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Charles C. Robinson
Bridgewater State College

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CAUGHT IN THE MIDDLE: The Challenge of Middle Level Education

Charles C. Robinson

INTRODUCTION

There is widespread evidence that a mismatch exists between what middle level schools offer and what 10 to 14 year olds need. More and more of these “early adolescents” are experimenting with drugs and alcohol, becoming pregnant, and dropping out. These issues and the increased incidents of violence at this age cause many parents to view with anxiety their children’s transition from the relatively safe elementary school to the unknown, often maligned middle or junior high school. Prospective teachers most often choose not to work in the middle grades because they don’t think they can work with “those kids”. Who are these 10 to 14 year old kids that are caught in the middle, no longer children, but not yet adults? Providing

educational programs that best serve their needs is the challenge of middle level education today.

CHARACTERISTICS OF EARLY ADOLESCENTS

Like the middle child, students in the middle grades have struggled to establish their own identity. They have been labeled “tweeners”, “in-between-agers”, and “transescents” by educators trying to describe this special time between childhood and adulthood. Psychologists describe 10 to 14 year-olds as youngsters in the stage of development that begins prior to the onset of puberty and extends through the early stages of adolescence. The quiz that follows is designed to help you clarify your own ideas about these “early adolescents”.



PHOTO: CHARLES C. ROBINSON

A QUIZ ABOUT EARLY ADOLESCENTS

Circle True or False

Early adolescents...

- | | |
|------------|--|
| True False | 1. Gain 8-10 pounds and 2 inches on average each year |
| True False | 2. Are often awkward and clumsy |
| True False | 3. Are not concerned with awareness of sexual maturation |
| True False | 4. Develop stronger peer allegiances as family allegiances diminish |
| True False | 5. Vacillate between a desire for regulation and a demand for independence |
| True False | 6. Accept criticism well |
| True False | 7. Are reluctant to test the confines of adult value systems |
| True False | 8. Are formal, abstract thinkers |
| True False | 9. Face much academic pressure |
| True False | 10. Are unique |

The answers to #1, #2 are both true. More dramatic changes that occur during early adolescence than at any other time except during fetal development and during the first two years of life. A period of accelerated physical development during these years usually begins between 8 and 12 in girls and 9 and 13 in boys and lasts until ages 15 to 18 in girls and 17 to 20 in boys. Because bone growth is faster than muscle develop-

ment, there is a lack of coordination — awkward, clumsy behavior is normal. Early adolescents really can't sit still for long periods of time. While girls are usually taller and tend to reach full maturity sooner, a wide range of individual physical differences appear.

The answer to #3 is false. Early adolescents are extremely aware of anything and everything having to do with sexual maturation. They are very sensitive to the changing contours of their own and others' bodies, and worry about any deviations from "normality". Educators and parents need to help them understand that growth is an individual process and must be accepted realistically.

The answers to #4 and #5 are both true. Even though it is normal for the base of affiliation to broaden from the family to the peer group, early adolescents experience anxiety as they begin to devalue the family in favor of their peers. They want to be allowed to make their own decisions, yet authority still remains within the family (or school). The desire for social acceptance leads to the feeling that the will of the group is paramount, often resulting in cruel behavior toward those not in the group. Group conformity in dress, speech and behavior often causes conflict not only with existing norms, but also, with adolescent need for individuality and self-esteem.

#6 and #7 are both false. Early adolescents do not accept criticism well. They are extremely thin-skinned because the well established view of self developed at the elementary level has been shattered and must be completely reformed. No longer do they see things in terms of black and white. At age 8 they were willing to accept the adult warning that smoking and using alcohol and drugs was bad for them. At age 12 they see their friends doing these things and want to experiment themselves, both to be accepted and to test the limits of adult values.

#8 is false. Most early adolescents are concrete thinkers and need hands-on experiences to understand new concepts. They are often not capable of understanding the abstract nature of subjects like algebra and grammar. I was recently discussing with two 14 year olds the meaning of the expression "to stop smoking cold turkey." I was amused but not surprised by their absolutely serious reply, "I guess they ate cold turkey to help them stop smoking."

