CHAPTER 4

CREATING QUALITY IN THE MIDDLE SCHOOL CURRICULUM

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INTRODUCTION

Little more than a decade after the first junior high schools opened their doors, leading reformers like Thomas Briggs (1920) and Leonard Kobos (1927) were already warning that the most difficult challenge facing the fledgling movement would be in working on the curriculum. Unless a curriculum was organized for the junior high school itself, not simply as a prelude to the high school, the institution would make little headway toward providing an appropriate education for young adolescents. As it turns out, they were partially, though not completely, correct in this forecast.

Though the evolution of middle level schools from the junior high school of those years to the middle schools of today has seen its shares of ups and downs, there can be little question that substantial progress has been made (Cuban, 1992). Improved understanding of young adolescents and the subsequent development of structural arrangements like team teaching have helped to make middle level schools in many places increasingly more appropriate for that age group (Lee & Smith, 1993; McEwin,

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Dickinson, & Jenkins, 1996). Yet the matter of the curriculum remains largely unsettled and unsettling (Beane, 1993; Dickinson, 2001; Powell & Skoog, 1995; Powell, Skoog, & Troutman, 1996). As those early reformers predicted, the lack of an appropriate curriculum continues to frustrate the lives of young adolescents and a great many of the adults who live and work with them in school and at home.

As we think about today's middle school curriculum, we must remember that the junior high school, at its roots, was created out of a rare alliance of competing cultural and political pressure groups (Kliebard 1986). As momentum built to replace the 8–4 elementary to high school grade configuration with 6–3–3 plan, a variety of groups saw an opening for their interests. Higher education officials, for example, saw an opportunity to begin college preparatory courses earlier. Social reformers hoped to keep children in school, and thus diminish child labor abuses by offering a curriculum more appealing to seventh and eighth graders than the elementary school offered. Industrial leaders sought to have trade skills and vocational guidance offered to young people who would leave school at the end of ninth grade to enter their factories. And developmentalists, by far the least influential of these groups, imagined this moment to be their opportunity to solidify a place for "early adolescence" in the psychological and educational structure. Unfortunately the academic and vocational aspects of the curriculum were cast according to the social and economic class backgrounds of students thus involving the junior high school in the long and continuing history of social inequity in schools in general (Beane, 1993).

Given this context we are reminded that the junior high school was intended to be what its name implied: a "junior" version of the high school. Thus the long struggle to create a curriculum specifically appropriate for young adolescents was bound to be complicated from the start for it has always been a struggle against the middle level's own history and those who remain loyal to it. This does not mean that no progress has been made on the curriculum question. In the middle of the 20th century many junior high schools across the United States and elsewhere centered the curriculum on "core" programs organized around problem-oriented issues and themes rather than the separate subject approach handed down from the high school (Bossing & Cramer, 1965; Faunce & Bossing, 1951; Vars, 1991).

Likewise in the 1990s, a new wave of interest brought the curriculum question to the forefront again and with it renewed interest in more integrative approaches. Although, for the most part, the curriculum of middle schools remains much the same as the one that dominated the junior high schools, namely a collection of academic and "exploratory" subjects named much like the ones offered in high schools and colleges and generally concerned with mastery of some portion of the content and vocabulary within

each. Summarizing data from a national, one-day "shadow study" of sixth graders, Lounsbury and Johnston (1988) reported:

> The students' day is intellectually fragmented, and they are seldom called upon to utilize learning from one subject in another area . . . Much attention is given to coverage and retention of content; little instruction makes use of higher order thinking skills. (p. 41)

Fifteen years later, there is no evidence to suggest their description does not still apply. Nevertheless, contemporary middle school policy makers continue in their efforts to push for reform at the middle level. Most recently, high-profile groups such as the National Middle School Association have called for a middle school that is "academically challenging, developmentally responsive, and socially equitable." The purpose of this paper is to explore the question, "What kind of curriculum is academically challenging, developmentally responsive, and socially equitable? In answering that question, though, I first want to expand and clarify the way those conditions ought to be used.

