

Insights into the Middle School Years

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The middle school years are the most critical period for the individual to synthesize a rational, positive, personal value system. Indicated here are psychological insights that have implications for school organization, curriculum design, and staff preparation.

If any *one* thing is clear about the middle school, it is the fact that it is not yet institutionalized, at least in a formal bureaucratic sense. The concept still means many things to many people.

The logic of grouping students together in a unique school setting during grades five-eight heavily depends on a combination of common sense and extensive research about the *social, physical, intellectual, and psychological* characteristics of young people in the 10-14 age range.

First, common sense suggests the reasonableness of grouping students together when they share certain broadly defined qualities or attributes. This facilitates the provision of a rich and specialized curriculum tailored to meet their unique needs. Common sense also dictates the logic of economy in organizing instruction, materials, and facilities within a narrower range of learner requirements. The four-year high school illustrates this logic as does the four-year university. For the middle school, it equally means that a teacher specialist can concentrate on one or two discrete disciplines as opposed to the impossible role of a curriculum generalist represented by the conventional homeroom teacher.

Second, from a research standpoint, an extensive amount of knowledge has been gained about the developmental characteristics of the middle-school-age student. For example, there is, perhaps, no more critical point than this in an



Photos clockwise from top: The big question, "Who am I?"; The student establishes a clearly defined feminine or masculine sex role and ordinarily seeks meaning for that role in heterosexual settings; and, The middle school should allow an easily accessible forum for individuals to share and confirm the legitimacy of their feelings and emotions. Photos: Robert Dodds



individual's life for the synthesizing of values and attitudes about self. It is also at this stage in one's growth that fundamental questions are answered regarding a wide array of personal and social issues. Each student must be provided with instruction and guidance that is uniquely focused on these priorities. This means that the middle school staff must possess special competencies related to child growth and development. The likelihood of effectively employing these competencies is maximized when the age-grade level span of the school is more compactly defined.

Let us look at some of the critical psychological characteristics of the middle school student. This is not to gainsay the importance of the social, physical, and intellectual demands of this age group. It is my conviction, however, that too little is being said about the *psychological* imperatives of students in grades five-eight. These have profound implications for school organization, curriculum design, and staff preparation.

Most of us get our psychological insights from the school of experience. We rely on a gutsy, intuitive approach that stands us in good stead most of the time. When it doesn't, we shrug it off or find some other coping strategy that will allow us to rationalize our way through with as little loss of face as possible.

This approach may be the best the lay person can do but it isn't adequate for those of us who subscribe to the idea that we are, indeed, practicing professionals.

Why the homily? Simple logic dictates the fact that the middle school grades constitute, in some important ways, the most crucial and most formative period in the life of an individual. Wise and sympathetic curriculum planning can spell the difference between a confused and negative self-concept as opposed to a life that is rich and promising because the student was helped through a jungle of self-doubt and anxiety to emerge with a clarified and rational value system.

Characteristics of the Middle School Students

Let us examine some of the psychological characteristics of the middle schooler and consider what kinds of inferences can be drawn for curriculum planning, school organization, and staff development.

- *The student experiences turbulent, shifting, and frequently conflicting emotions.*

Provision of a strong teacher-counselor role is suggested as a practical approach for understanding and responding to the periodic crises that arise from this characteristic. From a practical curriculum and instructional standpoint, peer group discussions of feelings and emotions should be a predictable part of social studies, health education, home economics, and generalized guidance activities. The use of peer group settings for this purpose is consistent with research that stresses the heavy dependence of the 10- to 14-year-old individual on his/her peers when testing reality. The middle school should allow an easily accessible forum for individuals to confirm the legitimacy of their feelings and emotions and to diminish fear and other expressions of anxiety that occur when there is no means to share, compare, and reaffirm one's self-image.

- *The student has a tendency to lack self-confidence, to appear moody and introspective; there is often an all-out quest for answers to the big question "Who am I?"*

The rapid physical, emotional, and related hormonal changes experienced at this age level leave a legacy of highs and lows. Shifting feelings, especially when they are not fully understood by the individuals experiencing them, undermine self-confidence. This happens at any age when the circumstances are similar; the dilemma is exacerbated for pre- and mid-pubescent young persons. Moodiness and introspection are easily understood as manifestations of self-doubt, ambiguity, and uncertainty. Any dimension of the curriculum that has as its purpose the reaffirmation of the individual as a person of worth and ultimate potential should be encouraged: in fact it is hard to justify any middle school instruction that does not have such a goal as central to its effort. The enormous needs of this age group to gain self-confidence suggest that every available resource should be focused on efforts to achieve this goal.