#9 is true. Early adolescents do face a lot of academic pressure, as they are often told, "From now on grades count", or, "You can't get into college (or be a doctor) unless you get good grades." Many put pressure on themselves — it is not uncommon for ulcers or school phobia to develop. In reaction, many early adolescents dismiss those who succeed academically by calling them "nerds", or saying that it's "uncool" to get good grades. For the first time many of them have been put into "tracks" that often determine both the quality of teaching that they will receive and their academic future.

Finally, # 10 is clearly true. While they share common physical, intellectual, social and emotional characteristics with students at the elementary and secondary levels, early adolescents are unique. They therefore deserve their own distinct level of schooling — the middle school.

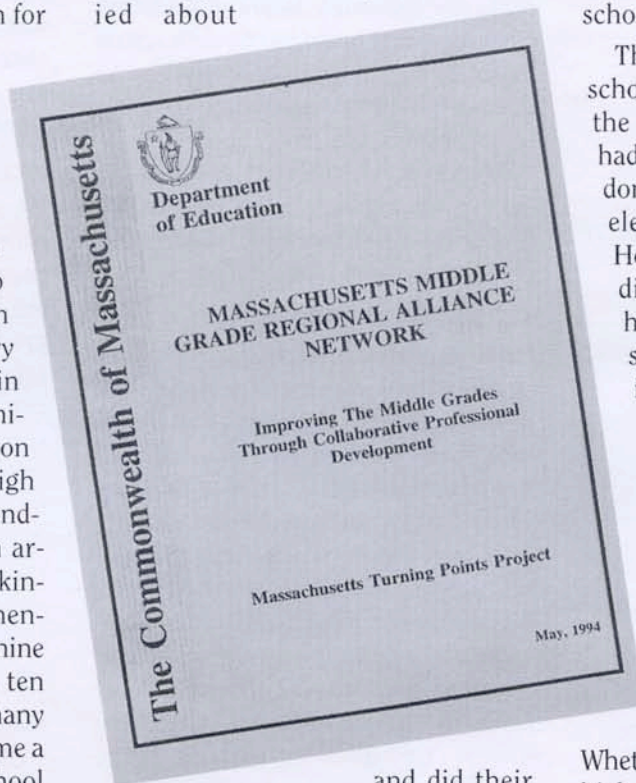
JUNIOR HIGH VS MIDDLE SCHOOL

As American education entered the twentieth century, there were two distinct levels of pre-college education, elementary and secondary. Nearly all elementary or grammar schools contained grades one through eight, while the secondary or high school level contained grades nine through twelve. It was not uncommon for many students

to enter the work force after completing grammar school. In the 1920s, President Charles Elliot of Harvard led a movement to change this system by suggesting another level of schooling between the elementary and the secondary so that high school subjects such as algebra, biology, and foreign languages could be introduced earlier to students to better prepare them for college. As this concept of a "junior high school" became more popular, another very different rationale for this change emerged. Many educators felt that a junior high school was needed not to introduce high school courses earlier, but to help students make the transition from the elementary to the secondary level, and to provide assistance in choosing careers. By 1950 the dominant pattern in American education had changed to include a junior high between the elementary and secondary level, with the most common arrangement being a grade one (or kindergarten) through grade six elementary school, a grade seven through nine junior high school, and a grades ten through twelve high school. In many rural areas grades 7-12 often became a regionalized junior/senior high school housed in the same building, perhaps with a separate junior high wing.

Even as the junior high school concept was developing, dissatisfaction with it was being expressed by many educators. Its rationale had never been clearly established. Was it to be a school where high school subjects were introduced earlier, or one that assisted students in transition, or in making career choices? Or, was it to be all of these? No clear philosophy of junior high school education or body of research emerged. Instead many junior high schools began to copy the high

schools, becoming mini-high schools with interscholastic athletic teams (usually wearing the high school hand-me-down uniforms), formal proms and graduation ceremonies, and with a curriculum heavily influenced by the high school. Teachers were not prepared specifically for teaching in the junior high school. They studied about



and did their training in high schools. They often "served their time" in the junior high until a position opened in the high school so that they could "move up." In many communities when there was a need for a new school, a new high school was built and the old high school became the junior high.

