Rediscovering the middle school mission

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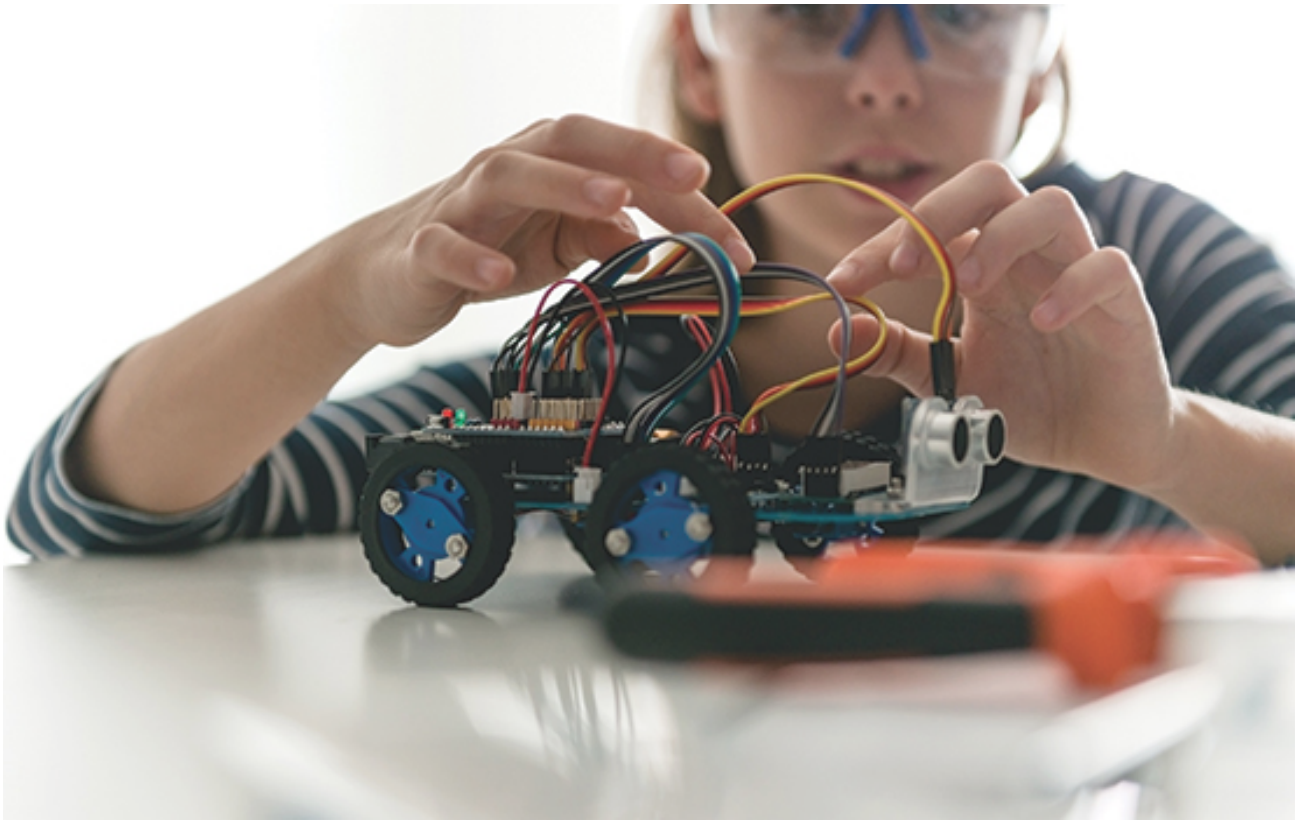

Interdisciplinary curricula — such as STEM, STEAM, and STREAM — can help middle schools return to their original purpose.

The meaning and mission of a middle school depends on who is talking about it. For most people other than middle-level advocates, middle school and junior high school are synonyms: places where students between the 5th and 9th grades go to "prepare" for high school. The only difference between junior highs and middle schools appear to be the names on the signs outside the school buildings. Even after 100 years and three separate movements to create a unique curriculum for young adolescents, a coherent mission for middle schools has yet to emerge, and they continue to be lumped together with junior high schools. As result, most schools for 10- to 14-year-olds continue to underserve the students who attend them.

