

Perspectives on Middle Level Education Past and Present

“. . . the junior high school is not at present a definite institution, but rather a state of mind, or a striving to achieve a vision, either limited or extensive.”

Thomas H. Briggs

Striving to achieve a vision of what education for young adolescents should be has been the goal of administrators, teachers, scholars and researchers for almost 100 years. This century-long struggle for identity and purpose is significant to current middle level administrators and teachers who, drawing on the experience and wisdom of past leaders, can create new visions for the future. While much has changed in middle level education over the past 100 years, one is impressed by the number of forces, functions, and purposes that remain similar.

Understanding the complexities of middle level education as it exists in the late twentieth century is based upon four important factors:

1. The definition of a middle level school
2. Knowledge of the forces that led to the establishment and rapid growth of the junior high school
3. Knowledge of how middle level schools have evolved during the past three decades
4. Knowledge of current middle level school organization and practice

WHAT IS A MIDDLE LEVEL SCHOOL?

Defining middle level schools and middle level education is a complex process that requires the consideration of several perspectives. These perspectives include **purposes**, **separation**, **organization**, **curriculum**, and **program** (Figure 1-1).

Figure 1-1
Middle Level Schools - Some Perspectives

<i>Purpose</i>
To be developmentally responsive to the special needs of young adolescents
<i>Uniqueness</i>
A unique, autonomous unit, separate from the elementary school that precedes it and the high school that follows it
<i>Organization</i>
The inclusion of the grade levels with the largest number of students who are beginning the process of becoming adolescents (any combination of grades 5-9)
<i>Curriculum and Instruction</i>
Content that connects with the everyday lives of students and instruction that actively involves them in the learning process
<i>Program</i>
Programs that are developmentally appropriate and include but are not limited to interdisciplinary teaming, teacher advisories, cocurricular activities and youth service

Most scholars and practitioners agree that middle level schools should exist for one **purpose**, and one purpose only, to be developmentally responsive to the special needs of the early adolescent learner. This purpose has an historic precedent that began in the early twentieth century (Briggs, 1920; Koos, 1927; Pringle, 1937) and continues to the present time (Clark and Clark, 1987; Lounsbury, 1991; Lounsbury and Clark, 1990; NASSP, 1985).

Most middle level educators suggest also that middle level schools must be a **separate** school—a unique, autonomous unit—separate from the elementary school that precedes it and the high school that follows it. Separation in this context not only means a separate school facility where special accommodation can be made for early adolescent needs and characteris-

tics, it also means a separate and unique program and curriculum.

The **organization** of middle level schools is based upon the inclusion of the grade levels that have the largest number of students who are beginning the process of becoming adolescents. Over the past seventy years the grade levels included in middle level schools have varied from the 7 through 9 configuration of the original junior high schools, to 5 through 8 or 6 through 8 of today's middle schools. Currently among the more than 12,000 middle level schools in the United States, the 6 through 8 grade level configuration is the most frequently found organization (Alexander and McEwin, 1989; Cawelti, 1988). This shift to include the lower grade is largely attributable to the early onset of puberty which begins 18 to 24 months earlier than it did at the turn of the century (Thornburg, 1981). Other factors such as enrollment and desegregation have also contributed to the differing grade level structures in middle level schools (Alexander, 1968; Valentine, Clark, Nickerson, and Keefe, 1981).

Meeting the needs of young adolescents requires a special **curriculum**, a curriculum that features content that connects with the everyday lives of students as well as instruction that actively involves them in the learning process. Opportunities for young adolescents to explore interests has been a unique part of middle level education since its inception. The concept of exploratory experiences, long a cornerstone of middle level education, was originally intended to include every program and activity in the school curriculum. More recently, the concept of "exploratory" curriculum has been considerably narrowed, and currently it is defined primarily as courses and activities not normally included in the core subjects. In the last decade of the twentieth century, many middle level educators are calling for the return to the original concept of exploration as a major component of every content area and activity in the school (Lounsbury, 1991).