- *The opinions of one's peers are cause either for joy or dismay. The norm of conformity to peer behavior can result in intolerance of others' apparent differences, especially when these do not meet peer standards.*

Sensitive teachers and those in a guidance relationship must first of all seek to understand the meaning behind the importance of peer approval. The very ambiguity and uncertainty that goes along with the student's transition from childhood to young adulthood creates compelling reasons for seeking safety in the middle of the flock. This particular phenomenon is not reserved for this age group; it helps to directly explain the history of ghettos and enclaves that human beings have historically carved out of their social and geographical environments. The wise teacher and counselor will turn the instinctive response of students to seek psychological shelter within the values and attitudes of peers into a positive opportunity for understanding a variety of social phenomena.

Excellent possibilities exist here for explorations into the areas of multicultural education, social stratification, values clarification, law education, and many others. The emerging capacity of students of this age level to think inductively and abstractly contributes directly to the potential of carefully planned learning episodes in such curriculum areas as social studies, health education, and literature.

- *There is often an unpredictability in the student's response to adult affection with a strong tendency to show either rejection or ambivalence.*

There is an old axiom that says that "each of us tends to respond to others as we perceive ourselves being responded to." There is an understandable temptation on the part of teachers and parents to withdraw love from children when it is not reciprocated. In fact, we may do this at any age. To respond in kind to the middle schooler's ambiguity relative to adult affection is to withdraw a critical level of emotional support; adult anger and frustration must be subordinated to a mature understanding of the temporary and transitional nature of the student's response of rejection.

Conflicts and tensions that are the product of the student's search for autonomy, independence, and peer group approbation have the potential to make all adult influences suspect. There must be continuing, unequivocal evidence of adult caring and concern apparent to the student at all times. This is not to suggest a maudlin, emotional response; it is to be a mature, sensitive,



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consistent expression of love and acceptance that transcends the most provocative and rejective behavior. It can be equally present in the teacher's responses of anger or in the close moments of affinity that teachers and students tend to remember and cherish for a lifetime.

The curriculum meaning for the teacher's response to the student's unpredictability and ambivalence in relation to adult affection is less evident than the instructional meaning. Students should have access to a variety of adults in their day-to-day learning experiences. The likelihood of mixing and matching adult and student personality and mood styles, at least for part of each school day, is maximized when there is a continuing opportunity for significant student-teacher encounters. Every learning situation should have enough length of time associated with it to build in a guarantee of positive affective exchanges between students and teachers.

- *The impact of rapid physical growth and*

accelerated hormone changes can produce skewed responses in individual student behavior patterns.

The merry-go-round effect in terms of a student's physical and emotional responses to rapid physical and hormonal changes moves on a continuum from high humor to tragedy. Happily, most children survive in spite of this potential period of trauma in their lives. The mystery of the unfolding butterfly (or stringbean) may leave teachers and parents, alike, in a state of awe. Most parents have to deal with one or two such metamorphoses at a time. The middle school may have 700 cocoons suspended from the ceiling at any given moment.

The capacity to deal with individual differences becomes an imperative for the middle school teacher. At no other point in growing up is there less likelihood for sameness or homogeneity. Provision for differentiated assignments, semi-independent study and small group learning situations are each equally important. While large group instruction is a necessity, the skewness of individual differences and behavior patterns can, in part, be compensated for by at least some low-key semi-private and quiet study time for the student. A search for creative ways to baffle sight and sound is a priority consideration in defining the physical characteristics of learning situations that are intended to address more subtle and abstract curriculum goals.

- *Personal values and attitudes inculcated in the home or primary grades tend to be questioned and frequently rejected. "Other imposed" values gradually give way to one's own value system.*

Unless the testing of values and attitudes is recognized as normal and desirable, it rapidly lights the fuse for tension building. Regrettably, this happens more often than we would like to admit. The emergence of logical thinking and critical, abstractive intellectual capacities has natural consequences in the questioning and testing of previously-held beliefs, feelings, and attitudes. The ancient quest of the philosopher kings was to discover what is *real*, what is *true*, and what is *good*. Each of us is, in a very real sense, a miniature philosopher king and no more "regal" period occurs for many of us than during that time, which Piaget describes so well, when we move from fixed, concrete thought to a level of abstrac-

tion that opens up the awesomeness of our own spiritual development.

Trouble is certain to ensue when adult authority figures insist on the absoluteness of a value or attitude without allowing the student to examine the logic of the position that sustains that value or attitude. Because the middle school years represent such a crucial formative period in the crystallization of one's adult value system, a curriculum priority exists to provide the opportunity for every student to learn values clarification process skills.

