



# Advocacy for Gifted and Talented in New York

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## **Developing Middle Experts: Can aspects of gifted education be applied to benefit all middle level students?**

By: Jay A. McIntire

From a psychological perspective, the primary goal of early adolescence is identity formation. To develop a sense of identity, young teens define themselves by the groups to which they belong (affiliation) and by the traits and characteristics that set them apart within the group (distinction). Middle level schools without the "we" and "they," the "us" and "them," the "me" and "everybody else," simply wouldn't be middle level schools. The challenge is to put this early teen challenge to use educationally.

Adolescents begin to crystallize their identities during the middle years. Each student enters the middle level with a perception of himself or herself as a learner and a person, but not a solid one. Educators at that level have unique chances to support positive perceptions and to open the minds of students to their own vast capabilities and potential (Buescher, 1987).

### Group Membership

Student groups are based on a wide variety of perceived similarities. Most schools have at least one group of students who are defined by shared interests and/or abilities in sports. In middle level schools that draw from more than one elementary school, groups of students who attended the same elementary school are common.

The students tend to select groups based on interests, abilities, experiences, and achievements. Among high achievers, a group of students often forms based on academic achievement. Unfortunately, not all affiliations are based on socially-appropriate characteristics. Most, if not all, middle level schools have groups of students who define themselves based on tobacco use, sexual experience, or some other attribute or behavior of questionable value.

Within groups, individuals set themselves apart based on the same types of characteristics: interests, abilities, experiences, and achievements. Here, the differences are accentuated. Thus, the academically-oriented group may have members who are known as the flirt, the gang member, the math whiz, and the athlete. Another group in the same school, one whose membership is defined by general school failure, might have its own flirt, gang member, math whiz, and athlete.

In a recent study, a seventh grader reported that one of the best aspects of her participation in a summer program for gifted students was that in that setting she was perceived as a superior athlete instead of being labeled the "brain." In her middle school, she felt confined by one label, "brain." By

spending some of her summer in a group in which her academic excellence was the norm, some of her other traits became noticeable. Affiliation and distinction, though opposites, are both needed to develop a healthy sense of identity.

How do students decide in what group they belong and how they are unique within that group? Family and community experiences and values, which may have cultural or racial/ethnic aspects, are very important to some, but the labels that young people use to describe one another are also very important and often seem self-fulfilling. Of course, not all students are accepted into the group to which they would like to belong. The painful process of finding groups leads to teary eyes in middle level restrooms all over the country.

Do not underestimate the role and importance of school-based relationships. Educators can make or break a healthy identity. A young man who was home-schooled through eighth grade had a great deal of difficulty adjusting to a typical high school. Although he excelled academically, he became at risk for suicide. Positive relationships with one or two teachers and with people outside the school were sufficient to sustain this young man through his first year. It was not until well into his second year of high school that he found a peer group based on shared interests in outdoor activities. Ricky completed high school in three years and is now a successful and self-assured college student.

Early adolescents develop identity by internalizing some of the many traits, states, and labels they attach to themselves as well as the labels they pick up from others. Some of these internalized "identity messages" are based on positive traits, while others are based on traits that are less likely to prove beneficial. Schools play an important role in providing experiences with success for students and in helping them internalize positive school experiences so the emerging identity will include a sense that the student is capable of doing well in school.

Often the same student trait can be labeled either positively or negatively depending on perspective. It must be the goal of middle level educators to stress the positive potential of any given trait. Students who may be seen as "stubborn" might benefit more from hearing themselves described as "persistent." A student is more likely to make positive use of an internalized perception of persistence than stubbornness, especially if they are exposed to examples of real people who have used this trait positively and some who have applied it in negative ways.

### Forming Identity in the Middle School

When early adolescents have honest, positive school experiences, they develop identities that will carry them into high school feeling they can distinguish themselves positively at school and that schools have something to offer them. Unfortunately, positive identity messages, no matter how heartfelt, may or may not be received or internalized, especially in students who have a negative sense of self. Sometimes students need many positive identity messages, both in and out of school, to overcome negative identity messages.

