

What Do Young Adolescents Really Need In School?
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In responding to this question, “What do young adolescents really need to thrive in in school?” most of us would appropriately start with one of the many checklists that rest among the volumes describing the developmental characteristics of young adolescents. While such lists can afford us a baseline of academic understanding, when I share them with middle level educators, I often get the look suggesting that this is old news. But is it?

Declarations like: "It's all about the kids...We're here for our children...Students first." We do what's best for students" dot both conversations and school bulletin boards in most of our schools. Yet I have come to believe what every exemplary educator would confess, our rhetoric is not always our reality. One of the indicators of a reflective practitioner is the steady commitment to revisit the bold ideals she hopes to live by, not just once in awhile, but all the time.

When was the last time you took a good look at what you know about the age group and reexamined what that means for your school and classroom practice?

When launching such a conversation, it makes good sense to revisit a short list like the one below:

- Intellectual: Young adolescent learners are curious, motivated to achieve when challenged, and capable of critical and complex thinking.
- Social: Young adolescent learners have an intense need to belong and to be accepted by their peers while finding their own place in the world. They are engaged in forming and questioning their identities on many different levels.
- Physical: Young adolescent learners mature at varying rates and go through rapid and irregular physical growth, with bodily changes that can cause awkward and uncoordinated movements.
- Emotional and Psychological: Young adolescent learners are vulnerable and self-conscious, and often experience unpredictable mood swings.
- Moral: With their new sense of the larger world around them, young adolescent learners are idealistic and want to have an impact on making the world a better place.

(Complete Turning Points Guide available from www.turningpts.org.)

While this is a place to start, and there are abundant implications for practice, I have found that all of us are more able to respond to child development with greater empathy when we go directly to our own young people and ask them. Several years ago, my colleague Trudy Knowles and I did just that with students from middle schools across North America. We asked participating teachers in those schools to have their students respond in writing to our prompt: “What should middle level teachers know about middle level students?” We received 3,500 letters in return and much wisdom. (Doda and Knowles, 2006). Since then, we continue to add to that database year after year. In a new piece written by Ann Yehle (AMLE, in press) students were asked the same

question: “What should middle school teachers know about middle school students?” and her findings confirmed once again that our young people want to be heard, taken seriously and understood. Moreover, the same themes reemerged once again offering us further evidence that this collection has validity over time.

Keep in mind, we did not ask students to tell us about themselves in a personal sense. We asked them in a general sense and they confirmed not only what developmental psychologists have documented in volumes of middle level literature, but much more. They revealed how they—living, breathing young adolescents—actually experience their own development in the context of school life.

So, what did we learn, how does it compare with developmental research, and how can middle schools use this knowledge to build the most responsive programs for young adolescents?

1. Respect

“It would help if teachers knew that we can do much more than they think we can. We may act silly and do childish things at times, but we can really handle a lot. We like to be seen as more capable cause as some teachers say we are the future.”

Young adolescents long to be respected, heard, and taken seriously and by asking them that question, we were in fact taking the first step. You and your staff of course can do the same. Developmentally this should make sense to all of us who have studied the age group. After all, this is the time in life when the trappings of childhood are slowly being replaced by the emergence of adult capacities. Our young people are no longer as dependent and compliant as they once were and are beginning, albeit tentatively, to assert their place in the adult world. In this developmental window, they need continuous, well-constructed opportunities to make choices and exercise decision-making. In classroom life, this might translate into students and teachers collaborating on many decisions such as the development of the class “working agreements” that will serve to guide student and teacher behavior throughout the year. Some teams might engage students in the development of a team constitution to live by which is posted prominently in every classroom. Still others might engage students in negotiating inquiry projects, units, or even the entire curriculum, developing meaningful themes from students’ questions and concerns.

In the classroom, advancing respect means advancing student choice and voice in classroom life. When we take seriously this developmental need, we are more likely to design lessons, homework, and projects that exercise students’ burgeoning thinking skills. Right answer worksheets should be replaced by open-ended “think sheets” and students more often than not, should be invited to generate and explore provocative, reflective, essential questions. All too often, essential questions are posted but we rarely let them live in our lessons. At times, they do little more than decorate our walls.

Finally, choice should be more than an occasional anomaly. As a steady part of instructional differentiation, students need to be making choices all the time about the books they read, the research topics they will explore, their writing topics, and the projects they will pursue. And, when we ask students how they are performing they should be able to tell us because they are regularly asked to assess themselves, their group work efforts, and the quality of their work.

Of course, even when there is ‘voice and choice’ in the classroom, dialogue must be respectful in all areas of school life. Teachers are enormously important to young teens. In our study, we were stunned at how often students called for gentle teaching. They want teachers to understand that while development does not diminish them, it often means they stumble and fumble quite regularly. Many felt as though teachers were too quick to criticize and too harsh in their judgment. Yes, they want high expectations but with a gentle and compassionate touch. As one child explains:

“It might be nice for them to know that we are living human beings, we have feelings, and we are people. Sometimes teachers think of you just as a student not a person, so they push you over your limits and sometimes they maybe might talk to you a little louder than they usually do if it is taking you a long time to answer a problem or you don’t understand. We are people too! We are not perfect. We can’t do everything perfectly the first time. If teachers understand this, it might make us feel more comfortable and we might do better in school.”

