

The Future of Middle Level Education: Optimistic and Pessimistic Views

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Age, it is commonly assumed, enhances perspective. And likewise, it is generally held that those who can look back the furthest are in the best position to predict the future. One might well assume, then, that based on our collective 100 plus years of experience with middle level education, the co-authors of this article are well-equipped for the task given us by the guest editor—to look back and then to look ahead. One of us, an eternal, but often naive optimist, sees the glass as now half full; while the other, a seasoned veteran always close to the classroom, is keenly conscious of current conditions that would quell almost anyone's optimism about the future of middle level education and so views the glass as half empty. But first, consider the following.

MIDDLE LEVEL EDUCATION IN CHRONOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

- **115 years** have passed since Charles W. Eliot, the president of Harvard University, kicked off the movement to reorganize secondary education with his call for school programs “to be shortened and enriched.”
- **94 years** have passed since the Indianola Junior High School, generally regarded as the first junior high school, was established in Columbus, Ohio.
- **85 years** have passed since the Commission on the Reorganization of Secondary Education (1918) in its famous report *Cardinal Principles of Secondary Education* recommended the 6-3-3 form of organization.
- **58 years** have passed since the 6-3-3 pattern became majority practice in America's school districts, with most pupils going through a junior high school on the way to high school graduation.
- **40 years** have passed since William Alexander, in a speech at Cornell University, first used and advocated the term *middle school*. (Gordon Vars was present).
- **30 years** have passed since National Middle School Association (NMSA) was launched.
- **18 years** have now passed since the 6-8 middle school became the centerpiece of the 5-3-4 pattern that is, by far, the most common form of school organization in the United states.

About the *organizational* success of the movement to reorganize secondary education, which began in the last decade of the 19th century, there can be little doubt. The face of American education has been remade twice during the last century as a result of this effort. First, the junior high school replaced the traditional 8-4 pattern with the 6-3-3 plan. More recently, the 5-3-4 arrangement with the middle school in the center has become the most common pattern of school organization.

The middle school entered the educational arena, overtook, and passed the 7-9 junior high school to become the dominant form of school organization in little more than 20 years! This is a truly remarkable achievement by any standard, particularly when it is realized that no single government agency operates our public schools; rather, in just two decades 50 independent states, each in its own way, adopted the middle school idea. And now in the intervening years, the junior high school seems to be approaching extinction.





The true goal of the middle school movement, however, has never been organizational, but rather programmatic; and so there is another side to the story—one much more complicated and, unfortunately, much less successful. The way public education is operated at the school and classroom levels is the result of many interacting factors and conditions, most old but some new. There are vested interests and deeply institutionalized practices. Always present is the human inclination to resist change. Economic and political factors are constantly at work. Resolving conflicting demands and expectations of various stakeholders is a never-ending challenge (Vars, 2000).

Into such a complex entity the middle school concept charged, seeking to do essentially what the junior high school sought to do (but was unable), to make fundamental changes in the way schools operate and instruct. No easy victory should have been anticipated—and none has been achieved. But efforts to institute middle schools that are developmentally responsive have been widespread for several decades. It may be a good time to take stock and predict the future—from two perspectives.

A GLASS HALF FULL

Certainly the middle school movement has already had a major impact on American education and seems ready to exert further influence. Optimism about the future of middle level education seems, then, justified on several counts:

Early adolescence has gained recognition as a distinct developmental period.

Children do not leave childhood one year and become adolescents the next; but rather there is between the two this major period of transition covering roughly ages 10 to 15. Scholarly consideration of early adolescence has advanced dramatically in the last few decades. And although the general public has not yet come to recognize fully the special and enduring importance of early adolescence, the topic has been addressed on many fronts and was helped considerably by the Carnegie Corporation's widely distributed report, *Turning Points: Preparing America's Youth for the 21st Century* (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1989), and the follow-up report *Turning Points 2000: Educating Adolescents in the 21st Century* (Jackson & Davis, 2000).

