

Teaching High Ability Learners in an Authentic Middle School

Our best vision is one that combines equity of opportunity for all learners—including those who are academically advanced—to maximize their potentials, while participating in a community of learners that contributes to their development academically, affectively, and as citizens of a shared world.

By Carol Ann Tomlinson & Paul S. George

The authors of this article share an educator's love for middle schoolers and a vision of schools designed to address their unique developmental needs. Our careers represent more than 60 years of work in middle school classrooms and in research that supports quality education for young adolescents. It is fair to say that time has deepened our understanding of both the complexity and the power implicit in high quality education for students who are no longer children and not yet young adults.

Well over a decade ago, the two of us began a shared exploration of issues and interests around



To conclude an independent inquiry, a student explains her project to fellow students.

the topic of what it means to teach advanced learners effectively in the context of an authentic middle school. Our mutual goal throughout that time has been to honor the philosophy of middle school with its focus on high quality educational opportunity for the full range of young adolescents—including those whose academic performance exceeds grade expectations and those whose high potential is as yet untapped. Throughout those years, we have talked, shared information, met with others whose work focuses on the same concerns, presented jointly, and have researched and written separately on various aspects of this topic.

In this period of upheaval and controversy in education, it is a good time for our two voices to join in a shared statement about key facets of our ongoing journey. What follows is a statement of shared beliefs about issues that both drive and challenge middle level educators. While each of the sections has a basis in research and practice, it is not our intent in this article to present a review of literature. Rather our goal is to articulate beliefs that stem from our career-long research and practice. At the end of the article, we will list some readings for those who would like to pursue further the issues we briefly address in this piece.

The Underlying Question

A question we have shared in separate but intertwined careers has been what it means to teach highly able learners well in an authentic middle school setting. On the one hand, the answer seems transparent. Just find the kids who are advanced and teach them what comes next. While there is a certain obviousness in that answer, it camouflages other important questions. How confident can we be that we know precisely who has advanced abilities? In what areas ought we to identify and develop those abilities? How do we ensure that we develop opportunities to maximize abilities in every ethnic and economic group? Is it possible that abilities

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develop on differing timetables? How can we ensure that the vast majority of teachers are charged with providing continual and escalating challenge for their students as a means of both identifying and developing potential rather than assigning that role to only a few teachers? How can we be certain that the effects of effectively educating one group of young adolescents are not borne disproportionately by any other group of students in the school? The issues are many and important. Beneath them all are

two pivotal values in American society—*equity and excellence*. Equity is often taken to mean access to opportunity. In our country, we cling to the vision of the child born in poverty who becomes a national leader. Excellence is often taken to mean high end quality—a kind of “ceiling achievement” available only to a few. Citizens in this country also subscribe to the goal of being world class in virtually all endeavors. Historically, the middle school movement reflects a strong equity perspective. Historically, proponents focusing largely on the educational needs of high ability learners reflect a strong excellence perspective. Some perceive these to be competing values, a “zero sum game” in contemporary parlance. To support access to opportunity for many, some would say, is to diminish emphasis on high end quality for a few, and vice versa.

These two authors believe that equity and excellence ought simultaneously to govern educational decisions for all students in the middle grades. That is, each student should have access to curriculum that is high level, authentic, meaning-making, expert-focused, and highly relevant to young adolescents. In that way, equity of opportunity belongs to all young adolescents. In addition, each young adolescent—including those who demonstrate advanced academic performance and potential—should have persistent, knowledgeable adult support in maximizing his or her potential. In that way, excellence becomes a barometer of success for each student and his or her teachers.

We believe, then, that schools that teach young adolescents well do at least three important things. First, they work to develop educational environments that affirm and extend the possibilities of students who reflect a full range of race, gender, culture, experience, maturity, and development. Such environments support the capacity of young adolescents to understand and embrace the growing diversity that characterizes the society in which young adolescents already live and in which they will increasingly live. Second, such schools consistently focus on providing for *all* students curriculum and instruction that reflect our best understanding of quality. Third, they do so in ways that support *each* student in developing his or her capacity as fully as possible.

The balancing of equity and excellence as guiding values for middle grades education reflects an immutable and equally enthusiastic commitment to

all young adolescents. At this defining period in a young person's life, when both potentials and vulnerabilities are paramount, educators have unparalleled opportunities to help each student develop the knowledge, understanding, and skill—as well as the emotional confidence—that build the self-efficacy necessary for a vibrant future. This becomes the compass for educational decisions in the middle grades, shaping the way we think about where we teach students, what we teach them, and how we teach them.