The first condition, "academically challenging," typically refers to the presence of a curriculum (and teaching and assessment) that is "standards-based." But standards come in different forms including some that are merely a collection of facts and skills whose real challenge, often mistaken for intellectual rigor, lies in their remoteness from the personal or social needs, interests, problems, and concerns of middle school students who are, after all, young adolescents and not scholars or graduate students. The academic challenge in a middle school curriculum lies not in painful abstraction, but rather in its capacity to engage the intellectual imagination and curiosity of young adolescents. As such, it should encourage them to make good use of their minds in broadening their understanding of themselves and their world. A lesser kind of challenge created mainly out of academic ritual and resulting mostly in drudgery hardly seems like one worth pursuing. For this reason, I want to add "intellectually stimulating" to the condition of "academically challenging."

The second condition, "developmental responsiveness" typically means that arrangements within the school take account of the fact that young adolescents find themselves at or about puberty. In this moment, most experience increased concern for peer relationships, heightened attention to self-identity, desire for greater independence, and increasingly complex awareness of value and moral questions. Too often, though, middle level educators and others seem to view young adolescents not as real people experiencing a lifespan transition, but as rootless and superficial "hormones with feet." In this case the concept of developmental responsiveness is left open to narrow discussions of how to respond to what appears in

school as short attention spans, preoccupation with peer acceptance, and lack of attention to homework and textbooks. For this reason I want to add the concept of "developmental respectfulness" to the understanding of "responsiveness." This means that middle level educators would want to know not just the generic and statistical descriptions of young adolescents in general, but also the personally and socially significant agendas and perspectives emerging in the lives of those in their own schools. As we will see, respecting these agendas and perspectives can provide important clues to a high quality curriculum.

The third condition, "socially equitable," is long overdue in a middle level discourse that has mainly focused on physical and psychological dimensions of young adolescents. The fact is that junior high schools often played a leading role in the school inequities as they sorted and selected young people into various academic and vocational tracks, mainly according to race, class, and gender. Yet forging a curriculum that rejects these practices in favor of more equitable ones does not push far enough since social inequities are not simply school matters. I want to stretch the concept of "socially equitable" to embrace the idea of "socially conscious." In this sense, we need to think about a curriculum that not only avoids internal inequities but which consciously engages young people in thinking about and working on social issues and problems. For the middle school, overcoming inequity should begin at "home," but it should not end there.

Reframed in this way, then, the contemporary version of a high quality middle school is one that is academically challenging and intellectually stimulating, developmentally responsive and respectful, and socially equitable and conscious. As we now turn to the question of what kind of curriculum such a school would have, it is important to remember that these three conditions might be met in a variety of ways. Thus the task is not to describe a single approach or "a curriculum," but to instead name some of the characteristics of any particular curriculum focused on these conditions.

A GENERAL EDUCATION

In the interest of equity and developmental responsiveness, a middle school curriculum should emphasize a general education for all young adolescents. Put another way, what is offered in the school program would be intended for all students and all students would be involved in it. This does not mean that all young adolescents would do exactly the same thing in the same way or be expected to derive the same meanings from various curriculum experiences. However, it does mean that the important ideas, content, skills, resources, and so on provided by the school, would be

shared by all with the intention of enhancing and equalizing access to knowledge, outcomes, and offerings for all young adolescents.

A democratic society to some extent depends upon all citizens having some shared understandings and experiences regarding the persistent and critical ideas of democratic living. The kind of general education as necessary to meet the conditions outlined earlier would present just such an experience. As we will see later, it would involve exploring self and societal issues, collaborative problem-solving, authentic projects, and other activities associated with democratic living while also introducing and applying important content and skills from the disciplines of knowledge and popular culture (Beane, 1993).

A general education curriculum is also intended to avoid fragmenting young adolescents into various programs or tracks based on special interests, abilities, or talents. Young adolescents are not ready to make decisions about their futures, even though they may express early preferences or inclinations. Moreover, adults have a dismal record of predicting what those futures might be. To force young adolescents to make such decisions or, worse yet, to decide for them is one way in which some curriculum arrangements have been developmentally inappropriate for young adolescents.

