A Bona Fide Middle School: Programs, Policy, Practice, and Grade Span Configurations

What Current Research Says to the Middle Level Practitioner

ON TARGET
DEFINING
MIDDLE SCHOOL

David Hough

Five important findings can be drawn from the research literature accompanying middle school programs, policies, and practice (i.e., components) and grade span: (1) components are generally conceptualized in a similar, agreed-upon fashion by most middle school scholars, (2) these same components do enhance student achievement, (3) grade span does make a difference in student achievement, (4) the number of schools in the United States implementing middle school components around a 6,7,8 grade span continues to grow, and (5) research is just now beginning to provide necessary data to help researchers ask the "right" questions leading to definitive answers for the first time ever.

Middle school components are most often conceptualized as teams of teachers meeting during a *common planning* time to (among other things) develop *integrated curricula* and teach within the structure of a *flexible schedule* that allows for more in-depth study and experiential learning. *Advisory* programs are provided in an effort to establish positive relationships between young adolescents and adults, ensuring that students are known well by at least one adult. Students are encouraged to participate in *intramural* activities to build self-esteem and promote healthy life-styles. *Exploratory* classes or enrichment experiences are provided to allow students a chance to experiment with novel subject matter and interest areas without fear of being penalized by a letter grade. And all of the above are accomplished within *small heterogeneous* learning *communities* that emphasize *cooperative* teaching strategies that capitalize on the social dimension of teaching and learning.

BACKGROUND

Discussions surrounding middle level programs, policies, practice, and grade span configurations spawn some of the most frequently asked questions about middle level education. Chief among these (and underlying the entire middle level education movement) are questions associated with the impact of middle school components and grade span on student outcomes, especially academic achievement. While research on middle level education programs, policies, and practice (i.e. components) has increased over the past two-and-a-half decades, virtually all studies have focused on the following: (a) ways to design and implement middle school components effectively, (b) the impact of this change process on teachers, teaching, and overall school organization, (c) student affect and/or teacher/principal perceptions of outcomes (Hough, 1991a; 1991b; 1991c; 1991d; Irvin, 1992).

Before 1996, not enough empirical data had been collected to show conclusive evidence that any given combination of middle school components implemented within any given grade span configuration impacted student achievement (Hough, 1991d; Van Zant & Totten, 1995). This is not to say that middle school components have no relationship to grade span. They do. However, until recent efforts guided by comprehensive empirical data, too much past research had been based on only a few studies that had concentrated on a single program, policy, or practice (Hough, 1991a; 1991b; 1991c; 1991d; Irvin, 1992; Mac Iver & Epstein, 1993; Melton, 1984), leaving too much to speculative theory and incipient understandings instead of scientific fact - the latter of which is now the central focus (Felner, 1996).

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Bona fide "middle schools" can and do differ greatly in the number and type of components operationalized at varying degrees; however, all should exhibit specific programs, policies, and practice that meet the diverse physical, social, emotional, moral, cognitive needs of young adolescents. These learners ranging roughly between 10 and 14 years of age are most often, but not always, found in grades six, seven, and eight; some may be found in the fifth grade, while others may be in the ninth grade, due to differing rates of maturation. This wide range of diverse development adds to the component/grade span-outcomes conundrum.

Relationships among and between components and grade span to student achievement is measurable; however, the direct, indirect, and interactive paths of these relationships are just now being understood by researchers. Preliminary findings indicate that the paths are seldom direct, but that they almost always interact with one or more other variables and in concert do favorably impact student achievement when implemented conscientiously over time (Felner, 1996). The plausibility of middle level education, then, necessitates broad definitions of a variety of far-ranging components and outcomes.

RATIONALE

A bona fide middle school is not an organizational structure consisting of a specific grade level configuration, set of components, and name that includes the word *middle*. It is, however, any organizational structure consisting of developmentally appropriate programs, policies, and practice tailored to maximize young adolescent learning while nurturing affect (Clark & Clark, 1993; Cuban, 1993; Epstein, 1990; Hough, 1989; Johnston, 1984; Romano & Georgiady, 1994). A number of demographic variables peculiar to a specific school community make an impact on middle level organizational structures (Becker, 1987; Epstein, 1990; Hough, 1995a; 1995b; Hough & Irvin, 1995), and these factors do influence types, degrees and levels of implementation that make a difference in learning outcomes, including achievement and socialization (Epstein, 1990; Hough, 1995b; Hough & Sills-Briegel, in press).

