Young Adolescents: Different Learners, Different Strategies

Research on young adolescents’ physical, social, and cognitive growth processes, as well as their identity development, provides a clear picture of someone who is no longer a child, yet clearly not a full-grown adolescent. While educators of young adolescents are well aware of the visible traits that affect their daily behaviors, it’s their hidden growth processes as they progress through the ages from 10 to 14 that provide a more definitive picture of their learning needs.

Why Are They Always Eating?
Although changes in middle school students’ physical appearance are obvious, their immense growth processes often explain their unique behaviors. For instance, teachers often see young adolescents eating every chance they get. What teachers may not know is that many of them need as many as 3,000 to 4,000 calories of food to satisfy their rapid physical development. Typical middle schools have lunch periods that begin at 10:35 a.m. for some students and 12:30 p.m. for others. If students catch the bus at 6:45 a.m. and have lunch at 12:30, they have gone for six hours without eating. The 10:30 lunchgoers don’t eat all afternoon; therefore, they go for four to five hours without eating. Add another three hours without food if they participate in after-school extracurricular activities.

One obvious solution to this dilemma is planned snack periods that match the hunger needs of students at each grade level. These snack periods can also be convenient times for teachers to discuss and promote healthy eating habits, and address other health concerns.

In a middle school, every teacher is also a health teacher because young adolescents have so many questions about their changing bodies, attitudes, and minds. Because physical growth processes affect their social behaviors, emotional states of mind, self-esteem, and attitudes toward learning, they desire guidance on these topics from an adult who will provide accurate answers rather than hearing inaccurate rumors from peers.

In addition to their appetites, other significant changes that impact their behavior include:

- Extensive growth spurts that cause periods of lethargy and others of high energy;
- Bones that grow faster than muscles, affecting coordination and ability to sit comfortably, and limiting athletic strength and endurance; and
- An increase in the levels of testosterone for males and estradiol for females, affecting their moods and excitability levels.

Every middle-level educator should be cognizant of these physical growth processes, which affect students’ emotional, social, and cognitive behaviors during the school day.

What Do They Want?
According to David Walsh (2003), young adolescents’ brains are going through several changes that cause them to be unaware of the consequences of their behavior during the middle school years. The prefrontal cortex of the brain—responsible for planning, establishing priorities, organizing thoughts, controlling impulses, and thinking critically about how behavior affects others—is the last part of the brain to mature, and the result is that many middle school students act before they think. Therefore, any middle school that adopts a zero-tolerance policy for certain behaviors may be expecting more of their students than is actually possible. Educators who can remain calm when handling student confrontations provide an avenue for growth for offending students, as well as guidance in leading them to clearer thinking and smarter future choices.

An essential aspect of identity development among young adolescents is their interest in trying new activities. They suddenly want to play an instrument, join the soccer team, ride horses, or become actors. To accommodate them, schools should adopt no-cut policies for all extracurricular activities. This would give every student an opportunity to participate, regardless of skill level.

Why Can’t They Understand?
The question every middle school teacher frequently asks is “Why can’t my students understand this content?” One eighth-grade teacher put it this way: “I think my biggest challenge is getting all the kids in the class to reach the same conclusions and the same level of thinking—which I can’t do” (Knowles and Brown 2000). That’s the challenge every middle-level teacher experiences—trying to move young adolescents from the concrete stage of cognitive development to the formal operational stage in an effort to help them understand the complexities of the middle-level curricula. Students who reach this formal operational stage are able to:

- Hypothesize;
- Use inductive reasoning;
Engage in introspection about their own thinking;
Use logic systematically;
Project themselves into the future; and
Reason beyond personal experience.

Most middle school students are not capable of thinking abstractly in these ways and probably won’t be able to until after completing high school (Rice and Dolgin 2005). On the other hand, young adolescents do become significantly more intelligent, beginning at about age 11, and there are several strategies that can help students improve the development of their cognitive skills:

- Provide students with frequent opportunities to discuss and debate issues with students who have different views;
- Encourage students to develop their own questions on required reading instead of having teachers ask the questions;
- Design time in lessons for students to explain difficult concepts and principles to each other, especially new vocabulary words; and
- Provide learning experiences for students in which they generate their own hypotheses, conduct experiments, and generate their own solutions.

How Can We Provide Support?
No matter what grade configuration exists in your district (e.g., K–8, 5–8, 6–9), you will find young adolescents experiencing these abrupt and life-changing developmental changes. Effective middle-grade schools can support and encourage appropriate young adolescent development through:

- Flexible scheduling formats that provide more time to process abstract principles;
- Advisory sessions that provide opportunities to resolve identity crises, such as peer pressure, drug and alcohol abuse, and cultural identity concerns;
- Recess periods, kinesthetic learning experiences, and frequent snack times to address students’ physical growth processes; and
- Exploratory periods, clubs, and inclusive extracurricular activities.

These types of middle-level programs are positive and influential ways to meet young adolescents’ developmental needs because, after all, they’re only young adolescents.

References

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