argument that middle level curriculum was urgently in need of major overhaul. The writer cautioned, however, that to simply replace ineffective programs in favor of all new designs would likely bring about certain catastrophe. The essay went on to encourage that educators resolve to build 15% of their curriculum around the expressed needs and interests of their students. We were advised to treat that modest 15% as professional inquiry conceived to better understand the studies and pedagogy that best served our students. The remaining 85% of our curriculum could remain unchanged for the moment. The crucial advice, however, was that we incorporate the insights drawn from the 15% into the remaining 85%, and thereby remake subsequent curriculum in ways that will be more closely aligned with the particular characteristics and needs of our students. In so doing, we affirm ourselves as professionals who adapt practices according to insights resulting from our inquiries. Young people like those reported in this chapter will thank us for our wisdom, actions, and courage.

## References

- Allen, R. (2003). The democratic aims of service learning. *Educational Leadership*, 60(6), 51-54.
- Beane, J. A. (1993). *A middle school curriculum: From rhetoric to reality* (2nd ed.). Columbus, OH: National Middle School Association.
- Beane, J. A. (2005). *A reason to teach: Creating classrooms of dignity and hope*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Bishop, P., & Pflaum, S. (2005a). *Reaching and teaching middle school learners: Asking students to show us what works*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.
- Bishop, P., & Pflaum, S. (2005b). Student perceptions of action, relevance, and pace. *Middle School Journal*, 36(4), 4-12.

- Bishop, P., Allen-Malley, G., & Brinegar, K. (2007). Student perceptions of integration and community: "Always give me a chance to shine." Volume 6 in V. Anfara (Ed.) *The handbook of research in middle level education*. (pp 91-120). American Educational Research Association's Middle Level Education Research Special Interest Group. Greenwich, CT: Information Age Publishing.
- Chiaravalloti, L. A. (2009). Making the switch: Lightbulbs, literacy, and service-learning. *Voices from the Middle*, 17(1), 24-33.
- Cook-Sather, A. (2002). Authorizing students' perspectives: Toward trust, dialogue and change in education. *Educational Researcher*, 31(4), 3-14.
- Hamburg, D. A. (1993). The opportunities of early adolescence. *Teachers College Record*, 94, 466-471.
- National Middle School Association. (2010). *This we believe: Keys to educating young adolescents*. Westerville, OH: Author.
- Stevenson, C. (2002). *Teaching ten to fourteen year olds* (3rd ed.). Boston: Pearson Allyn & Bacon.
- Valentine, J., & Collins, J. (2011, April). *Student engagement and achievement on high-stakes tests: A hierarchical linear modeling (HLM) analysis across 68 middle schools*. Paper presentation at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, New Orleans, LA.

# This We Believe

## Keys to Educating Young Adolescents



Association for Middle Level Education  
formerly National Middle School Association

### 16 Characteristics

#### Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment

Educators value young adolescents and are prepared to teach them. *Value Young Adolescents*

Students and teachers are engaged in active, purposeful learning. *Active Learning*

Curriculum is challenging, exploratory, integrative, and relevant. *Challenging Curriculum*

Educators use multiple learning and teaching approaches. *Multiple Learning Approaches*

Varied and ongoing assessments advance learning as well as measure it. *Varied Assessments*

#### Leadership and Organization

A shared vision developed by all stakeholders guides every decision. *Shared Vision*

Leaders are committed to and knowledgeable about this age group, educational research, and best practices. *Committed Leaders*

Leaders demonstrate courage and collaboration. *Courageous & Collaborative Leaders*

Ongoing professional development reflects best educational practices. *Professional Development*

Organizational structures foster purposeful learning and meaningful relationships. *Organizational Structures*

#### Culture and Community

The school environment is inviting, safe, inclusive, and supportive of all. *School Environment*

Every student's academic and personal development is guided by an adult advocate. *Adult Advocate*

Comprehensive guidance and support services meet the needs of young adolescents. *Guidance Services*

Health and wellness are supported in curricula, school-wide programs, and related policies. *Health & Wellness*

The school actively involves families in the education of their children. *Family Involvement*

The school includes community and business partners. *Community & Business*

#### Essential Attributes

An education for young adolescents must be

##### Developmentally Responsive

using the nature of young adolescents as the foundation on which all decisions are made.

