What Characteristically Does An Ideal Middle School Look Like?

A great philosopher once said, “Education is not simply the filling of a pail but the lighting of a fire.” This philosopher was referring to the act of sparking an interest in the act of lifelong learning. As John Dewey proclaimed, “Education is not preparation for life, education is life itself.” These two ideas about what education is can be very helpful when assessing what an ideal middle school environment needs to have to be effective. The first quote asserts that education must produce pupils who have not only been taught how to be lifelong learners but who develop a love for doing so. This is an absolute must for every ideal middle school, for the years of middle school education are limited, but a lifetime of learning is not. The second quote asserts that education must be relevant. Education must be practical and applicable to life now, because the students are not just preparing to live in the future; they are living life now. These are just two of the main aspects of an ideal middle school of which I plan to discuss throughout this paper. My list of characteristics that an ideal middle school must have are, in no way exhaustive, but seek to provide a framework from which to begin to analyze the qualities with which every effective middle school must consider. At the end of this brief study, I shall include a personal reflection of my experiences and how they relate the characteristics I cover.

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An Ideal Middle School Must Be:

**Relevant**

An ideal middle school must be relevant to the student not only for the future but also for now. The material covered in the classroom should be applicable to the issues the student deals with at the moment, or issues that will be faced in the near future. A teacher must tie the curricula to life in such a manner as to prepare the student by giving them principles that go beyond the initial learning of the subject matter.

“An effective middle school curriculum is distinguished by learning activities that appeal to young adolescents and create opportunities to pose and answer questions that are important to them” (NMSA, 19). Curricula is relevant when it challenges students learning about themselves, content and the world around them, these is normally a combination of interests of study that they have along with skills that adult educators feel they should have. This by no means should influence the teacher to limit the areas of learning to simply those interests that currently exist in the students. (NMSA 19)

**Student-focused**

An ideal middle school must seek to meet the needs of the students. Teachers should believe in the potential of every student and seek to help him or her to achieve it.
Rules and content should be developed in regards to what the students might need or desire to learn. A teacher must seek to meet the needs of the students before that teacher can hope to pass on content knowledge. Educators are “brush-clearers” in that they must seek to remove barriers that stand in the way of children’s learning, whether these barriers be persons, attitudes, learning disabilities, physical disabilities, or social, emotional, and physical deficiencies.

The middle school years can be some of the most difficult for many students as they seek to fit in, find where they belong, and discover and identity. This time is marked by physical changes such as puberty that can be different for each student and occur at different paces. Emotional maturity is also being developed during this time period as students are being challenged to “grow up” in the way they think and act so as to be more like adults. Many of them begin searching for who they are, what they believe, and search for someone to love them. It is absolutely crucial that the teacher seek to understand the needs of every student in his or her classroom. There are so many pressures placed on the students by society, peers, parents, and other teachers that must be recognized and sympathized by the teacher. This will help the teacher to know how much structure each student needs and how best to reach each student so as to not harm them in such a way as to “scar” them for life.

**Standards-driven**

An ideal middle school curriculum must be based on the content standards for the department of education (or similar board depending on state). Turning
Points 2000 identified to key byproducts of having education standards: “excellence and equity.” They suggested that:

To promote excellence, high standards also demand a thorough understanding of essential knowledge, require critical thinking and problem-solving skills, and encourage habits of mind that can be applied across the disciplines. These habits of the mind include self-discipline, flexibility, reflective-ness, dependability, and perseverance. To support equity, standards set the expectations that all students can meet or exceed high standards. To make sure that “all” means all, every student must have the support and time required to take him or her from he or she is to where the standards say he or she should go; ensuring that support means providing access to high-quality teaching, resources, and materials in an atmosphere of high expectations for all students. (33)

Jackson and Davis lay forth a solid argument for having middle schools that are based on standards that can be tested through various means, typically standardized testing. They also make it clear that it is inevitable that schools will need to “supplement and modify standards” to ensure that students can know and be able to do what the school believes is appropriate (34-5). There is a major struggle in the future of middle schools because young people are at the peak of diversity and individualism most often in middle school and yet they are dealing with these most profound changes while being confronted by demands to measure up to adult-determined “standards.” (Middle web Journal)

**Relationship-Building**

An ideal middle school provides an atmosphere where teacher and students work toward fostering close-knit, interpersonal relationships. This begins with the
teacher learning each students name and what sorts of things interest them. These interpersonal relationships are built on trust and maintaining a level of respect for all students. Respect is demonstrated when the teacher models politeness, courtesy, and honesty (Knowles, 59). The teacher must not only build relationships with student, but also encourage them to build relationships with one another. The teacher can cultivate this type of environment through group work and allowing partners for assignments where the students work with someone whom they don’t know that well.