Origins of the middle school model

One of the first junior high schools was established in Richmond, Ind., in 1896. This school consisted of 7th and 8th graders who were taught in departmentalized arrangements and took electives like practical arts and foreign languages. By 1910, a junior high school movement was underway, as some districts assigned students to elementary school for six years and junior high school and high school for three years each (Gruhn & Douglass, 1956).

One of the most influential advocates for junior highs was Frank Bunker, the school superintendent from Berkeley, Calif. Like most social efficiency advocates, Bunker was a proponent of mental testing, vocational education, and an elective system, all of which were components of the two introductory high schools in his district. His schools also sorted students into specific tracks, based on their test scores and likely futures. The growing movement toward establishing junior high schools was also supported by child developmentalists, who believed that special schools for younger adolescents would enable teachers to meet their educational, social, and psychological needs (Kliebard, 2004).

Given this support, junior high schools expanded quickly: "By 1918, the number of junior high schools had grown to 557 and two years later to 833. That growth pattern continued until there were more than 7,000 junior high schools in the United States, including both 7-9 and 7-8 schools" (Melton, 1964, p. 7).

However, and perhaps because two very different groups (social efficiency advocates and child developmentalists) both had a hand in shaping the movement, it wasn't entirely clear how these new schools (typically serving grades 7-9) should be defined. To most educators, the name "junior high" seemed to imply that they should be organized in much the same way as high schools, complete with departmentalized curricula, an emphasis on academics and career preparation, interscholastic athletics, and social activities like dances and sporting events (Melton, 1964).

Some junior highs, though, were explicitly designed to be responsive to young adolescents' developmental needs, rather than as high schools in miniature. Notably, in 1947, the psychologists William Gruhn and Harl Douglass:

> constructed a list of functions for the junior high school which was evaluated and criticized by a group of recognized leaders in secondary education . . . According to those who participated in the survey, the junior high school of the middle 1940s was expected to provide for (1) integration, (2) exploration, (3) guidance, (4) differentiation, (5) socialization, (6) articulation. (Noar, 1953, p. 4)

In schools that emphasize these six functions, the teacher becomes a guide or facilitator of students rather than a disseminator of information. Education continues to have a preparatory purpose — readying young people for high school and beyond — but it also seeks to address students' *current* needs, concerns, interests, and abilities. In short, this particular version of the junior high was meant to be a unique institution, not a quasi-high school for slightly younger students. Above all, it was supposed to help adolescents become integrated into the larger society, rather than sorting them according to what adults, operating under the logic of social efficiency, believed their futures would be.

This kind of junior high school, focused on developmental needs, was the exception rather than the rule, however. Recognizing the challenges of creating schools based on their list of six core functions, Gruhn and Douglass (1956) identified 34 barriers that would have to be overcome. These included a lack of administrators and teachers trained to understand the unique needs of young adolescents, as well as pressure to devote much of the curriculum to content, specializations, and electives. Some educators remained committed to a developmental approach to teaching young adolescents, but most junior high educators, not to mention parents and community members, had little awareness of these issues or desire and/or competence to move in this direction.

What's in a name?

By the early 1960s, the term *middle school* began to emerge as an alternative to junior high school (Alexander, 1984). The name change was intended as both a rejection of the minimizing connotation of the word "junior" — as though this institution was just a lesser version of high school — and an effort to focus attention on adolescents' distinct developmental issues.

Further, proponents of a new middle school model had two other issues on their minds as well, informed by the era's psychological research and its political climate. These included:

> "(1) the earlier maturation of girls and boys during the middle school years, with related, increasing concern about the traditional program's match with the needs of that age group, and (2) local problems of the buildings, enrollments, desegregation, and other such matters." (Alexander, 1984, p. 14)

In response to evidence that children were reaching maturation at earlier ages, many middle schools shifted to a grade 6-8 arrangement, rather than 7-9. (As a result, many Americans came to assume, simplistically, that the only difference between a middle school and a junior high was the grade span it covered.) But the name change and new grade arrangement were not the only distinguishing characteristics of the new model. More important, middle schools were designed to promote exploration in the curriculum in addition to "such innovative practices as interdisciplinary organization for instruction, non-graded organization, block scheduling, individualized instruction, and teacher guidance plans" (Alexander, 1984, p. 21).

