Affirming Middle Grades Education

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Chapter 3

The Excluded Middle: Postmodern Conceptions of the Middle School

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The emergence of the popular concept of the middle school is a recent phenomenon that has its roots in the perceived need to create developmentally appropriate, psychologically relevant, and educationally stimulating learning environments for students between the elementary school and the high school. Assuming that early childhood educators and secondary educators have already developed constructs and models appropriate for students in the earliest and later levels of schooling, educators who work with students in the middle grades have sought to create appropriate schooling models for these children. In short, it has been assumed that middle school children have been excluded in an educational system that ignores the special needs of those caught between the elementary school and high school. This is not a unique complaint. The majority of “average” students are usually
considered to be overlooked by an educational system that invests its resources at
the top in gifted and talented programs, extracurricular activities, honors classes,
and advanced placement programs and at the bottom in remedial classes, tutor-
ing, Head Start, and special education. The middle is often considered to be ex-
cluded. Adolescent children are marginalized and overlooked.

Journals, conferences, classroom materials, and textbooks—like this one—for
middle school students and teachers have proliferated in an effort to overcome
the exclusion of middle grades children. On the one hand, this is a positive de-
velopment. A renewed interest in the needs of the middle school provides incentives
and opportunities for growth. On the other hand, the modernist structure of bu-
reaucracy, hierarchy, and positivism that continues to influence these resources
does not allow for the emergence of significantly different models of education in
the middle school. The philosophy of the middle school that has evolved often
replicates the modernist paradigm of traditional elementary and secondary edu-
cation. Imitating a flawed philosophy fails to produce a curriculum model or in-
structional program for middle schools that is appropriate for children in the
postmodern era. In this chapter I will present a critique of modern education and
propose a postmodern philosophy that is more appropriate for the middle
school. Particularly, I will explore what it means to say that middle level edu-
cation is excluded.

There are several contemporary philosophical analyses that reveal the contra-
dictions that currently exist in the philosophical construct of middle level edu-
cation. Obviously the first issue is the definition of "middle school" itself. While
most middle schools include students in grades six through eight between the
ages of 11 and 14, variations in the configuration of middle level education range
from third grade to ninth grade and ages 8 to 16. Some junior high schools have
simply changed their names to middle schools without any significant alteration
in the philosophy, curriculum, or instructional programs. Is there anything signif-
ically different in practice between a junior high school and a middle school?
Should middle schools even be defined by traditional grade level configurations,
levels of experience, and ages of the students? What is the middle school actually
between? Or is the middle an imaginary classification? Thus, if we say that the
middle school is excluded, must it first exist before it can be excluded?

If, for the sake of discussion, we assume the existence of middle schools, then
in what sense is middle level education excluded? Are the voices of students and
teachers silenced or erased? If so, is this a self-imposed silence, or is the clamor-
ing voice of the middle unheard by those with the power to silence and ignore? Is
there a resistance to being in the middle, or is there only silence in the middle? Is
the middle the statistical average, or is it a process of becoming? If the middle is
excluded, is it possible that middle schooling could be protected from the con-
tamination of modern bureaucratic and positivistic models of education that per-
meate other levels of schooling? In this sense, middle level education may be so
misunderstood by traditional bureaucratic educators that, in being overlooked,
the middle may be free to create itself in a new context. Middle schooling may
provide a unique opportunity for reconceptualized and progressive visions of
teaching and learning to emerge that are not permitted or included in mainstream educational programs. I propose such an alternative in this chapter; I use the term *postmodern* to describe this philosophical position.

**Modern Education**

The common schools were founded in the early nineteenth century for the purpose of enculturating all citizens—particularly immigrants—into American society. Common schools were created to establish a common culture in the emerging American democracy. The white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant majority created a school system that would enculturate, indoctrinate, civilize, and democratize the people of this new country and prepare them for the labor force. Of course, native Americans, enslaved Africans, women, and other minorities were excluded from this process (Spring, 1986). Catholics revolted, fearing for their religious independence. They formed their own school system with the encouragement of their bishops at the Councils of Baltimore (Pinar et al., 1995). The common schools—now called public schools—prepared students for civil society and the work force by teaching them to be compliant, obedient, respectful, and Protestant Christians.

