Middle Schools:
Reducing Transescent Risk

By Genevieve Marie Johnson

The word *risk* first appeared in printed English in the mid-1600s and was defined as exposure to danger, hazard, mischance, or peril. Some three centuries later, notions of risk permeate the thought of many disciplines (for example, financial risk, environmental risk, health risk). In recent years, the discipline of education has adopted the concept of risk, specifically in terms of *students at-risk* (Slavin, Karweit, & Madden, 1989). Educators recognize that certain students appear far more likely than other students to encounter danger, hazard, mischance, or peril (Johnson, 1994). *Transescence,* a term that refers to the preadolescent to early adolescent ages (Gutheinz-Pierce & Whoolery, 1995; Henson, 1995), is a life stage often associated with high risk. "In recent years researchers have concluded that early adolescents (middle school or junior high age in particular) are at the greatest risk for negative social and psychological consequences" (Adams, Gullotta, & Markstrom-Adams, 1994, p. 22).

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An Educational Orientation to Students At-Risk

Within an educational framework, approaches to understanding and assisting students at-risk include

the concepts of *risk outcomes* and *risk factors* (Richardson, Casanova, Placier, & Guilfoyle, 1989). Risk outcomes are specific negative situations in school and in life. For example, adolescent pregnancy, school failure, early school withdrawal, referral to special education, suicide, and incarceration are outcomes that educators and society in general view as negative. Such outcomes, it is widely maintained, must be avoided whenever possible (Miller, Kim, & Johnson, 1991). Risk factors, by definition, are those individual characteristics and personal circumstances that predispose students to risk outcomes. Low socioeconomic status, educational disadvantage, parental unemployment, single-parent households, violence, sexual abuse, racism, dysfunctional family situations, and poor parenting have all been identified as factors that place students at risk of experiencing negative outcomes (Alberta Education Policy and Planning Branch, 1994; Connell, Spencer, & Aber, 1994; Liontos, 1991; Ruff, 1993). Such student, familial, and societal characteristics are understood as risk factors, that is, characteristics and circumstances that place students at-risk of failure in school and in life (Johnson, 1993; Slavin *et al.*, 1989).

Not all students characterized by risk factors actually experience negative outcomes. Against the odds, some at-risk students realize satisfactory achievement in school. Such students are referred to as *resilient* (Garmezy, 1991; Rutter, 1993). In a recent study of students whose life circumstances and behaviors where characterized by numerous risk factors for academic failure, approximately 19 percent were found to have developed positive goals and plans for the future (Peng, Lee, Wang, & Walberg, 1992). Other studies of resilient students have shown that as many as one-third to one-half of children who experience adverse conditions early in their lives subsequently overcome these conditions to become productive successful adolescents and adults (Benard, 1993). Apparently, risk factors do not guarantee the actualization of risk outcomes. For this reason, educational risk is understood in terms of *increased probability* that a student will experience an adverse outcome (Keogh, 1989). In trying to assist students at-risk, educators focus on decreasing the probability that an adverse outcome will occur (Johnson & Johnson, 1993).

Transescence: A Heightened Stage of Risk

Transescence, a term used to describe preadolescence and early adolescence, is difficult to precisely define because it is tied to culture and to era. Being a 12-year-old in Canada is different than being a 12-year-old in China. Both Canadian and Chinese 12-year-olds have a few physical characteristics in common, but identifying other similarities is difficult because of the many different expectations of this age group caused by different cultural environments. Correspondingly, being a 12-year-old in the 1990s is different than being a 12-year-old in the 1930s. Definitions and expectations of age-appropriate behavior fluctuate over time. In this regard, it

is not reasonable to discuss transescence outside of a socio-cultural framework (Adams *et al.*, 1994; Henson, 1995). From a contemporary Western psychological perspective, transescence is associated with an integration of past experiences, a development of a sense of individuality, and a growing awareness of personal identity (Santrock, 1996).

