

# The Middle School: The Natural Home of Integrated Curriculum

*For two decades, middle-level educators have been engaged in reform efforts. Yet the interdisciplinary, integrated curriculum is still rare.*

JAMES BEANE

Given a pile of jigsaw puzzle pieces and told to put them together, no doubt we would ask to see the picture they make. It is the picture, after all, that gives meaning to the puzzle and assures us that the pieces fit together, that none are missing, and that there are no extras. Without the picture, we probably wouldn't want to bother with the puzzle.

Ironically, this situation is very much like what we ask young people to do all the time in school. To students, the typical curriculum presents an endless array of facts and skills that are unconnected, fragmented, and disjointed. That they might be connected or lead toward some whole picture is a matter that must be taken on faith by young people or, more precisely, on the word of adult authority. Like working the jigsaw puzzle without a picture, one can only trust that the pieces do make one, that they do fit together, and that there are just the right number and combination of pieces.

## Territories of Knowledge

It is time we faced the fact that subject areas or disciplines of knowledge around which the curriculum has traditionally been organized are actually territorial spaces carved out by academic scholars for their own purposes. These subject areas contain much that is



known, but not all that is or might be. Their boundaries limit our access to broader meanings.

For people other than subject scholars, such subjects are only abstract categories. When we are confronted in real life with a compelling problem or puzzling situation, we don't ask which part is mathematics, which part science, which part history, and so on. Instead we draw on or seek out knowledge and skill from any and all sources that might be helpful. In short, the school constructs and organizes a curriculum that is an artifice of life and, in that sense, an obstacle to education that has unity and meaning.

While the jigsaw puzzle analogy helps us understand this shortcoming of the separate subject curriculum, it only partly reveals a deeper problem with that approach. Genuine learning involves interaction with the environment in such a way that what we experience becomes integrated into our system of meanings. Integration is something that we do ourselves; it is not done for us by

*With encouragement from their teacher, 8th graders at Markette Middle School in Madison, Wisconsin, plan activities for a Living in the Future thematic unit. Students designed a model city in the year 2020 and investigated family health histories to determine future personal risk factors.*

others (Hopkins 1937). This means that the whole picture we start with—the problem or puzzling situation—is one that we ourselves create or imagine. It has importance for us, and this importance compels us to work on it.

Thus, we see the need for integration in the curriculum. But we must be careful to recognize that curriculum integration has two crucial aspects. First, integration implies wholeness and unity rather than separation and fragmentation. Second, real curriculum integration occurs when young people confront personally meaningful questions and engage in experiences related to those questions—experiences they can integrate into their own system of meanings. When we seek to integrate the curriculum, we need to inquire into the

questions and meanings that young people create rather than contrive connections across academically constructed subject boundaries.

### The Middle School Curriculum Question

For more than two decades, educators at the middle level have been engaged in serious efforts to reform their schools. At the heart of this movement has been persistent rhetoric regarding the need to think first about the characteristics of early adolescence. Many middle schools have made dramatic strides toward more positive school climate and restructured organizational arrangements like block scheduling and interdisciplinary collaboration among teachers. However, as dramatic as the movement has been, it has not addressed a crucial and fundamental question: *What should the middle school curriculum be?*

To understand how this question could have been missed, we must look briefly back at the beginnings of the junior high school movement. Junior high schools emerged in the United States around 1910 as a response to the perception that the extended elementary program of the K-8 school was inappropriate for early adolescents (Toepfer 1962). Advocates of the new organization argued that it could offer accelerated programs for the college bound and vocational guidance and introductory classical studies for the growing number who were dropping out of school by the end of the 8th grade (Gruhn and Douglass 1947, Kliebard 1986). In other words, the junior high school was intended to be a junior version of the high school, the same program adapted to be more suitable for early adolescents.

