
PREFACE

No Time to Retreat

Children are living messages we send to a time we will not see.

—John W. Whitehead

The role of the middle school principal has been evolving; once largely concerned with organisational and management issues, more and more principals are called on to lead schools instructionally (Jackson & Davis, 2000). This change takes place at a time when quantifying student learning through data analysis, balancing curriculum with relevant mandates and achieving more stringent test scores have become increasingly critical.

This resource focuses on the heart of middle level education, the relationships and learning experiences that occur between students and teachers, students and students, and teachers and teachers. It reflects those deeply held beliefs that compel many educators to choose to work with young adolescents because they see the value and importance of working with these in-transition students.

Educators must ask, What are the desired outcomes for a student in our middle school? Is it to pass a standardised test? Is it to grow as an individual? Is it to develop intellectual gifts? Is it to become a positive citizen in a democratic society? Most will agree that the ideal middle school would help achieve all these things for each of its students. If that is the case, the next question has to be, Is our curriculum structured in a way to accomplish these things? If it isn't, what must we do to prepare our students to meet these varied and desired outcomes?

Curriculum integration is a term often used by middle level educators to identify a particular approach to curriculum; however, integrated or connected curriculum has a rich history dating back to

TOPIC ONE

Curriculum Integration Design

Do not separate the seamless cloak of learning.

—Alfred North Whitehead

Successful middle level schools have a “curriculum that is relevant, challenging, integrative, and exploratory” (National Middle School Association, 2003, p. 19). To achieve this end, the ideal middle level curriculum focuses on two closely related elements: integrated curriculum and democratic classrooms. There are several ways to organise the curriculum, ranging from a separate subject approach to a fully integrated curriculum where subject boundaries dissolve and learning activities are focused on answering authentic student questions. A second, yet equally important element of an integrated middle level curriculum is the inclusion of student voice in selecting curriculum topics, assessment measures, learning activities, and in the overall environment of the classroom, all of which result in a democratic classroom. While some would argue that absolute curriculum integration cannot take place unless both elements—curriculum integration and democratic classrooms—are fully in place, the reality is that many middle level classrooms still lack a truly democratic approach, even while making a real effort to break down strict subject boundaries.

An integrated curriculum pursues major concepts, not narrowly defined bodies of content; but in studying these concepts, all subjects are sources of pertinent information. However, no subject is the organising centre for such a curriculum; rather, a theme provides the organising structure. Some have suggested that the different approaches to curriculum fall on a continuum that identifies the level of student

TOPIC TWO

Democratic Classrooms

Empowerment does not seem to be an item high on our agenda. Negative views have led us to grossly underestimate the potential that young adolescents have to create, contribute, and assume responsibility for their own learning.—John Arnold

An effective middle level curriculum is distinguished by learning activities that appeal to young adolescents and create opportunities to pose and answer questions that are important to them (National Middle School Association, 2003, p.19). What is the best way to create schools as described in this passage? Giving young adolescents a voice in what and how they learn at this time when they are struggling with self-identity, seeking greater autonomy and yet relying heavily on the opinions of others is the best time to have them become more fully engaged in their own learning.

In democratic classrooms students have meaningful input into all aspects of the learning experience. This input may begin with achieving agreement about classroom rules, but quickly goes beyond that to the heart of what takes place in the classroom—learning. Beane (1993) describes a democratic classroom as one where the curriculum is structured around the questions and concerns students have about themselves and the world in which they live (p. 68). Based on their questions and concerns, students identify themes and issues that are relevant to them. From these themes, teachers and students collaboratively design learning experiences, often in a variety of ways to demonstrate that learning, and define the expected level of student performance or guiding rubrics. It is at the point when democratic classrooms and curriculum integration meet that young adolescents are in a learning environment that best matches their social, emotional, intellectual and physical development.

TOPIC FIVE

Standards Support Curriculum Integration

The promise of the “standards movement” for better learning and teaching lies in embracing new norms and routines that can turn schools into places that celebrate all kinds of accomplishments, where it is both desirable and safe for every student to become smart, work hard, and learn through risk taking and effort.

—Anne Wheelock

The standards movement has been growing in importance and has definitely impacted middle level educators and students during the past decade. Content standards have brought a different focus and a higher level of accountability to classrooms across the world. Unfortunately for many dedicated middle level educators, the standards movement has also helped reverse the trend toward more integrated curriculum and democratic classrooms, often sending the curriculum back to a single subject approach with little or no attempt to connect with other subjects.

The question middle level educators must ask now is: *Can integrated curriculum really work in a content-driven, standards-based, high-accountability environment?* The answer is yes! Integrating curriculum was never described as an easy task for middle level educators, and the standards movement has not made the process any easier. However, even with the most specific content standards, integrated curriculum can thrive (Beane & Vars, 2000).

In classrooms where teachers are responsible for developing themes, integrated curriculum can emerge from extensive curriculum mapping. Here, teachers use their planning time to make connections between the various content areas and use age-appropriate themes to frame questions to be answered during the integrated unit. This can take considerable time, especially for larger teams. It can also be dif-

TOPIC SEVEN

Creating Positive Public Relations

Only those who dare to fail greatly can ever achieve greatly.

— Robert Kennedy

The success or failure of curriculum integration in many middle schools is not a result of what actually takes place in the classroom but rather the public relations—or lack thereof—that take place outside the classroom. The principal is key to creating positive relationships that better ensure the success of curriculum integration and enhanced student learning. Principals are accustomed to talking positively about their schools and trumpeting successes. They understand the importance of creating positive public relations, whereas classroom teachers are likely to be less adept at this function. Principals skilled in positive public relations, then, should have a plan for sharing information about curriculum integration with their own faculty and staff, central office personnel, school board, parents and the school community.

Principals, especially those who have been involved in the school for any length of time, know the culture of the community and their receptiveness to changes in practices and programs. The type and amount of communication needed are impacted by this knowledge and the depth of change as a result of implementing integrated curriculum. Defining how the scope of change will impact the school community is essential since it will drive the communications plan. For example, a team of teachers engaged in a two-week integrated unit of study will typically need to communicate with a much smaller audience, typically parents, possibly school staff and central office personnel, than a team of teachers planning to launch a yearlong integrated program.