While middle school components most often refer to programs, policies, and practice perceived to hold promise as effective ways to facilitate learning and affect, not unlike other innovations in education or any other field, many of the effects or outcomes have yet to be fully substantiated through empirical research (Hough, 1995a; 1995b; Mac Iver & Epstein, 1993; Van Zant & Totten, 1995). Even though lack of data regarding the effects of change prior to full implementation over time is not uncommon in any field of study, some have misconstrued incipient or incomplete data and used same as grounds for opposing middle level education ideals. Too often, well-meaning groups use "ipso facto" logic to challenge the efficacy of new approaches. In an effort to ensure the highest quality education possible for their children, parents and school boards sometimes associate declining test scores, for example, with what they may perceive to be a "warm-fuzzy" curriculum infused with advisory and exploratory classes that detract from time that could be devoted to more rigorous "basics." In an extreme example, some have been led to believe that middle level education has caused schools in rural communities to consolidate and believe, further, that consolidation is detrimental to children (see, e.g., DeYoung, Howley, & Theobald, 1995). In reality, while varied, middle level education programs, policies, and practice have more often been viewed as reform initiatives to be implemented after consolidation had already taken place. And many of these initiatives share

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basic philosophical and operational similarities with middle school components that are grounded in research theory and composed of equally varied orientations, approaches, and methodologies (Cuban, 1993; Hough, 1995a; Mac Iver & Epstein, 1993).

In addition to descriptive data used to identify middle school components, two premises undergird the research/theory used to determine grade levels most often found to be appropriate for inclusion in middle schools. The first premise holds that early adolescence is a separate developmental stage situated between childhood and adolescence. The second premise holds that appropriate programs, policies, and practice designed to meet young adolescent needs are difficult to generalize to grade levels because differing rates of maturation are highly individual between childhood and adolescence. Therefore, it would follow that the most prudent approach to the grade configuration issue is to develop a bona fide middle school first, then determine which children are at the young adolescent stage before assigning them to grades in that organizational structure. Too often in the past, the reverse has been tried, i.e., grouping students by grade level (vertical articulation) and then trying to manufacture solutions to fit whatever resulting grade span configuration emerges - usually as a result of administrative expediency in reaction to facilities utilization (e.g., Alexander, 1988; Johnston, 1984). This latter approach has not met with high levels of success (e.g., Hough, 1989; Van Zant & Totten, 1995). The former, however, is just now being tried in enough locales nationally to allow for empirical research to be conducted among truly different school types (Hough & Irvin, 1995).

PROGRAMS, POLICIES, PRACTICE = COMPONENTS

Middle school components can be conceptualized in a variety of ways. One very general rubric classifies all components as either curricular, co-curricular, or extramural programs. More often, middle level researchers, scholars, and practitioners refer to a list of programs, policies, and practice that often vary in number from six to twelve (e.g., Epstein & Mac Iver, 1990; McEwin, Dickinson, Erb, & Scales, 1995; Romano & Georgiady, 1994). Among the most common are advisory, intramurals, teaching teams with common planning time, flexible (usually block) scheduling, integrated curricula (multidisciplinary or interdisciplinary), and exploratory classes. Each of these, as well as additional "components," are discussed in some depth throughout this volume.

Since 1989, *Turning Points: Preparing American Youth for the 21st Century* (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1989) has been the catalyst for development of both components and blueprints for designing and implementing bona fide middle schools throughout the United States (e.g., Oakes, Serna, & Guiton, 1996). Using *Turning Points* as a blueprint, many schools have developed and implemented a variety of programs, policies, and practices that focus on the following: creating small communities for learning in which every student is known well by at least one adult; designing and teaching a common core of academics that centers around literacy, the sciences, critical thinking, healthy life-styles, ethical behavior, and citizenship in a pluralistic society; ensuring success for all students by eliminating tracking by achievement while promoting cooperative learning and flexible instructional time; empowering teachers and administrators; exerting more centralized control over instruction leading to high levels of measurable performance; staffing middle grades with teachers who have been specially prepared to teach young adolescents; improving academic performance through fostering health and fitness; reengaging families through meaningful roles and school governance; and connecting school with communities by forming partnerships that are mutually responsible for students' success (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1989).

