

ACHIEVEMENT FOR ALL:

Keys to Educating Middle Grades Students in Poverty

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INTRODUCTION:

What Does It Mean To Be an Adolescent in Poverty?

The purpose of this book is to promote the development of assets and resources for students in the middle grades. We will explore what can be done when students come to school with fewer resources than they need and what educators can do to help those students develop as successful, resourced human beings.

Although many significant developments occur during early adolescence (years 10–15), the following tend to be the most important.

1. Physical development: puberty and body image
2. Cognitive/intellectual development: brain changes
3. Moral development: development of a moral compass
4. Psychological development: identity and differentiation from adults
5. Social/emotional development: safety and belonging—“fitting in”

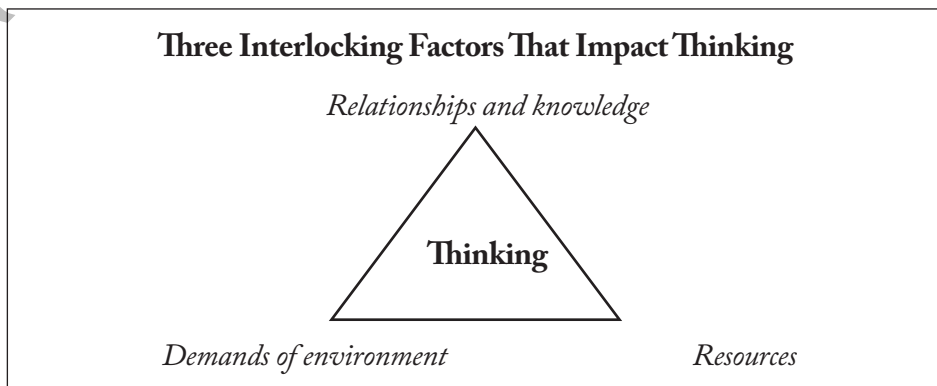
Each of the first five chapters focuses on one of these, listing the characteristics of the type of development, reviewing the research about that stage of development, discussing how under-resourcing impacts that type of development, and finally, suggesting interventions for the under-resourcing. The sixth chapter outlines school interventions that can improve the chances of success for under-resourced students. The Conclusion emphasizes the importance to adolescents and the community of laying a strong foundation at the middle level, as well as the lasting value of excellent teachers and schools.

Throughout the book, I have drawn upon the wealth of research and resources that the Association for Middle Level Education (AMLE) provides for educators to fulfill their mission of improving the education of all students ages 10–15. Long a champion of developmentally appropriate learning, they are the perfect partner for me as I apply my own research, resources, and experience to the problem of helping all middle grades students succeed. And, although I do cite research and spend a fair amount of time giving you background knowledge about adolescent development, my aim is to provide you with real-world interventions for real-world issues.

Connecting the Factors of Environment, Resources, and Relationships

Three interlocking factors impact the cognitive framework of adolescents. First, is the environment, or surroundings. It's a well-known axiom in biology that a key to survival is for organisms, including people, to adapt to their external environments. The second factor is the availability of resources: The more stable the resources, the more predictable the environment. The more predictable the environment, the more an individual can plan and have a future story. If an individual is in an environment with scarce resources, then every day becomes a win-lose proposition for survival.

In addition to environment and resources, the cognitive framework of adolescents includes relationships (and knowledge derived from those relationships). The following diagram illustrates these three interlocking factors that impact thinking.



In my book *A Framework for Understanding Poverty* (2013), I state that the fewer resources you have, the more you “live” on the left-hand side of the following chart. If you have more resources, the more you live on the right side of the chart.

Continuum of Resources That Help Build Stability

UNDER-RESOURCED	RESOURCED
Instability/crisis	Stability
Isolation	Exposure
Dysfunction	Functionality
Concrete reality	Abstract, representational reality
Casual, oral language	Written, formal register
Thought polarization	Option seeking
Survival	Abundance
No work/intermittent work	Work/careers/larger cause
Poverty	Wealth
Less educated	More educated

Source: *A Framework for Understanding Poverty* by R. K. Payne, 2013.

In this book, we will examine each of the above characteristics, provide a checklist for each in order to understand to what extent a student has resources, analyze the impact of that reality, and provide interventions that assist with the development of resources.

Under-Resourced Environments Can and Do Produce Strengths

You have probably heard the saying “That which doesn’t kill you, only makes you stronger.” Adapting to an under-resourced environment can develop valuable strengths and characteristics in many individuals, such as

- The ability to survive.
- A clear understanding of concrete reality.
- The ability to defend oneself.
- A strong sense of connection with others who also are in survival mode.
- An ability to problem-solve and “make do” with minimal materials.