Program is also an important part of the definition of "a middle level school." Through the development of a variety of different programs and organizational patterns such as interdisciplinary teaming, teacher advisories, alternative instructional strategies, grouping, student activities, career education, and youth service, middle level educators have attempted to make their schools developmentally responsive. During the decades of the sixties, seventies, and eighties, some middle level educators

tried to use program to define the differences between junior high schools and middle schools (e.g., middle schools had team teaching and teacher advisories; junior highs had traditional single subject schedules and counselors, etc.). Classifying developmental responsiveness by program was erroneous for two reasons: (1) middle level schools are too complex to be defined by only one element, and (2) research on middle level schools found that developmentally responsive programs were found in schools regardless of their grade level configurations or their name (Alexander and McEwin, 1989; Cawelti, 1988; Lounsbury and Clark, 1990; Mac Iver, 1990; Valentine, Clark, Nickerson, and Keefe, 1981).

Defining junior high schools and middle schools would not be complete without addressing the terms "middle level schools" and "middle level education." Seeking to find a term which would describe schools that served young adolescents was an issue of concern and debate among middle level educators during the late 1970s. The terms "middle level schools" and "middle level education" were first used extensively by the Research Team of the Dodge Foundation/National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP) National Study of Schools in the Middle in their two Volumes—*The Middle Level Principalship—Volume I: A Survey of Middle Level Principals and Programs* (Valentine, Clark, Nickerson, and Keefe, 1981) and *The Middle Level Principalship—Volume II: The Effective Middle Level Principal* (Keefe, Clark, Nickerson, and Valentine, 1983). These terms, however, gained general acceptance among junior high and middle school educators largely through the energetic efforts of George Melton, Deputy Executive Director of NASSP, who popularized the terms through his work with schools throughout the nation and his numerous presentations at state, regional, and national conferences and conventions. By the end of the 1980s the terms "middle level school" and "middle level education" had gained wide acceptance and were the terms used by middle level educators to describe their schools in the educational hierarchy (Lounsbury, 1991).

What is a middle level school? Considering the elements previously described, a middle level school can be defined as:

A separate school designed to meet the special needs of young adolescents in an organizational structure that encompasses any combination of grades five through nine, wherein developmentally appropriate curricula and programs are used to create learning experiences that are both relevant and interactive.

FORCES THAT LED TO THE ESTABLISHMENT AND RAPID GROWTH OF THE JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL

Most middle level scholars generally agree that the first junior high schools were opened during the 1909-10 school year when Columbus, Ohio and Berkeley, California established junior high schools. The origins of the concept, however, are found in the late 19th century and early 20th century and involve some of the leading scholars and educators of the time.

The idea of a separate school for young adolescents evolved slowly, based primarily on concerns about the perceived failure of the 8-4 organization of schools. As one examines the historical development of middle level education, it becomes increasingly apparent that the initial impetus was to solve major problems that existed in the current school structure rather than to create a new organization. Hansen and Hern suggest that:

The history of the first middle school, the junior high school, indicates that it was conceived not as a movement to introduce something new into American education but as an expedient endeavor to ease several supposed deficiencies (1971; 4).

Thomas H. Briggs (1920), a professor at Columbia University and a leading scholar in junior high school education, identified several critical conditions in elementary and secondary schools in the late 19th century that influenced major criticisms of the 8-4 school organizational system. The conditions described by Briggs (1920) included the tremendous increase in the number of high schools, changes in social and industrial life, an "unparalleled" increase in the number of children continuing beyond elementary school, the necessity of a more highly differentiated curriculum, demands for increased budget to support programs, and the indefiniteness of function and of purpose of schools.

During the same period of time Briggs was describing conditions in American schools that influenced educational change, Leonard Koos (1927), another leading early junior high school educator, was examining what he called the forces responsible for the establishment of junior high schools. "Many forces . . .," he stated, "are responsible for the movement for educational reorganization finding expression in the present widespread establishment of 'junior high schools' or 'intermediate schools'" (1927; 1). These forces identified by Koos (1927) included:

(1) economy of time, (2) concern for high student mortality—drop-out rates, (3) wide variations in learners, and (4) needs of young adolescents.

Economy of Time

The issue of economy of time was the factor that received the most attention in early attempts to reorganize America's educational system. For forty years (1873-1913), educators, primarily college presidents such as Charles Eliot of Harvard, were concerned because students spent too much time in elementary school leaving little time for them to be exposed to the more difficult subjects important for success in college. Eliot became the leading spokesperson for college presidents throughout the United States in advocating for compression of elementary and secondary education, thus allowing students to enter college at an earlier age. As chair of the Committee of Ten on Secondary Studies, appointed in 1892, Eliot recommended that several subjects reserved for high school (algebra, geometry, natural science, and foreign languages) be taught earlier. The committee also recommended that secondary school education should begin at the seventh grade (two years earlier than the present), thus leaving six years instead of eight of elementary education (NEA, 1894).