As much as we would like students not to compare themselves based on school success, grades, or other measures of achievement, they must do so to fulfill their identity formation task. They will compare themselves on any criterion that occurs to them. Instead of fighting this comparison, we should take advantage of it. Middle level schools, by expanding the use of certain positive aspects frequently associated with gifted education programs, can greatly increase the positive identity messages students receive. This increases the chances for students to develop identities with positive feelings and self-perceptions with respect to school and their ability to succeed in school.

### The Current Role of Gifted Education

Students who participate in gifted education programs receive several messages that allow them to affiliate and discriminate themselves in ways that lead to an identity based on positive traits. Perhaps the most powerful message is that the student can achieve success in school and through school. Anything educators do to provide such messages to the maximum number of students should be encouraged.

Unfortunately, participation in gifted education can also result in identity messages that are confusing or might even undermine healthy identity formation. The same distinction from peers that may be positive for some can be negative for others. If the distinction is not only from most peers, but from all one's friends from various group affiliations, identification of a gift or talent can lead to identity confusion or underachievement (Gross, 1989). Some students, parents, and teachers also confuse identified high potential with increased value or even outright superiority. This is less often a problem among students than among the adults involved.

For many reasons, all of which must be overcome, almost all systems for identifying outstanding potential have been relatively unsuccessful in recognizing ability among members of certain minorities, individuals from economically stressed homes and communities, and students with disabilities. Thus, any positive messages (not to mention educational opportunities) are not evenly distributed.

Another equity problem is seen in some poorly designed gifted programs that treat all students the same, rather than matching differentiated learning experiences to areas of demonstrated need. Such programs not only undermine the development of talent, but deny students the opportunity to benefit from distinctions between themselves and their gifted peers based on areas of strength, interest, or other factors.

Gifted education programs also can give unintended negative identity messages to students who do not participate in them. This is especially common in schools whose gifted education programs are not sufficiently rigorous. In these cases, many students rightly say, "I could do that."

### Taking the Good and Leaving the Bad

If every child was gifted at something, which obviously is not the case, what identity messages would be provided by gifted education? It would be impossible for gifted programs to be one-size-fits-all, so a wide variety of individually-matched programs would be provided for developing a vast range of gifts and talents. This would provide each student with a strength-based identity message while giving them group affiliation with others whose recognized potential was in a related or similar area.

Few gifted children have outstanding potential in the limited subjects covered by traditional curricula. If schools devoted time to providing in-depth learning opportunities in many more areas, we could identify and provide programs and positive identity messages for far more students with outstanding potential.

### A small town once had a dance studio

Although a large number of students received positive identity messages from their experiences at this studio after school and on weekends, these achievements were rarely recognized or taken advantage of in school. Some of the students thought of themselves as failures in school, but successes in dance. If the school had provided resources relating to dance, some of these early adolescents would have received the message that excellence in dance was appreciated by the school and that school could contribute to dance excellence.

Middle level schools can increase the number of students for whom school seems relevant by recognizing excellence being developed outside school and fostering these developments through school. When a student is gifted and talented at home but learning disabled or failing at school, the discrepancy may be due to a disconnect between the limited curricular options in school and the unlimited options offered by life.

### Middle Level Schools for Developing Expertise

Although administrators and team members already have scheduling nightmares, making space in the schedule for the long-term development of individual student expertise would allow all students to receive the positive identity messages associated with students in gifted education. Such strength-based school models are becoming more common in recent school reforms (Hopfenberg and Levin, 1993; Armstrong, 1994). By making the development of expertise an expectation for each student, both positive group affiliation and individual distinction become possible.