Within contemporary Western culture, transescents or young adolescents appear particularly vulnerable to the deleterious effects of risk factors. Indeed, adolescence itself is sometimes considered a risk factor because the life stage is associated with an increased probability of experiencing social and psychological difficulties (Irwin, 1987). Drug and alcohol abuse, depression, violence, pregnancy, sexually-transmitted disease, and school-related problems place many transescents and adolescents at risk of not reaching their full potential (Ruff, 1993; Takanishi, 1993). A recent estimate suggests that as many as one-fourth of American adolescents and transescents are in the high-risk category (U.S. Congress Office of Technology and Assessment, 1991). Perhaps this can be at least partially explained by the cognitive processes of young adolescents. Susan Moore and Doreen Rosenthal (1993) observed that adolescent thought is characterized by the *not me phenomena*. For example, youth show a high level of community concern for health issues related to smoking and contraceptive use but little evidence of concern regarding their own risks of respiratory illness and sexually-transmitted disease. This is consistent with the suggestion that transescent thought is characterized, in some situations, by a *personal fable* (Mitchell, 1996). Indeed, it has frequently been suggested that, although dropping out of school typically occurs during high school, the precursors of dropping out are formed during transescence (Brodinsky & Keough, 1989; Nevetsky, 1991; Reed, McMillan, & McBee, 1995).

The transition from elementary to junior high school, a situation unique to the transescent, may further contribute to this stage of heightened risk. The transition from elementary to junior high school is emotionally difficult for many students (Santrock, 1996). Such emotional difficulty has been explained in a number of ways. One such explanation focuses on loss of social dominance and personal power. Seemingly overnight, transescent students shift from a position of dominance (*i.e.*, being the oldest, biggest and most powerful members of the elementary school hierarchy) to a position of subordination (*i.e.*, being the youngest, smallest and least powerful of the junior high school hierarchy). Such a loss of prestige may render the transescent emotionally vulnerable and socially volatile. School and teacher variables have also been used to explain the emotional difficulty associated with the transition from elementary to junior high school. Jacquelynne S. Eccles and Carol Midgely (1990) reported that the most common pattern for the 1,300 transescents in their study was to move from sixth-grade teachers who believed in their effectiveness as teachers to seventh-grade teachers who had less confidence in themselves as teachers. Transescents whose teachers reported lower levels of instructional confidence had poorer perceptions of their academic ability and lower

educational expectations than did transescents who experienced no decrease in their teacher's sense of professional efficacy. Thus it may be that junior high school teachers are themselves characterized by anxiety about teaching transescents and that this anxiety, via classroom dynamics, translates into social and emotional difficulties for students. It may be that junior high school teachers are anxious about their instructional competence because their transescent students present an educational challenge for which they are not well prepared.

Indeed, Stephen B. Hillman (1991) described transescence as characterized by change and by attempts to adjust to that change. Puberty and related concerns with body image frequently result in dissatisfaction and obsession with physical appearance (Hinton & Margerum, 1984; Zakin, Blyth, & Simmons, 1984). Changes in social cognition and increasing commitment to peers culminate in susceptibility to negative influence (Dielman, Schulenberg, Leech, & Shope, 1992). Increased responsibility in conjunction with decreases in dependency on parents frequently result in familial conflict and anxiety. Early adolescence is often a time of acute parent-child conflict (Steinberg & Levine, 1990). Young adolescents, in response to feelings of alienation from family and society, sometimes express pent-up emotions through norm-violating behaviors such as truancy, aggression, promiscuity, theft, assault, rape, and suicide (Johnson, 1995; Rice, 1996). During transescence, the beginnings of identity struggles set the stage for a time of emotional upheaval and experimentation (Adams *et al.*, 1994). Corresponding to these physical, emotional, and social changes, transescents are characterized by a strong need for recognition and praise. John J. Mitchell (1996) suggests that the overpowering need of transescents for personal recognition "in no small measure, contributes to their corruptibility" (p. 209).

