

Integrating Common Characteristics of Middle School Students Into Instruction
Sarah Frazer, June 2009

At the Charyl Stockwell Academy, the approach to education is undoubtedly unique. As a charter school, there is a strong foundation of every practice, philosophy and policy in the school's mission statement: "To provide a safe enriching environment for young children to grow to adolescence, while providing those children with specific learning activities that will allow each of them to meet and exceed the minimum academic standards set by the state and federal government." Although there are many components factoring into the quality education that each student at CSA receives, one of the most distinctive aspects of instruction at the CSA Middle School is the integration of the common characteristics of middle school students into instruction, through the developmental approach of teaching to the whole child.

One of the essential facets of the philosophy at CSA is the importance of teaching to the whole child. This includes not only the cognitive and intellectual component that is usually the focus at traditional schools, but also social and emotional growth, physical and sensory development, as well as moral and character education. At the CSA Middle School, teachers see students as more than just academic beings; as students begin the search for their own identities, they rely heavily on social relationships, their evolving moral compasses, and the discovery of their emerging physicality. It is imperative to provide middle school students with multiple opportunities to be successful in all of these areas on a daily basis.

Taking each student's social growth into consideration, students at the CSA Middle School are in multi-aged, flexibly grouped classrooms. This means that students who are eleven and technically in "6th grade" have the opportunity to be in classes with students who are fourteen and would be considered "8th graders" at a traditional school. In the CSA Middle School, the 6th through 8th grade curriculum is taught in all content areas, however students are referred to as either first, second or third year middle school students. This allows students to progress at their own speed through mastery of concepts, instead of punishing those who do not immediately master content by "holding them back a grade." Students also see this as an opportunity to spend time and develop friendships with students of other age levels than just their own.

As a middle school student, there is a focus placed on being part of a close-knit peer group. Teens often see time spent with, and opinions of their peers as more important than those of their parents, teachers or other adults (Wood, 133). With this in mind, the teachers at the CSA Middle School deliberately provide numerous occasions every day for students to be in social environments. Students spend their forty minute lunch period in a self-selected group of peers who they eat lunch with, and play basketball with. More academically, most assignments have partner or group work built into them. An emphasis is placed on choosing teammates who will help the student make good choices and not distract him or her from working. As a culminating event for science, students researched forces and motion and then built a working model of an amusement park ride, where they explained the scientific reasons their ride moved the way it did. They were able to either work alone, or choose one partner, which allowed students with similar interests to group together.

Forming positive, meaningful relationships between teachers and students, as well as facilitating them between students themselves, is a necessary way to meet the social needs of middle school students. Although there are over 140 students in the CSA Middle School, they are grouped in small advisories, each led by two or three teachers. Not only is this best practice, but it allows teachers to get to know students and their families personally, and gives each student the opportunity to have a “go-to” person when they need advice with solving a problem (Armstrong, 123). In order to ensure that students form relationships with each other, students are often flexibly grouped. This means that the small group students are in on Monday morning for theme math may be entirely different than the group they work with on Tuesday in the same class, allowing students to work with and form relationships with a wide variety of their peers. Students also attend fall camp, which consists of many team building activities and allows time for students to bond with each other.

Another important consideration of middle school students’ social needs is to provide instruction that is not only engaging, but relevant to students’ interests (Erwin, 121). Music and sports, both largely a part of our nation’s society, take leading roles in what students view as important. Most students not only participate in sports, but cheer passionately for their favorite college or pro team. In one particular science assignment, students were to write about how forces and energy transfer were a part of a sporting event they had recently seen or were involved in. This encouraged students to scientifically write and think about something they were interested in, and because of this, students were able to make connections between what they were learning about in the classroom and the outside world. It is

imperative for the social development of adolescents to be coupled with their moral growth as well, so CSA can contribute well-rounded young adults to society.

The main way that students' moral development is addressed at CSA is through the Smart Character Choices program. Although this program is implemented from kindergarten on, because of students' more emergent ability to think abstractly and be more empathetic by the time they have reached middle school, they are able to participate at a more in-depth level through both conversation and incorporation into core-curriculum (Wood, 164). The components of the character education program include responsibility, respect, getting along, working together, optimism, and work ethic (Smart Character Choices DVD). At the CSA Middle School, these components are integrated heavily into social studies and language arts, focusing student attention on famous figures in history and literature who have exemplified some of the character traits. In one of their student-led conferencing packets, students identified an individual who they had studied throughout the term, whether in social studies or science, and explained how that person embodied a certain character trait. They also connected how they as students could learn from that person, and what they would do in the following term to improve that particular quality about themselves.