Middle schools gained momentum throughout the 1960s, with hundreds of schools abandoning the junior high model and the total number of middle schools reaching more than 5,000 (Pickett, 1984). Further, the movement's leaders (figures such as William Alexander, John Lounsbury, Gordon Vars, Conrad Toepfer, and Donald Eichorn) continued to promote the middle-level

philosophy and the training of middle-level teachers and administrators into the 1970s and ’80s. The establishment of the National Middle School Association (NMSA) in 1973 added professional legitimacy to the movement, and its 1982 publication *This We Believe* provided a written foundation for middle-level beliefs and practices. In 1989, the Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development published a second guiding statement for the field, *Turning Points: Preparing American Youth for the 21st Century*, which brought the important issues of educating young adolescents national attention and provided a model for aspiring middle schools to follow.

On the heels of *Turning Points,* the early 1990s brought international attention to middle-level curriculum reform (see Beane, 1990), an issue that had rarely been addressed by earlier middle-level advocates. In particular, those years saw a flurry of interest in curriculum integration (emphasizing interdisciplinary topics and connections among subject areas), and many schools shifted to integrative curriculum models. Not all middle-level advocates were supportive (George, 1996), however. Moreover, with the rise of the standards movement, which came to dominate all of K-12 education in the 1990s, experiments in curriculum integration disappeared just as quickly as they had arrived, with most schools moving back to a more traditional curriculum emphasizing distinct subject areas.

This curricular retrenchment continued after the turn of the century. Given increased pressure to hold students and teachers accountable to high standards and test scores, interest waned in middle school principles and, especially, curriculum integration. Some large school districts (such as Baltimore, Cincinnati, Philadelphia, and New York) pulled back from earlier efforts to transition junior high schools into middle schools (Viadero, 2004), and many smaller districts followed suit, as budget cuts caused school boards to decide that it was too expensive to fund middle school mainstays such as team planning time for teachers and an array of exploratory classes for students.

While the numbers of authentic middle schools appear to be on the decline, though, it is important to recognize that ambitious and effective middle schools continue to exist. For instance, the Schools to Watch initiative, created by the National Forum to Accelerate Middle Grades reform, regularly highlights notable examples, and 18 states are currently involved in using a comprehensive rubric to evaluate, recognize, and support schools that are using middle school practice and philosophy to guide their work.

That said, public confusion continues to exist as to what constitutes a middle school, and the past two decades of educational policy making have done little to support the movement. An emphasis on test scores, standards, and holding teachers and students accountable has led to a narrowing of the curriculum that disregards the developmental needs of adolescents. Such practices are aversive to maintaining and establishing the kinds of schools that were proposed by Gruhn and Douglass (1956) and those who followed their lead.

Revisiting the vision

As I see it, the key to creating a unified mission for middle schools lies in curricular change. If the middle school is to achieve an identity of its own, it needs to dissociate itself from the high school curriculum (Beane, 1997). The middle school movement created practices to aid young adolescents with their development: advisory for emotional support and socialization, exploratory classes and cocurricular activities to help students find and develop their interests, and teams to build community and provide more individualized support. It also recommended a “curriculum that is relevant, challenging, integrative, and exploratory” (NMSA, 2003, p. 19). These developments gave rise to the perception that middle schools were soft on academics even though, other than for occasional interdisciplinary units, the curriculum itself rarely deviated from the junior version of the high school curriculum.

Young adolescents are in the process of building their identities, and a responsive curriculum would encourage middle-level students to explore themes that matter critically to them, such as race, culture, gender, sexual orientation, language, and spirituality. In order to address their need for independence, an authentic middle school curriculum would provide adolescents with legitimate choices and give them at least partial ownership in what and how they learn. This means providing them with opportunities to select and study topics of personal and global interest so that they can see how they can interact with the world around them. In short, the middle school curriculum must organize itself in ways that take the needs of adolescents seriously. It cannot continue to be the reductive curriculum currently in place, which is dominated mainly by the tested subject areas.