Modern society was linearly organized: military rank and file, farming rows, factory assembly lines, church pews, patriarchal family hierarchies, and the like. Thus, rows of desks, silence, raising hands for permission, repetition of tasks, submission to authority, and standing in lines were of paramount importance in schools (Kincheloe, 1993). Schools were designed to create a common and compliant work force and culture (Spring, 1986). The rhetoric of the American dream, the rugged individual, and manifest destiny all contributed to an attitude that helped convince laborers, immigrants, the poor, and eventually women and minorities that education is the engine of society that levels the economic playing field for all people and builds a democratic society. This attitude has become so ingrained in the American psyche that every politician today aspires to be the "education governor" or "education president."

Some of the features of modern schooling that continue to dominate in the 1990s include the following: segmentation of tasks, linear organization of curriculum on scope and sequence charts, predetermining goals and objectives outside of the context of the school or classroom, universalizing outcomes, emphasizing time on task, mastering proficiency in discrete skills, unquestioning compliance to adult authority, memorizing officially sanctioned information, and promotion of students (and in some states, teachers) based solely on the results of state-mandated criterion-referenced tests. Frederick Taylor designed time and motion studies in the 1930s that would help schools develop models similar to industry to ensure efficiency in this process. The modern school is characterized by efficiency, memorization, predetermined outcomes, segmentation and separation by age and ability, tracking, repetition, rewards for competitive victors, bureaucratic regulation, accountability, written tests with rubrics that simplify complex issues, sorting, and ranking (Oakes, 1985).
Those with a commitment to the status quo modern educational system assume that schooling serves an important credentialing, sorting, and enculturation function in our society. Their commitment to modern schooling is rooted in self-preservation in the economic, political, religious, or social realm. Any deviation in the current social arrangements would threaten those with power. Thus, schooling is seen as the best means of encouraging compliance with the status quo.

Postmodern scholars recognize that the ecological, psychological, economic, political, religious, and social problems of contemporary society require a fundamental shift away from the status quo power arrangements. The survival of the planet is at stake. Education must no longer serve social structures and unjust power arrangements. A postmodern vision is essential. As John Dewey, George Counts, and other educators insisted in the early twentieth century, society must be the function of education. In other words, improving society and creating a just, caring, and ecologically sustainable community must be the primary focus of education. Middle schools must adopt this vision or they will continue to reproduce modern hierarchical and unjust power structures that will never have the effect of empowering students and teachers.

Despite protestations from those who would like to preserve the modern bureaucratic and hegemonic schooling structures, we have now entered a postmodern era. This makes powerful people nervous and angry. They would like to go back to the “good old days” (which were not very good for people who are “different” in race, religion, ethnicity, gender, language, physical challenges, and learning modes—in other words, everyone except white, male, heterosexual, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant land owners). The traditionalists who insist that schools must teach the “basics” must be challenged to understand that the basics have been variously defined over the centuries by different special interest groups: astronomy, rhetoric, geometry, music, and physical education for the Greeks; Latin, Greek, classics, speech, and mathematics in the nineteenth century; reading, writing, arithmetic, and the Protestant Christian Bible in early American common schools; physical conditioning, cranial measurement, and political theory in socialist Germany. What are the real “basics,” and who controls the course content and textbooks? Curriculum is a contested terrain (McLaren, 1994) on which various conceptions of knowledge and truth compete for dominance. The issues of power and control must first be addressed before an appropriate middle school curriculum and philosophy can be understood.

**The Postmodern Era**

John Fiske (1993) in his book *Power Plays, Power Works* contends that the notion of power must be addressed directly in our contentious global society. Before the fifteenth century, premodern societies relied on physical coercion, torture, force, and confrontation to impose order and values on people. With growing populations, particularly in cities, the modern age of the last five hundred years has had to rely on surveillance and monitoring in order to gain compliance of the population
(Foucault, 1979). We are beginning to recognize that there are not enough police and prisons to control the entire population. While churches seek to control the conscience and behavior of people, governments use mechanisms of surveillance, patriotism, economics, and fear to force citizens to comply with rules and regulations. The goal is to develop consensus in the population.

