

Middle School 101: Basic Resources for Middle Level Teacher Education

By Dan Young

What does one need to know in order to become an effective middle level teacher?

Since the emergence of the middle school concept 30 years ago, this question has been the subject of much discussion. Throughout this time, a series of important studies have explored, defined, and elaborated upon the concept of middle school (Alexander, 1969; Bondi, 1972; Eichhorn, 1966; George, 1977; George & Alexander, 1993; Lipsitz, 1984; Lounsbury & Vars, 1978; Moss, 1969). Building upon these pioneering works, several state and national task forces have synthesized the middle level research and have outlined means to create exemplary middle level programs (California State Department of Education, 1987; Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1989; Florida State Department of Education, 1989; Maryland State Department of Education, 1989; National Association of Secondary School Principals, 1985; National Middle School Association, 1995; Virginia Department of Education, 1990).

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One feature shared by all of the task force reports is a comprehensive set of guidelines for the knowledge base for prospective middle level teachers. These guidelines provide excellent criteria for answering the question *What does one need to know in order to become an effective middle level teacher?*

The array of resources available to those charged with developing middle level teacher preparation programs, however, is vast and can be overwhelming for those new to the task of developing curricula.

The purpose of this article is to highlight a few of the basic resources one might include in Middle School 101—an introductory course in middle level teacher education. The four books I will discuss are *Turning Points* (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1989), *Developmentally Appropriate Middle Level Schools* (Manning, 1993), *Teaching Ten to Fourteen Year Olds* (Stevenson, 1992), and *Integrated Studies in the Middle Grades: "Dancing Through Walls"* (Stevenson & Carr, 1993). I selected these books based on three criteria: (1) the qualities of the resources; (2) the coverage of important topics; and (3) complementarity of resources.

Criteria for Selecting Resources

Qualities of Resources. Recent work by Peter Scales (1992, 1994) suggested the first two criteria: qualities of the resources and coverage of important topics. Scales (1994, 61) surveyed 175 professors involved in middle level teacher education programs at 125 institutions of higher education in the United States. The four qualities most frequently mentioned “when evaluating potential resources for their middle grades teacher education programs” were—in order of their perceived importance—“an up-to-date research base, a positive view of young adolescents, a teacher-as-coach perspective, and plentiful practical teaching examples.” Table 1 shows the degree to which each of the selected books embodies each of these qualities. (Scales’ article is also helpful to program designers in providing a comprehensive list of resources identified by his survey respondents as important to the field.)

Table 1
Qualities Embodied in Resource

Quality	Resources			
	Turning Points	Manning	Stevenson	Stevenson & Carr
Up-to-date research base	extensive	extensive	extensive	limited
Positive view of young adolescents	mixed	strong	very strong	very strong
Teacher-as-coach perspective	mentioned	implicit	very prominent	very strong
Practical teaching examples	many	many	extensive	extensive

Coverage of Topics. The second criterion for selection was the coverage of 11 critical topics identified by Scales (1992) in an earlier work: integrative curriculum; assessment by exhibitions; classroom management; family involvement; cultural/language diversity; community involvement; teacher-based guidance; young adolescent social development; teacher's role in site-based management; cooperative learning; and young adolescent physical development. Table 2 shows the degree to which each of the selected books covers each of these topics.

Table 2
Topic Area Coverage by Resource

Topic Area	Resources			
	Turning Points	Manning	Stevenson	Stevenson & Carr
Integrative Curriculum	essential principle	briefly mentioned	brief sections	basic premise
Assessment by exhibitions	not well addressed	briefly mentioned	well developed	basic premise
Classroom management	not well addressed	not addressed	well developed	indirectly addressed
Family involvement	essential principle	brief sections	well developed	basic premise
Cultural/language diversity	passing mention	passing mention	passing mention	brief mention
Community involvement	essential principle	brief sections	some mention	basic premise
Teacher-based guidance involvement	essential principle	several mentions	well developed	implicit
Young adolescent social development	passing mention	primary emphasis	well developed	primary emphasis
Teacher's role in site-based management	essential principle	passing mention	passing mention	implicit
Cooperative learning	passing mention	several mentions	well developed	basic premise
Young adolescent physical development	passing mention	primary emphasis	well developed	primary emphasis

Complementarity. The final criterion for selection was complementarity. I selected books that possess the desired qualities and provide adequate coverage of all the topics, but do so without unnecessary duplication of information.