On Fridays, the middle school staff occasionally has small group discussions with their advisories that address issues going on in the middle school. For example, when teachers were becoming frustrated with students' blaming behavior, the students participated in a lesson about taking responsibility for one's actions. Students were able to talk freely about the sorts of things that upset them, and the steps they could take to accept the consequences for their own actions. Because of the Smart Character Choices program, students become responsible for their own personal choices, and school safety as well as academic performance is thus improved (Smart Character Choices DVD).

The intellectual abilities of middle school students are incredible. As students search for their identities, they begin to decide which subjects they enjoy and which they do not. At the CSA Middle School, students are allowed to choose their own enhancement classes. Each core-content teacher also creates an elective of his or her own interest, and when included with regular enhancement classes such as choir, art, and fitness and conditioning, students have over fourteen choices each term. Not only does this permit students to take classes with their friends and have choice based on their own interests, but in classes such as philosophy or creative writing, they are also broadening their horizons and getting the opportunity to debate both sides of certain issues. Middle school students also enjoy the opportunity to

work with technology in the classroom, which is provided by enhancement classes like web design and history of the automobile.

An important characteristic of middle school students to be aware of in planning instruction is that they seek relevancy in their assignments and projects, or else they will be unwilling to complete them (Wood, 141). Great care is taken by the middle school staff to incorporate “real world,” engaging material into the curriculum. In a science lab introducing the concept of heredity, students smashed frozen cherries and added household chemicals in order to remove the DNA strands and make them visible. To many students, it was an eye-opening experience for them to physically see this genetic material. Not only was the experiment hands-on, but connections were made between the DNA in cherries and the DNA in humans. Along with relevancy, adolescents learn better when they can make connections between subjects. At the CSA Middle School, all teachers from all content areas not only team teach, but plan units together under a unit theme that structures the curriculum for each subject area. Teachers use backward design, a best practice strategy that focuses first on the essential questions and enduring understandings from state and national benchmarks teachers want students to know at the end of the unit, then branches out to assessments, “I can...” statements that are easily accessible to students, and finally, daily lessons and activities. This approach of integrating the content areas is key in providing an education that meets the intellectual developmental needs of middle school students.

A central philosophy at CSA is that all children do not learn the same content at the same speed. In order to meet the cognitive needs of a wide variety of middle school students, it is imperative for teachers to differentiate the instruction, assignments and assessments. The main theory behind differentiation is simply to provide students with multiple ways to learn and to exhibit their learning (Tomlinson, 4). In a science lecture about the unique properties of water, students received a packet in which to take notes; some packets were completely blank while others had partial notes with blanks for students to fill in. For every essay students are given, there are multiple choices for topics, at different ability levels. They are able to choose the topic that is most interesting yet also challenging to them. Every time students do a group project in science, they are purposefully placed into groups by the teachers, who take into consideration the difficulty of the topic given to the group as well as the way each member of the group learns best. Differentiation also allows students to represent their knowledge in different ways through assessments. On a conceptual math test about volume of three dimensional figures, students were able to choose whether they would answer an 8 point question of basic difficulty,

or a 10 point problem which involved higher level thinking. Just as middle school students require differentiated instruction, they also need an education that takes into account their need for movement.

The final component of the whole child that CSA focuses on is the physical growth and needs of each student. Although society sees middle school students as young adults – and make no doubt, they are – adolescents still need plenty of physical movement due to growth spurts and the onset of puberty in order to be successful at school (Wood, 138). A practice that is usually seen as too “childish” at most traditional middle schools is snack time, something that the CSA Middle School embraces. Teachers understand that students need a mid-morning snack in order to stay focused and become less irritable due to low blood sugar, and this time is provided every day (Erwin, 25). Middle school students also need movement built into their lessons, or they will find a way to move in a way that is distracting to others, such as tapping a pencil or tipping a chair backward. In a science activity about heredity, students measured their own traits (again, which was interesting to middle school students because it was about themselves) of certain skills like hand span and long jump distance. Not only did the data collection require movement, but the organization of the data on large graphs involved students moving around the room to add their information and analyze the combined data of the class.

Throughout each of its educational practices, the CSA Middle School upholds the foundational philosophies of CSA. Teachers strongly believe that middle school students are unique, and thus deserve an educational program that is designed around their specific needs. Adolescents have just begun the long journey to determining who they will eventually become, and this involves learning how to be someone who is not only an intellectual, but who has appropriate social skills, is physically capable, and morally conscious. Because of the developmental approach of teaching to the whole, middle-level child, the CSA Middle School is truly a safe place for these students to learn and grow into well-rounded young adults.

Works Cited

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