In the postmodern era such consensus has eroded. There are multiple perspectives; competing values; a variety of religious experiences, communities, ideologies, and, for our purposes, curriculums, that are competing for recognition and acceptance. This frightens those who are committed to singular views of society and education. Thus, it is not surprising that powerful communities and constituencies attempt to impose their values on all citizens. National curriculums, state proficiency tests, and standardized accountability models are an outgrowth of this philosophy. Narrow definitions of family values and religious morality are another example. As various minority groups fight for recognition, acceptance, and democratic rights, dominant power groups redouble their efforts to control citizens—particularly minority populations like adolescent children, immigrants, gays, laborers, persons of color, and religious minorities. A return to premodern physical coercion can be seen in the proliferation of prisons, police brutality, hate groups, and militant militias. It is not surprising that schools are often built like prisons and patrolled vigilantly. It is assumed that exerting more control over students will lead to obedience and learning. However, this type of coercion only leads to more turmoil (Slattery & Daigle, 1994).

There is another way to deal with the problems of modern society according to many postmodern writers. John Fisk (1993), for example, writes:

*The change in the social order, to put it succinctly, will be one from a society organized around a general consensus to one organized around varied points of consent. The United States' social order of the twentieth century was one organized around a broadly shared consensus of values and priorities that stretched across the domains of politics, economics, religion, and culture. It has been legitimated by a long and powerful history in which Greco-Roman and Judeo-Christian influences combined to produce first Europe and the US as major world powers. The consensus was therefore sure of its values, it knew that they were the only ones which could produce a powerful and fair modern society. Any problems that might result, then, tended to be ones of accommodation, not of the values themselves. (p. 44)*

What we are experiencing in the late twentieth century is an explosion of global communities with diffuse influence in politics, economics, religion, and culture. The separation between cultures has been eradicated by mass communication, transportation, computer technology, job migration, and immigration. Despite isolationist rhetoric, it is impossible to return to the independent power centers of the modern era. We live in an interdependent global community where our survival depends on cooperation rather than competition and dominance. Our schools must reflect postmodern values and practices; otherwise education
contributes to the divisiveness in our society rather than solutions that are just, caring, and ecologically sustainable.

Postmodern education is a complex process. However, it promotes diversity, understanding, and a new social imagination with "multiple points of consent" (Fiske, 1993, p. 46). Multiculturalism; eclecticism; cooperative practices; interdisciplinary experiences; community-based projects; racial and gender inclusiveness; ecological and spiritual sensibilities; shared power arrangements; and just economic structures that support health, nutrition, and psychological well-being of all citizens will be the hallmark of postmodern learning environments. Education must be prophetic in its condemnation of modern power structures that have resulted in holocausts, genocide, starvation, ecological destruction, massive poverty, slavery, patriarchal domination, colonialization, environmental degradation, and other horrors of the twentieth century. If education does not focus on these issues, then it is complicit in the continuing modern holocausts.

Caught in the Middle as the Postmodern Emerges

The preceding discussion of the emerging postmodern era is unsettling to some. Schooling will now require a realignment of relationships and a reconceptualization of power arrangements by those in control. Middle schools must allow for the emergence of multiple perspectives and multiple forms of representation. The cultures of Africa, Asia, the Middle East, Latin America, and other areas will share stature with European culture. Buddhism, Hinduism, Gnosticism, atheism, pantheism, and Islam—among others—will be respected in society and in schools along with Judaism and various Christianities. Women will share equal opportunities with men. Gender differences, sexual orientations, physical conditions, learning differences, and the like will no longer be the object of ridicule, harassment, and exclusion. Those who continue to resist multiculturalism and multiple communities contribute to the hatred and divisiveness of modern society. Teachers and other school leaders have the opportunity to contribute positively to the emerging postmodern era. However, the middle school movement is literally "caught in the middle" between those who would exert their power and influence to prevent multiplicity from emerging by preserving the status quo social and economic arrangements and those who recognize the needs of middle school children to be actively involved in creating relationships and community practices to improve society.

