

Lest we forget—the open window

In the face of imposed standards, testing, and bureaucracy, John Lounsbury rightfully reminds us to place our primary focus on the needs and interests of young adolescents as a distinguishing mark of middle level education's unique and urgent mission.

John H. Lounsbury

In a marketing manual I came across many years ago, the headline, “Your key to the billion dollar teen market” caught my eye and I immediately read these opening sentences:

When a young person is between 12 and 18 years old, you have the chance of a lifetime to transform a fickle consumer into a loyal customer. These years form **a window that opens but once**. Never again will you be able to build share of marketing so easily and cost-effectively. If you can deliver the right message to teens, under the right conditions, **when they are forming lifestyle patterns** and brand decisions as a group, you can gain their loyalty. Miss that open window and you will have to spend many more years and many times the money to track down your target audience after they have dispersed into the adult world. (emphasis added)

I was very much taken with this business world's “open window” characterization of a particular reality that occurs in human growth and development at the time of early adolescence (explained in later paragraphs). Although I would change the age range, dropping 18 to 15 or 16, I liked this characterization and often used it and these opening lines in presentations and articles.

The open window concept came back to my mind as I was bemoaning the direction public education has taken in recent years. At the same time, I have been deeply concerned over what I view as the serious decline in the quality of our common life—and wonder if there may be a cause-result relationship in operation here.

Schools and teachers, I believe, have been pushed to give so much time and attention to meeting narrow cognitive goals that they have not capitalized fully on the open window opportunity, and, therefore, they have not impacted students as persons and citizens as significantly as they should have. The great concern about preparing students for *tomorrow*—for high school, college, and career—has, I'm afraid, led to overlooking the fact that students are somebody *today*, and that now while the window is open, they are firming up the attitudes, dispositions, and values that will be the prime determinants of both their success in future schooling and in life itself. The repertoire of cognitive information that they are being pushed to master, pales in significance compared to the life lessons learned from experiences that come under the affective domain. The obsession with standardized test scores, may have made the reduced attention to broader, affective goals understandable, but certainly not acceptable if middle level schools are to fulfill the commitment to educating the whole young adolescent.

The middle school's responsibility

I believe *middle school educators have what is at once an immense privilege and a particularly awesome responsibility—guiding the learning and development of impressionable young adolescents as they come of age*. Read that statement again slowly. Do you agree with it? Do you recognize

the implications it contains? If so, then you will have to support the position that, apart from the prime and given responsibility of teaching selected content and skills, middle school teachers must be about the business of helping students believe in themselves, form their character, discover their interests, nurture their potential, gain a sound perspective on their physical development and related health issues, and develop those universally and critically important humanitarian and social skills—all while daring them to be their best selves, to breathe deeply, and to live well at the moment. Whee! The extent and breadth of such responsibilities is mind-boggling. A passage from an old textbook (Chapman & Counts, 1924) came to mind. These engaging and somewhat quaint lines set forth questions that youth wrestled with in the post-World War I era. They are still germane; in fact, I believe, even more so.

Greeting his pupils the master asked:

What would you learn of me?

And the reply came:

How shall we care for our bodies?

How shall we rear our children?

How shall we work together?

How shall we live with our fellow men?

How shall we play?

For what ends shall we live??

And the teacher pondered these words, and sorrow was in his heart, for the prescribed curriculum touched not these things.

I confess to altering the last line by inserting “the prescribed curriculum” in place of “his own learning.” Forgive me, but any way this concept is expressed, the overwhelming and almost impossible task of the middle grades teacher is clear.

Fortunately, Mother Nature provides this open window that gives educators a better than usual chance to influence youth in lasting ways. Young adolescents now reach a level of mental maturity that permits them to be introspective, so the search for self gets underway. They work on developing their philosophies of life and consider seriously the values they will live by. They reject or hold in abeyance the principles and values that they have heretofore accepted rather automatically from family members and other influential adults in their lives. Now, they create their own answers to questions about right and wrong, good and bad, God and man,

responsibility, integrity, and other fundamental questions, including the oft-cited one, “Who am I?” For the most part, the values accepted are closely aligned with those they had previously acquired—apples don’t fall far from the tree—but now they are their own beliefs or values, not just ones handed down.

