

# Today's Middle Schools Combining Education with Life Experiences

By M. Lee Manning

“So, what’s different about today’s middle school? Isn’t it just a school with a new name between the elementary and high school?” “Do middle schools really do anything different?” These questions have been asked many times. Along with my Old Dominion colleague Katherine T. Bucher, professor of educational curriculum and instruction, I have written *Teaching in the Middle School*, which describes what contemporary middle schools do. We focused on grades six through eight, 10- to 14-year-old students, middle school curriculum and organization, instructional methods, classroom management, and guidance and counseling.

Today’s middle schools do indeed differ from those of several decades ago. People often imagine middle school students sitting in straight rows, listening intently to the teacher and reading from the same book. *Teaching in the Middle School* shows how middle schools have changed. Students work in small groups, perform different learning tasks and learn from different books. Teachers provide guidance, and all students have the opportunity to participate in school activities. Parents sometimes serve as helpers and resource people. Indeed, a positive classroom demonstrates cooperation and collaboration.

Our students who are preparing to teach in the middle school sometimes ask us, “How can teachers determine a ‘good’ middle school?” The list of questions to ask is almost endless, but in essence they can determine if learning experiences comprehensively provide what is best for middle school students. Good middle schools provide 10- to 14-year-olds with educational experiences that emphasize the instruction and overall well-being of learners. Working collaboratively, teachers, counselors, administrators and many parents address middle school students’ learning and socialization needs and ensure some degree of success for all learners. They also recognize and address adolescents’ developmental diversity. In turn, students know educators value academic achievement and appropriate behaviors.

Although *Teaching in the Middle School* makes it clear that individual middle schools differ, several “signs” show how well middle schools meet students’ educational and other needs. The most successful middle schools recognize learner diversity, employ educators trained in middle school education, offer exploratory curricular programs that encourage learner interest, provide age-appropriate guidance and counseling, ensure equal access to educational experiences, promote a positive school environment, and involve parents and families in the educational process.

It is important to state that today’s middle schools do not downplay academic achievement and appropriate behavior. Quite the contrary, teachers and administrators emphasize these fundamental aspects of education, but they also provide learning experiences that meet individual needs.

## Student Diversity

One student teacher explained, “I saw a 14-year-old boy. He was physically well-developed and probably as big as he would grow to be. Upon closer observation, I realized he was far less developed socially and intellectually. He was painfully shy and immature.” Middle school educators see such diversity every day. Rather than providing educational experiences that assume adolescents are too much alike, middle school educators teach

individuals and provide experiences that meet particular learning and socialization needs. While determining what students need might appear to be an unwieldy task, learners' individuality can be identified through appropriate testing, suggestions from previous teachers, interest surveys and simply talking to the students. Teaching experiences can be accomplished by providing instruction designed for individuals, allowing students to work cooperatively in small-group instruction and encouraging them to tutor one another.

## **Professional Teacher Preparation**

Some teachers once thought, "I have my training; now, all I have to do is teach." Such a mindset is no longer correct because educators receive specific training that prepares them for teaching the middle school grades. Middle school educators genuinely want to teach 10- to 14-year-olds and provide educational experiences that reflect the needs and challenges of individual girls and boys. This age group benefits when educators obtain appropriate professional training during teacher preparation or through ongoing professional development. Such training includes appropriate teacher education courses and firsthand experiences in middle schools, which help teachers better understand what effective middle schools do and how they contribute to educational experiences. The training also shows them how to promote positive classrooms and how to advise students and encourage them to explore different curricular interests.

## **Exploratory Curricular Programs**

Exploratory curricular programs, considered essential in good middle schools, give adolescents six-week, eight-week or semester-long learning experiences in which learners can discover their talents, unique abilities and values. These exploratory programs take into account students' shorter attention spans, rapidly changing interests and different motivational levels.

Exploratory programs also build interest. For example, middle school students learn about areas they might want to pursue by taking exploratory courses in business, keyboarding, choir, homemaking and independent living, drama, foreign languages, arts and crafts, independent study opportunities, dance, music and other topics. Enthusiastic teachers, who have interest and expertise in these areas, should plan and lead exploratory programs. They develop programs and focus learning experiences, to the degree possible, on individual learners. Educators should expect all students to actively participate, although some might develop an intense interest in the exploratory program, while others might have only a casual interest.