##### Challenging

recognizing that every student can learn and everyone is held to high expectations.

##### Empowering

providing all students with the knowledge and skills they need to take control of their lives.

##### Equitable

advocating for every student's right to learn and providing challenging and relevant learning opportunities.

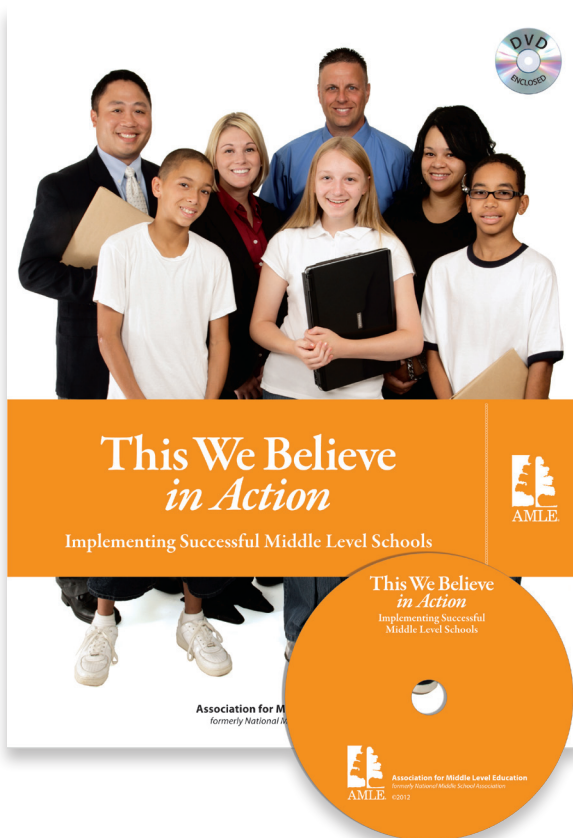
Association for Middle Level Education

# Successful Schools for Young Adolescents

This chart is based on This We Believe: Keys to Educating Young Adolescents (AMLE 2010). For more information visit us at [www.amle.org](http://www.amle.org)

Brand New  
Edition!

# Seeing is Believing!



## This We Believe in Action: Implementing Successful Middle Level Schools Book/DVD Combo

by AMLE

**The middle school concept is a reality, not a theory. Make it work in your school!**

In today's world, getting the attention of educators, parents, and policymakers can be difficult, and without buy-in from everyone involved, successfully implementing the middle school concept can seem insurmountable. This resource not only shows you that it can be done but demonstrates exactly how to do it in your school!

Watch as eight schools from around the country show you how their schools have implemented the 16 characteristics of successful middle grade schools identified in *This We Believe: Keys to Educating Young Adolescents*.

This comprehensive resource visualizes what successful middle grade schools can be and gives all middle grade leaders information and direction to take action and fully implement the middle school concept—providing the challenging and engaging educational experiences every young adolescent deserves.

**Item #1402**

**Nonmember \$35.00 • Member \$28.00**

**229 Pages • 978-1-56090-244-7**

HIGHLIGHTS

4 EASY  
WAYS  
TO  
ORDER

1. Order online or download an order form at [www.amle.org/store](http://www.amle.org/store)

2. Fax your order to 614-895-4750

3. Call us at 1-800-528-6672

4. Mail your order to:

Association for Middle Level Education  
4151 Executive Parkway, Suite 300  
Westerville, OH 43081

- Newly revised to match the 16 characteristics of successful middle grade schools identified in *This We Believe*.
- Demonstrates and explains to educators, parents, and policymakers what makes a truly successful middle grades school.
- A DVD of “in action” scenarios featuring compelling scenes from eight highly successful middle grade schools across the country.



**Association for Middle Level Education**  
formerly National Middle School Association  
[www.amle.org/store](http://www.amle.org/store)