The Committee on College Entrance Requirements (1895-1899) supported the concept of the six-year secondary school and recommended it in their report (NEA, 1899). This committee, which was composed of an equal number of public secondary school educators and college/university presidents, recommended the six-year secondary school for a somewhat different reason than did Eliot's Committee of Ten. Van Til, Vars, and Lounsbury (1961) report:

The Committee on College Entrance Requirements pointed out that "the seventh grade, rather than the ninth, is the natural turning-point in the pupil's life, as the age of adolescence demands new methods and wiser direction." The members believed that the 6-6 division would make transition to adolescence easier, and would tend to close the gap between the elementary and high school, and would retain more students in school. In other words, the Committee argued that the proposed change would be good for the young people of the stage involved, early adolescence. (p. 9).

In drawing conclusions about the importance of the Committee on College Entrance Requirements Van Til, Vars, and Lounsbury state:

The Committee was more concerned for the best program here and now for children entering early adolescence and less concerned for President Eliot's major interest in sending students to college earlier. But the college presidents still stressed economy of time and earlier study of college subjects (p. 9).

Eight years later another committee was appointed to again specifically address *economy of time issues*. Appropriately named the Committee on Economy of Time in Education, it began its work in 1907 and issued preliminary reports during the period of 1908-1911. For middle level educators the most significant part of the Report of the Committee on the Economy of Time in Education was an individual member's report which suggested that the secondary school be reorganized into junior high and high school divisions—a reorganization which at the time of the report was already being implemented in a number of school systems.

For the first time a major report had given attention to the importance of dividing the six year high school into junior and senior high schools (Van Til, Vars, and Lounsbury, 1961). The innovative nature of the Committee on Economy of Time's recommendations was further demonstrated by the committee's conception of reorganization to include provision for accommodating vocational needs and interests of adolescents. The call for economy of time continued to be an issue in the reorganization of schools, but it received less attention as the junior high movement matured. During the years of careful study, the focus of economy of time went from one of emphasis on preparing those who wished to go on to college to an emphasis on the preparation of all of America's youth.

Pupil Mortality—Retentions and Dropouts

The second force that influenced the establishment of the junior high school was the concern for the high number of students who at early ages were dropping out of school. The "fulfillment" of the dream of equality of educational opportunity for all of America's youth was being seriously questioned as the nation moved into the twentieth century. New studies directed by Thorndike (1907), Ayers (1909), and Strayer (1911) showed that an alarming number of students were leaving school prior to the start of ninth grade. Their studies, which were based on data collected from schools in cities across the United States, indicated that a high percentage of pupils dropped out after fifth

grade, only one-third of the students reached ninth grade, and only slightly more than one in ten students completed high school.

Briggs (1920) in discussing findings reported, "The amount of elimination from all our schools between the sixth and the beginning of the tenth is roughly speaking, about seventy pupils out of every hundred" (p. 18). He attributed this high student mortality rate partly to the lack of compulsory attendance laws and partly to the lack of articulation between elementary and secondary schools. He also believed that the dramatic break between elementary and high school created marked differences in program and teaching, differences that were so difficult for many students that they chose to drop out. These differences as identified by both Briggs (1920) and Koos (1927) included (1) a major change in subjects studied, (2) differences in school organization, (3) differences in behavioral expectations (discipline), and (4) differences in school atmosphere and environment.

Creating an additional barrier was the fact that there was a sharp break between elementary and high school, often giving a sense of completion. This break in the continuity of educational experience and the lack of articulation between elementary and secondary school when combined with the "release" from compulsory attendance laws often led to the decision of many pupils to drop out of school. Briggs contended that, "There is considerable evidence showing that if a pupil before being released by the law has entered upon secondary-school work, he tends to persist somewhat longer than if still in elementary school" (1920; 19).

Pupil mortality was also influenced by the high rate of student failure and the number of "left-backs" or students repeating a grade level.