In addition to the burgeoning body of professional literature covering early adolescence, there is now a good supply of books for the general public dealing with what has been well characterized as "the roller coaster years" (Giannetti & Sagarese, 1997). Newspaper stories and popular magazine articles also frequently feature these years when youth come of age. Although this attention is late in coming and is still incomplete, it is building a knowledge base of understanding about young adolescents to guide sound educational practices.

A third level of education has been established.

Traditionally, public education was comprised of elementary education for children and secondary education for adolescents. Now, however, the middle level has claimed a place as a third level. Teacher education and licensure are gradually coming to recognize middle level teaching as distinctive and calling for specially designed preparation programs. While progress has been discouragingly slow, a handful of states have put in place non-overlapping certification, while many others have created endorsements; and almost all states have under consideration some proposals that would recognize the middle level in licensure. Colleges and universities have instituted middle level programs that often precede state licensure, and a few universities have independent middle level departments.



Professional associations exist to support middle level education.

The existence of professional associations is a major factor supporting an optimistic outlook. The junior high schools had no voice compared to that now present in National Middle School Association. As the fastest-growing professional association in recent decades, NMSA has achieved a place of prominence at the table with other national associations and is able to exercise considerable influence. NMSA's middle school message and materials are extended immeasurably through its 58 state, regional, and provincial affiliates. The conferences and the publications of NMSA are recognized for their excellence and their value in influencing classroom instruction and school reform. The Month of the Young Adolescent, an NMSA initiative, is co-sponsored by more than 40 other national youth-serving agencies and organizations, and this annual celebration has given greatly increased public attention to young adolescents and the schools that serve them.

In addition to National Middle School Association, the National Association of Secondary School Principals and the National Association of Elementary School Principals both have commitments to middle level education and offer services to administrators of schools enrolling middle grades. Both associations also collaborate with NMSA.

Particularly important in advancing middle level education in recent years has been the support offered by foundations. The Carnegie Corporation and the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation are two prime examples. The creation of the National Forum to Accelerate Middle-Grades Reform is another platform that has given a boost to middle level education. This alliance of educators, researchers, national associations, and officers of professional organizations is committed to promoting the academic performance *and* healthy development of young adolescents. One of the Forum's initiatives was the creation of "Schools to Watch." This program was extended to Georgia, North Carolina, and California in 2003. As a result, 10 good schools that have achieved gains in student performance beyond what might be expected in light of their demographics have been spotlighted. The program will be implemented in four additional states in 2004.

Research findings give validity to the middle school.

Although the movement thrived in its early years, it did so more on faith than on the findings of research. Middle school advocates had, and still have, deeply held convictions about what is best for young adolescents. Their experiences when working with kids confirmed the validity of their positions. Now, however, research is able to provide hard evidence that the middle school does in fact work. When the tenets of the concept are implemented fully over time, student achievement and development increase markedly (Felner et al., 1997)! While research in education can never be as definitive as in other fields, there has been accumulating in the last decade the results from a number of carefully designed studies that strengthen immeasurably the case for middle school practices, and additional evidence is forthcoming. At the same time, it might be noted, there are no studies appearing to show the effectiveness of traditional junior high practices!

Research and Resources in Support of This We Believe (Anfara, 2003) summarizes research findings. A companion to *This We Believe: Successful Schools for Young Adolescents* (National Middle School Association, 2003), this publication documents the results of research studies showing the success of middle school practices.



Classroom teachers by the hundreds are doing good things for kids day in and day out.

Fifth and finally, optimism for the future is fueled by what can be witnessed in middle level schools all across America. The middle school movement has given conscientious, professional teachers and principals opportunities and encouragement for breaking the mold rather than perpetuating traditional ways and for assuming leadership as team leaders and administrators. Although most come from elementary or high school backgrounds and usually lack middle level preservice education, a new breed of courageous, caring teachers has implemented more effective learning strategies, ones that lead to improved student achievement and personal development—and their numbers are growing. If one wants to see cutting edge professional practices, increased student involvement, student-centered classrooms, teachers working together as collegial professionals, go to a middle school. If one is looking for examples of student-led conferences wherein students have assumed responsibility for their own learning, curriculum-based service learning programs, problem-centered learning that cuts across subject lines, or school-initiated parent involvement programs, go to a middle school.