Selected Texts

The four texts selected here for review can be used in the order in which they are discussed. The order presents a logical progression starting with a general overview of the need for specific middle level teacher preparation (*Turning Points*), moving through an exploration of the developmental stages and needs of young adolescents (*Developmentally Appropriate Middle Level Schools*) and the practical application of developmental theory to the middle level student and classroom (*Teaching Ten to Fourteen Year Olds*), ending with a series of case studies of middle level principles in action (*Integrated Studies in the Middle Grades*).

Turning Points

Turning Points: Preparing American Youth for the 21st Century (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1989) is considered by many to be the seminal call to action and “the impetus for the middle level school reform movement” (Manning 1993, 9). In a sense, it is a transitional document, spanning the gap between the somewhat alarmist calls for educational reform of the preceding years and a commitment to the improvement of the current educational situation. To use a medical metaphor, *Turning Points* is both socially diagnostic and programatically prescriptive. To the latter end, the Carnegie network has been extremely active and influential in advocating and supporting the rethinking of middle level teacher preparation. In an introductory course on middle level education, *Turning Points* would serve to provide historical background to the middle school movement and concrete direction for improvement.

Because of its social-diagnostic aspect, *Turning Points* has a rather urgent tone. An introductory section describes two threats to our nation: the external threat of decreasing competitiveness in the global economy, and the internal threat of a numerically growing but economically and socially stagnant underclass. Regarding the first threat, we are advised that “successful participation in a technically based and interdependent world economy will require that we have a more skillful and interdependent workforce than ever before” (p. 12); regarding the second, “Continuing to allow minority youth to face extraordinary risks of failure is a direct threat to our national standard of living and democratic foundations” (p. 27). The remedy for these twin threats is better “middle grade schools: potentially society’s most powerful force to recapture millions of youth adrift, and help every young person thrive during early adolescence” (p. 8).

Despite its grim tone and ostensibly conservative goals of maintaining American economic competitiveness abroad and preventing underclass disaffection and the dissolution of democracy at home, the heart of the Carnegie Task Force proposal is a clear call for a dramatic and radical transformation of middle level education. The reform agenda is organized around “eight essential principles” (p. 36): (1) large

middle grade schools are divided into smaller communities for learning; (2) middle grade schools transmit a core of common knowledge to all students; (3) middle grade schools are organized to ensure success for all students; (4) teachers and principals have the major responsibility and power to transform middle grade schools; (5) teachers for the middle grades are specifically prepared to teach young adolescents; (6) schools promote good health—the education and health of young adolescents are inextricably linked; (7) families are allied with school staff through mutual respect, trust, and communication; and (8) schools and communities are partners in educating young adolescents.

Turning Points scores well as a teaching resource based on the criteria drawn from Scales' work. Its strongest qualities are its up-to-date research base—it includes over six pages of endnotes, and its inclusion of many practical examples both of teaching and of institutional change. While the notion of “teacher-as-coach” is not present in *Turning Points*, passing reference is made of “teacher as facilitator through which young people construct knowledge” (p. 43). The general view of young adolescents depicted in *Turning Points*, however, is somewhat mixed. Some positive—although muted—statements are directly made—for example, “Contrary to much conventional belief, cognitive development during early adolescence is not on hold” (p. 42). Indirectly, too, we can adduce a positive view—we *must* have a positive view if we assume that today's middle level students can bring about the salvation of the nation; but there is nagging feeling that the reform of middle school education for young adolescents is a means to a greater national good rather than a desirable end in itself.

