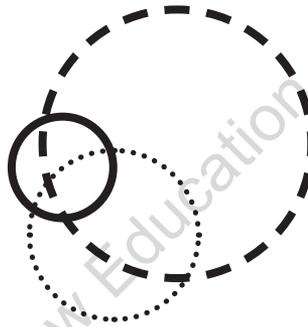


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Chapter 1

Moments of Harmony: Relationships as the Essence of Good Teaching

A successful secondary school proactively addresses the unique needs of the young adolescents who attend that school. Because these needs are so dynamic, good middle years teachers are responsive and supportive. In this chapter, we focus more specifically on ways successful teachers create classroom environments that promote harmony.

While we have used a musical metaphor, teachers have described these moments of harmony in many ways. Some talk about times “when everything goes together”. Others refer to “being in the zone”. Years ago, a teacher described these times as “aha moments”:

When I am teaching a lesson, I watch students’ eyes to see if the picture is growing clear. When I see those pictures in their eyes, that is the “aha moment” for me. If I see the picture begin

to fade, I know I have to adjust my lesson to bring the pictures back. That's the excitement that keeps me going.

Psychological researchers use the language of “flow” to describe these times when learning occurs most naturally (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). Csikszentmihalyi and his colleagues (1989) have found that adolescents’ involvement in meaningful learning activities is characterised by “flow”.

Flow is what people feel when they enjoy what they are doing, when they would not want to do anything else. What makes flow so intrinsically motivating? The evidence suggests a simple answer: in flow, the human organism is functioning at its fullest capacity. When this happens, the experience is its own reward. (p. 55)

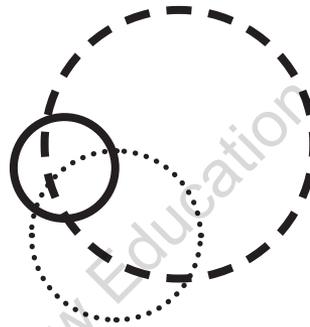
We will explore concepts of flow more specifically in Chapter 2. In this chapter, we explore the dynamics of harmony in the classroom.

A growing body of research has identified relationships as the single most important variable in school success. In the summer of 2003, the Center for Adolescent Health and Development at the University of Minnesota coordinated an extensive review of research on factors essential to success in school (Blum, 2005). They then invited an interdisciplinary group of educational leaders to meet and make recommendations based on this research. The resulting document entitled “The Wingspread Declaration: A National Strategy for Improving School Connectedness” concluded,

Students are more likely to succeed when they feel connected to school. School connection is the belief by students that adults in the school care about their learning as well as about them as individuals. The critical requirements for feeling connected include students’ experiencing

- High academic expectations and rigour coupled with support for learning.
- Positive adult-student relationships.
- Physical and emotional safety. (p. 20)

In their synthesis of studies entitled “Who Are Adolescents Today? Youth Voices and What They Tell Us”, Intrator and Kunzman (2009)



Chapter 2

Intellectual and Emotional Development

While not as visible as the physical changes, the intellectual and emotional changes that occur during early adolescence are equally dramatic. Just as muscles grow and develop new powers of movement, students' brains change and develop new powers of reasoning. They begin to think of themselves and the world around them in new ways. Their emotions grow stronger—and sometimes more confusing. For the first time in their lives, young adolescents can “think about thinking”. Classroom activities play a major role in bringing about these significant intellectual and emotional changes that occur in this period. When teachers understand how reasoning develops and can interpret students' responses accordingly, they can orchestrate activities in ways that promote harmony.

In this chapter, we consider intellectual and emotional development comprehensively. Recent research studies make it clear that the notion of “feelings vs thoughts” is outdated. Emotional thoughts are

intertwined with other modes of reasoning. Goleman's (1995; 1998) studies of the relationships among ideas and feelings have highlighted many of the connections.

In reality, the brain's wetware is awash in a messy, pulsating puddle of neurochemicals, nothing like the sanitized, orderly silicon that has spawned the guiding metaphor for mind.

(Goleman, 1998, pp. 40-41)

Researchers studying the human brain are finding many ways that the brain develops across the lifespan. This does not mean that middle years students cannot think well or control their emotions—far from it. It means that one of our most important responsibilities is to help them think better. In this chapter we will explore ways that middle years students develop their minds and how this impacts their understanding of themselves and their world.

Understanding how students think

As an organising framework for understanding more about how young adolescents think, we build on a powerful synthesis of research on learning prepared by Patricia Cross in 1999. In her monograph entitled *Learning Is About Making Connections*, Cross summarised much of what scientists have discovered about how people learn.