By the 1930s, laws restricting child labor and extending compulsory education theoretically made such arguments obsolete. Yet junior high educators did not rush to rethink the purposes of their

schools or the curriculum those purposes were tied into. Nevertheless, as part of the larger progressive movement, some proposals for change did surface (Hopkins 1941, 1955; Gruhn and Douglass 1947; Faunce and Bossing 1951; Hock and Hill 1960; Van Til et al 1961). A persistent theme was the idea of developing a program of common learnings for all early adolescents that would be experience-centered and organized around personal and social problems. As a result, many junior high schools created so-called block-time or problem-centered core programs.

Despite their reported successes, such programs were used in only 12 percent of junior high schools by the 1950s (Wright 1958), testimony to the stranglehold maintained by the academic, subject-centered view of secondary education. Recognizing that context, and its renewed strength following the launching of *Sputnik*, helps to explain why the middle school movement may have missed the curriculum question as it got under way in the early 1960s. While a few proposals for serious curriculum reform have appeared in recent years (Beane 1975, Lounsbury and Vars 1978, Stevenson 1986), the "secondary" school, subject-centered organization has continued to dominate middle schools.

Even the widely publicized stories of interdisciplinary units carried out by teams typically involve only mild subject correlations, such as the "what can each subject contribute to this topic" question, which retains the separate identity, space, and power of the separate subjects involved (for example, James 1972, Jacobs 1989, Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development 1989). In this sense, what passes for interdisciplinary is really multidisciplinary and certainly not integrative. Moreover, the usual membership on those teams (language arts, mathematics, science, and social studies) continues the historic differentiation of status between the "big four" subjects and others like home economics, industrial arts,

art, and music. In short, even the more innovative curriculum examples in middle schools are really adapted versions of the high school curriculum (Beane 1990a).

### Visions of an Integrative Curriculum

Some educators have recently taken up the middle school curriculum question in earnest (Beane 1990a, The Middle Level Curriculum Project in press). The content of their conversations has been markedly different from debates about the primacy of one or another subject area or discussions of connections among those areas. Indeed, the new conversations start in an entirely different place than those others.

That starting point involves three critical concepts. The first is that the middle school ought to be a general education school in which the curriculum focuses on widely shared concerns of early adolescents and the larger world rather than increasing specialization and differentiation among separate subjects. The second concept is that while the middle school curriculum, like that at other levels, is subject to many demands and pressures, its primary and explicit purpose ought to be to serve the early adolescents who attend the school.

The third concept involves revising the increasingly popular view that portrays early adolescents simply as victims of their developmental stage: for example, "hormones with feet," being in the "range of the strange," or "brain dead." While these labels may seem humorous, they demean early adolescents and encourage low expectations and clever gimics like slogan systems, coupons, and bumper stickers to simply "keep the hormones in check" (Arnold 1980). The new curriculum conversations view early adolescents as real human beings who, while at that stage, are also participants in the larger world and have serious questions and concerns about both.

These three concepts along with the notion of integration point to a compelling possibility for answering the middle school curriculum question. This new vision begins with two kinds of questions and concerns: those that early adolescents have about themselves and their world and those that are widely shared by people in the larger world (Beane 1990a, The Middle Level Curriculum Project in press).

While the actual identification of such questions is a matter to be taken up by early adolescents and adults in local schools, a few examples might help to illustrate this idea. For instance, early adolescents often have questions about the physical changes they're experiencing, their self-identities, their relations with peers and adult authority figures, and their future prospects. At the same time, they share with all of us concerns about living in a changing world, the environment, wealth and poverty, war and peace, cultural diversity and racism, freedom and interdependence, and so on.

Thus, early adolescents have the same concerns as people in general, regardless of their developmental stage. Moreover, their questions about themselves are often personal versions of larger-world questions, as, for example, in the connections between personal changes and living in a changing world, the search for personal self-esteem and that of group esteem in a culturally diverse world, and conflict with adults and peers and conflict on a global scale. In other words, at the intersection of questions and concerns from early adolescents and from the larger world, we may begin to imagine powerful themes that connect the two and thus offer a promising possibility for organizing an integrative curriculum (Beane 1990a).

