

Must Middle Grades Education Consist of "Cast-Offs"?

CONRAD F. TOEPFER, JR.*

From recent efforts by Educational Leadership Institute and ASCD's Working Group on the Emerging Adolescent Learner have created six new information packages. These present concepts, improvement and teacher skill development for the emerging adolescent years.

THE work of the ASCD Working Group on the Emerging Adolescent Learner was keenly attuned to the dilemma of "Secondhand Rose" as depicted in the song made popular at that time by Barbra Streisand. The members of the working group concurred that in virtually all aspects of his school experience the emerging adolescent has been subjected to a wide range of "hand-me-downs." Whether it be school plant facilities, scheduling conflicts, teacher certification and preparation, or instructional materials, the middle school is like the middle child in many families, who receives the outgrown or cast-off clothes of his or her elder siblings!

Theorists continue to define the growing body of data and evidence supporting the unique nature of the emerging adolescent as a learner and personality. Nevertheless, few

school districts have considered such needs in developing programs and educational opportunities designed to meet these validated imperatives. New high schools are built and junior high and middle schools try to make do with old, former high school plants. Scheduling and bus transportation prerogatives focus upon either high school or elementary school concerns, and instructional materials budget cuts seem invariably to put their paring knife to the middle unit of the school system first.

"Retreads" Make Poor Teachers

Most critical over the years has been the "retread" approach to staffing schools for emerging adolescents. Until the appearance of the recent "lighthouse" efforts in Florida and Georgia, preservice teacher education programs for teachers in the middle grades have almost totally obviated any preparation to cope with the unique problems of emerging adolescent learners or to provide teachers with a specific attitude and expertise toward

** Conrad F. Toepfer, Jr., Associate Professor, Department of Curriculum Development and Instructional Media, State University of New York, Buffalo; and President, New York State ASCD*

A Multimedia Presentation on
**The Emerging Adolescent Learner
in the Middle Grades**

The Program

The ASCD Working Group on The Emerging Adolescent Learner, composed of leaders in junior high/middle school education, has developed this Multimedia Presentation. The topics and their authors are:

- **Implications of the Curriculum:
Boyce Medical Study**
Dr. Donald Eichhorn, *Group Chairman*
Assistant Superintendent of Schools
Upper St. Clair, Pennsylvania
- **Educating Emerging Adolescents:
Some Operational Problems**
Dr. Conrad Toepfer, Jr.
Associate Professor of Education
SUNY at Buffalo, New York
- **The Nature of the Emerging Adolescent**
Dr. Mary Compton
Associate Professor of Education
University of Georgia, Athens
- **Learning Strategies for the Emerging
Adolescent**
Dr. Bruce Howell
Superintendent of Schools
Tulsa, Oklahoma
- **Adult Models for the Emerging
Adolescent**
Dr. Thomas Sweeney
Associate Professor of Education
Ohio State University, Columbus
- **The Impact of Social Forces on Children**
Dr. James Phillips
Director of Secondary Education
St. Paul, Minnesota
- **Program Editor**
Dr. Philip Pumerantz
Associate Professor of Education
University of Bridgeport, Connecticut

Inquiries concerning this program should be directed to:
Educational Leadership Institute, Inc., P.O. Box 863, Spring-
field, Massachusetts 01101.

clarifying developmental emerging adolescent needs. With a major national effort to specify preservice teacher education for the middle grades apparently still far off, the critical level for refinement viewed by the ASCD working group was and continues to be the in-service avenue. The relatively minor focus of most graduate school programs upon concerns of middle grades teachers led to the decision to develop some specific means for discrete, tactical support of teachers and administrators in middle grades looking to refine their programs. To this end, it was decided that "written materials only" would not provide such a means beyond the existing literature. The members of the working group decided that a "hands-on" approach which could be utilized at the local school level was something which a total information package could best provide. For a description of the development of the project, see: *ASCD News Exchange* 13 (5): 3-5; September 1971.

ELI-ASCD Packages Give Hope

Out of these efforts have come six information packages including filmstrips, audio cassettes, records, library and reference cards, and position papers designed for use in local in-service programs concerned with the improvement of middle grades instruction for emerging adolescents. The six packages are in the areas of: Educating Emerging Adolescents—Some Operational Problems; Implications of the Curriculum—Boyce Medical Study; The Nature of the Emerging Adolescent; Learning Strategies for the Emerging Adolescent; The Impact of Social Forces on Children; and Adult Models for the Emerging Adolescent. Each of these areas was viewed by the working group as critical to the refinement of curricula and the development of teacher perception of the nature and educational needs of the emerging adolescent learner. Thus the expectation for the utilization of the information packages is both for curriculum improvement as well as teacher skill development in a more realistic understanding of the emerging adolescent.

In addition to the field testing of the

packages in their developmental stages under ASCD auspices, follow-up utilization causes optimism in projecting the usefulness of the packages in local school districts. During the past year the packages were used in a series of continuing in-service activities with middle school teachers in the Scranton, Pennsylvania, School District, with encouraging results. Personnel from a number of school districts also utilized the packages in an in-service institute held in the summer of 1973 at North Adams State College in Massachusetts, with similar enthusiasm from participants.

The intent here is not to imply that when mixed with water the six information packages will result in instant refinement of emerging adolescent school programs. It does appear, however, that they represent a specific source of information and help for schools seeking to improve educational experiences in the middle grades. Perhaps some of the success in their utilization comes from the fact that they were prepared specifically for use in the middle grades and not "watered down" from an existing high school level series. These materials were developed by educators with a specific concern for the needs of emerging adolescents rather than for forms of schooling or grade level demarcations. It is felt that both of these concerns are pivotal to continuing efforts to improve education for emerging adolescents in the middle grades.

There is certainly room and need for the development of additional materials for use in developing local programs and improved educational experiences for emerging adolescents. However, these packages as developed by the ASCD Working Group on the Emerging Adolescent Learner do appear to be an important source of help to local school districts interested in improving their instructional program in the middle grades. They also point clearly to the importance of ASCD's taking on a continuing commitment to work for the improvement and humanization of the educative experience for the learner housed in the middle of our system of schooling. It is only as we recognize his uniqueness as a learner and human being that we



Photo by Michael J. Sexton

Learning materials must be specifically designed for the unique instructional needs of the emerging adolescent.

begin to identify how education must be reorganized if it is successfully to utilize the emerging adolescent's capabilities for positive growth. Our failure to do so will force him or her to continue to cope with the dispensing of information on the basis of administrative convenience rather than working within his or her capacities at this developmental stage.

The six information packages developed by the ASCD Working Group on the Emerging Adolescent Learner represent a definitive but beginning step in developing means to revitalize education for emerging adolescents in terms of their capabilities as learners in a critical stage of human development. They represent a "firsthand rose" rather than another "hand-me-down" set of pants with the cuffs altered. Obviously, more than these beginning efforts will be necessary if we are to get beyond the "retread" approach in developing education at this level. We hope, however, that educators throughout the country will examine these materials carefully and utilize them to initiate local efforts to improve their educational offerings in the middle grades. □

Copyright © 1973 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. All rights reserved.