

Why the Middle School Curriculum Vacuum?

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Will supporters of the middle school be able to create a new instructional program congenial to today's preadolescents? Some efforts in this direction are noted.

THE middle school movement has engaged the imagination of educators throughout the country. Advocated as institutions unique and stimulating for preadolescents, middle schools are expected to rectify programs in which traditional junior high schools were ineffective. Under this new approach, no longer are preadolescents to be subjected to highly sophisticated adolescent-oriented activities, interscholastic athletics, and senior high instructional methods. No longer should pressures unsuited for students in early adolescence be perpetuated.

We have an opportunity to establish a new type of school. This new institution is to be sensitive to the growth and development needs of youngsters going through a strenuous period of physical, social, and emotional change. Literature about the middle school movement abounds, yet seldom is anything suggested regarding curriculum development. Of all the changes advocated for the middle school, the greatest vacuum exists

in the area of appropriate curriculum development.

The changes that have been made in middle schools are in such areas as clubs, athletics, socials, and general school environment. These elements were less difficult to change and could be instituted with the least administrative effort. Yet the middle school movement would fall short of the goals its advocates most strongly desire unless one of the most frequent recommendations found in professional literature, the use of interdisciplinary teams, is implemented. In order for these teams to be effective, a revision of the curriculum commonly utilized is necessary. Currently the practice is to continue curriculum programs as they existed in the elementary fifth and sixth grades and the junior high seventh and eighth grades and to incorporate these programs into a middle school setting. This being so, it is apparent to educators interested in middle school growth that more effort is needed in projecting and organizing a curriculum that will enhance the further development of young people of middle school age.

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Local School Efforts

Changes in middle school curriculum, where these have taken place, have largely been limited to local attempts to produce learning units facilitating cooperation between disciplines. These learning units were produced by teachers who were performing other duties at the same time. Consequently there were limitations as to what could be accomplished. The following examples show the awareness that faculty members have of the need to produce a program that will enable them to fulfill the purposes of the middle school.

Example: At Hammond Middle School in Howard County, Maryland, a nongraded interdisciplinary team developed a unit titled "The Assembly Line." The purpose of this unit is to help students understand concepts and practices related to production and sales.

Disciplines Involved: Social Studies, Language Arts, Science, Art, Home Economics, and Industrial Arts.

Project Goal: To make Snowmen (stuffed pillows) using the assembly line approach.

Procedures: Involved 130 students, heterogeneously grouped. Assembly line set up in pod. Students explored types of job opportunities, interviewed, and filled in applications. Company officers decided on by group. Officers placed students in jobs. Types of jobs included: salesmen, advertising and public relations, stuffers, gluers, sewers, inspectors, distributors, and foremen. Product was marketed.

The project took planning and preparation time, production time, and follow-up time. In two weeks, students had experienced not only the broad concepts of economics but also opportunities to practice skills in written and oral communication, interpersonal relations, and decision making. Resource people from the community assisted in the unit. Students analyzed the process and particularly the type of job they performed. Though many of these efforts are quite noteworthy, no attempts are being made to utilize them beyond the school in which they were developed.



Photo courtesy of the author

Middle school students respond to projects in which they may interact as social beings.

National Curriculum Projects

While teachers and students are producing locally made materials, curriculum programs in this area have been developed by federal projects, universities, and commercial companies and are constantly being marketed. These nationally organized curriculum attempts such as BSCS Biology, AAAS Science, and Nebraska English have resulted in designs limited to the narrow confines of a particular discipline. Use of such programs dictates a school organized by disciplines. For example, to place a science program in a middle school that requires the science teacher to perform in the area of science to the exclusion of other disciplines breaks down the relationships sought in the interdisciplinary approach.

With a discipline-organized curriculum the opportunities for a team of teachers to meet with a common group of students, diagnose their needs, and prescribe accordingly become very limited. In an interdisciplinary-organized school a curriculum organized by subject disciplines dictates methods by which class groups of 30 students form the instructional pattern even when 120+ students are assigned to a "team" of four teachers. Because of these limitations, many middle schools are reorganizing into disciplinary teams shifting students period by period.

Admittedly teachers in this setting can use a greater variety of teaching strategies than can their interdisciplinary counterparts using the same traditional curriculum. The effect is that no group of teachers has a student for more than one class period. Instead the pitfall common to the junior high school becomes the pattern and the middle school then loses one of the ingredients strongly desired by its advocates. The preadolescent in need of daily guidance by all who are responsible for his school environment soon realizes that the major portion of his school day is no different than it was in any other school he attended. The vacuum that exists is the lack of an instructional program that encourages the best use of interdisciplinary relationships.

In conclusion, the middle school movement is in need of an in-depth, well funded project to produce a suitable curriculum. Such a curriculum would contain units which encourage administrators and teams to capitalize on all of the advantages of the interdisciplinary organization that is strongly recommended for the middle school. Recognition must be made of those disciplines or units within a single discipline that can most effectively be accomplished only when approached as a separate discipline. Thus the middle school curriculum, like the middle school organization, will utilize the best of two worlds, a combination of disciplinary and interdisciplinary relationships. It will contain those elements which permit a diagnosis of each student's mastery of basic fundamentals as well as encourage a wide variety of opportunities for learning experiences relevant to the student's world.

A good middle school curriculum is not one that results in memorizing content. Instead it offers the learner alternatives of experiences. The content should be the vehicle through which the learner develops his fundamental skills and concepts of life. The content of the middle school curriculum then consists of the high interest materials, not necessarily logically organized, which will help to produce a student who is anxious to get to high school to investigate further. □

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Manuscripts should be 1,400 words in length (approximately five typewritten double-spaced pages), including references. Submit manuscripts in duplicate and with return envelope and postage. Decisions on materials will be made as promptly as possible.

Materials for "Research in Review" should be addressed to: Dr. Marcella L. Kysilka, Associate Professor, College of Education, Florida Technological University, P.O. Box 25000, Orlando, Florida 32816.

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