One middle school teacher implemented a seventh grade home arts exploratory experience. The nine-week course, designed for both boys and girls, helped students understand themselves, their families and other people. Home arts emphasized development of lifelong skills. The first four weeks focused on nutrition, while week five looked at home care, and weeks six through nine emphasized clothing.

## **Guidance and Counseling**

Contemporary middle school students present a variety of challenges to educators, including unstable home situations, school problems, risky behaviors and peer pressure. To address adolescents' problems, educators have implemented a team approach to guidance, with teachers and counselors collaboratively providing counseling services. Middle schools take several approaches such as individual, small- and large-group counseling, as well as adviser-advisee programs.

Adviser-advisee programs are planned efforts in which each student participates in a small interactive group with peers and staff to discuss school, personal and societal concerns.

Conducted for about 25 minutes daily, the adviser-advisee program helps each student develop a meaningful relationship with at least one significant adult in the middle school.

## **Equal Participatory Opportunities**

All students should have equal opportunity to participate in school experiences, whether advanced academic classes, physical education activities, or clubs and plays. This does not mean all students will be successful at the learning experience or activity, but that they have the chance to try to be successful. In one middle school, all students participated in a play. Some had speaking roles, while others sang as a group. Everyone who wanted to be in the play could do so. No one was “cut” or encouraged to quit and try again next time. In fact, the students showed so much interest that the teachers decided to have five one-act plays rather than one longer play, so all students could participate.

## **Positive Learning Environments**

Middle schools ensure a school environment that gives adolescents opportunities to learn and interact in a humane, respectful and psychologically safe learning environment — one that emphasizes cooperation and peaceful existence. The school environment demonstrates a sense of collaboration among students and educators, promotes harmony and interpersonal relations among students, and reflects positive communication. Teachers and students listen with empathy and support others in a positive manner. In essence, they promote a nurturing school environment where all are valued, and where people feel respected and nurtured, with everyone accepting responsibility for student success.

Middle school educators want an environment that lessens conflicts between educators and students and reduces discipline referrals and confrontations, teasing, bullying and harassment among students. With the elimination of the “students vs. educators” mentality, middle school students perceive the harmonious relationships in the school and see less of a need to engage in hostile and confrontational behaviors. To ensure such an atmosphere, educators implement schedules, discipline procedures, teaching methods, school organization and guidance programs that place priority on the learner.

## **Parental Involvement**

The number of parents involved in their children’s education drops to about 50 percent when children reach middle school. One parent of an eighth grader explained, “Well, first, Jill does not want me at school, and also, I think her teachers are doing an all right job. Jill is not in elementary school anymore, and she really does not need me there.” That probably sums up the opinions of many parents of middle schoolers. The teacher explained to Jill’s mother that she still needed to take an active role in her daughter’s education. She explained that even eighth graders — and their teachers — benefit from parental involvement.

Teaching in the Middle School calls attention to the lack of parental involvement and encourages educators to try to get parents involved. Educators are often challenged to recapture parents’ and families’ interest and to re-engage them in their children’s education. However, students whose parents are interested and involved usually demonstrate higher levels of motivation and commitment to education.

In addition, educators and parents get to know one another and assist each other. By getting more involved in school activities and homework, parents learn the various purposes of middle school education. Middle school educators recognize the importance of involving parents in adolescents’ education. Whether through parent involvement or conferences, they understand the need to include parents in the educational process. Students, parents, and educators all benefit when a partnership approach to middle school education is emphasized.

## Today's Middle Schools

Students should always have clear expectations for academic achievement and appropriate behavior. Middle schools that recognize learner diversity, provide professionally trained educators, ensure learners have opportunities to explore curricular areas, offer responsive guidance and counseling programs, ensure equal access, instill positive classrooms and schools, and involve parents and families effectively convey these expectations. Today's middle schools are providing more than just educational experiences – they are preparing young people to be well-adjusted adults.

*M. Lee Manning is a professor of educational curriculum and instruction at Old Dominion University. He has written 13 books and more than 150 journal articles on middle school education and multicultural education.*

*Quest Winter 2003 • Volume 6 Issue 1*

[QUEST HOME](#)[ARCHIVE](#)[ABOUT QUEST](#)[OLD DOMINION UNIVERSITY](#)