2. Engagement

“Teachers, teachers, teachers, when will they learn, I have the attention span of a raisin. Middle school students need to be kept busy doing stuff when we are learning. So for a less whiny, temperamental class, make it fun.”

This quote always brings a smile from educators who know all too well that this is true. Young adolescents are best engaged when they can learn through action: debating, researching, discussing, presenting, collaborating, building, creating, and yes, moving. In highly engaging classrooms, teachers know how to create a classroom space where young adolescent energy can thrive. They replace “desks in a row” with more interactive and socially inviting seating patterns. Lessons include a hefty dose of small group work and assessments are largely products not paper. Norms are co-created so everyone knows what great collaborative group work looks like and how best to keep the classroom running smoothly with lots of talking and moving going on.

These engaging approaches are good for learners of all ages; indeed they are best practice (Zemelman, Daniels & Hyde, 1998), but are particularly vital to success with young adolescents. In this time of heightened accountability, many teachers express fear that they will never cover their curriculum if they don’t resort to a high-speed

“curriculum by mentioning” model of teaching. Unfortunately, while the “sage on the stage’ model of teaching has a place in our teaching repertoire, a small dose goes along way. We should all note that even if we can be exceptionally entertaining, or have smart boards or videos to glamorize the old lecture, our students grow more brain synapses when they do the work. When your classroom has considerable chatter, don’t panic. Instead, pull up a chair and join one of the talkative small groups. Ask them what they are learning and why. Help them nudge that conversation forward.

3. Belonging and Connection

“We were not all best friends, but we all cared enough to be kind, and I think this is because our team spent time helping us learn how to be a community of learners together. We didn’t just dive into academics. At the start of the school year, the teachers got us involved in knowing each other well and building good working friendships and they kept it going all year.”

Some years ago, I attended a reunion hosted by a successful teacher team at Billingshurst Middle School in Reno, NV. Many of their former middle level students attended the reunion, some having been gone for several years. Teachers and the visiting adults asked the students why they had come back and what had made such a positive impact on them. They were unanimous—it was their amazing team! But they had much more to tell us about just how this team made the difference. Most of them recalled that during the two years they had spent with this 7-8 grade team, they had found a ‘safe haven’. Many recalled that it was a time in their lives, when what they most wanted was to fit in, to have friends, and to feel safe. Putting positive peer relationships first, and working on them all year long, in every classroom and team experience, this team worked to insure that every student felt connected to the team community in profound life changing ways.

Today, there is considerable research to underscore this team’s great work. Students perform far better in schools and classrooms that have high degrees of social trust. (Sousa, 2006) In other words, when they feel safe they learn more. Social trust for middle schoolers, however, is no easy thing. Left to chance, many students bully or are bullied and can become disconnected and isolated. According to the Center for Disease Control, Division of Adolescent Health, “Students are more likely to engage in healthy behaviors and succeed academically when they feel connected to school.... School connectedness was found to be among the strongest protective factors for both boys and girls.” (Klem and Connell, 2004)

Middle schools have a wide array of options for creating safe havens in which they can successfully address the social attachment needs of young adolescents. Some schools have a daily or weekly formal Advisory or Home-base time devoted to shoring up relationships, providing support, and teaching social skills. Other schools integrate social

and emotional literacy into team activities, units, daily lessons, or daily protocols, leaning on service, or interdisciplinary studies to address values, ethics, and personal development. Likewise, students at the middle level can develop vital connections through clubs, sports, and extracurricular activities. Schools have found that looping students with the same team of teachers over several years can provide continuity of care that many of our students need to progress.

Interdisciplinary teams are a natural foundation for safe, smaller, and more personalized learning environments for young adolescents. One year, near the close of the year, I witnessed a seventh-grade team execute a powerful afternoon of relationship building for their students. At the close of the event, the students were very excited and delighted by the experience and one seventh-grade boy in particular had something to say. He handed me a note in which he explained that he had had a terrible 7th grade year. He had made no friends during the year and he said it was really hard. He suggested that the team might be better off to do this social network gathering early in the year so he could make friends first. His team and I concur with his wise advice.

This implies that teaching teams in our middle schools might be invited to consider how they will become an authentic community. In one middle school, then Principal Bob Fenter gave each team one full day to craft a plan for how they would execute team personalization. Each team produced spectacular opening events devoted to building relationships with and among students. They also developed curriculum maps in which they planned for quarterly team town meetings and social and emotional literacy skills embedded in all subjects. The results were remarkable.

Of course our daily demeanor is powerful as well. One student provides a healthy reminder of this: “At my old school, we had one principal that would stand out by the front door every day and cheerily greet everyone by their first name. Since my school is much larger school, knowing everyone’s name would be next to impossible, but it would be nice if the staff—especially the principal—tried to take more time to really get to know us. That would make it at least seem like they genuinely care about us, and the staff would probably learn from us, also. And if we liked the teachers, we would behave much more.”