Turning Points does an admirable job of covering most of Scales' 11 criterion topics. In discussing its eight essential principles, it directly addresses integrative curriculum, family and community involvement, teacher-based guidance, and the teacher's role in site-based management. Four other topics are either given brief mention or referred to implicitly: cultural/language diversity, young adolescent social and physical development, and cooperative learning. Only assessment by exhibition and classroom management are substantially absent from the report.

Developmentally Appropriate Middle Level Schools

Turning Points presents a broad and comprehensive overview of the middle school question; it can be seen as the background against which *Developmentally Appropriate Middle Level Schools* is set. As the title so clearly states, Manning's monograph is tightly focused on the very heart of the middle school question—developmentally appropriate middle level schools.

The difference in scale between the two books is reflected in their difference in tone. With Manning there is an immediate sense of the centrality of the individual child, the necessity to create developmentally appropriate schools because they are best for young adolescents. Rather than recounting the threats that face our society if middle level education is not reformed, Manning's first chapter presents a brief

but extensively referenced overview of the emergence of early adolescence as a recognized developmental period.

Chapters Two and Three are organized around three topics: the physical, psychosocial, and cognitive characteristics of 10-to-14-year olds. Chapter Two defines and presents a review of the relevant research on the three domains and suggests some implication for middle level educators. Chapter Three elaborates on the implications by suggesting specific practices that are grounded upon a firm theoretical and research base and have been tested in the classroom. The final chapter consists of a comprehensive list of resources, including professional and regional organizations, privately and governmentally funded programs and initiatives, national resource centers, youth organizations, and a selected annotated bibliography. The monograph concludes with an appendix that provides an extremely useful checklist to help assess a school's responsiveness to young adolescents' developmental characteristics.

The two strongest qualities of the monograph are its detailed references and its strong focus on early adolescent development. Manning's careful documentation of important middle level research and the extensive lists of resources in Chapter Four make it easy to embed more detailed examination of specific topics into the flow of *Developmentally Appropriate Middle Level Schools*. The resources mentioned form a nice complement to the literature cited in *Turning Points*. Manning also elaborates on two of the important topics missing from *Turning Points*: early adolescent social and physical development. The quality of teacher-as-coach is not overtly addressed in *Developmentally Appropriate Middle Level Schools*, but it is implicit in Manning's discussion of the need for a personal and caring relationship between teacher and student. Practical teaching examples are more obvious in the monograph, particularly in Chapter Three where the implications of developmental principles are expanded upon.

Although Manning's primary emphases are the physical, psychosocial, and cognitive development during early adolescence, several other of Scales' important topics receive varying degrees of attention. Brief sections of Chapter Three treat family and community involvement, and here again, Manning's literature citations provide additional avenues of study. Several brief mentions are made of integrative curriculum, portfolios or assessment by exhibition, teacher-based guidance, the teacher's role in site-based management, and cooperative learning. The topic of cultural/language diversity is also mentioned in passing, but Manning's attention to diversity centers primarily on developmental diversity and secondarily on gender diversity. Implications for cultural diversity can be drawn from discussion, for example, of learning styles, brain hemisphericity, and multiple intelligences, but one would need additional resources to draw conclusions about how to work with students from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Classroom management is the only topic not given any attention.

Teaching Ten to Fourteen Year Olds

Of the four resources I have selected for review in this article, *Developmentally Appropriate Middle Level Schools* and *Teaching Ten to Fourteen Year Olds* have the greatest overlap of content. The major difference between the two, however, can be best described by saying that while Manning focuses on *early adolescence*, Stevenson focuses on *young adolescents*. The shift between the two resources, then, represents the movement from a general description of a developmental stage to a more direct investigation of the individuals who are experiencing the changes that take place at that stage.

A second difference exists in how Manning and Stevenson analyze the facets of the complex process of development. Although both authors strongly emphasize the interrelatedness of the different aspects of early adolescent development, Manning identifies three strands of development—physical, psychosocial, and cognitive—while Stevenson divides the whole into five “domains” (pp. 78–109). Part of the difference between the two analyses is simply semantic: Manning’s *physical development* parallels Stevenson’s somatic domain and *cognitive development* parallels the intellectual domain.

