

Middle School:

FOR the past two decades the education of the 11- to 14-year-old age group has faced a change. The middle school movement has become a fact, and its initial stage of faddism is over. Or is it?

Middle schools are now the "in thing" in education. The foundations established for the middle schools by Eichhorn, Alexander, and Murphy point to the development of a separate educational structure for this age group. Middle schools are child centered, not subject centered. However, in the transition from the junior high school to the middle school, strange things are happening.

Faced with overcrowded conditions, many districts have found it very convenient to change the grade organization from a 7-8-9 junior high school to a 6-7-8 junior high/middle school. The trappings of the junior high school remain, and only the name is changed to give an air of respectable innovation to the school. Hence, the middle school becomes a fad and not a fact.

A Lack of Commitment

There are several reasons for this failure on the part of the middle school to become a fact. One could plead that it is a new movement and that not enough is known about the concept to implement it fully. One

could plead that the time is not right for change, that the pendulum is swinging back from the numerous innovations that education has witnessed over the past two decades, and that the social community will not allow such change. One could advance the idea that teacher education has not kept pace with the newer advances inherent in the middle school concept.

All of these reasons may be true, either partially or wholly. However, one important reason needs to be considered when we talk of the failure of the transition from a junior high to a middle school; it is the lack of total commitment on the part of those persons who work most closely with the program. How can this lack of commitment be overcome?

There is need to retrain the staff of the school to enable them to develop self-commitment so that this transition can occur effectively and efficiently. The gradualism that pervades many of the districts that try to move to a middle school affords the opportunity for the continuation of their present program. Attrition of personnel is so slow that it results in the replacement of personnel, but not ideas and concepts. Business and industry have established the precedent for the retraining of their personnel in new methods, concepts, ideas, and skills to keep them current with the present-day business

Fantasy, Fad, or Fact?

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and industry scene. Why not do this on a regular, well-planned basis for education?

Graduate study too often falls within the realm of specialized subject areas and does not prepare a staff for a total change to a new idea. What is needed is a thorough in-service program that will develop understanding and a sense of security in the concepts, ideas, and skills that are inherent within the middle school movement. This will enable the staff to become committed to the middle school movement, allowing for a total transition from the junior high school.

The concepts that are needed are those dealing with the psychology of the pre-adolescent, how he learns, explores, achieves, and grows. The concept of the child-centered approach to education, an approach found in elementary programs but foreign to most subject-centered secondary teachers, needs to be examined and taken to heart. The idea of the child doing the learning in an active environment that allows him to explore, touch, feel, and accept and/or

reject ideas based on his needs and decisions is quite different from the dispensing of information by the lecture/recitation methods traditionally used within junior and senior high schools. The concepts of interpersonal relations and the child's relationship to himself, his fellow classmates, his environment, and the society within which he finds himself must be understood, so that the staff realizes that education is more than mere information processing.

Teachers Need Reorientation

Beyond these concepts, certain skills need to be developed within the staff. These skills are ones that, when mastered, will give the staff member a sense of security in a new role, and will enable him to become committed to the place and function of the middle school in the child's life. These new skills include diagnosis of learning and social disorders and how to deal with them; the various approaches to independent study; the skills inherent in large- and small-group instruction; the skills (mostly human relations) that are part of team teaching; the many facets of

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interdisciplinary team teaching; the concepts and skills that are needed to develop a core type approach to education; the various skills necessary to allow for nongradedness; the skills involved with individualized instruction; and the skills of evaluation, not just of information consumed by the student, but of his attitude and feelings, the aspects of education that deal with his self-concept.

Teachers have been taught by the lecture/recitation method and for most this is the only working model with which they have had contact. It is not a general rule that the teacher is the facilitator of learning, even though we talk a great deal about this concept in education. However, if a true middle school is to evolve from the transition, then the facilitation of education for the 11- to 14-year-old must be the focal point rather than the traditional methods of teaching that are employed today.

The retraining process, with the subsequent development of a commitment to the idea of the middle school, cannot be a hit or miss proposition. It must be a detailed operation from beginning to end. One individual must serve as full-time coordinator for this process, bringing to bear his full talents and resources for the completion of the project. Time-wise this operation must be given at least two years, including summers, to have any real effect in changing attitudes on the part of the staff.

Have You a Manuscript?

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In order to accomplish the task, biweekly meetings on the aforementioned topics must be held for the entire staff. These meetings should be an in-depth examination of the positive, as well as the negative, facets of middle school concepts and skills. Everyone should reach a deep understanding of what goes into the makeup of a middle school and how it is to function for the child. In addition to the biweekly meetings, staff members, both individually and in the groups in which they will be working, should be sent to seminars, conferences, and meetings dealing with the middle school so that they can have a feel for the movement and what it can do. Visitations to actively working middle schools, not renamed junior high schools, are of the utmost importance. Change is hard for children, but it is even harder for staff members who are comfortable in old skills and skeptical about new ones.

Actually seeing the concepts work has a vitalizing effect on the needed commitment for this program. This in-service program must be for all members of the staff who intend to become part of the middle school. During the process of change, those who feel that they cannot be comfortable within this structure must be allowed to transfer to another area suitable to their background and social/emotional needs. A person who is part of the structure, and not happy, can do more damage than can be overcome by the best concepts and ideas for the child.

Failure to develop a commitment to the concepts and ideas behind the middle school will lead to failure in the transition. What is needed for the child of 11 to 14 is not a renamed administrative unit, but a middle school that will allow for his total development both intellectually and socially. This transition cannot be a patchwork addition of extras to the program with no basic change within the structure of the curriculum and the organization of the school for the child. This transition cannot occur unless the staff is committed totally to the concepts of the middle school.

From retraining comes commitment and from commitment comes a middle school in fact and not in fad.

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