About one third of the school children in the early twentieth century were left back some time during the few years they spent in school. About one out of every six children in any grade was a repeater in that grade (Van Til, Vars, and Lounsbury, 1961; 15).

"No one enjoys failure," stated Van Til, Vars, and Lounsbury (1961). "Left-backs very often become drop-outs. American educators became increasingly critical of conditions which led to so many left-backs and drop-outs. They argued that we could do better in democratic America. Consequently, when the new proposal for a junior high school was advanced, many educators

were ready to approve. They hoped that the new seventh-through ninth-grade organization with improved methods and content more related to the learner's life might better serve education by reducing drop-outs" (Van Til, Vars, and Lounsbury, 1961; 15).

Student Learning Differences

Another contributing factor to the high rate of drop-outs and left-backs was the failure of schools to recognize and provide for individual differences. Traditional notions about the homogeneity of pupils were being challenged during the first decade of the twentieth century. Thorndike, Cattell, and other leading psychologists of the day were calling attention to the importance of individual differences. For the most part schools in the early twentieth century appeared to be based on the assumption that all pupils were very much alike. And perhaps they were. Van Til, Vars, and Lounsbury (1961) suggest that the schools' clientele were drawn from only the able students and the others, unsuccessful pupils, dropped out. As a result, the remaining students, in fact, were very much alike. Failure to recognize individual differences in schools led to erroneous beliefs about student learning. It was a common belief that if a pupil did not learn it was the pupil's fault. All one had to do to be successful was to practice good study habits and to work hard. Students who failed lacked commitment, did not apply themselves, or were considered to be lazy.

Psychologists at the turn of the century were reporting data that refuted the validity of these assumptions. Briggs referred his readers to Thorndike's book entitled *Individuality*, which he characterized as a "succinct and sound summary of some facts about individual differences" (1920; 17).

Koos (1927) believed that there was abundant evidence of the fact of learning variation in the school and of the need to recognize it in the instruction and administration of the nation's schools. He cited research that supported differences among seventh, eighth, and ninth grade students in the following categories (Koos, 1927; 36-50):

1. Variation in Age of Students
2. Differences in Physique
3. Differences in Sexual Maturation
4. Differences in Mental/Intellectual Capacity

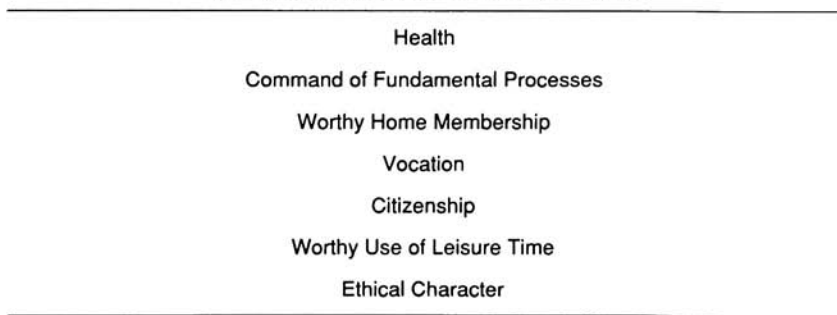
5. Differences in Academic Work
6. Expanding Range of Differences
7. Differences in Interest

With the increasing awareness of the number of differences among school children, educators and psychologists began to explore the factors that led to these variations.

This recognition of the wide variations among adolescent learners in grades seven, eight, and nine, and the factors that contributed to them, supported the efforts for school reorganization. It was imperative that educators consider seriously strategies with which to deal effectively with these differences, and many believed that the junior high school was the most suitable place for this to happen. Koos suggested that the junior high school was especially well suited to recognize individual differences by providing for "differentiation of work through partially variable curricula, groups moving at differing rates, promotion by subject, permitting brighter pupils to carry more courses, and supervised study" (1927; 50).

The new emphasis on individual differences was enhanced by the report of the Commission on the Reorganization of Secondary Education of the National Education Association (1918) (Figure 1-2). The most famous of all the reports during the early years of the twentieth century, this report published in 1918 became known as the "Cardinal Principles of Secondary Education." Although the Commission recommended and endorsed the junior

Figure 1-2
The Cardinal Principles of Secondary Education



Commission on the Reorganization of Secondary Education. (1918). *Cardinal principles of secondary education* [Bulletin 1918, No. 35]. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Interior, Bureau of Education.

high school and suggested organizational and programmatic components, the significance of the report lies in its emphases on the larger purposes of American secondary education, purposes that recognized the importance of creating educational experiences relevant to all of America's youth. The "Seven Cardinal Principles" broadened the scope of educational aims beyond subject mastery and expanded them to include citizenship, vocation, family membership, and leisure activities. These new principles were very much in tune with the purposes of the new school for young adolescents, the junior high school. Without doubt, the "Seven Cardinal Principles" fueled the momentum to establish junior high schools, a movement that was by 1918 sweeping the country.