On the one hand, middle schools have the opportunity to structure the teaching and learning environment based on the postmodern values described here. On the other hand, there is tremendous pressure to create middle schools in the traditional modernist paradigm. I believe that the traditional modern philosophy still dominates middle schools. In the attempt to create middle schools with a focus on discovery learning, spaces for movement, creative projects, interdisciplinary lessons, cooperative relational practices, multicultural celebrations, and con-
structivist learning, many middle schools find that they remain caught in the modern bureaucratic power arrangements that demand accountability, order, control, measurable data, and compliance. As a result, the emerging middle school has become just another structure at the service of modern technocratic and bureaucratic schooling practices. If the only significant difference between a middle school and other forms of schooling is a new name; a different grade level configuration; a new set of learning materials; rearranged learning spaces; flexible time structures; new goals, objectives, and outcomes, then the middle school perpetuates the disasters of modern society and delays the emergence of the postmodern community. What is needed in the middle school is a total re-thinking of the premises of modern education. Middle schools are the best place for this transformation and new “social imagination” (Fiske, 1993) to occur because, like the modern society in transition to the postmodern, they have an opportunity to reconceptualize their place in the process as a new and emerging educational endeavor.

A Social Imagination for Middle Schools

Giles Deleuze and Felix Guattari (1987) in A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia challenge the concept of the middle as a place between two points or a statistical average:

A line of becoming is not defined by points that it connects, or by points that compose it; on the contrary, it passes between points, it comes up through the middle, it runs perpendicular to the points first perceived, transversally to the localizable relation to distant or contiguous points. A point is always a point of origin. But a line of becoming has neither beginning nor end, departure nor arrival, origin nor destination; to speak of the absence of an origin, to make the absence of an origin the origin, is a bad play on words. A line of becoming has only a middle. The middle is not an average; it is fast motion, it is the absolute speed of movement. A becoming is always in the middle; one can only get it by the middle. A becoming is neither one nor two, nor the relation of the two; it is the in-between, the border of line or flight of descent running perpendicular to both. (p. 293)

Thus, as students and teachers are always in the process of becoming, we are always in the middle, yet the middle does not exist as a place between two points. Deleuze and Guattari challenge the whole notion of middle level education by demonstrating that becoming is always the middle. Middle school educators understand this concept. They experience the emotional swings, shifting interests, self-exploration, and emerging literacy of middle school children. Those who live and work with middle school children understand that the middle is a place of becoming and not a rigid point of arrival.
In a postmodern sense, is it possible that there is no middle because of the constant shifting and redefining of self, schooling, and culture in this process of becoming? Autobiographies and narratives from the boundaries of the schooling experience may provide the best understanding of schooling in the middle. Is a phenomenological approach to middle level education ultimately necessary to discover the presence of what is absent or excluded? Through the use of stories and dialogue a postmodern understanding of middle level education may emerge that will address these perplexing questions.

There has been a virtual explosion of the use of the word postmodern in recent years: deconstructive postmodernism, constructive postmodernism, eliminative postmodernism, cultural postmodernism, postmodern art, postmodern society, postmodern theology, postmodern architecture, and on and on. Postmodernism can be understood from at least eleven different perspectives: an emerging historical period that transcends the modern industrial and technological age; a contemporary aesthetic style in art and architecture that is eclectic, kaleidoscopic, ironic, and allegorical; a social criticism of unified systems of economic and political organization such as liberalism and communism; a philosophical movement that seeks to expose the internal contradictions of metanarratives by deconstructing modern notions of truth, language, knowledge, and power; a cultural analysis that critiques the negative impact of modern technology on the human psyche and the environment while promoting the construction of a holistic and ecologically sustainable global community; a radical eclecticism (not compromise or consensus) and double-voiced discourse that accepts and criticizes at the same time because the past and the future are both honored and subverted, embraced and limited, constructed and deconstructed; a movement that attempts to go beyond the materialist philosophy of modernity: an acknowledgment and celebration of otherness, particularly from racial and gender perspectives; a momentous historical period marked by a revolutionary paradigm change that transcends the basic assumptions, patterns of operation, and cosmology of the previous modern age; an ecological and ecumenical worldview beyond the modern obsession with dominance and control; or finally, a post-structural movement toward decentering in which there is an absence of anything at the center or any overriding embedded truth at the core, thus necessitating a concentration on the margins and a shift in emphasis to the borders.