A large part of building relationships means being available; a teacher must be available to the students both physically and emotionally. By that, I mean that a teacher must have set aside times for the students, and the teacher must be approachable in that the students do not feel intimidated by him or her because that educator’s ideology, temperament in the classroom, or any matter of personality. If teachers are both available and approachable, then this will serve to make the relationship-building process much more expedient.

**A Safe Haven for Learning**

An ideal middle school must create a safe haven for the learning of every student. The environment should reduce and prevent barriers that cause students to be unable to learn. This starts by building a caring environment. (Knowles, 57) As Knowles and Brown present, “Researchers in one study have discovered that showing care and respect for students ‘promoted learning and overpowered the comparative effects of instructional methodologies’” (58).
A teacher should use conflicts that occur to help teach students how he or she should deal with those situations. Modeling mediation of conflicts in a positive manner can be a great learning experience for the students. Having a strong discipline is essential to managing the classroom. There are many different philosophies concerning classroom management such as Fred Jones, C.M. Charles, Howard Gardner, etc. Any of these, or a combination of these, can really help cultivate a more productive learning environment if used effective and flexibly. Having a good plan is better than having no plan at all; having a bad plan is the same as having no plan at all.

**Integrative**

An ideal middle school will have teachers who are integrative. Not only do the teachers work to make the different content areas overlap, but also use many forms of teaching styles to address the different styles of learning. These different styles would include Howard Gardener’s Multiple Intelligences, in which the teacher would find different strategies and activities to meet the different learning styles of his or her students. Basic skills such as reading, writing, basic mathematics, critical thinking, etc should be used in all content areas. The teacher can also encourage students to share their knowledge and expertise with one another through group processes (Knowles 64).

“Curriculum is integrative when it helps students make sense of their lives and the world around them and when students learn how to make significant, meaningful decisions about their learning” (NMSA 22). The teacher will be most effective...
at integration when the curriculum is focused relevantly on the lives and interest of both students and adults. When they are both interested and challenged, then they will be able to being producing constructive knowledge through critical thinking rather than simply consuming information. These principles will help to serve as a model of learning throughout their lives and can be integrated in all areas of learning. (NMSA 22).

**Challenging**

An ideal middle school must challenge the students to go beyond their limits. Going beyond limits does not mean being unrealistic, it simply means to go just enough past one’s limits in order to expand them. Assessing the Vzkotzgy’s Zone of Proximal Development would be very helpful in this process. A teacher is also responsible for helping students to be healthy risk-takers in order to stretch their cognitive growth beyond their comfort zones (Knowles, 62).

“Challenging curriculum actively engages young adolescents both in interests and efforts” (NMSA, 21). This will challenge the teachers to go beyond simply “covering material.” Teachers must challenge students to think critically, which will make this issues “come alive” as they analyze them in the context of values, assumptions, basic principles, and alternative points of view while addressing why and how things happen. Diversifying and individualizing methods and content is extremely important as the teacher offers more
assistance to some students who may need it while allowing independent study, group cooperation, or special interest assignments to others who may be advanced in their skills. (NMSA 21-2).

A Model for Lifelong Learning

“Give a man a fish and he will eat for a day. Teach a man to fish and he will eat for a lifetime.” An ideal education at any level, especially that of middle school, must go beyond the here and now. The education must give the student the ability to learn in such a manner to love doing so and continue it well into the future; striving for anything less is falling short of the true essence of being an educator. Teachers must model lifelong learning and have a passion for it.

The middle school, as the National Association for Middle School’s suggested, is the “finding place.” The entire curriculum should be exploratory in nature so as to spark the curiosity of the students (NMSA 23). By having exploratory curricula, the students can begin to make conclusions about special interests they have and special skills they possess because they have been exposed to a broader nature of learning. This will serve them well in continuing education as they go throughout their lives in college, the work force, social interactions, marriage, child rearing, etc. Exploratory teachers can model this self-sufficiency and well roundedness through the manner they allow their students to explore their own skills and interests through flexible, explorative curricula.