The search for self is on-going as young adolescents work out their philosophies of life and determine the values they will live by.

Therefore...

And here is the clincher, the condition or reality that makes middle level education especially important—arguably the most critical period in the human life cycle. The code, philosophy, the self-concept that young adolescents now craft becomes the one that, with very few exceptions, will direct their behavior from here on out! Young adolescents have, in effect, invented themselves as the kind of persons they will be as adults.

After the window is closed it will never be easy, almost impossible to influence students’ values, dispositions, and fundamental beliefs. Knowing this, businesses have exploited the open window, almost shamelessly—think Nike. Education, with far more noble motives, must exploit it fully too.

Schools dare not assume that the critical non-cognitive, behavioral goals will be adequately met simply as by-products of the activities and experiences associated with cognitive-focused instruction. Of course, middle school teachers intuitively do give attention to the affective side of an education, and they should be commended for so doing. But the demand to achieve acceptable scores on standardized tests is so strong and insistent that teachers find it difficult to be the guide and mentor for students that they should and would like to be. Test scores be damned! Their value is ephemeral. These one-shot, one time measures have been imbued with meanings that far exceed their real value. And, furthermore, students’ success, in both further education and in their personal lives, is determined more by the acquisition of desirable behavior traits, social skills, and

dispositions, than by the acquisition of particular bodies of information and related skills. Parents, and educators as well, would do well to stop and consider this point.

There always exists in our society, a tension between freedom and obligation, between personal interest and civic duty. This is inevitable in our unique democratic society. However, when a fair balance between these opposites is lost, serious consequences follow. In recent years, that reasonable balance has been lost as selfishness and personal interests have overshadowed the spirit of selfless citizenship with its commitment to advance the common good. Our society has become pock-marked by fractured relationships, between individuals and between groups, by dishonesty, violence, vulgarity, and behaviors once considered totally unacceptable. While there are many reasons for this condition, it is hard not to believe that the public schools, however unwittingly, have played a role in this decline in our common life because students have not been given adequate help and guidance in understanding themselves, knowing and respecting others, becoming self-reliant, and in developing their social conscience. The open window years comprise the best time for these critical matters to be addressed.

And, if so...

Schools, with full faculty involvement, need to consider the merits of the position taken in this article along with reviewing the goals of middle level education (see

This We Believe, pp.11–12). When doing so, it will become apparent that few if any of these goals can be met through direct instruction and purely intellectual efforts. Middle level educators must rise above the pressure to prepare students for tests and give a priority to guiding the personal, social, and citizenship development of students. The open window opportunity should not slip by unused if middle schools are to provide, “an education that will enhance their healthy growth as lifelong learners, ethical and democratic citizens, and increasingly competent, self-sufficient individuals who are optimistic about their future and prepared to succeed in our ever-changing world” (National Middle School Association, 2010, p. 3).

And finally, as a part of this reconsideration process, faculties should definitely bring to bear the many research findings that collectively conclude: academic achievement, even as measured by test scores, improves when students’ social, emotional, moral, and physical development have been fully supported. Believe it, and conduct the teaching-learning enterprise accordingly—for kids’ sake, and indeed, for our society’s sake.

References

- Chapman, J. C. and Count, G. S. (1924). *Principles of education*. Boston, Massachusetts: Houghton-Mifflin.
- National Middle School Association. (2010). *This we believe: Keys to educating young adolescents*. Westerville, OH: Author.

John H. Lounsbury is Dean Emeritus at Georgia College in Milledgeville, Georgia and one of the founders of the middle school movement .
E-mail: john.lounsbury@gcsu.edu