The move toward more specialized curriculum offerings based upon individual differences or interests has also been one of the main ways by which social and economic inequities have been sustained in the school. To understand this we need look no further than limited Algebra sections in the eighth grade in schools with diverse populations. Too often, such sections are disproportionately filled with social and economically privileged students. Moreover, including these tracked courses as well as specialized performing musical groups and other single section classes in the regular school schedule usually interferes with diversity in class and team groupings across the whole school, disrupting the general education curriculum, differentiating access to knowledge, and unfairly judging the future possibilities and aspirations of young adolescents. A moral and ethical middle school curriculum simply cannot allow these kinds of inequities.

In examining existing curriculum arrangements or proposals for new ones, then, middle level educators and policymakers need to ask:

- Do all students have access to the important ideas, content, skills, and resources provided by the school?
- Does the curriculum encourage diverse, heterogeneous groupings or does it lead toward tracking?
- Do specialized arrangements for a few students tend to dominate the program and schedule or is priority given to those that are meant for all students?

- Does the curriculum encourage all students to have high aspirations or does it suggest some students have limited career opportunities?

FRAMED FOR YOUNG ADOLESCENTS

Young adolescents are neither children nor mature adolescents. Nor are they adults, scholars, graduate students, or paid laborers. They are young adolescents and they cannot be otherwise. Thus the curriculum of the middle school should be framed for them rather than as if they are one of those other groups. When we engage them with content, skills, values, social issues, or any other kind of knowledge, we have an obligation to do so in terms that are meaningful, appropriate, and accessible for them as young adolescents.

As described above, most young adolescents are experiencing considerable change in perspectives about themselves and the world around them (Eccles & Midgley, 1989). Among these is expanding awareness of self, especially in relation to others (Brinthaupt & Lipka, 2002). This is the time when the self becomes defined not so much as the "I am what I own" or "I am what I do" of childhood as the "I am who I am" of expanded awareness (Beane & Lipka, 1987). Arnold (1985) takes this one step further in saying that:

> Young adolescents are asking some of the most profound questions human beings can ever ask: Who am I? What should I be? What should I do? To respond to them effectively we must forge a curriculum that frequently deals with their own questions. (p. 14)

In addition to this expanding sense of self, young adolescents are also becoming increasingly aware of and concerned about value and moral issues. Teachers who have involved young adolescents in curriculum planning (Alexander, McAvoy, & Carr, 1995; Beane, 1997; Brodhagen, 1995) by asking what questions they have about themselves and the world have reported that they consistently ask questions like:

> What will happen to the earth in the future? Why are there so many crimes? Will racism ever end? Will the United States ever be out of debt? Will cures be found for cancer and AIDS? Why are schools the way they are? Will the rain forests be saved? Why is there so much prejudice? Why are there so many poor people? Will there ever be a time when no one is poor? When will gang violence stop? Will there ever be world peace? Why do people hurt/kill each other?

Moreover, when the same young adolescents are asked what themes their questions suggest, they again consistently name themes like: Jobs, Money, Careers, Living in the Future, Environmental Problems, Conflict and Violence, "ISMs" and Prejudice, Government and Politics, Outer Space, Economy, and Drugs, Diseases, and Health (Beane, 1997; Brodhagen, 1995).

Some teachers have used young adolescent questions and themes like these to plan their full curriculum. Others have used them to inform decisions within teacher planned units or even traditional subject area courses. The point is that young adolescents are concerned about significant self and societal issues and those ought to be taken into account in the middle school curriculum if it is to be intellectually stimulating, developmentally respectful, and socially conscious.

Two important points are suggested by the case for this kind of curriculum focus. First, the questions and themes just cited are obviously not those of people who are simply "hormones with feet" or "brain dead," two descriptors that are often applied to young adolescents. On the contrary, those questions and themes are significant enough to organize or at least play a major role in a curriculum that meets the three conditions we are considering here. Young adolescents will not answer such questions or deal with issues at the same technical level as scholars or graduate students, but they can and have dealt with them at sufficiently sophisticated levels to maintain academic integrity.