The Unique Needs of Young Adolescents

The last major force identified by Koos (1927) was the recognition that early adolescence was a unique time in the life span. It was the work of G. Stanley Hall that brought attention to the special needs of adolescents. His "recapitulation" or "cultural epoch theory," whether valid or not, provided the impetus needed for educators to begin to address the special needs of adolescent youth. Hall believed that adolescence was a time of abrupt and radical changes and that these changes took place in all phases of a child's life, emotional, physical, mental, and social. He suggested that the responsibility for these changes were the physiological phases of puberty.

His writings, which gave new importance to adolescence as a distinct and unique period in life, encouraged educators to examine current educational practice, practice that was giving no special consideration for this unique age group. His followers sought to establish new schools that were separate from both elementary and high schools. They believed that these schools should be organized differently, use different instructional methods, and make provisions for the special needs of their young adolescents.

Many adolescent psychologists have since disagreed with Hall's theories, but to his credit it must be said that he heavily influenced educational programs for adolescents. Because of him and his work, junior high and middle school educators have developed a tradition and a commitment to assist children and youth to successfully make the difficult transition through the early adolescent years.

These four forces described by Koos and reinforced by other early scholars and educators provide a framework for examining

the changes that took place in American education, changes that eventually led to the establishment of the junior high school and its rapid growth during the first half of the twentieth century. These forces, along with other elements, continue to be influential in current efforts to reform American education, particularly the middle level school.

THE EVOLUTION OF MIDDLE LEVEL SCHOOLS

The evolution of middle level education is a complex and ongoing process, a process that continues to be influenced by those forces identified by the early writers in junior high education (Briggs, 1920; Cox, 1929; Davis, 1924; Koos, 1927; and Smith, 1927). Using the four categories of forces as identified by Koos (1927), the evolution of middle level education will be described.

Economy of Time

The economy of time issue, originally conceived by Eliot and others as a way to allow students to enter college at a younger age, soon took on a much broader focus. That focus was school reorganization. School reorganization issues in the early 1900s were centered, much as they are now, around grade level organization, compression of time spent in school, pressures to push "high school" coursework to lower grades, and departmentalization and specialization.

Grade Level Organization. The junior high school, with its grade level configuration of grades 7-9, was created to replace the 8-4 system of schooling in existence at the beginning of the twentieth century. Reformers justified the change by claiming that such a reorganization would provide better educational opportunities for students and a better transition between elementary and high school. For almost fifty years education for young adolescents was defined by the term "junior high school" with grade level organizations of 7-8 or 7-9.

In the early 1960s some educators began to challenge the effectiveness of the junior high school in meeting the special needs of their students. Many of these educators, who claimed that the junior high school had become nothing more than a "junior edition" of high school, called for the development of a new school. Believing that the junior high school had failed, they advocated the organization of middle schools. These schools,

which would reflect the earlier onset of puberty, would push the grade levels further into the elementary school grades to include grade six and in some cases, grade five. Just as reformers had done more than fifty years earlier, middle level educators of the 1960s had taken the initial steps to reorganize the grade levels of schooling for young adolescents.

The advocates of the new middle school, particularly William Alexander and Donald Eichhorn, sought to define this new school in terms of developmental appropriateness and responsiveness rather than by grade level. Alexander (1968), then active in the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, was an early promoter of the "middle level concept." It was, however, Donald Eichhorn who, through his publication *The Middle School* (1966), established the legitimacy of the new middle school. His descriptions of the philosophy, purposes, and programs of middle level schools made his book the "cornerstone" on which middle level schools have been built.