- A sixth sense about adults who may not be “safe.”
- The capacity for sometimes going all day without food.
- An informal, even casual, approach to living.
- The ability to entertain and be entertained.
- A capacity for enjoying the basics of life in very immediate ways.

Furthermore, just because an environment is under-resourced doesn't mean it's permanent. Note that each of us, whether we are adult or adolescent, periodically lack everything we require. Just because we may not have had all the resources that we wished for at a given time in our life doesn't mean that we were or are a failure; overcoming adversity is a part of life. And just switching external environments requires a different set of resources to survive, which then requires new adaptations and support.

The purpose of this book is simply to acknowledge the realities of under-resourced situations and then identify ways to compensate for the scarcity. Life always has been and always will be about learning and growing.

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PHYSICAL DEVELOPMENT

In the wonderful book titled *This We Believe: Keys to Educating Young Adolescents* (National Middle School Association, 2010), the following characteristics of physical development of young adolescents are listed. (I have rephrased and simplified the original list. For added detail, see *This We Believe*.)

- Rapid, irregular physical growth
- Body changes that create awkwardness
- Varying maturity rates
- Restlessness and fatigue due to hormonal changes
- The need for daily physical activity
- The need to release energy
- Preferences for junk food
- Risky dieting practices
- Developing sexual awareness
- Concern with bodily changes
- Increased need for accurate information about sex and health
- Physical vulnerability to drugs
- High-risk sexual behaviors
- Poor habits

What Does the Research Indicate About Physical Development of Adolescents?

The biggest issue for adolescents ages 10–15 is *puberty*. And the biggest issue about puberty that concerns adolescents is simply: *Am I they going through the physical changes at about the same time as my friends?* Too early or too late, and they lose status with their peers.

There can be up to three years of variation either way in all the changes adolescents go through during puberty, depending on the genetics and ethnicity of an adolescent. The average girl is two years ahead of the average boy in height changes. A girl's height spurt generally occurs before *menarche*—the first menstrual period—but the boy's height spurt usually takes place after *spermatarche*—his first ejaculation.

A young adolescent, on average, gains from two to four inches in height per year, and in weight, the gain is eight to ten pounds. Over the five year period of young adolescence, this amounts to an average gain of 10 to 20 inches in height and 40 to 50 pounds in weight (Balk, as cited in Strahan, L'Esperance, & Van Hoose, 2009). Because these increases come in irregular spurts and at varying speeds, they would be considered a medical concern in anyone other than a young adolescent. Although they give an overview, these averages do not highlight the wide range of variation in the physical development of young adolescents.

The weight gain can cause students in middle grades concern, even though the weight gain is natural and not an indication of the onset of obesity. Students may worry about the physical changes and believe there is something wrong with them (whether they are taller, shorter, bigger, or smaller) as they continually compare themselves to others. Their ongoing changes impact their self-esteem and thus all of their social relationships which can then impact their body image and eating habits

Research shows the major importance to teens of their peers' acceptance of the physical changes they are undergoing. It also shows that early onset of puberty is a huge risk factor for them and that later onset of puberty also carries risks. The following chart is a compilation of information (Berger, 2011) about some of the risk factors of early and late maturing of girls and boys.

Risk Factors in Early and Late Maturing of Girls and Boys

	EARLY MATURING	LATE MATURING
Girls	Lower self-esteem More depression Poorer body image Earlier sexual activity Higher level of pregnancy Harsh parenting Correlates to absence of biological father (Berger, 2011, p. 387) Lower grades and the likelihood of course failure in ninth grade (Crosnoe & Johnson, 2011) More vulnerable to sexual abuse (Berger, 2011)	Four times the rate of self-harm (cutting, poisoning, etc.)
Boys	More aggressive More delinquency More alcohol abuse More early sex Correlates to absence of biological father (Berger, 2011, p. 387) Lower grades and the likelihood of course failure in ninth grade (Crosnoe & Johnson, 2011)	More anxious, depressed, and afraid of sex Four times the rate of self-harm (cutting, poisoning, etc.)

Chart compiled from information in *The Developing Person Through the Life Span* by K. S. Berger, 2011.

Note that if a young adolescent's parents are under the stress of illness, divorce, addiction, or if they live in a violent environment, that young person is more likely to have earlier onset puberty. Early puberty correlates with earlier sexual activity and with the absence of the biological father. Scientists do not agree on whether stress causes the early puberty or whether it's caused genetically.