4. Fairness & Equity

“I think one of the most important things they should understand is that every single student has their own hopes and dreams. For some it may be to be on the honor roll all through high school, go to Harvard, and grow up to be a very ‘successful’ person. For others, it may just be not to flunk out of high school. You need to embrace everyone’s wants. That doesn’t mean that you should give more attention to those with higher hopes— just work with each one and encourage them to do their best.”

Young adolescents are fashioning identity, learning who they are, who they can be, and who they can become. They are eager to explore new ideas, new ways of being, and new roles. As such, this is a promising window for educators as so many young people are capable of falling in love with positive visions of their futures. Of course it can be a perilous window as well. It's not surprising that how a child performs in middle school is a key indicator of how that child will perform in the years that follow. (Balfanz, 2009) It is certainly as George Burns once said, 'The chance to fall in love with a future.'

This developmental characteristic is precisely why so many knowledgeable advocates have declared a moratorium on selective honors programs and on tracking and ability grouping for the middle years. Every young adolescent must have exposure to our best and richest curriculum, our finest pedagogy, and our very best differentiation. As Anne Wheelock wrote some time ago, "All human beings can become intelligent, and can learn intelligent behaviors; what students derive from the classroom depends to a great extent not on an "IQ" factor, but on academic environments that equip them to use their intelligence." (Wheelock, 1992, 13) In one middle school in rural Ohio, a sign in the faculty center conveys this message. It reads: "It's not about being smart. It's about learning to behave in smart ways."

There are many ways to prevent students from falling through the cracks. The essential question that should be on top in our equity conversations is:

Does every academic environment offer every student inspiration, challenge and hope? If insuring hope floats to the top of your list, try asking these questions repeatedly: "Is this a school where every child can find joy in learning? Is this a school that celebrates eagerness, resilience, growth? Is this a school where we can say...if this way fails, we'll try another and teach our students to do the same? Do we celebrate diverse ways of learning? Do our grading practices fairly account for the vast differences in our students' performance and progress?"

Some of our students come to middle school already discouraged and those same young people leave us in 8th grade, dangerously disenfranchised. They have already become convinced that they will never succeed. If we cannot turn this 'mindset' around in the middle years, the odds are not favorable for those learners, but turn them around we must.

4. Meaningful, Relevant and Real

"Eighth graders need a special form of teaching. We could never learn about a subject by reading a textbook. We need it explained and compared to life. It also would help if the learning was connected to life."

While our standards delineate what every student should know and be able to do, they do not guide us in creating meaningful units and lessons. In fact, in many ways the subject matter curriculum we often inherit is not learner friendly. Take the example of the fragmented content to be taught in one week of the year. Students will learn about

volcanoes, Ancient Egypt, short stories, number theory, and so on. All too often content pieces are handed out like parts of a puzzle, with no compelling picture to pull it all together. Students can be exposed to tons and tons of content without a cause or question that gives it life and meaning.

Young adolescents want to know why what they are learning matters to them and to the world. Their development affords them the emerging capacity to ask that very question and we must deliver an answer. While interdisciplinary curriculum alone does not guarantee meaning, it is naturally more life like and authentic than the separate subject delivery and hence offers us a better chance at revealing meaning to our students. It also can have a story-like quality which makes it far more memorable.

When you revisit your curriculum, either in your own subject or with your whole team, examine how you can plan for large, compelling themes or questions or projects that put knowledge to work around meaningful life issues. Strive to craft themes that will be of personal and social significance. Invite students to deliberate about the big questions they have about their own lives and the world and then use their common questions to inform the Unit themes to be studied, or the topics to explore. Most of all, steer clear of merely covering content, and work to bring content to life in more meaningful ways.

Consider as you move ahead:

- Take the developmental checklist of your choice and jigsaw each characteristic considering what's being addressed and how. This may help you identify "developmental gaps" and set goals for refining the focus for the year.
- Go directly to students. Ask students to respond to the prompt: "What should middle level teachers know about young adolescents?" Do not be tempted to edit or provide students with direction. When you collect these, preferably by teams or grade levels, read through and ponder the messages. Data is not always numerical. This data can be powerful in helping your school identify its level of developmental responsiveness.
- Examine all current practices in light of the above reflections and ask: Are we a middle school that truly honors what young adolescents need to thrive? Are we a "true" middle school?

Last words:

"I can imagine that teaching eighth graders must be pretty tough. Half of us don't even know who we are, so how could teachers understand us? It's hard, but I can think of some ways. First of all, it must be understood that we are all trying to fit in. Eighth grade is a hard year and everyone has insecurities. I'm not saying to walk on eggshells around us, but be aware that our emotions can change like the wind. Be firm, but understanding and strict but gentle. Also, we need to get breaks from class work and homework. We have a life outside of school. Parts of us wish we were older, but other parts wish we were still in kindergarten, playing in the sandbox. If it's nice weather,

don't give a lot of homework. You could even have us read aloud outside or something. We need time to breathe and enjoy life while we're still kids."

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