Paralleling the earlier junior high movement, the grades of a school defined what it was. Some educators began to draw distinctions between grade level organizations, characterizing schools with grades 6-8 as responsive student-centered middle schools and schools with grades 7-9 as unresponsive subject-centered junior high schools. Despite these distinctions, the "first comparative studies and surveys revealed that the new middle schools and the old junior high schools were surprisingly alike in actual practice" (Lounsbury, 1991; 68).

As middle level educators became more knowledgeable about young adolescents, their efforts focused more on the development of programs to meet the specific needs of their students regardless of the grade level organization of their schools. In spite of this renewed effort for being more developmentally responsive, the issue of grade level organization still remains an important force in American middle level schools.

Compression of Time in School. While the Committee on Economy of Time's (Baker, 1913) recommendation for reducing schooling by two years was never implemented, finding ways to effect economy of time continues to be a major force in American education. In 1984, John Goodlad, in his book *A Place Called School*, advocated better use of instructional time. He also suggested that American schooling be reorganized into a 4-4-4 grade level pattern and that pupils complete their public schooling by

age sixteen. Unlike Eliot and Conant (1960), who were seeking economy of time for the benefit of college students, Goodlad was seeking more effective, efficient educational systems for all of America's youth.

Pressure to Push "High School" Coursework into Lower Grades. From the early days of the junior high school movement through its evolution to the middle level school of today, the issue of "high school type" courses at the middle level has reemerged periodically. In the late 1950s former Harvard president James B. Conant made a major impact on American secondary education. Following his comprehensive study of American high schools, *The American High School Today* (1959), Conant turned his attention to the study of junior high schools. In a *Memorandum to School Boards: Recommendations for Education in the Junior High School Years* (1960), Conant, among other recommendations, supported effecting economy of time through earlier college preparation. With this recommendation and other specific recommendations for courses that should be included in the junior high curriculum, Conant was reflecting the views of an earlier Harvard president, Charles Eliot, who was also concerned primarily with economy of time and earlier college preparation.

A Nation at Risk (1983), while not mentioning middle level schools specifically, in advocating more rigorous coursework at the high school level implied that the same rigorous type of coursework should be pushed into middle level schools. This was particularly true of foreign language, the sciences, and mathematics. The writers of *A Nation At Risk*, as were the reformers in the early twentieth century, were greatly concerned about unfavorable comparisons of American schools to schools in other countries.

While the "pushing down of content" to lower grade levels was a significant force in the development of the junior high, the influence it exerts on middle level schools today has been, for the most part, detrimental to the continuing efforts to make middle level schools more developmentally responsive (Clark and Clark, 1986).

Departmentalization/Specialization. The early reformers believed that with secondary education beginning at the seventh grade young adolescents would have the advantage of receiving their instruction from teachers specially prepared to teach a specific content area. This departmental organization, which was

designed to expose young adolescents to experts in the subject matter areas, became and has remained the predominate form of curriculum organization in middle level schools. In spite of attempts over the last two decades to develop interdisciplinary curricula, departmentalization has remained firmly entrenched in middle level schools.

Pupil Mortality—Retentions and Dropouts

The low number of students who completed high school during the early twentieth century was of great concern to educators of that time. They thought that by reorganizing the schools steps could be taken that would increase the number of young people who would stay in school. There is reason to believe that in some instances they were right, for the percentages of students remaining in school districts with junior high schools did appear to be higher than those who maintained the 8-4 pattern of organization (Briggs, 1920). Closely aligned with high drop-out rates was a concern about the high number of students (left-backs) who were "repeating" a grade level for a second or third time. Several important issues evolved from these early concerns over pupil mortality and grade repetition, including provision for educational opportunity for all students, repeating courses—rather than an entire grade, a more relevant curriculum, and better instructional strategies.

Educational Opportunity. Early scholars such as Briggs and Koos saw American schools as being narrowly focused on the preparation of students for college. Because of that focus a high percentage of students dropped out of school. These advocates of the junior high school called for schools that would be more democratic, schools that would give opportunities for learning and success to all students. The junior high school was the way to "democratize" education (Koos, 1927).

Middle level educators of today "dream the same dream." While the drop-out rate is not as high as it was when the first junior high schools were established, dropping out is still a serious problem. Unlike the early 1900s when a school dropout could be absorbed into the work force and become a contributing member of society, a high percentage of today's dropouts face an uncertain future of low paying jobs and unemployment. Offering equal educational opportunity to all students continues to be a major concern of middle level and high school educators.