Despite a climate that gives little support or recognition, there are legions of genuinely good teachers both touching lives and successfully teaching skills and content in hundreds of middle schools. They give life at the grass roots level to a movement that is firmly based on human growth and development. The best examples of what the art and craft of teaching can be when practiced fully are more often than not found at the middle level. A recognition of this reality surfaced in Georgia. The 2000 Georgia Teacher of the Year was a middle school teacher. The 2002 Georgia Teacher of the Year, although a high school teacher in a rural North Georgia school, was and is an open advocate for student-centered classrooms and integrated learning. The 2003 Georgia Teacher of the Year was a middle school teacher. And, you guessed it, the 2004 Georgia Teacher of the Year is a middle school teacher, as were two of the other three finalists for the 2004 award.

Middle school teachers are influencing the lives of young adolescents daily, providing models, and teaching lessons of life, as well as preparing them academically. While many parents are aware of this, the general public somehow seems oblivious to this important aspect of teaching at the middle level as the media and the politicians focus on test scores.

A Glass Half Empty

Pessimism about the future of middle level education is justified when one bears in mind the current educational reform efforts that run directly counter to the unique characteristics, needs, and concerns of young adolescents. Consider four important aspects of young adolescents and the ways that current reforms impact them.

Individual differences

Human beings differ in many ways, and these differences are magnified during the middle school years. Individuals go through the massive physical, social, emotional, and intellectual changes of puberty at different times and at different rates. Middle level classes are made up of men, women, and children, plus those who are at various points in between!



Yet young people dealing with these most profound changes are now confronted by demands that they all measure up to some adult-determined “standards.” They, their teachers, and their schools are punished if students do not attain a certain score on a paper-and-pencil test, which may or may not be aligned with the standards. Little or no allowances are made for differences in social background, innate academic ability, handicapping conditions, or even students’ command of the English language. When applied strictly, high-stakes testing dooms numbers of students to failure even before they take part in an assessment.

Mental development

One of the most exciting aspects of working with middle level youth is their rapidly developing ability to think more abstractly. The human brain is truly one of the great miracles of the universe, and its role in all of life’s processes is becoming clearer, offering educators powerful new ways to promote intellectual development.

Yet at this very time, most of the mandated assessments being used to determine students’ attainment of the standards focus heavily on recall of facts, one of the lowest forms of thinking. Moreover, the high stakes attached to student test scores coerce schools and teachers into spending an inordinate amount of time drilling students on facts and skills deemed most likely to be on those tests. Teachers have little time to follow up on students’ interests, to say nothing of inviting them to share in planning learning experiences that address their personal and social concerns.

Some effects of this pressure were revealed in the nationwide survey reported by McEwin, Dickinson, and Jenkins (2003). They found that middle schools had increased the time devoted to “direct instruction” and decreased time for electives, and in some schools even the advisory period, supposedly set aside to give students a place to deal with some of their needs and concerns, was being used for test-prep. Is it too extreme an exaggeration to suggest that high-stakes testing may be lobotomizing an entire generation of young people?

Socialization

Heightened sensitivity to acceptance by the peer group also distinguishes the middle school years. Parents sometimes feel that they no longer have much influence on their children who seem so wrapped up in interactions with other young people. Although peers may provide wholesome models for young people, wanting to be accepted by “the gang” may lead them into exceedingly risky behavior: smoking, drinking, drugs, sex, crime, and violence. Unfortunately the desire to be in with the crowd is continuously being exploited by media and commercial interests to the tune of millions of dollars every year.

