



9-1-1979

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Recommended Citation

Buttery, Thomas J. (1979) "Curriculum for the middle school," *Educational Considerations*: Vol. 7: No. 1. <https://doi.org/10.4148/0146-9282.1934>

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Review

Curriculum for the middle school

Lounsbury, John H., and Vars, Gordon E., *A Curriculum for the Middle School Years*. Harper and Row, New York, 1978, 138 pages.

The middle school is an organizational unit designated to serve children as they grow into adolescents. Individuals undergoing this change are called transescents. This period of time in the human growth cycle abounds with growth and change. This text offers a viable curriculum paradigm to meet the needs of transescents while they complete the metamorphosis from elementary pupils to senior high students.

The authors initially develop the stage for their proposal by citing the teachers role in middle schools. Emphasis is given to the changing nature of teaching, the special importance of middle school teaching, and tools teachers can use for self improvement. The schools for the transitional years are then examined. A comparison is drawn from the junior high movement to the middle school phenomenon. The final preparatory dimension examined is curriculum foundations. An overview of the learner, his learning processes, social and cultural environments and organized knowledge are given.

The recommended curriculum organization for middle schools consists of three components: core, continuous progress, and variable exploration. The plan attempts to coordinate an assortment of factors such as time, personnel, materials, and content in order to achieve the objectives of education for a particular school.

The core component suggests that much, however not all, of the content and skills traditionally taught in the academic areas of English, social studies and science classes may be included in core. Additionally subjects such as art and music which have unfortunately in the past been so frequently relegated to auxiliary roles are included. The academic and fine arts skills and content become tools to be utilized in the process of inquiry.

A core curriculum may be structured or unstructured. The particular classification depends upon the degree of planning set in advance by the faculty. In a structured core program, the faculty determines in advance which problem areas or centers of experience the transescents will explore. The text suggests a variety of problem areas for exploration. The unstructured core model permits the teachers and transescents to choose and examine any problem they consider worthwhile. Theoretically trivial topics are minimized when transescents perceive teachers as sincere and realize they will have to make a serious study of their chosen topics.

The question of whether core classes are optimally taught by one teacher or by a team is given careful review. Emphasis is given to the goal of ensuring that all transescents have access to an adult who knows and cares for them personally, and who is responsible for facilitating them to deal with the problems of growing up. No unique instructional techniques are offered as part of the core component. Core teachers do however, tend to make greater use of teacher-student planning, small group work, value clarification, and other methods that tend to stress personal interaction. Finally, the authors recom-

mend frequent use of interaction analysis processes as feedback tools to strengthen teacher-student interaction.

The continuous progress component of the curriculum offers a nongraded organization for learning experiences which consist of skills and concepts that have a genuine sequential order. It is believed that the continuous progress element attends to the individual differences and variable rates of growth in transescents while still being responsive to the demands for specialization of knowledge. Science, reading, mathematics and foreign language are classified as suggested subjects for the continuous progress nongraded design.

Instruction in any subject area would not be an exclusively continuous progress. Skills for such subjects as reading and math would be taught primarily in the nongraded programs, yet applied and practiced throughout the school curriculum.

The actual structure of the continuous progress component is broken down into three approaches. The first is the single sequence, variable-rate approach. In this method all students progress through the same prescribed sequence of learning experiences, but some take more time than others. The second approach is a multiple-sequence, variable rate method. The branching form of programmed instruction serves as an example of this style. The variable-sequence, variable-rate approach is offered as a third method. Neither the sequence nor the rate is fixed in advance by the teacher. Independent study is an example of this method.

The third major component is variable exploration. This area includes worthwhile learnings that are neither primarily problem focused nor highly sequentially ordered. These topics such as health, physical education, homemaking, industrial arts, and social-recreational skills embrace learning experiences that vary widely in structure, student grouping, and time allotment. This component places primary emphasis on exploration and the discovery of the transescents interests and capabilities. A variety of methods and techniques are used in this component such as electives, minicourses, clubs, activities, and independent study opportunities.

The authors include vital support information for their curriculum proposal. An overview of evaluating and reporting student progress is given. They recommend diversity in student evaluation and the reporting procedures used.

Implementing the proposed middle school curriculum is given consideration. Curriculum leadership is reviewed. The theory that teachers inherently desire to improve their effectiveness is extended and thus change efforts should become largely efforts to assist, support, and encourage teachers in their own professional growth and development. Administrators are viewed as establishing the climate needed for curriculum developed, while students input should be secured.

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