Full of Passionate Teachers and Administrators
Effective middle school teachers have “a zest for living, they enjoy being with young adolescents and understand the dynamics of the ever-changing youth culture” (NMSA, 9). These educators have a passion for the children they teach and believe that all students can reach their potential, and they will not stop short of aiding students toward that goal. Effective teachers have passion for their students because they have high expectations for each one of them and fully believe that each one can fully meet those expectations. This passion continues to grow as both the “students and the teachers engage in active learning” (NMSA, 15).

**Flexible**

Effective middle school teachers are flexible, both to time and student needs. The curricula and standards are important, but specific questions and needs must be met before teaching the content or else the students will have little retention. The teacher should plan the schedule accordingly so that time blocks are allowed for the material to be adjusted based on available time. The teacher should also be flexible in preparing the curricula so that the students can have some power in suggesting what topics they might like to discuss, as long as these are appropriate and practical.

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**My Personal Reflection:**

I remember my years as a junior high student as a very positive experience. My experience could have been potentially negative had things happened differently than they had. I enjoyed school, as it helped me to not only to learn, but it was my basic avenue of social blossoming. During my grade school years, I was very shy and
didn’t like talking in front of others, nor did I initiate new contacts. During jr. high, I was forced to take a speech class, which helped me to identify and come to grips with the fact that I am the happiest when socializing with others. It took me quite some time to become comfortable with it, but I was essentially a people person.

In school, becoming popular wasn’t too important to me, and thus it just seemed to come naturally. I mention that only for that fact that it had a great deal to do with me never having to worry about peer pressure, popularity, or fitting in. I really tried to reach out to everyone, especially those who I felt others left in the dust. This in itself, allowed me to eventually be raised up as a leader in the class as my classmates chose me to represent them for many different things.

Another thing that made my jr. high experience so wonderful was that my teachers were not only excellent at teaching their content area, but they showed me that they cared about me more as a person than just as one of their students. I even had teachers keep me accountable if they thought I wasn’t trying my hardest, which sometimes I needed. I had personal relationships with every one of my teachers, and cared for nearly all of them at a high, personal level. They were both available, and more importantly approachable. They encouraged me to keep working hard, to stay positive, and to use my influence for the betterment of others. Because of my close relationship with so many teachers, I gain certain privileges of trust and approval that allowed me to be a part of opportunities not always open to other students.

The curriculum of my jr. high was challenging, but not impossible. I had to work hard, sometimes a little harder than I wanted to, but eventually it helped me to stretch and grow as a person and as a student. I was able to explore and establish
my identity of what I believed, and the man I wanted to become. I had several posi-
tive role models within the core group of teachers that I had. I do however, feel that
some of the content wasn’t integrative enough across the subject area, but they tried
to do as best they could. I felt that my teachers prepared me very well for college. I
knew my content that was based on state standards, and I knew how to use different
forms of technology as well as read, write, and present material through oral com-
munication. I learned how to research, think critically, analyze, as well as how to
study effectively.

I feel that I learned many principles that were helpful far beyond the imme-
diate lesson being learned. One of the biggest attributes to which I remember is the
passion with which many of my teachers taught. You could sense the excitement
they had each day they stood in front of you. That helped to make it fun.

Some of the negative things I remember are teachers who were extremely strict be-
yond reason, yelled at students, were never understanding, didn’t know their sub-
ject area, didn’t care what happened or who learned as long as they could get to
their car by 3:05pm, and those who taught with no passion at all. I learned many
things that I do not want to do as a teacher. Those stick in my mind almost as much
as the positive things I remember.

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I’ve described some of the ideal necessities of effective middle schools. They must be
challenging, integrative, explorative, relevant, flexible, standards-driven, student-
focused, relationship-building, models of lifelong learning, full of passionate teach-
ers, and foster a safe haven for learning. Once again this list is not exhaustive but it
serves to build a foundation that can be added as more characteristics come to mind. I’ve included a brief reflection of some positive aspects of my junior high, which served to help shape me through my adolescent development. It is my goal that this brief study will help me to be a better middle level educator as I seek to understand my students, how they learn, and the best way to clear the way for them to reach their potential and learning that will prepare them for life in the years to come.

Sources Consulted:

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