During the fifties, criticism of the junior high school became so widespread that many educators began to call for a new school in the middle. The middle school concept that developed in the early sixties was more a reaction to what the junior high school had become (a mini-high school), than a dissatisfaction with the idea that a dis-

tinct level of schooling between the elementary and secondary level was needed. The rise of the middle school concept was a direct result of the failure of the junior high school to become recognized as a separate, unique level of education. Had the junior high school accomplished this, there would have been no need for the middle school.

The rise and fall of the junior high school took less than fifty years. By the mid-seventies the middle school had replaced the junior high as the dominant type of school between the elementary and secondary school. How is the middle school concept different from that of the junior high? Why are there so many schools still called junior high or intermediate not middle? Will the middle school meet the same fate as the junior high, and, if so, what will replace it?

CHARACTERISTICS OF EFFECTIVE MIDDLE SCHOOLS

Today the name of the school is not important. Whether it is called intermediate, junior high or middle school does not matter. What does matter is that the school supports the "middle school concept;" that is, it provides an educational program that best meets the developmental needs of early adolescents. In the past thirty years scores of studies have been published that have attempted to identify what the characteristics of an effective middle school are. If you were to walk into a middle level school today, how would you know if it was effective? What would you look for? A list with a brief description of what I believe to be the essential characteristics of an effective middle school follows.

1. Teachers and students are organized into interdisciplinary teams. To ease the transition from the typical one teacher, self-contained elementary plan to the multi-teacher departmentalized high school, teams of 4-6 teachers and 100-150 students are formed. The development of integrated thematic units across disciplines is supported by small classes and by common schedules and planning time.

2. All students have an adult adviser. To support personal growth and intellectual development, students need to develop trusting relationships with adults. Adviser-advisee programs ensure that all students have a faculty member who serves as an adviser, advocate, or liaison, and who is available to them as needed.

3. Instruction focuses on process not content. Curriculum is designed to emphasize critical thinking, healthy living, and ethical and responsible citizenship. Students learn to reflect upon the learning process and to develop study skills which help them become life-long learners.

4. All students have the chance to succeed in all school programs. Access to all programs is made available to all students regardless of prior achievement or pace of learning. The elimination of academic tracking and development of heterogeneous, inclusive classrooms, as well as the use of flexible and block scheduling support student access to all programs.

5. Decisions about early adolescents are made by those who know them best. Teachers have a greater influence in decisions about curriculum and instruction. The school governance system is based on shared decision-making and site-based management. The school's administrators are instructional leaders who support teachers and advocate for early adolescents.

6. All students have access to health services. In order to learn, early adolescents need to be healthy. The school should promote healthy living, and provide access to all health services.

7. Families are actively involved in the school. Parents are not only informed and involved, but have meaningful roles in governance. Opportunities for school-home collaboration are provided. In an atmosphere of mutual respect and trust, schools and families work together to ensure success for all students.

8. Responsibility for student success is shared by the school and the community. Community youth, health and social services work with the school. Community organizations support the school's programs and augment resources for teachers and students. Career exploration is encouraged by community organizations and businesses that visit the school and invite students to visit them.

REFLECTIONS

After more than twenty years experience as a middle level educator, I am increasingly hopeful about the future of middle level education. National and regional professional organizations are actively involved in providing professional development opportunities for educators while adding to the growing body of research in this area. There seems to be a readiness on the part of many communities to support the "middle school concept" and move away from the traditional junior high model which is still widespread in New England.

Educational reforms at the national and state level are based on philosophies and curriculum frameworks which are compatible with the middle school concept. More and more educators embrace the middle school concept as the best way to meet the needs of early adolescents.

However, much needs to be done. Colleges and universities must provide better programs to prepare educators to work with early adolescents. Currently, there are very few undergraduate or graduate programs devoted exclusively to middle level education. Society in general needs to realize how critical the middle years are, and allocate more resources to supporting programs for early adolescents. Parents need to be open to change and realize that schools today need to be significantly different from the schools that they attended. Families, community organizations and businesses need to go beyond fund raising to become actively involved partners in schools.

Today, the challenge of middle level education is not in determining what programs are best for early adolescents — we already know what works but rather, bringing all the shareholders together to ensure that appropriate programs are implemented and supported. Parents, educators and community organizations must work together to ensure each middle grade student's success.



Charles Robinson is a professor in the Department of Secondary Education and Professional Programs.