Rigid educational requirements may exacerbate the vulnerable and volatile transescent (Gutheinz-Pierce & Whoolery, 1995). As children enter preadolescence and early adolescence, they may become less focused, and their attention span may grow shorter. They often develop a keen sense of peer interdependence (Adams *et al.*, 1994). Such typical characteristics, however, must be interpreted in terms of many individual transescents who do not adhere to this stereotype (Henson, 1995). Social, emotional, psychological, and physical changes during transescence are often variable and unpredictable. The young adolescent is sometimes described as lonely and vulnerable (Konopka, 1973; Mitchell, 1996). Teachers of this age group are often surprised to learn how important teacher approval is to students. Transescent students, by their very nature, need and desire a variety of challenging and flexible learning activities (Ruff, 1993). Because of their enormous developmental diversity, 10-to-15-year-olds require a variety of types and levels of educational activities (Scales, 1992a). During this life stage, students vary widely in terms of their personal responsibility for learning, their rates of learning, and their learning styles (Hillman, 1991; Kligele, 1979). Deanna Winn, Paula Regan, and Sandy Gibson (1991) clarify a cognitive quality of the transescent student:

One main characteristic of the learner during the fifth through eighth grades is that his or her strategies for learning are unpredictable. Because the move from concrete operations to formal operation occurs during this time, the learning vacillates between the two as the shift is occurring. (p. 265)

Needless-to-say, the unique nature of the transescent has been of concern to educators for some time. Pedagogical response has been to recognize the special learning and social needs of the preadolescent and the young adolescent (Hillman, 1991). Changes in school structure reflect evolving concern with this age group. The emergence of the junior high school and the more recent emergence of the middle school illustrate educational attempts to effectively address the nature of transescent developmental, social, and instructional requirements. The second priority recently listed by the National Middle School Association (Jenkins & Jenkins, 1991) was that both curriculum and instruction become more relevant to the developmental characteristics of middle-level students.
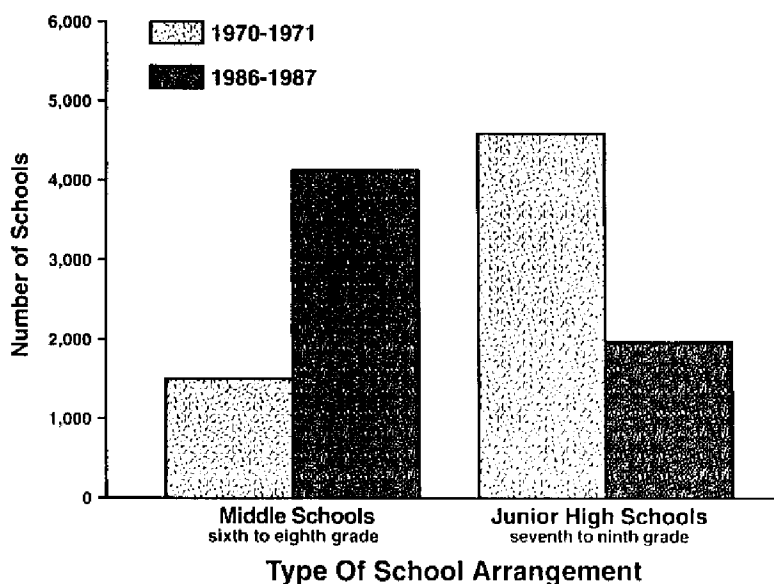
The Middle School Movement

The emergence of junior high schools in the 1920s and 1930s was justified on the basis of physical, cognitive, and social changes that characterize early adolescence (Hall, 1904). The current 6-3-3 structure became popular, where children in the first six grades are referred to as elementary students, in grades seven to nine are termed junior high school students, and in grades nine to twelve are considered senior high school students (Santrock, 1996). In some cases, junior high school students are housed with elementary students, in other cases with senior high school students, and in still other cases in their own school buildings. While the original intention to create unique junior high school arrangements to accommodate the special needs of transescents was sound, most studies have found little difference between transescents in specifically formulated junior high schools as opposed to those taught with older students in senior high schools. "By the middle of the twentieth century, studies of the junior high school produced results that were disappointing to proponents who anticipated that these schools would be significantly superior to the high schools" (Henson, 1995, pp. 67-68).

