RESEARCH
BRIEF

Middle School

MIDDLE SCHOOL

CONTEXT

Adolescence can be a particularly difficult time for youth as they experience **physical**, **social**, and **academic** changes.[1] The transition from elementary school to middle-level school often marks a decline in students' motivation and their behavior may begin to change as well.[2] Adolescence is a period when relationships with nonparental adults and peers take on increased meaning because adolescents are seeking support from adults outside of the home and peer acceptance.[3]

School can provide good-quality relationships with teachers and peers. When middle-level students have a high-quality relationship with at least one non-familial adult in school who understands their developmental needs and enjoys working with them, their sense of feeling cared for and their chances of being successful in school increase.[4]

A Task Force on the Education of Young Adolescents (10 to 15 years old) compiled a list of 8 recommendations for the educational improvement of youth:[5]

(1) small learning communities,
(2) a core of common knowledge,
(3) an organizational structure for success,
(4) teacher and principal responsibility
    for decision-making,
(5) expert teachers for this age group,
(6) promotion of adolescent health,
(7) alliance with families, and
(8) partnerships between school and community

In practice, these recommendations resulted in interdisciplinary teaming, advisory groups, common planning time for teachers, alignment of curriculum, instruction, and assessment, as well as an emphasis on relationships for learning, shared decision-making, the importance of professional development, and representative participation in school governance.[6]

STAGE-ENVIRONMENT FIT THEORY

Stage-environment fit theory suggests that school social context has a tremendous influence on the outcomes of young adolescents. There is a strong tension between the developmental needs of adolescents and their social context. This is particularly important because the developmental needs and the social contexts of young adolescents are in great transition during this stage[7]. Notably, a lack of fit between developmental needs and social context can have a detrimental effect on adolescent outcomes. Such negative effects could include poor academic outcomes, social-emotional or mental health issues, and risk behaviours, including substance abuse and sexual risk.[8]

Studies suggest that middle-level students may experience a worse fit between their developmental needs and their environments than elementary or high school students.[9]

Young adolescents are at a stage in which they need positive, warm relationships, yet they often transition into middle-grade organizational structures that make it more difficult to establish and maintain these types of relationships. Likewise, school curricula may become less experiential and more skill-and-drill oriented at the middle level, despite the fact that early adolescent brain development demands experiential and emotional learning.[10] As such, middle schools are in an excellent position to help support their students.[11]

Youth developmental needs include high-quality friendships, peer acceptance, and close relationships with non-familial adults as well as dynamic cognitive, social, personal, and emotional needs.[12]

Teachers can help meet young adolescents' developmental needs and promote positive adjustment by providing students with appropriate levels of autonomy support, structure, and involvement.[13]

1   McGorry, Purcell, Goldstone, & Amminger, 2011
2   Eccles, Vida, & Barber, 2004
3   Roeser et al., 1998
4   Jackson & Davis, 2000
5   Jackson & Davis, 2000
6   Jackson & Davis, 2002

7   Eccles et al., 1993
8   Gutman & Eccles, 2007
9   Eccles et al., 1993; Roeser, 2005
10   Wallis & Dell, 2004
11   Eccles & Roeser, 2011; Eccles et al., 1993
12   Brown, 2004; Eccles & Roeser, 2011
13   Stroet, Opdenakker, & Minnaert, 2013

STUDENT VOICE
and personalized learning in Middle Schools

Student voice is often a hallmark of middle school philosophy. Phrases such as empowering, relevant, and active and purposeful learning are used to describe developmentally responsive middle-grade learning experiences, which relay the importance of providing adolescents with opportunities to be in the driver's seat of their own learning.[14]

14   National Middle School Association [NMSA], 2010

Scholars and reform advocates have long identified a mismatch between young adolescents' desire for autonomy and schools that offer few opportunities for middle-grade students to have a choice in or make meaningful decisions about their learning.[15] A growing body of research has shown

> teaching practices that support adolescents' perceptions of autonomy—such as creating classroom environments congruent with adolescent-defined goals and values and supporting adolescents' actions that are derived from adolescents' evolving sense of self—can be an effective means for increasing student motivation and engagement in the classroom.[16]

Calls for teachers and school structures to share power with students in middle grades education are supported by both self-determination theory[17] and young adolescent developmental theory.[18] Self-determination theory suggests all humans have an innate psychological need for autonomy, and motivation is correlated with the extent to which this need is met. During early adolescence, a person's need for autonomy increases considerably;[19] therefore, middle-grade instruction that emphasizes teacher control and limits decision-making opportunities may tend to have a negative effect on young adolescent motivation.[20]

The importance of sharing power in middle grades creates especially fertile ground for personalized learning approaches that ask for teachers to make similar shifts away from traditional teacher-centered instructional practices.

Personalized learning has the potential to be developmentally responsive and enhance the fit between young adolescents and their schools. That said, emerging scholarship on personalized learning at the middle level has shown that it can be difficult for teachers to strike the appropriate balance between providing adequate instructional scaffolding without stifling learner ownership.[21]

With its emphasis on student voice and choice in the learning process, personalized learning represents a promising pedagogy for responding to young adolescents' developmental need for autonomy in school. Successful middle schools for young adolescents should provide all students "with the knowledge and skills they need to take responsibility for their lives, to address life's challenges, to function successfully at all levels of society, and to be creators of knowledge".[22] When students are afforded voice and choice in personalized classroom environments, they are able to design learning opportunities that are purposeful and relevant. Students are then able to "take responsibility for helping to plan and assess their learning".[23]

Finally, personalized learning and project-based share many commonalities; as such, some have argued that project-based learning is a promising pedagogy through which learning can be personalized.

15   Eccles et al., 1993; Jackson & Davis, 2000
16   Williams, Wallace, & Sung, 2016, p. 528
17   Ryan & Deci, 2000
18   NMSA, 2010
19   Eccles & Wigfield, 1997
20   Eccles & Midgley, 1989

21   Demink-Carthew et al., 2017; Netcoh, 2017
22   NMSA, 2010, p. 13
23   Nesin, 2012, p. 22

CRITIQUES

It may well be that developmentally responsive practices in middle schools are ideal but can only be put into practice under specialized conditions.[24] In other words, the idea that middle schools are made developmentally appropriate only works if massive structural changes are made to teaching and learning.

As such, models that adhere to the middle school concept in a holistic way[25] show better outcomes[26], while middle schools with incremental implementation[27] or those that focus on raising test scores[28] are much less successful.

Elements of middle school practices that emerged as most effective in raising measurable student achievement levels included interdisciplinary teams and common planning time.[29]

24   Cuban, 1992
25   Angelle & Anfara, 2006; Gallagher-Polite, 2001
26   Anfara & Lipka, 2003; Lounsbury & Vars, 2003
27   Dickinson & Butler, 2001
28   Faulkner & Cook, 2006; Irvin & Arhar, 2003
29   George, 2009; Mertens & Flowers, 2003

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