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In addition, a new blueprint, *Great Transitions* (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1996), published as the fourth and concluding report of the Carnegie Task Force on Education and Young Adolescence, along with a new position paper from National Middle School Association (NMSA), *This We Believe: Developmentally Responsive Middle Level Schools* (1995), may very well become the next catalysts for middle level school improvement by providing innovative ways of viewing the components of a middle school. Using *This We Believe* as a guide, middle schools would design programs, policies, and practice addressing the following: curriculum that is challenging, integrative, and exploratory; varied teaching and learning approaches; assessment and evaluation that promote learning; flexible organizational structures; health, wellness, and safety; comprehensive guidance and support services (NMSA, 1995).

An encouraging facet of the NMSA rubric of reform is that, regardless of how programs, policies, and practices are fashioned, the middle school components become *descriptive* rather than *prescriptive* in nature. This is a marked departure from earlier efforts to replicate components across schools. The descriptive nature of these middle school components guards against proselytizing or attempts to routinize charismatic reform initiatives. Instead, the NMSA recommendations concentrate on customized components to meet individual school improvement plans in conjunction with community needs and preference. While site-based initiatives are welcome, "customization" adds to the methodological complexities presented researchers studying the effect of components and grade span on student outcomes, including achievement.

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN COMPONENTS AND GRADE SPAN

Before the mid 1980s, designing a "middle school" had traditionally involved grouping students by grade level (e.g., 7-8, 6-8, 7-9) and changing the name of the school from *junior high* to *middle school.* Numerous descriptive studies have documented this reorganization movement and have examined changing demographics by grade level configuration, usually noting decreases in the number of 7-9 and K-6 schools coupled with increases in the number of K-5 and 6-8 schools (Alexander & McEwin, 1989; Hough 1991a; 1991b; 1991c; McEwin, Dickinson, & Jenkins, 1996; Valentine, Clark, Nickerson, & Keefe, 1981; Valentine, Clark, Irvin, Keefe, & Melton, 1993). According to the National Center for Education Statistics (1995) and verified by McEwin, Dickinson, & Jenkins (1995), the following data were identified for the most common grade spans housing a seventh-grade in 1993:

NUMBER AND PERCENT OF MIDDLE LEVEL SCHOOLS IN 1993 BY GRADE SPAN

Grade Span	Number of Schools	Percent of Total	Past 20 Years % of Change
5-8	1,223	11%	+53%
6-8	6,115	55%	+293%
7-8	2,412	22%	+ 5%
7-9	1,424	13%	-91%

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If one begins by examining the seventh grade and then expands the examination in a direction either toward higher grade levels included in the school's overall configuration or toward lower grade levels, a clear pattern emerges. As higher grades are included, say the 8th and 9th, programs, policies, and practices tend to be more subject centered. Fewer components are operational and at lower levels. As lower grades are included, say the 6th and 5th, programs, policies, and practices tend to be more student-centered. More components are generally operational and at a higher level in schools with these lower grades including K-8 schools (Hough, 1995a). In short, there is a relationship between components and grade span.

The above is an important finding whenever one considers how most young adolescent students are grouped for instruction. More than 35 different grade span configurations contain a seventh grade. Of these, seven are common enough to warrant attention (PK/K/1 - 8, 4-8, 5-8, 6-8, 7-8, 7-9, 7-12), and four grade spans (5-8, 6-8, 7-8, 7-9) house almost 90% of all seventh-grade students (Hough, 1995b).

Most recently, attention has focused on programmatic and policy changes that seek to effect changes in practice. As a result, young adolescent teaching-learning dimensions have been determined to be more closely aligned to elementary schooling than to secondary schooling (Epstein, 1990; Hough 1995a; Mac Iver, 1990; Melton, 1984; Scales & McEwin, 1994). Many states have changed their teaching certification requirements to reflect this shift. Instead of being an "add-on" to the secondary certificate, middle level teaching certification is becoming more closely aligned to the elementary program, or it is a stand-alone program (McEwin, Dickinson, Erb, & Scales, 1995; Swaim & Stefanich, 1996). These developments have led to closer scrutiny of appropriate grade level configurations, especially placement of fifth, sixth, and ninth grade students.

Regardless of their grade span placement, young adolescents should not be thrust into an inappropriate learning environment. The most prudent approach is to develop appropriate programs, policies, and practices for young adolescents first, then place students into the resulting organizational structure.

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