By the 1950s, many critics of the junior high school believed it had lost sight of its original purpose: to serve the unique needs and interests of transescents. It seemed that the junior high school had gradually become a miniature senior high school. Thus emerged the middle school, defined as "a school of some three to five years between the elementary and high school focused on the educational needs of students in these in-between years and designed to promote continuous educational progress for all concerned" (Alexander & George, 1981, p. 3).

The first middle school opened in Michigan in 1950. The number of middle schools grew modestly for about 15 years; by the mid-1960s growth accelerated. Adapted from John W. Santrock (1996), Figure 1 illustrates the dramatic increase

Figure 1
Comparison of Number of American Middle Schools
and Junior High Schools: 1970-1971 and 1986-1987
(adapted from Santrock, 1996)

in sixth-through-eighth-grade middle schools and the corresponding decrease in seventh-through-ninth-grade junior high schools in the United States in the 1970s and 1980s. From the early 1970s to the mid 1980s, the number of middle schools increased by approximately 160 percent. Conversely, from the early 1970s to the mid 1980s, the number of junior high schools decreased by approximately 53 percent. Such an organizational shift in the nature of transescent education suggests a continually increasing dissatisfaction with junior high schools and a continually increasing commitment to the educational alternative of middle schools.

With such rapid expansion, it is not surprising that middle schools currently vary widely in terms of organizational arrangements and instructional strategies. Some middle schools encompass grades five through eight, some include grades six through eight, and still others involve grades five through seven (Henson, 1995). Middle level teachers primarily hold secondary teacher certification, although the availability of middle level teaching certification has increased in recent years (McEwin, 1992: Scales, 1992b). Alexander and McEwin (1989) reported that 33 percent of the middle schools they surveyed implemented interdisciplinary team

teaching. Joyce L. Epstein and Douglas J. MacIver (1990) reported that 42 percent of the middle schools they surveyed had partial or full implementation of instructional teaming. Less than half of American middle schools employ flexible scheduling. Adviser-advisee program are implemented in about half of American middle schools (Irvin, Valentine, & Clark, 1994).

The original junior high school movement was propelled by a recognition of the unique needs of transescent students. The more contemporary middle school movement appears to be based on identical concerns. Educators continue to promote reform in order to meet the special needs of transescents. Unfortunately, numerous educators currently conclude that most young adolescents attend massive, impersonal schools, learning seemingly irrelevant curricula, trust few adults in school, and lack access to health care and counseling (Takanishi, 1993; Urdan, Midgley, & Woods, 1994). The structure, philosophy, curriculum, and instructional strategies of the middle school, however, appear to hold considerable promise for ultimately providing young adolescents with an educational mechanism for reducing the high risk associated with this life stage.

Middle School Curriculum and Instruction

In some respects the middle school is an extension of the elementary school (Kligele, 1979). This is most obvious in terms of teacher pedagogical orientation and training. Ideally, middle school teachers are highly student-oriented and sensitive to student interest and needs. Teachers who obtain certification to teach students from kindergarten to eighth grade, or a middle school certificate, typically have a student-oriented background since that is the curriculum focus of most elementary and middle school teacher education programs at colleges and universities. Teachers who obtain teaching certification in grades 7-12 are generally subject-matter oriented since they major in a content area in the liberal arts (*e.g.*, history, mathematics, life sciences) in their teacher education programs in college (Farris, 1996). Thus it seems that teacher orientation and training set the stage for different approaches to transescent education. Middle school versus secondary school teacher education appears to be a critical variable in understanding differing instructional orientations toward transescent education.