Implications for *Where We Teach Middle Level Students*

Decisions about grouping students in the middle grades necessarily affect both equity and excellence for individual learners. Decisions we make regarding ability grouping are most defensible when they ensure both high quality curriculum, instruction, and, support for individual growth. Research in this area over an extended period of time reinforces the need to carefully consider both equity and excellence in grouping decisions. When high end learners are separated from age mates for instruction, it is likely that expectations fall for students we deem to be less able. On the other hand, when we integrate high end learners into heterogeneous classes and fail to address their learning needs, their achievement may suffer.

In general, grouping in the middle grades will most likely achieve both equity and excellence for each learner when (a) heterogeneity is emphasized, (b) teachers are effectively supported in teaching high quality, meaning-making, expert-focused curriculum in heterogeneous settings, and (c) teachers are effectively supported in attending to learner variance in their classes.

After decades of research on ability grouping, one truth persists. The issue is not nearly so much where we put students as the quality of what we do with them.

Implications for *What We Teach Middle Level Students*

If it is the case that we aspire to provide each middle school student (equity) with the highest quality curriculum possible (excellence), then there are certain hallmarks of curriculum toward which we would relentlessly aspire. For example, such curriculum

would clearly focus on the knowledge, understanding, and skills that help young adolescents organize and make sense of what they learn in ways that authentically reflect the various disciplines they study. Learning experiences emanating from such plans would both connect with students' own lives and show students connections with a wider world. This

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sort of curriculum would help them see purpose and derive power from what they learn. It would ask them to think critically and produce meaningful products. It would help them realize satisfaction in meeting genuine challenge. In these classrooms, teachers operate from the assumption that each learner comes to school with far more capacity than we are able to see, and from the belief that teachers teach best when they hold high aspirations for each of their students and lift each student to those aspirations.

Standards articulated by states and districts can provide strong guidance for curriculum in the middle grades—as in all other grades. Using standards as centerpieces for decision-making about curricular content, middle grades teachers must organize content in ways that promote coherence of student understanding, meaning-making, thinking, and producing in order to develop curriculum that is at once both challenging and inviting. We believe that in a middle school where equity and excellence are balanced, standards are the beginning of developing high quality curriculum, not the end.

Early adolescence is prime time for students to make connections and to learn to think abstractly as they do so. For that reason, integrated curriculum has great potential during these years. Effective integrated curriculum helps students develop frameworks of knowledge, understanding, and skill that amplify meaning in the individual disciplines and also show students the connectedness of knowledge across disciplines. Further, effectively integrated curriculum helps students develop competence and confidence as critical thinkers who can use information and ideas in one area to reason about other areas.

Interdisciplinary team organization in middle schools allows teachers with expertise in particular disciplines to work together to help their students make meaningful connections within and between the subjects they study. At the same time, interdisciplinary teams encourage teachers to share insights about the students they teach so that each learner can be supported more fully in his or her growth by a team of adults focused on understanding the student's particular needs and capitalizing on the student's particular strengths.

Implications for *How We Teach Middle Level Students*

Of great importance in developing middle level classrooms that balance equity and excellence is the issue of *how* we ensure that each student has access to the kind of learning opportunities we often associate with high end students while still ensuring the opportunity for each learner to grow from his or her own particular starting points and in accordance with his or her own particular strengths. It is the case that how we teach young adolescents will, in large measure, determine our capacity to provide high quality curriculum and instruction (equity) in ways that maximize individual growth (excellence). In that vein, learning environments we aspire to create, the instructional approaches we use, how we use those approaches, and our capacity to know and address student variance are critical.

Of pivotal importance in developing potential in young adolescents—as in developing learning opportunities that balance equity and excellence for all students—is creating learning communities in which the value of each student is evident. In such settings, teams of teachers play the lead role in helping students find and appreciate one another's contributions to the class and in supporting one another in working through difficulties.