Some of the anxieties experienced by adolescents may be ameliorated if they are shared with others going through the same period of life in advisory programs or other student-centered activities. Wholesome socialization also can be promoted in such student activities as intramural athletics, performance groups, clubs, and electives minicourses. Cooperative learning is a research-proven strategy that increases academic achievement, and it also meets a socialization need. Yet the percent of middle schools using cooperative learning “regularly” increased only moderately between 1993 and 2001 (McEwin, Dickinson, & Jenkins, 2003, pp. 32-33), and in 37% to 41% of the schools it was used only “occasionally” or “rarely.”



At the very time when students are seeking to develop bonds with others, stress in schools and in the broader society is on individual achievement. The few states that once included group problem solving as part of student assessment have had to bow to dictates imposed by the *No Child Left Behind Act* (Arhar, 2003). Our entire culture is increasingly driven by stress on individual success, measured primarily in terms of money. Sports heroes, rock stars, and CEOs receive millions of dollars, while more and more people sink deeper into poverty and lack needed social services. Sociologists decry the loss of genuine community in our society, as symbolized in the title of Putnam's (2002) research report *Bowling Alone*.

Independence

Throughout their middle school years, young people seek increasing independence from adults. Making the transition from a heavily dependent child to a fully independent adult is difficult even under the best of circumstances. Adults who work with youth know that the best way to avoid outright rebellion is to gradually reduce restrictions, negotiate honestly, and be prepared for some lapses as young people assume more responsibility. Middle level schools are uniquely situated to help both students and families deal wisely and compassionately with young adolescents' struggle for independence. Understanding teachers and parents offer young people many choices, nonjudgmentally guide them toward reasonable choices, and help them learn from the consequences of choices that prove unwise.

Moreover, a basic principle of democracy is that those who will be affected by a decision should share in making that decision. Cooperative teacher-student planning has long been advocated by progressive educators (Giles, 1941; Miel, 1952; Parrish & Waskin, 1967), and is a key element of the integrative/ core curriculum advocated by some middle level specialists (Beane, 1993, 1997; Lounsbury & Vars, 1978, Vars, 1993). Middle school teachers sometimes involve students in determining such things as appropriate classroom rules and scheduling options, even if they do not invite students to participate fully in deciding what is studied, how it will be studied, and how it will be evaluated.

Now, however, the dominant approach to educational reform is top-down dictation from bureaucrats at federal, state, and district levels, leaving teachers no choice but to submit to high-stakes tests that they know many students will fail. Schools have resorted to various ways of minimizing the negative consequences of low test scores, including the "encouragement" of students who do not do well on tests to be absent on the test day. Unreasonable requirements that schools post arbitrary gains every year make the pressure even worse, leading some teachers and principals to unethically give students help on the tests. Many parents fall prey to the offerings of various for-profit test-prep corporations. In such a coercive environment, neither students nor their teachers dare take the time needed to learn and practice democratic principles.

GREATER THREATS

Thus far some current educational reforms that seem designed to thwart healthy development of middle level youth have been examined. Serious as these may be, they appear to be driven by forces that pose threats to our entire society as well as to our middle schools.



Attacks on the public schools

The *Nation at Risk* pronouncement (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983) has been viewed by some as the opening gun of a systematic effort by wealthy corporate interests and their political allies to replace public education with for-profit institutions. Berliner and Biddle (1995) documented how these organizations created a “manufactured crisis” in education and used it to push for vouchers, charter schools, for-profit school management, and the like. Since then other educators have added their voices to the warning. Boutwell (1997) called attention to *Corporate America’s Agenda for Schools*. Ohanian (1999) pointed out how the “military-industrial-infotainment complex” influences politicians at all levels to impose impossible demands on public schools, measure compliance with inappropriate, poorly designed, and often incorrectly scored tests, then punish schools that do not measure up. Unfortunately the major brunt of the punishment is borne by school districts already saddled with high concentrations of students living in poverty, a meager tax base, and state budgeting that does little to equalize per-pupil resources for education.