The emerging vision of a middle school curriculum, then, is one that is organized around rich and provocative themes from these two sources rather than abstract and artificial subject areas. Imagine, for example, a unit on Identities in which students examine how self-perceptions are formed, how culture

influences their self-concepts, how various cultures express their identities, and how increasing cultural diversity promises to reshape politics and the economy. Imagine a unit on Living in the Future in which students construct models of desirable communities, analyze extrapolations of current trends, investigate personal aspirations, and

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imagine new inventions for bettering the quality of life. Imagine a unit on Wellness in which students investigate their personal lives and the larger world as they study environmental issues, nutrition, disease, stress, and health regulations.

Examples like these point to one of the most important aspects of the emerging middle school curriculum vision: We have many powerful opportunities to engage students' knowledge and skill in the search for self and social meaning. We can imagine early adolescents developing and applying skills related to communication, questioning, problem-solving, computation, researching, valuing, and social action. Furthermore, they can expand their critical, creative, and reflective thinking skills and become acquainted with a rich array of facts, principles, and concepts from a wide variety of sources. In planning and carrying out such thematic units with

young people, we also have the opportunity to bring to life enduring, but elusive, ideas like democracy, human dignity, and cultural diversity (Beane 1990b).

This is not just an armchair vision of the curriculum. For example, a group of 8th grade teachers at the Cross Keys Middle School in Florissant, Missouri, are working with units that illustrate this kind of thinking:

Teachers agree upon a concept that connects the students' learning and has no content-area barriers. Teachers relinquish their areas of content specialization and begin to draw objectives and activities from their wide range of human talents and experiences both in and outside of their formal training and area of certification. Once again, they become human beings, competent and experienced in life itself, first, and in content areas only incidentally (Cross Keys Middle School 1990).

At Marquette Middle School in Madison, Wisconsin, a group of teachers carried out a thematic unit that followed the new curriculum vision almost literally. The unit began with the students listing questions about themselves and their world and then identifying a number of themes that those questions suggested. The students then selected one theme, Living in the Future, and listed possible activities they might use to answer the questions related to it. As part of the planning, the students also named the knowledge and skills they would need to answer their questions.

The actual activities suggest just how such a curriculum works. One involved designing a model for the city of Madison in the year 2020 and required integrating the work of committees on the environment, transportation, government, education, and health. Another activity called for investigating family health histories to determine personal

risk factors in the future. A third brought an artist into the school to sketch pictures of how the kids might look in 30 years and to discuss the physical effects of aging. A fourth involved creating, distributing, tabulating, and analyzing a survey sent to several middle schools to find out what their peers predicted for the future. Still another activity found students investigating the accuracy of predictions made for this decade 100 years ago.

It takes little imagination to picture those students debating various issues, making graphs of survey responses, presenting oral reports on individual and group findings, scouring the media center for information, and raising endless questions about their work. Nor does it take much imagination to see the incredible array of knowledge and skill that was engaged by the unit.

This example points out several key features of the new curriculum vision. One is that it compels us to work with young people in ways that give them a powerful voice in curriculum planning. This is quite different from adapting a planned curriculum to their presumed needs or characteristics. Certainly many teachers have taught exciting units like the one just described, perhaps even with the same title, but probably within one subject or by contriving contributions from several. Here, instead, the theme and subsequent activities emerge from the original questions and concerns of the students rather than the interests of a teacher or the manipulation of subject areas.

Another feature of this vision of the curriculum is that it proceeds from a constructivist view. Since meanings are created by students rather than imposed by adults, students use their knowledge and skill to search for answers to their own questions and concerns, rather than to concentrate on preparing for a next course or grade, passing examinations, preparing for some occupation, or gaining some narrowly defined cultural capital. Obviously this shift in the source of meanings redefines the role of the

teacher from knowledge gatekeeper and meaning maker to guide and facilitator. And since adults have many of the same concerns as early adolescents, an integrative curriculum of this kind also offers opportunities for teachers to construct new and profound meanings for themselves.

A third feature of this vision of the curriculum is that it is knowledge-rich.