Based on extensive observation and the recommendation of educational experts, Joan Lipsitz (1984) found what she believed to be four middle schools that were outstanding in their ability to address the educational needs of transescents. The most striking feature of these exemplary middle schools was their ability and willingness to adapt all school practices to the individual differences in physical, cognitive, and social development of their students. One middle school had a schedule of mini-courses on Friday so that every student spent some time with friends and pursued personal interests. Two other exemplary middle schools expended considerable energy on a complex school organization allowing small

groups of students to work with small groups of teachers who could vary the tone and pace of the school day, depending on students' needs. Another exemplary middle school developed an advisory scheme so that each transescent student had daily contact with an adult who was willing to listen, explain, comfort, and encourage. An instructional characteristic common to these four exemplary middle schools was their emphasis on creating an environment that was positive for the transescent's social and emotional development. This goal was established not only because such environments contribute to academic excellence but also because social and emotional development were viewed as intrinsically valuable, as important in themselves in transescent development (Santrock, 1996).

Educational reformers argue that unique curricular and extracurricular activities reflecting a wide range of individual differences in biological and psychological development in early adolescence should be incorporated into middle schools (MacIver, Urdan, Beck, Midgley, Reuman, Tasko, Fenzel, Arhar, & Kramer, 1992). In many cases there is a hiatus in brain growth in individuals between the ages of 12 and 14 (Epstein, 1976). Attempts to make the vulnerable and volatile transescent student feel secure and well adjusted may interfere with the growth of his/her intellectual and artistic capacity. Since transescent students seek greater independence, there should be provision for activities that allow middle school students to accept challenges, and there should be support from teachers to help them meet those challenges (Gutheinz-Pierce & Whoolery, 1995; Ruff, 1993). Donald H. Eichorn (1980) claimed that:

> The mercurial nature of the transescent requires a fluid but structured atmosphere. It [learning experiences] should provide students with the security of structure, but it should be sufficiently elastic to permit students to explore learning and socialization in a manner consistent with individual needs. (p. 67)

At least in theory, middle school instruction and curriculum are tailored to the unique developmental capacity and needs of transescent students. Effective instruction at the middle school level requires students to be active participants in learning (Taylor & Reeves, 1993). Strategies for learning should be taught, modeled, and retaught as necessary. Oral language is encouraged to allow sharing of thought processes. Vocabulary is taught orally through regular use of new words as well as through activities that encourage vocabulary development. Small learning groups are a regular part of middle school classroom organization. Teacher feedback deals primarily with learning rather than discipline. Transescent learners require time to react and share their learning with interested listeners. Middle school students should hear excellent readers read; reading should be viewed as a means to an end, not an end in itself. Thus, transescent learners produce their own reading materials (Winn *et al.*, 1991). The National Middle School Association (1992), in its essential text, *This We Believe*, promotes the following ten pedagogical elements as mandatory to the effective teaching of transescent students:
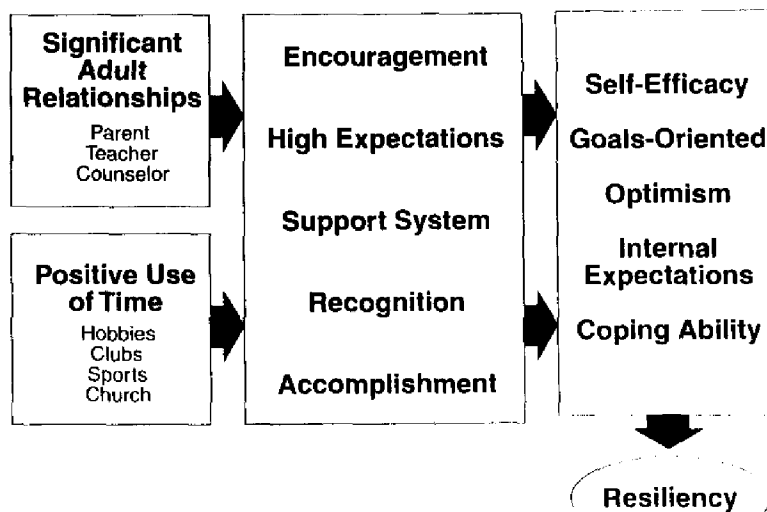
1) Educators knowledgeable about and committed to young adolescents.
2) Balanced curriculum based on the needs of young adolescents.
3) A range of organizational arrangements.
4) Varied instructional strategies.
5) Comprehensive advising and counseling.
6) Continuous progress for students.
7) Evaluation procedures compatible with the nature of young adolescents.
8) Cooperative planning.
9) A full exploratory program.
10) Positive school climate.