It is hard to imagine an early adolescent who is recognized as the school's expert on a subject feeling incapable of learning or succeeding in high school and beyond. A feeling of expertise, when applied to any endeavor, is bound to contribute to identity development. Is expertise possible for every student (or even most)? Yes, if expertise is defined broadly.

The goal of a middle level school should not be to develop expertise on an adult scale, but to assist each student in learning something that is unique among their school peers. By using the school's resources and expertise and the natural curiosity and interest of each student, and by providing time and support for hard work over an extended period schools could make the production of in-house experts a central part of their missions. Essential middle level features such as teaming, advisory, flexible block scheduling, and curricular choices (George, 1995) are well-suited to the development of individual expertise. Service learning (Hope, 1997) and problem-based learning determined by student choice (Vars, 1997) are also well-suited to such an educational focus.

A middle school devoted to maximizing positive identity formation would be an "expert factory." With a quality staff and three years of a couple hours a week devoted to the understanding of expertise and the development of experts, there would be few students leaving for high school who did not believe they could learn and succeed.

The resulting experts from different expert factories probably would have different characteristics. Developing a definition of expertise and a set of criteria for demonstrating expertise would involve the staff, parents, and students. To demonstrate expertise before graduation, a student might need to document, via portfolio, numerous learning skills applied to their chosen area. Most portfolio standards for middle level expertise probably would require the gathering of information using multiple sources, including demonstration of the use of reading and computer technology. Most would require communicating one's expertise through at least two modes. The possibilities are almost endless.

Would all experts have skills that seem alike in the end? Absolutely not. One student might develop expertise as a flutist. Reading, listening, performing, learning the basics of how waves in air result in sound, and assisting with flute lessons for beginners, might all be part of a portfolio.

A second student, experiencing developmental delays, but with a favorite dog, might choose to become the school's expert on beagles.

A third student might choose to explore certain areas of mathematics, including calculus. While such study might be beyond the interest and capability of most middle level students, it is unlikely that the

student developing calculus expertise would know as much about the flute or about beagles as the students who focused on those areas.

By making the development of unique expertise a goal and an expectation for each student in the school, each one could gain positive identity messages and learning opportunities currently provided only to students in quality gifted education programs. Using such a focus, a middle level school could increase the number of students receiving positive identity messages relating to school; increase the responsibility of each student for their education; increase the recognition of individual, family, and cultural values and interests; increase the level of challenge for each student; and increase learning for each student.

Gifted students would also benefit from such a system. Any differentiation of their curriculum, even outside the hours set aside for developing expertise, would be consistent with the school's overall mission. These students would continue to feel distinct based on the expertise they would be developing, but this challenging and identity-affirming experience would be shared by every student, providing for affiliation needs. The positive identity formation aspects of gifted education would be maintained without the negatives.

Implementing an expert development program would not supplant any aspect of curriculum currently provided. Such a program would not obviate the need for differentiating some curriculum for many gifted students, although it probably would for some.

## Summary

Middle level schools are uniquely able to help early adolescents develop healthy, positive identities that include an understanding that they can achieve success in at least some aspect of school and that school has something to contribute to their developing areas of personal interest. One way schools might approach this goal would be to promote the development of individual expertise.

To develop and recognize individual expertise, schools would need to vastly increase breadth of areas in which excellence is recognized, valued, and developed; become more aware of individual students' interests and goals; create a school climate in which expertise is accepted and expected; provide time and resources to the development of expertise; develop criteria students would need to document their expertise; and make developing expertise the mission, motto, and culture of the school.

Schools that develop experts would also see such positive outcomes as:

Increased teacher appreciation and understanding of individual student strengths

An achievement orientation in each student

Diminished confusion between excellence and personal value

Awareness in each student that he or she can excel at something, given careful selection, quality education, and hard work over time

Higher personal expectations and aspirations

Increased school understanding of personal, familial, and cultural values and interests

Increased student input and responsibility.

Best of luck in developing the identities of your incoming middle level students. You can do it. After all, you are the expert! -B

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