A recent development that promotes a curriculum that comes closer to one aspect of what middle-level advocates have recommended is the rise of STEM, STEAM, and STREAM (Chen, 2018; Trachta, 2018). STEM curricula incorporate multiple disciplines (Science, Technology, Engineering and Math; the "A" stands for Arts; the "R" for reading), and lessons and units often focus on solving an authentic problem. Although the impetus behind these programs often has to do with job training, this is the first time in recent memory that interdisciplinary forms of curricula have been met with wide approval. And, as it happens, these are the kinds of curricula that middle school advocates have promoted for decades.

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The main reason STEM could be crucial for middle school curricula is that one of the foundations of authentic middle schools is interdisciplinary teaming, in which teams of two or more teachers endorsed in different disciplines work together, using common planning time, to design curriculum collaboratively, schedule daily activities, and meet with administration, guidance counselors, social workers, students, and parents.

Unfortunately, the first function of interdisciplinary teaming, *planning interdisciplinary curriculum,* has been eclipsed by the need to attend to accountability measures related to current educational policies. The result is that some middle schools may complete an interdisciplinary unit or two a year but will rarely organize their entire curriculum thematically. If STEM becomes more than a daily class that students attend — and "STEM schools are cropping up across the country" (Burke et al., 2016, p. 1) — interdisciplinary curriculum may become more common.

As valuable as STEM is as an interdisciplinary approach to curriculum, it's less clear how much STEM does in terms of meeting the developmental needs of young adolescents. Because STEM often addresses real-world problems (Burke, et al., 2016), it seems likely that many young adolescents will at least see relevance in the curriculum. But ownership could be added to relevance by allowing the students to have a say in the problems being studied. If STEM programs can be planned democratically with middle school students, they could provide a curriculum that would show students that their voices were being heard.

Ideally, listening to young adolescents is the foundation for integrative curriculum, in which students and teachers co-plan their course of study based on the students' shared personal and global concerns (Beane, 1990, 1995). In an integrative curriculum, all students have an opportunity to participate in the planning process by forming, discussing, and submitting questions they have about themselves and the world around them. Students and teachers review these questions to determine their intersections and connections and create themes around which to build units of study. Students then vote on which themes to pursue, and together the students and teachers plan the activities and assessments for each unit. By giving voice to the opinions, concerns, and questions of young adolescents, teachers recognize their students as thoughtful, diverse, and complex individuals capable of asking questions that are both personally and socially relevant.

What an integrative curriculum shares with STEM is using a combination of disciplines to address problems that matter. When we ask students questions about themselves and their world, their responses will most likely match problems that STEM can address. Many of the important issues facing adults are concerns students share, too: Global warming, hunger, the dwindling fresh water supply, and overpopulation come immediately to mind. Imagine how a middle school curriculum could be formed by using the powerful themes found in the sciences and social sciences as organizing centers while using literacy and numeracy as tools for studying these themes.

The barriers before us

If the middle school is ever going to find its own mission, it needs to address the heart of education — students and teachers' interactions around ideas that matter. As important as teaming, advisory, and exploratory are to the education of young adolescents, these structures have done little to distinguish middle schools as a separate, educational entity and are often being cast aside by remedial programming geared to raising test scores. Even though I am encouraged by the interdisciplinary aspects of STEM, growing attention to the social and emotional needs of adolescents, and a cooling of the obsession with standards and testing (Burke et al., 2016; Karp, 2013/2014), I hold out little hope for full curricular reform.

The barriers to revitalizing the middle school mission are considerable: the momentum of 100 plus years of a departmentalized, high school-driven curriculum; a lack of teachers who are familiar with, let alone competent in, providing curricular alternatives to the separate-subject approach; an increasingly narrow curriculum dominated by math and literacy, and the recent, growing trend of purchasing scripted curricula that all but remove, teachers from the curriculum planning process. As a middle-level advocate, my fear is that young adolescents will always be stuck in the middle — between well-intended but inconsistent efforts to address their developmental needs and an antiquated, high school curriculum that has little to do with who they are as people. They deserve better.

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