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There is nothing anti-intellectual or superficial here. While not all students will learn the same particular pieces of information, they do share the common experience of powerful themes that call for in-depth study and the use of important concepts. Knowledge and skill are thus taken out of abstract subject categories and repositioned in the context of thematic units where they are more likely to develop. In an era of rapid knowledge explosion, this kind of curriculum is both appropriate and realistic.

A fourth feature is that this curriculum presents an authentic integration of affect and cognition. The most important questions and concerns of people in general, and early adolescents in particular, have to do with self and social (or affective) issues. Such issues are not

simply a matter of emotion; we think about and act upon them in terms of values, morals, and so on. Yet middle and other schools continue to treat affect and cognition as if their theoretical distinctions reflected real life. The curriculum I envision recognizes the artificiality of such distinctions and challenges their application in separate affective arrangements like advisory programs.

Finally, this vision of the curriculum departs from arrangements like the earlier block-time core programs, which were scheduled alongside traditional subject courses, in that it is proposed as virtually the entire middle school curriculum. One reason for this is that those programs usually disappeared as new academic demands found a place in the schedule. More important, though, the new curriculum embraces an entirely different theory of curriculum and learning than that of the subject-area approach. It says that a curriculum that facilitates integration and is person-centered, constructivist, and thematic makes sense and, therefore, ought to be the whole curriculum.

### **Restructuring the Curriculum**

The general area of school restructuring has, like the middle school movement, been concerned almost entirely with climate and institutional features. These are very important topics. Yet it seems that no matter how radical restructuring talk may otherwise be, it almost never touches on the curriculum itself. Much of what passes for restructuring is, in this sense, new bottles for old wine that clearly has not gotten better with age. How is it that we can claim to speak of school reform without addressing the centerpiece of schools, the curriculum?

The fact is that the subject approach has been with us for so long and is so deeply entrenched in our schooling schemes that it has virtually paralyzed our capacity to imagine something different. The network of educational

elites—academic scholars, state departments of education, certification bureaus, and text and test publishers—forms an almost intransigent force that makes serious curriculum reform seem almost impossible. There is barely a language left to describe other possibilities for the curriculum.

Many middle-level educators want to know how this new vision of the curriculum relates to the junior high school structures still in existence, as well as to more innovative ones such as teaming, advisory programs, and other arrangements (some of which restructuring at other levels has just begun to explore). They have trouble seeing that even these recent changes were designed for the old subject curriculum and its view of learning that now need to be questioned.

Since arguments for an integrative curriculum have implications for all levels of education, I have often been asked why my own proposal (Beane 1990a) has focused on the middle level. The reason is simple: For three decades, people at the middle level, more so than at any other, have been engaged in efforts to rethink their work and to reform their schools. While most of these efforts have focused on institutional features and instructional methods, the progress in many of these schools has been dramatic. For this reason, those at the middle level are perhaps more willing to consider larger possibilities, even some that would involve reforming curriculum.

The whole language approach now emerging at the elementary level clearly holds promise for an integrative curriculum there. And it may be that the recent calls for integration emerging from subject-area associations may eventually crack even the hard subject categories at the high school level. But middle-level education cannot wait for such developments. If it does, another generation of early adolescents may miss the chance for a genuinely meaningful education. Perhaps, too, actions taken in the middle will become a source of support to those other levels for their efforts.

In all of this, however, the question in curriculum reform is whether educators are willing to make a leap of faith on behalf of the young people schools are intended to serve. By leap of faith I mean a willingness to turn themselves over to these young people rather than to the abstract subject categories and artificial purposes that have plagued schooling for so long. Fortunately, this is not a blind leap since we have known for many years that movement in this direction benefits both young people and their teachers (Aikin 1941, Jennings and Nathan 1977).

If we truly want integration in the curriculum, then we must think along the lines of the vision described here and extend the long struggle to make our rhetoric of concern for the young become a curriculum reality (Beane 1987). It is hard to believe that we would want anything less for the early adolescents we work and live with. □

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