This observation leads to the second point which is that such questions and themes offer a sufficient purpose for a middle school curriculum. In keeping with the earlier point about the uniqueness of young adolescence, I want to argue that a middle school curriculum should be concerned with the here and now of young adolescent lives. We need look no further for a curriculum rationale. The purpose of the middle school curriculum should not be to prepare young adolescents for high school or college. Nor should the school be a farm team for the labor force needs of corporations. Rather the purpose of the middle school curriculum should be to help young adolescents explore life as they are living it and to have the best middle school experience possible.

In examining existing curriculum arrangements or proposals for new ones, then, middle level educators and policymakers need to ask:

- Do they provide space for the kind of self and societal questions that are on the minds of young adolescents?
- Do they emphasize themes, content, and skills appropriate for young adolescents?
- Do they frame knowledge in terms of what young adolescents are thinking about and experiencing at this time of their lives?

DEMOCRACY AND DIGNITY

The middle school is not some independent entity without obligation to the society of which it is a part. Therefore, it must take seriously the conditions of social equity and consciousness as well as the dignity of young adolescents. These are, after all, among the most important demands that democracy and democratic living make upon us. A curriculum that meets these conditions requires both content and process considerations.

With regard to content, we have already seen the possibilities for using significant personal and societal issues to organize themes, projects, and activities. A socially conscious curriculum cannot ignore these possibilities since one of the most important parts of democratic living involves the right and responsibility of citizens to participate in resolving such problems. Moreover, to the extent that such problems frequently involve social inequities, the use of problems and issues to organize the curriculum is the path by which the middle school might demonstrate its commitment to social equity.

In addition to content considerations, the obligation to democracy and democratic living requires that the middle school curriculum also emphasize at least two kinds of processes. One is the involvement of young adolescents in making decisions about matters that affect them. In a middle school, of course, this means including student voice in almost everything ranging from governance, to curriculum planning, to student-led conferences. The other kind of process is emphasis on collaborative learning through a variety of small and large group discussions, debates, and projects. In addition to their justification on democratic grounds, these kinds of collaborative arrangements also respond to the young adolescent urge for peer group connections (Beane & Lipka, 1987).

Finally, the conditions of democracy, equity, and respectfulness require the middle school curriculum to persistently emphasize and prize diversity. Too often the diversity among young adolescents in terms of physical, social, and intellectual development as well as race, class, gender, sexual orientation and other characteristics is seen as a problem or obstacle to overcome in order to create efficiency in the school. A democratic society prizes diversity because it is built partly upon the notion of individual rights, freedoms, and perspectives. For this reason the middle school curriculum is obliged to seek out and persistently use resources that prevent different views and perspectives on life. These may range from materials, to community resources, to the culturally based questions and concerns that diverse young people want considered in the curriculum. This obligation also speaks to the need for heterogeneous grouping in both large and small groups as well as diverse representation in governance groups and all school and classroom activities. This is extremely important as it is these

arrangements that constitute much of the "hidden" curriculum from which young adolescents learn a great deal about themselves and others, frequently more than from the planned curriculum.

In examining existing curriculum arrangements or proposals for new ones, then, middle level educators and policymakers need to ask:

- Do they provide opportunities for young adolescents to participate in decision-making?
- Do they encourage collaborative learning and problem solving?
- Do they prize the diversities among young adolescents and across the larger society?

PROBLEMS AND PROJECTS

If the separate subject curriculum and lecture-worksheet regimen worked, middle level schools would have a very different history. For these have been the pedagogical bread and butter at this level from the earliest junior high schools to the more recent middle schools (Lounsbury & Marani, 1964; Lounsbury, Marani, & Compton, 1980; Lounsbury & Johnston 1988). Granted middle school literature and conference programs are full of alternatives, but these would not be given so much program space if they were not so unusual. In order for a curriculum to be intellectually stimulating it must first engage the attention and then the curiosity of young adolescents. To be academically challenging it must provide opportunities to actually apply content and skills to authentic tasks that require their authentic use (Newman & Associates, 1996).