A substantial difference exists, however, in the rest of the analysis. Stevenson analyzes the territory covered by Manning’s *psychosocial development* into the familial, communal, and introspective domains. In doing so, Stevenson formally separates the family and peer aspects of social development. The most significant difference between Manning’s and Stevenson’s analyses is the relative positions of the aspects of development. Manning’s developmental strands are described as interrelated but essentially equal and parallel, while Stevenson embeds the somatic, intellectual, familial, and communal domains within the introspective domain.

In shifting focus from early adolescence—the developmental stage—to young adolescents—the individuals experiencing the development—Stevenson signals a more personalized examination of the middle school years. The centrality of the introspective domain helps focus the reader on the experience and meaning of each child’s individual journey through early adolescence. The shift in emphasis to a more personal, even existential, aspect of development is also apparent in Stevenson’s use of the term *responsive education*. The movement from *developmentally appropriate middle schools* to *developmentally responsive pedagogy*—the subject explored at length in Chapters 5 through 8—further tightens the focus of investigation on the interactions of students and teachers in the classroom.

True to its emphasis on young adolescents, Stevenson’s book is designed to be used most profitably as a text in a field-based practicum. Part One—aptly titled “About the Kids”—gathers together in Chapter 1 some of the same material treated in a more dispersed manner in Manning’s monograph. It functions in some respects as a summary and refocusing of *Developmentally Appropriate Middle Level Schools*. The majority of the attention of Part One, however, is on techniques

teachers and teacher education students can employ in the field to get to know young adolescents better: shadow studies and inquiries focused on the lives of young adolescents.

Teaching Ten to Fourteen Year Olds scores very highly based on Scales' quality criteria. Like *Turning Points* and *Developmentally Appropriate Middle Level Schools*, it is thoroughly researched, providing a wealth of citations to guide further study. The view of young adolescents it presents is very strong; Stevenson gives us plentiful detailed insights into young adolescent life. There is a prominent, if implicit, perspective of teacher-as-coach. Finally, one of the major strengths of the book is its wealth of concrete examples gleaned from actual teaching situations.

Stevenson also provides very good coverage of the 11 criterion topics. The physical and social development of young adolescents is central to the entire text. Complete chapters or considerable portions of chapters are devoted to several other topics: family involvement; teacher-based guidance; assessment by exhibitions; and classroom management. Integrative curriculum and cooperative learning are discussed in separate sections and also receive other mentions throughout the text. Community involvement is treated in relation to service learning and as an important aspect of *Turning Points*. The teacher's role in site-based management is given passing attention, but it can be seen as implicit, such as when Stevenson refers to the teacher as the "essential catalyst" (p. 21) in the middle school. Like the two other resources already discussed, however, *Teaching Ten to Fourteen Year Olds* presents a limited discussion of diversity. As in Manning's monograph, emphasis in Stevenson's text is placed on the developmental diversity of young adolescents rather than their cultural and linguistic diversity.

Integrated Studies in the Middle Grades: "Dancing Through Walls"

The final resource I have selected brings the reader directly into the minds and hearts of middle level teachers and learners as they struggle together to make sense of themselves, their world, their own genuine questions. The great strength of *Integrated Studies in the Middle Grades*, as James Beane observes in his forward, is that the book "releases the integrated curriculum from its theoretical state and brings it into real life with the documented experiences of students and teachers engaged in integrated studies" (p. viii). The "walls" mentioned in the book's subtitle are—among other possibilities—the walls between subject matter areas, between teacher and learner, between school and community, between learning and fun, and between theory and practice. It is in breaking down the last-mentioned wall that *Integrated Studies in the Middle Grades* has its greatest value. It is the natural and necessary complement of the three other resources; it provides answers to the question: *How does developmentally appropriate and responsive middle level education actually look?*

This crucial question is answered through the words of the teachers and learners involved in planning, implementing, and reflectively assessing 13 innova-

tive learning projects undertaken in Vermont with the guidance and encouragement of Chris Stevenson and Judy Carr. The accounts are framed by two introductory chapters and an epilogue. In the introductory material, Stevenson and Carr discuss the goals of the integrative curriculum project and describe the framework within which the teachers involved in the project went about planning their work. In the epilogue, they reflect on the lessons learned and try to identify the factors that promoted and hindered success in the projects.

