

Academic Vigor and Meeting the Learning Needs of Middle Level Students

By Chris Sousa and Robert C. Spear, Ed.D

Middle level schools are unique places largely due to their unique student population. Students ages 10 – 14 undergo vast social, intellectual, emotional and physical changes. It is the role of middle level schools to provide an academically vigorous curriculum and instruction while assisting them to become knowledgeable about themselves and the world around them. This knowledge, their experiences, and their education will assist students to make better decisions about their personal and educational lives in order to form a strong foundation as they enter adulthood. Increasingly, more has been written about the difficulties for schools to find the balance between providing academic vigor as compared to meeting the developmental needs of young adolescent students.

Academically, middle level schools work to provide students with a vigorous curriculum that will move them through their own brain development from predominantly concrete thinkers to primarily abstract thinkers. This needs to be done by specifically trained educators who are not only experts in their specific disciplines but are artisans in the area of teaching early adolescent children. Studies suggest that successful students are taught by teachers who are not only proficient in their discipline (history, math, art, science, etc) but also have a high level of understanding and training while working with middle level students specifically. The same is true about middle level administrators.

Middle level educators have always embraced the importance of academic vigor; they have used the mantra of learning, relevance, and relationships to guide developmentally appropriate practices in the classroom. (These practices are outlined in the Carnegie Corporation's Turning Points 2000 and the National Middle School Association's This We Believe.) It is these practices that are sometimes maligned, that form the foundation upon which appropriate academic expectations are built to provide vigorous academic challenges. These practices also help students better understand their unique learning process and style and they also encourage students to take educational risks and to learn from their mistakes.

Educators, who know and understand young adolescents, can create developmentally appropriate curricula that builds upon basic skills and broadens the information base to provide opportunities for mastery. These results are achieved by an assortment of methods to properly assess the variety of thinkers in any middle level school group. One common practice that middle level educators use are the interdisciplinary links that provide opportunities for authentic learning that fits better with the natural curiosity of young adolescents.

Academic vigor cannot be measured accurately for middle level students by traditional standardized testing alone. Educators must assess and provide frequent feedback in many forms such as classroom discussions, essays, reports, tests, projects, and performances. Authentic assessments based on portfolio review and service learning is often overlooked by traditional testing measures.

Middle level schools can also support academic vigor by supporting the learning that occurs outside the classroom setting; encouraging faculty and students to take advantage of field trips, extra curricular activities, and social events. Participation in these activities can be risky for

some young adolescents, but they are often successful when they are supported by a deliberate program of student advocacy. This advocacy/advisory can serve to encourage students to stretch the boundaries of their thinking and feelings. Middle level academics will benefit when students are open to seeing risks as opportunities for growth and challenges as obstacles to overcome.

When examining academic vigor in middle level schools, it is important to look at the entirety of programs, much like middle level teachers look at the whole student. Middle level educators have always embraced the importance of academic vigor; in fact, it is a founding philosophy. They have infused high academic standards and state standards with a clear focus on understanding the whole child.

Developmentally appropriate education is not a “buzz word”, it is a necessity! As we look toward the challenge of providing educational programs that truly meet the developmental needs of our students, perhaps providing an overall vigorous educational experience should be our goal.

Bibliography:

Turning Points: Preparing American Youth for the 21st Century. The Report of the Task Force on Education of Young Adolescents (New York: Carnegie Corporation, 1989)

This We Believe: Successful Schools for Young Adolescents. A position Paper of National Middle School Association (Westerville, Ohio. 2003)

Author Note:

The authors have purposely used the word vigor as opposed to rigor. Rigor is defined by the Merriam-Webster Dictionary as “...harsh inflexibility in opinion, temper, or judgment... the quality of being unyielding or inflexible...” It is preceded in the dictionary by the words ridged and rigmarole and followed by the word rigormortis. These are hardly the words we want to use to describe the learning experience for young adolescents. Vigor is defined as, “...active bodily or mental strength or force...active healthy well-balanced growth...intensity of action or effect...” therefore, this is the word purposely chosen for this article.

Copyright © 2007 by NELMS. **Academic Vigor and Meeting the Learning Needs of Middle Level Students** is another in a series of articles offered by the New England League of Middle Schools on a variety of middle level topics. For more information about specific practices and answers to your questions, please contact the New England League of Middle Schools by e-mail nelms@nelms.org or phone (978) 887-6263. Information is also available on the NELMS web site at www.nelms.org. We welcome your inquires!

Chris Sousa is the Principal of Proctor Jr/Sr High School, Proctor, VT
Robert C. Spear Ed.D. is Executive Director of the New England League of Middle Schools, Topsfield, Massachusetts.