A high quality middle school curriculum begins with the understanding that content and skills are not learned well by most young adolescents, and not at all by others, without a meaningful context. We have already seen that it is possible for curriculum contexts to be created by inviting young adolescents to identify their self and societal concerns through collaborative planning with teachers. They may also be created by teachers themselves out of significant social problems such as environmental conditions, community issues, and current events. Such problems and concerns, in turn, can be used to organize major integrative themes or as the content of writing experiences, science experiments, literature discussions, art projects, or musical programs. Either way, they offer the potential to give purpose and direction to content and skills that otherwise are much like a jumble of jigsaw puzzle pieces with no picture (Beane, 1997; Vars, 1996). In summarizing a "solid body of research [that] has been accumulating," Iran-Nejad, McKeachie, and Berliner (1990) concluded that:

> The more meaningful, the more deeply or elaboratively processed, the more situated in context, and the more rooted in cultural, background, metacognitive, and personal knowledge an event is, the more readily it is understood, learned, and remembered. (p. 511)

Within these contexts, a high quality middle school curriculum emphasizes the use of projects as a means for both learning about and applying content and skills. This means that young adolescents are constantly involved in making, creating, dramatizing—in other words, "doing." The application of content and skills in large and small projects in this way gives them the kind of authentic purpose and use through which they may actually be "learned" (Blumenfeld, Soloway, & Marx, 1991). Projects also provide excellent opportunities to "perform knowledge" so that it is publicly shared and demonstrated in authentic and meaningful ways rather than through the artifice of tests and worksheets.

The use of problem-centered themes and activities as well as projects and performances also serve as the springboard to take the middle school curriculum past the separate subject approach and toward more interdisciplinary and integrative arrangements (Beane, 1997; Nagel, 1996). Ample evidence tells us that moving in this direction is a crucial step for the middle school curriculum. From a review of research, Thomas (2000) concluded that project-based learning:

> Seems to be equivalent or slightly better than other models of instruction for producing gains in general academic achievement and for developing lower-level cognitive skills in traditional subject matter areas . . . [and] for enhancing the quality of students' learning in subject matter areas, leading to the tentative claim that learning higher-level cognitive skills via [project-based learning] is associated with increased capability on the part of students for applying those learnings in novel, problem-solving contexts. (Pp. 34–35)

Moreover, experience in middle level schools reminds us constantly that young adolescents are not graduate students or scholars. They do not see the world or their concerns in strictly disciplinary categories (nor do most scholars, of course). Though the content and skills found within the traditional disciplines of knowledge are important for young adolescents to encounter, presenting them through a separate subject program both limits the possibilities they will be learned and diminishes their importance in the minds of young people. It is important to remember, however, that to be academically challenging and intellectually stimulating, the interdisciplinary and integrative contexts for content and skills must be of explicit significance as in the personal and societal issues and problems I have described. Selecting a theme simply because it sounds fun or exciting, runs

the risk of continuing to trivialize important content and skills and in doing so insufficiently challenging young adolescents.

In examining existing curriculum arrangements or proposals for new ones, then, middle level educators and policymakers need to ask:

- Do they involve questions and concerns that are on the minds of young adolescents?
- Do they involve issues of clear and compelling societal signi_cance?
- Do they engage a wide range of knowledge, skills, and resources?
- Do they pose opportunities for in-depth and extended projects?
- Do they present possibilities for a wide variety of activities, especially ones that involve collaborative problem solving?
- Do they present possibilities for personal and social action, both in school and outside the school?

PROSPECTS FOR A HIGH QUALITY MIDDLE SCHOOL CURRICULUM

Only a decade ago, we were in the midst of what seemed to be a renaissance of educational ideas like those I have described (Alexander et al., 1995; Beane, 1993; Brazee & Capelluti, 1995; Brodhagen, 1995; Pace, 1995; Stevenson & Carr, 1993; Vars, 1993). Around the country educators were talking about whole learning, democratic schools, interdisciplinary and integrative curriculum, detracking, problem-centered math and science, project-centered learning and many more ideas like them. In many cases these discussions were not simply about teaching methods. They were also about redirecting classrooms and schools toward more institutional equity, more meaningful learning, more culturally responsive content, more authentic assessments, and more socially conscious purposes. Conferences, journals, and workshops were full of these ideas and more than a few teachers and schools created projects and programs to bring them to life.