As a part of establishing such communities of learning and in service of the goal of learning success for each student, a variety of instructional approaches are useful. Instructional goals are most successful when they are effective in achieving specified learning goals, when they enable each student over time to make worthy contributions to the class, and when they allow a variety of learning opportunities and contexts for each student over time. It is important, for example, for students to

have opportunities to work with students who share their interests, approaches to learning, and levels of readiness as a regular part of classroom experience. It is also important for students to learn from and with students whose perspectives and abilities differ from their own. Effective use of a range of instructional strategies that focus both on key learning outcomes and the need of each student to be a contributing member of the class is important to developing classrooms in which equity and excellence are balanced. We know of no reputable instructional strategy that can, by itself, provide everything teachers and students need in accomplishing the goals of the classroom. Similarly, we know of no reputable instructional strategy that is without merit in the tapestry of creating classrooms for young adolescents that balance equity and excellence goals.

Also critical to the equity/excellence balance is the growing capacity of teachers to know where individual students are in relation to important learning goals and to modify instruction in ways that provide both challenge and support for achieving the challenge for academically diverse populations. In such classrooms, teachers consistently use a variety of assessments to guide instruction. They work with students in varying configurations. They use materials and time flexibly. While they are clear about critical learning outcomes, they also understand the reality that various students will reach those goals in different ways and with different support systems. One-size-fits-all instruction is a poor fit for an age group that by its nature is probably more diverse than any other in the school population.

Are We There Yet?

Neither of us can point to a school or classroom and say with conviction, "Go there. There is Nirvana!" Student populations are complex and becoming more so by the day. Teaching is difficult—and probably more demanding than at any time in our history. Today's answers are too limited for tomorrow's needs. And, blessedly, our profession continues to grow. This year's practice ought to be changing to incorporate last year's insights from research and practice.

Educators have not achieved the perfect balance of equity and excellence in middle level schools. We will not achieve it this year or next or the one after

that. At the same time, young adolescents continue to come to us with the trust that we will contribute in significant and positive ways to their development as young people. Our best knowledge of the development of young adolescents and what it would take to teach them well suggests that our best vision is one that combines equity of opportunity for all learners—including those who are academically advanced—to maximize their potentials, while participating in a community of learners that contributes to their development academically, affectively, and as citizens of a shared world.

The two of us—as is the case with multitudes of middle level educators across the country—ponder these issues relentlessly. We continue both to shape and to value the vision of middle level schools that effectively serve the full range of learners entrusted to them. And we are challenged and strengthened by being part of a vision that we believe is as promising as it is challenging.

Recent publications and presentations by the authors and National Middle School Association addressing the needs of gifted and talented students in middle grades settings:

Tomlinson

- Tomlinson, C. (2003) *Fulfilling the promise of the differentiated classroom: Strategies and tools for responsive teaching*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.
- Tomlinson, C., Ford, D., Reis, S., Briggs, C., & Strickland, C., (2003). *In search of the dream: Designing schools and classrooms that work for high potential students from diverse cultural backgrounds*. Washington, DC: National Association for Gifted Children and National Research Center on the Gifted and Talented.
- Tomlinson, C., Kaplan, S., Renzulli, J., Purcell, J., Leppien, J., & Burns, D. (2002). *The Parallel Curriculum Model: A design to develop high potential and challenge high ability learners*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.

George

- George, P. S., Renzulli, J. S., Reis, S. M., & Erb, T. O. (Ed.). (1997). *Dilemmas in talent development in the middle grades: Two views*. Columbus, OH: National Middle School Association.

Middle School Journal & NMSA Publications

- Navan, J. L. (2002). Enhancing the achievement of all learners means high ability students too. *Middle School Journal*, 34(2), 45-49.
- Renzulli, J. S. (2000). One way to organize exploratory curriculum: Academies of inquiry and talent development (Part 1). *Middle School Journal*, 32(2), 5-14.
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- Erb, T. O. (1992). Encouraging gifted performance in middle schools. *Midpoints Occasional Papers*, 3(1), 1-24.

NMSA Annual Conference

- J. Renzulli, P. George, C. Tomlinson, D. Krebs, A. Haskins, & T. Erb. *Developing talent in the middle grades*, assembly presentation at the annual conference of National Middle School Association, Indianapolis, October 30-November 2, 1997.
- C. Stevenson, C. Tomlinson, J. McIntyre, & T. Erb. *Meeting the needs of the gifted in middle level programs*, assembly presentation at the annual meeting of National Middle School Association, Baltimore, October 31-November 3, 1996.

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