Repeating Courses rather than Repeating a Grade Level.

Repeating a grade was generally acknowledged as a contributor to pupil mortality. With the introduction of departmentalization to the junior high school, students no longer failed the entire grade, they failed individual courses. The hypothesis, of course, was that failing a course had less of a stigma attached to it and students could make up the work in that course without having to repeat all of the other courses. Success or failure in each course thus became an integral part of the junior high and middle school.

While the number of students in middle level schools who are repeating a grade is much fewer, there are still a significant number of students who are either failing courses or achieving at very low levels. Lack of academic success is recognized by many as a contributing factor in dropping out (Mac Iver, 1990). Middle level educators of today share this concern with educators of the past, and they are continuing to address this issue through curricular relevancy and instructional strategies.

Curriculum Relevancy and Instructional Strategies. Making the curriculum relevant to the needs of young adolescents and using instructional strategies that actively involved learners were also important issues to the developers of the first junior high schools. These issues of curriculum and instruction, which also are important when dealing with individual differences of students and the special needs of young adolescents, continue to be forces in the modern middle level school. Participatory learning and connecting content with students' lives are more important now than at any time in the twentieth century.

Student Learning Differences

The work of Thorndike and other researchers gave solid evidence of the differences among learners in the typical classroom. As educational opportunity has broadened, the range of diversity has expanded. Not only must schools deal with the variations in learning ability and achievement, they must provide for the needs of youth from a variety of socioeconomic levels, family settings, and primary language backgrounds. While Thorndike and others did increase the awareness of educators about individual differences and sparked efforts to provide for these differences in the classroom, the impact of their work was not altogether positive. Two major issues which became popular in the early years of

the twentieth century and which are of great concern to middle level educators of today are the legitimacy and importance of standardized testing and homogeneous grouping (ability grouping, tracking).

Ability and Achievement Testing. Americans believe in tests as valid measures of student achievement. Although ability and intelligence testing do not enjoy the degree of popularity they did two decades ago, achievement testing is considered by many as the only "appropriate" way to measure student learning. Many middle level educators, as well as educators from elementary and high schools, are concerned that so much credibility is given to the results of a multiple choice test when they know that the test measures so few of the goals of the school. Middle level educators are also greatly concerned that the general public is so willing to categorize schools as good schools or poor schools based upon school test scores published in the newspaper.

Current efforts to find alternative ways of assessing student progress, assessments that are more correlated with school, district, state, and national purposes, are being implemented throughout the nation. Middle level schools, with their emphasis on developmental appropriateness, are particularly "in tune" with alternative assessment. Evaluation procedures, such as portfolios, projects, and demonstrations, correlate well with curriculum relevance and student involvement in learning.

Homogeneous Grouping/Ability Grouping/Tracking. It seemed logical to the early reformers that one of the best ways to meet individual differences was to place all children who were alike together in the same classroom or same course. As a result, along with a departmentalized curriculum, most junior and senior high schools began the practice of tracking. This practice grew in popularity and was almost universally supported by educators and the general public. Conant (1960), in his report on junior high schools, strongly endorsed ability grouping and recommended that early differentiation of program begin in the junior high school (e.g., college preparatory, vocational).

About three decades ago, some educators and sociologists began to question the practice of ability grouping; and in recent years, the evidence has mounted as to the deleterious effects of grouping practices among children and youth, particularly among minority and low income youth (Braddock, 1990; Oakes,

1985). Middle level educators have been particularly outspoken about the negative effects of tracking on young adolescents, yet the practice continues in the vast majority of America's middle level schools (Braddock, 1990; George, 1988; Lounsbury and Clark, 1990).

It is ironic that an idea that was originally developed to provide for individual student differences would sixty years later become a practice that has been found by many researchers to be harmful to the achievement and self-concept development of middle level students.

The Unique Needs of Young Adolescents

Ever since G. Stanley Hall first called attention to the unique needs of adolescent youth, the junior high school and the middle school have attempted to serve those special needs. Examination of the development of middle level education demonstrates that while "meeting the needs of young adolescents" has always been a major goal, goal accomplishment leaves much to be desired. Although there were many programs and activities that were adopted in the early junior high schools that focused on the needs of young adolescents, the issues that have remained the most important over the years are content relevancy, student involvement in learning, and guidance. These three important areas are, perhaps, most appropriately considered as functions of "exploration."