Stunning new research on the brain by neuroscientists is adding a new dimension to our knowledge about learning that reinforces our previously tentative conclusions from cognitive psychology. This research provides growing evidence that learning is about making connections—whether the connections are established by firing synapses in the brain, the “ah ha” experience of seeing the connections between two formerly isolated concepts, or the satisfaction of seeing the connections between an abstraction and a “hands-on” concrete application. (p. 5)

In the decade since Cross reported her synthesis, additional research has strengthened her conclusion that learning occurs in four intertwined types of connections:

- Neurological connections
- Cognitive connections
- Social connections
- Experiential connections. (p. 7)

These four categories provide organisers for our analysis of intellectual development during early adolescence. After examining these four interrelated dimensions, we will explore how emotional aspects of reasoning shape our thoughts.

Neurological connections

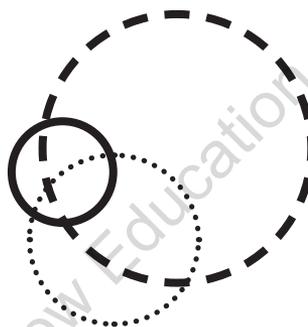
Scientific studies on the structure of the brain are helping us understand the basic, physical nature of the connections we make when we think. Robert Leamson (1999), a professor of biology at University of Massachusetts, described how our brains function as synaptic connections:

The paths that signals take as they pass from one part of the brain to another are, to the nonspecialist, simply bewildering. They fan out, converge, loop back, reenter the path from multiple sites, and probably do much more that we don't know yet. (p. 12)

These multiple connections among neurons link perception and thought. Pinker (1997) describes how our minds have evolved using these neurological connections:

The mind is what the brain does, specifically, the brain processes information and thinking is a kind of computation. . . . The mind is a system of organs of computation, designed by natural selection to solve the kinds of problems our ancestors faced in their foraging way of life, in particular, understanding and outmaneuvering objects, animals, plants, and other people. (p. 21)

Recognising this complexity requires us to abandon outmoded metaphors for thinking. Notions such as a “blank slate” or an “empty vessel” make no sense when we understand more about the mind. “We need ideas that capture the ways a complex device can tune itself to



Chapter 3

Physical and Sexual Development

All young adolescents are concerned with their physical and sexual development; for some, their physical development or lack thereof is the dominant, central theme in their lives for a time. While most middle years teachers know this, some may not make allowances for this “developmental override” when they prepare for their classes; therefore, students may tune into their personal concerns and tune out even the best teachers. Often, directions have to be repeated, explanations restated and concepts retaught because students “flipped out” of the instructional activities while focusing on a physical or sexual concern.

This kind of developmental override constantly occurs in middle years classrooms. Educators have to be aware of the root causes of these realities so that they can make appropriate modifications and allowances in their instruction. Since the basic causes are often physical and sexual changes, an overview of the latest research findings in these areas is provided here along with implications for teaching and learning.

Perhaps the best way to begin this profile is to suggest that the reader try to envision some of these changes on a personal level. For example, how would you react to a substantial outbreak of acne or the eruption of a sizable pimple on the end of your nose (a huge “zit” in young adolescent terms)? Though it is not possible for adults to completely get into the mind-set of young adolescents, it is important to try, because the effort alone may lead to better understanding of their needs. Internalising and reflecting on the common physical and sexual changes is one way of walking in the shoes of young adolescents.

Height and weight



Teacher: Something that always amazes me is the variance in size and development that you encounter in a middle years class. In one of my year eight classes I have a male student who some would mistake as a university student. He is over six feet tall and very muscular. He has to shave every morning, and by the end of the day you can already see signs of stubble. In the same class, I have a student who would fit in with the year six students. He is less than five feet tall and probably weighs about 40 kilograms soaking wet. When you see them walking down the corridor side by side, you would never believe them to be the same age, actually only a two-month age difference.



The average gain in height for a young adolescent is from five to ten centimetres per year, and the average weight gain per year is three to five kilograms. Over the period of early adolescence from 10 to 15, this averages out to a gain of 25 to 50 centimetres in height and 18 to 22 kilograms (Balk, 1995). These height and weight increases often come in irregular growth spurts and at varying rates of speed (Caskey & Anfara, 2007).

If you gained that much weight, you would consider it a serious medical concern; it would likely lead to panic, then to dieting, medication, and exercise and might lead to high blood pressure or heart disease.