As a resource for a middle level teacher education course, *Integrated Studies in the Middle Grades* very strongly embodies the qualities of a positive view of young adolescents and the teacher-as-coach perspective. The research base it implicitly draws from is vast, but because the emphasis of the book is on practice, revealed through the voices of those directly engaged in the project, very few references are actually cited. By far the strongest quality of the book is its rich, detailed, and personal examples of innovative teaching in practice.

Integrated Studies in the Middle Grades covers most of Scales' 11 critical topics quite well. Its primary focus, of course, is the development of integrative curriculum based firmly on the needs, interests, and physical, cognitive, and social characteristics of young adolescents. Implicit to the achievement of the curricular goals of the projects are the involvement of teachers as advisors and involvement in site-based management of the schools in which they work. Assessment by exhibitions, family and community involvement, and cooperative learning are basic premises of the integrative projects described. Classroom management is addressed indirectly. The least developed topic of *Integrated Studies in the Middle Grades* is, as it has been in all of the resources, the issue of cultural and linguistic diversity.

Concluding Remarks

The purpose of this review has been to identify and describe a limited set of basic resources for use in an introductory professional course in middle level education. As a whole, they represent a comprehensive and focused distillation of the current and historical literature of middle level education. The resources address the historical background of the middle school movement, the current educational context, the developmental theory that guides and informs practical action, and concrete examples of theory in practice. They present a view of young adolescents as individuals who can, with the guidance of intellectually alert and compassionate professionals and community members, achieve learning that will have immediate benefit for themselves and future benefit for society at large.

A review of Table 1 shows the strengths each of the resources has in terms of the qualities Scales identified as important for middle level resources to embody. A review of Table 2, however, does not reveal the same uniformly high achievement of the 11 critical topics. Three of the four resources place strong emphasis on the

topics of family involvement and the social and physical development of young adolescents; two of them provide a thorough discussion of integrative curriculum, assessment by exhibitions, community involvement, teacher-based guidance, and cooperative learning. Classroom management and the teachers' role in site-based management are each treated in detail by one of the resources.

On the topic of classroom management—often the topic of paramount concern to teacher education students and novice teachers—Stevenson and Carr note that “the fine line between discipline and freedom is realizable in a supportive context in which young adolescents are allowed reasonable limits that are open to negotiation” (p. 23). This comment reflects the general approach to classroom management in middle level literature. To many advocates of middle level educational reform, achievement of a classroom atmosphere conducive to the development of all aspects of young adolescents is not considered the result of a system of conditions imposed upon students, rather it is seen as an epiphenomenon of restructuring educational contexts and experiences to meet the needs and characteristics of the students.

It is clear from Table 2 that one important topic is inadequately addressed in the four resources I have reviewed. The least addressed topic is cultural/linguistic diversity; a topic which—along with the issue of gender—should be viewed as a natural complement to the middle level emphasis on sensitivity to the needs and developmental characteristics of individual young adolescents. The context of one's culture, language, and gender is inseparable from the conditions of one's physical, psychosocial, and intellectual development and from the meaning each young adolescent makes of the changes experienced during that development. While the four resources I have reviewed go a long way toward fulfilling the needs of an introductory course in middle level teacher education, they must be supplemented by additional materials that fully address these important topics within the context of early adolescent development. Beyond the present need for supplementing the current literature, there is an even more urgent need for new resources in which the issues of cultural, linguistic, and gender diversity are integrally woven into the fabric of the discussion of early adolescence.

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