Exploratory Experiences. Exploration, identified by the early junior high school leaders (Briggs, 1920; Koos, 1927; Smith, 1927), was a concept that permeated every aspect of the early junior high school. Briggs stressed the importance of exploration by incorporating the concept into almost all of his original five statements of purpose for the junior high school (Lounsbury, 1991). Koos (1927) identified "exploration for guidance" (p. 18), and Smith (1927) listed as two of his purposes of junior high schools the exploration "of interests, abilities, and aptitudes of children. . ." and the exploration of "the major fields of human endeavor" (pp. 196-197).

Although "exploratory" has remained a truly middle level concept, its definition has changed over the years. From being a concept that permeated the entire program, it changed (largely due to downward pressures from the high schools) to become a collection of courses which commonly include art, music, shop, and home economics. As middle level educators begin again to

refocus on the needs of the young adolescents in their schools, the concept of "exploration" is being integrated again into the entire school program. In reflecting this new definition, middle level educators are implementing exploratory experiences that include specialized courses, independent study and projects, and involvement in clubs and activities. The concept of exploratory is also being integrated into the content and instructional strategies in all content areas, and it has become an integral part of advisory programs where teachers encourage pupils to explore feelings, attitudes, and values.

Other Elements Influencing Change

From the earliest days of the junior high school to the current decade three additional elements have influenced the development of middle level schools. Identified by Koos in 1927, these elements of overcrowding, momentum, and "jumping on the bandwagon" have continued to be factors in the growth of middle level education.

Overcrowding. The first element described by Koos deals with creation of middle level schools to solve the problem of "overcrowding" at high schools. "By removing pupils of the ninth grade from the high school building," he states, "and housing them with those in the seventh and eighth grades in some older buildings, the problem is solved" (1927; 3). Koos continues:

This easy emancipation from a housing difficulty has sometimes been the primary cause of a superficial reorganization; it has also sometimes been used to effect genuine reorganization where otherwise there might be too great opposition to a change for which the populace was not yet prepared (1927; 3).

In addition to Koos, the existence of this element in the early junior high movement has been confirmed by many other junior high school historians and scholars. Hansen and Hern (1971) quote from D. W. Lenz:

It is apparent that . . . it [the junior high school] was established not because of any strong and proved educational values, but as an expedient, usually to solve a housing problem; in many cases because it was the thing to do in educational circles . . . (Hansen and Hern, 1971; 6-7).

Throughout the evolution of middle level education school districts have continued to view their middle level schools as the

"wild card" for solving enrollment problems (Alexander, 1967; Valentine, Clark, Nickerson, and Keefe, 1981). In many cases when elementary schools are overcrowded, the sixth grade is moved to the middle level school; when high schools are overcrowded, the ninth grade is moved to the middle level school. Unfortunately, in most instances little or no attempt is made to develop programs that are developmentally appropriate for the students in the newly configured school. As a result, when sixth graders are placed in a 7-8 or 7-9 school, a high school type program is often being pushed down one more grade level.

Momentum. A second element identified by Koos (1927) was "momentum." He believed that to the forces of economy of time, the problem with dropouts, the need to recognize individual differences, and the unique needs of young adolescents should be added the influence of momentum on the change process. He states:

. . . the momentum of the history of the [junior high] movement . . . [is] responsible for the vast array of reorganization with which we are now surrounded (Koos, 1927; 7-8).

The first two decades of the junior high school (1910-1930) were marked by high levels of visibility that included books, articles, reports, and conference presentations. This high visibility, fueled by rhetoric and research, initiated and sustained the momentum that led many educators to consider and establish junior high schools in their districts. This same type of "momentum" has reemerged in American middle level schools during the past two decades. As a result of the leadership of the National Association of Secondary School Principals, the National Middle School Association, and funding from the U. S. Department of Education and private foundations, middle level education has begun to gain recognition as a separate entity in the educational hierarchy. Of particular importance to this recognition is the work of the Carnegie Task Force on Education of Young Adolescents (1989). Their report, *Turning Points: Preparing American Youth for the 21st Century*, has refueled the "momentum" for change in middle level education.

Jumping on the Bandwagon. A third element identified by Koos (1927) as being important to the development of junior high schools was "jumping on the bandwagon." He suggested that in