Ironically, though, that renaissance in schools was surrounded by a steady growth in the power of social and economic conservatives intent upon downsizing everything public and progressive and using legislative policy to move the schools a very different direction. Today, the progressive educational ideas so popular just a decade ago have fallen on hard times, marginalized in public and professional media, their advocates silenced by the language of the new accountability movement and censored by the growing authority of standards and testing.

In dismantling progressive initiatives, advocates of the new accountability have set up a convenient rhetorical contrast: their supposedly "rigorous" standards and tests versus the allegedly "soft" methods of progressives.

According to this argument, the quality of public education has been going steadily downhill since the 1960s. What is needed to make things right is a good dose of hard-nosed academic retrofitting. No matter, by the way, that the 1960s were actually a decade of some of the most conservative measures ever seen in education, including behavioral objectives, teaching machines, "structure of the disciplines," teacher-proof curriculum packages, and performance contracting for student achievement. What does matter is that in order to make the new accountability seem the road to salvation, progressive ideas had to be made to seem the enemy of educational progress. Flimsy as it is, the accountability "thesis" requires an "antithesis" to be believable.

This analysis might seem to have taken us away from the question of what constitutes a high quality middle school curriculum. However, it is exactly that political struggle over curriculum in general that makes the middle school question so difficult to pursue. Historically, its ambiguous position between the elementary and high school has made the middle level a favorite site for curriculum conflict. Attempts to satisfy competing pressures with a multipurpose program have done little to settle debates over such issues as general versus specialized education or separate subject versus integrative curriculum.

Today, the pursuit of a middle school curriculum that would satisfy the three conditions outlined earlier is further hindered by the emerging version of the standards movement that is less concerned with significant learning and more concerned with increased testing and centralized control through standardized curriculum and teaching methods. This movement suggests an ominous future for the possibility of a high quality middle school curriculum. As I have defined it, such a curriculum requires that teachers and other local educators have the flexibility to work with students to define relevant themes or topics, draw upon a wide range of knowledge, select worthwhile projects and activities, and create appropriate assessments. When externally imposed standards, tests, and methods eliminate that flexibility, the middle school curriculum is fundamentally corrupted, losing the potential to meet the conditions for high quality.

Now this would seem simply a wildly hypothetical argument were it not actually true in so many places, either because external mandates have had that effect directly or because local officials have insisted on standardized methods. Ironically, of course, there is substantial evidence to suggest that the structures and methods associated with the middle school concept generally have proved to be academically and affectively quite successful with young adolescents (Beane & Brodhagen, 2002; Felner et al., 1997). Whether this evidence has been ignored out of ignorance or political convenience, the net effect is that the middle school concept has been seriously downsized. Worse yet, middle school educators themselves seem

afraid to say out loud that the emerging wave of standards, tests, and standardization is antithetical to the middle school concept. In some classrooms and schools the kind of curriculum I have described is still alive, but almost always under growing duress from the demands of national, state, and local authorities.

If current trends persist, we will soon be able to describe the middle school curriculum as a collection of test-driven content and skills isolated in separate subject classes and superficially covered by teachers using standardized methods and materials. In other words, we will have precisely the curriculum that has historically failed young adolescents so miserably, especially those who are poor and of color. It is time for middle school educators and policy makers to raise some serious questions about the kind of curriculum that seems to be emerging from the standardization movement. Whose interests are being served by this kind of curriculum? How is it that this kind of curriculum will challenge the intellect and curiosity of young adolescents when it never has before? In what way is this kind of curriculum responsive to the perspectives and developments that emerge in the lives of young adolescents? And how will it lead toward social equity now when historically it has lead in exactly the opposite direction?

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