Although not all middle schools adhere to all of these essential elements, considerable progress occurred in the 1980s (Irvin *et al.*, 1994). Given philosophical foundations and the recent progress of the middle school movement, a range of structural, curricular, and instructional opportunities exist to reduce the risk associated with transescent students (Ruff, 1993). The ten mandatory components proposed by the National Middle Schools Association (1992) appear to constitute the essence of what might be more aptly referred to as school-based intervention for high risk students.

Middle Schools: Reducing Transescent Risk

Daisy F. Reed and colleagues (1995) examined students in the middle grades who appear to be in the process of compensating for their social and academic disadvantages. In interviewing such resilient students, a number of compensatory factors were identified. "Resilient middle school students exhibit beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors which promote their academic success regardless of their backgrounds and current circumstances" (p. 7). There are important environmental factors that appear to influence the development of these strong, resilient personality traits. All the students interviewed described an important relationship with a significant adult who provided them with support and direction; a teacher or school counselor was often reported to be that significant adult. Resilient middle schoolers reported having opportunities to participate in hobbies, clubs, sports, and other positive extracurricular activities that were often sponsored by their schools. Illustrated in Figure 2, significant relationships result in personal, social, and academic encouragement and a psychological support system. Constructive use of time provides the conditions for personal recognition and accomplishments. These environmental factors, in turn, seem to promote student sense of self-efficacy, orientation toward goals, and assumptions of personal responsibility for life outcomes (Benard, 1993; Connell *et al.*, 1994; Garmezy, 1991). Such desirable internal qualities culminate in enhanced academic and social competence. Thus, transescent resiliency is proposed as the consequence of significant relationships with adults and positive use of time which results in constructive psychological student characteristics. Middle school pedagogical foundations address and pro-

Figure 2
A Model of the Factors Influencing the Resilience of At-Risk Transescents
(Adapted from Reed, McMillan, McBee, 1995)

Significant Adult Relationships	Encouragement	Self-Efficacy
Parent Teacher Counselor	High Expectations	Goals-Oriented
	Support System	Optimism
Positive Use of Time	Recognition	Internal Expectations
Hobbies Clubs Sports Church	Accomplishment	Coping Ability

Resiliency

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mote positive teacher-student relationships and constructive use of student time.

Studies of resilient students in middle school programs have a number of implications for teaching transescent students (Reed *et al.*, 1995). Instructional strategies and techniques, as well as all dimensions of the school environment, must be developed to promote a sense of student internal control, self-efficacy, optimism and personal responsibility (Taylor & Reeves, 1993). Tom V. Savage (1991) suggested that students whose circumstances place them on a path toward school failure require visible and tangible displays of success. The instructional arrangements and teacher training associated with the middle school movement appear to have the capacity to foster the development of student goal-setting, particularly long-range goals that will assist the transescent in moving beyond focus on the immediate. Louis R. Martino (1993) argued that "the most powerful method of helping at risk middle school students develop an internal sense of control and responsibility is through a carefully structured system of goal-setting, attaining, and scoring" (p. 20). Middle school educators can ensure a positive, supportive, and inviting school environment while simultaneously maintaining high expectations for student achievement. Classroom activities must lead to academic achievement while

building transescent self-esteem and self-confidence (Scales, 1992b). The middle school classroom environment should facilitate time-on-task, student interaction, student success, and reinforcement for appropriate classroom behavior.