Rampant commercialism

Time was when public schools were considered “off-limits” to advertising. It was assumed that since young people were required to attend, they should be protected from commercial interests. But by the year 2000, Molnar and Morales (2000) could say “Commercial activities now shape the structure of the school day, influence the content of the school curriculum, and determine whether children have access to a variety of technologies” (p.43). School districts strapped for funds too often enter into one-sided “partnerships” with businesses that then use the schools to “make a buck.” It is ironic that corporate interests, seemingly bent on destroying the public schools from the outside through government-imposed high-stakes testing, are simultaneously exploiting the children held captive in those same schools for commercial gain (See Kolin, 2002).

Media consolidation

The same military-industrial-infotainment complex also controls the major public information sources—newspapers, radio, television, magazine and book publishing. The situation was already serious when Berliner and Biddle published their analysis in 1995. Since then global giants have tightened their grip on the media, leaving few outlets for the voices of dissent. On top of that, some of their former executives are now setting federal policy. Indeed, the fox is now guarding the henhouse!

Economic inequities

Unequal support for public schools in most states reflects a gross and increasing gap between the rich and the poor. Globalization and the stagnant U.S. economy are putting severe strains on public school budgets, while tax breaks and loopholes in tax laws allow wealthy individuals and corporations to avoid paying their fair share. The proportion of our citizens living in poverty is increasing, and most of them are children. The direct correlation between a school district’s wealth and its school “effectiveness” is revealed every time a state publishes comparative ratings—the wealthy are at the top, the poor are at the bottom. The “Savage Inequalities” that Kozol (1991) railed against are still with us and getting worse.

At one time public schools were viewed as “the bulwark of democracy.” Now we are faced with seemingly deliberate attempts to destroy public schools, throttle free speech, and put more and more wealth and power into fewer and fewer hands.



TOMORROW—AND THE DAY AFTER TOMORROW

Having looked at the status of middle level education from two perspectives, what hope is there for the advancement of student-centered, democratic education at the middle level? It is difficult to implement the middle school envisioned in *This We Believe* (National Middle School Association, 1995, 2003) in the current hostile environment, and some of the most dedicated and creative teachers are abandoning the field altogether. Others are holding on until retirement, doing the best they can for the children they teach. There is good reason for pessimism.

Surely, however, as the obsession with standardized tests runs its course, America and her policy-makers will come to realize the obvious limitations of current reform efforts and recognize that the full education needed by today's young adolescents requires much, much more than that which is assessed by tests. Gains in test scores, when and if achieved, will have no immediate impact on the serious problems that beset our society. The greater need is to guide the overall development of young adolescents in ways that will equip them with the behavioral attributes, attitudes, and values they need to make wise choices in all aspects of their lives. Success in doing so will in no way handicap the school's clear responsibility for the intellectual development of students but will, in fact, fulfill that responsibility more effectively.

In the final analysis the future of middle level education, of public schooling, indeed, of all life on this planet depends on the human spirit. Survivors of the Nazi concentration camps reported that even under those incredibly brutal circumstances the spirit of many people was not completely crushed. The love of children and youth that motivates parents, teachers, and other caring adults seems to be inherent in human nature (Clark, 2002). Middle school educators have correctly been recognized for the degree to which that spirit characterizes their work.

In retrospect, both views are sound; one is not right and the other wrong. The resolution of this dilemma may be a matter of time. The pessimistic view is probably valid for tomorrow, while the optimistic view should be valid for the day after tomorrow. Eventually, the positive view ought to prevail, for it has the realities of human growth and development on its side and is in keeping with the democratic way of life that, while threatened, still characterizes our society. But we must take to heart the admonition of Edmund Burke issued in 1795, "The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing."

Using *This We Believe: Successful Schools for Young Adolescents* (National Middle School Association, 2003) as a tool, good middle level educators should work with new vigor, individually and in collaboration with professional colleagues, to bring about the day after tomorrow. Holding, as only middle level educators do, the very best opportunity to influence not only the future of individuals but of society itself, we can make the critical difference.



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