A variety of values clarification modes exists. Teachers who have not had formal training in this teaching strategy need staff development help. Too many adults have never learned appropriate ways to examine, affirm, modify, or reject their personal values that are holdovers from childhood. Teachers find that they do not need to be fearful that using values clarification techniques will somehow destroy the individual, the family, or society. Many, perhaps the majority, of our most cherished values can be defended from empirical or research bases that cause them to emerge stronger than ever following their "testing by fire" through values clarification approaches. Parents, especially, need to be helped to understand the heart of the values clarification process. Where this relatively new dimension of the curriculum has failed is in those instances where community anxiety has prevailed in the name of protecting children from putative, insidious, or perverting influences.

- *The student is able to grasp moral and ethical subtleties such as reality, truth, and goodness. There is a developing sense of social responsibility beyond that which involves self, family, and one's immediate peer group. The student can become fiercely idealistic.*

Values clarification skills and related processes in the hands of a sensitive, humane teacher, need not in any way lead to tension between school and home. When this occurs, good ethical, professional practice has been compromised.

A further vital consideration in the use of values clarification strategies is to help the student not only identify and affirm discrete values but also to help that same student move toward a synthesis of personal values that gives order



"The impact of rapid physical growth and accelerated hormone changes can produce skewed responses in individual student behavior patterns." Photo: Staff

and rationality to his/her life. Values should not exist in isolation; they should, when taken together, form a mosaic that gives beauty, dignity, and consistency to life. These statements are couched in idealized terms but this is what values are all about. *Every* middle school teacher should recognize that values clarification skills must be an integral part of his/her arsenal of teaching strategies. When we remember that the middle school years introduce the most critical formative period for the individual in the synthesis of a lifelong value system, it is cause for sober reflection. The middle school curriculum *must* give this matter exceptionally high priority.

- *The student establishes a clearly defined feminine or masculine sex role and ordinarily seeks meaning for that role in heterosexual settings. Hormonal changes, acceptance by peers, and influences of the mass media contribute heavily to the student's self-concept vis-à-vis his or her sex role.*

It is in the area of affirming one's sex role that each individual faces fundamental and frequently conflicting choices. This is emphatically true in a pluralistic society in which young people are continuously bombarded through television, the printed page, and the actions of parents and friends with alternatives to socially normative sex roles. By the time a student has reached the middle school years, he or she has experienced vicariously a spectrum of adult sexual behavior beyond brief description. Television viewing, alone, has allowed the student to amass a repertoire of several thousand viewing episodes largely undifferentiated by appropriate parental screening. Arthur Berger points out in his book, *The TV-Guided American*, that by the time an average child reaches 18 years of age that child has seen about 22,000 hours of TV programming and 600,000 commercials totaling some three years of his/her life.

Given the nature of network programming emphases, the middle schooler's knowledge of typical and atypical sex roles and role relationships is extensive. The student's television "education" is supplemented by highly visible and often localized efforts to "liberate" women and men from traditional stereotypes and to normalize lesbian and male homosexual behavior. It is little wonder that young people, who are in their most

formative years from the standpoint of the synthesis of personal values, desperately need the help of competent, sensitive, caring adults to give guidance in finding their way through the jungle of society's sex role contradictions.

• *The middle school years typically represent for the student a tenuous transition from childhood to adolescence and young adulthood. The difficulties of this transition are accentuated by value conflicts within a highly pluralistic society.*

The middle school curriculum must facilitate the emergence of young people with clearly defined, positive feminine or masculine sex roles, and knowledge of the meaning of those roles within the context of healthy heterosexual relationships. It is inexcusable for middle-school-age students to be left to stumble through this period of their lives without access to teachers and counselors with skills commensurate to the task of providing sound sex education and equally effective instruction in related personal-social issues. Middle school social studies, health education, home economics, and guidance programs should be linked together in a planned program that blends knowledge, values clarification, and sensible, empathetic instructional techniques. Every student must establish a positive, appropriate, and clearly defined sex role with an accompanying set of personal values sufficient to enable him/her to effectively deal with the issues and ambiguities of adult living in a highly pluralistic society.

I have already commented freely, and I do so once again, that the middle school years ordi-

narily represent the single most critical period for the individual in his/her entire life for synthesizing a rational, positive personal value system. The significance of this fact should preempt all other considerations when the "hard curriculum decisions" are made in each middle school.

An exciting thing about the middle school movement is that all of us who are involved in thinking about and planning for its design in our own communities are also having a small but important part to play in the history of education. We are helping to shape the future of the middle school in America, and the movement will carry with it a little of what we are able to offer in the way of wit and wisdom for as long as the concept endures. [E]



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