For all students, but perhaps most importantly for transescent students, school must be more than academic learning. Extracurricular activities are a source of personal validation and contribute toward positive use of time. "Not only does the extracurricular activity increase involvement, belonging, and self-esteem, it also provides a network of people who have a common bond and work in cooperation with each other" (Reed *et al.*, 1995, pp. 8-9). Conventional extracurricular programs include hobbies, creative interests, clubs, and sports. Extracurricular programs can also be a form of specialized intervention—for example, support for children from dysfunctional families, abused and neglected youth, and children whose parents are incarcerated. Both types of extracurricular programs are necessary for risk minimization among middle school student populations; both are highly compatible with middle school organization and teacher training programs.

Cooperative learning is an instructional tool that provides transescent students with a sense of empowerment, inclusion, belonging, and enjoyment in school (Savage, 1991; Slavin *et al.*, 1989; Taylor & Reeves, 1993). Positive group dynamics and learner satisfaction are associated with cooperative learning strategies (Farris, 1996). Related to cooperative learning strategies is the practice of *required helpfulness*. Required helpfulness may mean volunteer work in the community or tutoring in school. Susan Philliber (1986) found required helpfulness to be a powerful instructional strategy in resilient students' school experiences. Such activities appear to lend purpose to the lives of students, as well as to increase caring about humanity and building self-esteem. Visiting the elderly and fund raising for the homeless are some of the many ways that middle school students can be required to be helpful (Reed *et al.*, 1995).

Middle school teachers need to develop supportive relationships with transescents (Scales, 1992b). The existence of caring school communities has repeatedly been found critical to promoting resilience in at-risk children and youth (Connell *et al.*, 1994; Garmezy, 1991; Rutter, 1993). Transescent students, sometimes at-risk and frequently vulnerable, require teachers who are respectful of individual differences, caring, genuine, open-minded, and firm. Such students need teachers who have an appreciation for various learning styles, who expect positive results, who recognize cultural norms, and who celebrate cultural diversity in the classroom. The Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development (1989) recommended that middle schools be staffed with teachers "who are expert at teaching young adolescents and who are specially prepared for assignment to the middle schools" (p. 9). Students successfully navigate the transescent years via a series of complex familial, community, and school supports. By enhancing the learning environments and learning relationships in transescents' lives, middle school teachers and administrators can help convert difficult high risk years to a time of

positive growth and development. According to Bonnie Benard (1993), transescent students must have the opportunity to fulfill their basic needs for social support and caring: "If this opportunity is unavailable to them in their immediate family environment, it is imperative that the school give them the chance to develop caring relationships" (p. 46). Mitchell (1996) argues that transescents require educational mentors and spiritual stewards.

David Hamburg (1992), President of the Carnegie Foundation and overseer of one of the most constructive youth assistance programs in North America, suggests a critical need to assist young adolescents in acquiring durable self-esteem, flexible and inquiring minds, reliable and close human relationships, a sense of belonging in a valued group, and a sense of usefulness in some way beyond self. Transescents need to find constructive expression for their inherent curiosity and exploratory nature. They need a basis for making informed, deliberate, and thoughtful decisions, particularly on matters of consequence such as future education and high-risk behaviors. The challenge for middle schools is to provide the building blocks of transescent development and preparation for later adolescence and early adulthood. Schools that serve transescents, particularly middle schools with their current philosophical, pedagogical, and structural foundations, have the potential to make a powerful impact on the developing transescent. As Hamburg recently concluded:

> Early adolescents need attention from adults who can be positive role models, mentors, and sources of accurate information on important topics.... They need to learn interpersonal and communication skills, self-regulation, decision-making, and problem-solving skills. Early adolescents is a prime opportunity to teach such skills. (p. 241)

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