Middle level education can be understood to reflect many of these postmodern values: It is eclectic, encompassing many genres, styles, moods, and multiple personalities; it is decentered, requiring constant shifting to tangents and narratives; it is critical, challenging traditional convention and authoritarian structures; it is historical, occurring after infancy and before adulthood but not easily defined with precision. Postmodern middle level education includes these things and much more. This postmodern social imagination offers a philosophical basis to support those who would lead middle schools beyond the modern technical and bureaucratic structure to a new vision. What might a middle school program look like in the postmodern era?
Middle School Students as Curators and Tour Guides

An example of postmodern applications in middle level schooling is the Ambassador Jefferson Caffery Project at Cathedral-Carmel School in Lafayette, Louisiana, which began in 1992. In working with many groups of students and parents in the local community, I observed that very few people were familiar with Ambassador Jefferson Caffery, the longest-serving Chief of Foreign Mission in U.S. history, who served as ambassador to Japan, Iran, Cuba, Argentina, Brazil, and France, among other countries. He signed several treaties at the end of World War II and was personally associated with four popes, served under seven presidents, and was received by innumerable queens, kings, and prime ministers. Ambassador Caffery is buried in the cemetery on the grounds of the Cathedral of St. John, the property that also houses Cathedral-Carmel School. Founded in 1821, the church property was donated by Jean Mouton, founder of the Acadian village known as Vermilionville, now Lafayette, and was the settlement of the French Acadians who were expelled from Nova Scotia in the eighteenth century. Cathedral-Carmel, founded in 1846, was the first school, public or private, in Vermilionville. The property is on the National Trust of Historic Places and is visited daily by tourists from France, Canada, Japan, other foreign countries, and all parts of the United States.

In such an atmosphere it was unfortunate that so little attention to local history existed in the school classrooms. As part of the 1992 curriculum, I launched a special interdisciplinary project that brought several middle school students out of the traditional classroom. The students first took tours of the school cemetery, archives, and church. Historians from the local university (University of Southwestern Louisiana) were invited to meet with the students for walking tours of the property and dialogue with the students. During this initial phase of the project the French teacher worked with the students to develop their communication related to the local history using the French language. The speech teacher trained the students in techniques of public speaking on historical tours and began training students to serve as volunteer docents. Visits to local museums, the old family home of the ambassador, and discussions with family members of Ambassador Caffery all took place. Artifacts were collected from various sources.

At the end of this initial phase the students worked with a museum board member to help establish a museum on the campus. The students served as tour guides for visitors, speaking both in English and French. A video tape about local history was made for viewing in the museum and for sale in the new gift shop. The students were involved in every step of the process of establishing the museum: researching local history, collecting and cataloguing artifacts, filming the video, planning and directing tours for both visitors and fellow students, and scheduling upcoming events. In effect, the middle school students took a leadership role in creating a museum, gift shop, video, and tour in the local community.
This project required the students to integrate social studies, language, science, mathematics, religion, the French language, management, speech, language arts, and personal development all in one project. Artificial barriers between subjects dissolved. The leadership and creativity of the students were allowed to flourish. Autobiographical applications of subject matter were allowed to surface. Responsibility for learning was shifted from the teachers to the students. The natural interests of the students were celebrated and supported.

Of course, there continue to be difficulties in the implementation of this special project. There were mistakes made, deadlines missed, frustration with the complexity of the project at times. However, the process was followed through, and the students actually began serving as historical tour guides on their schools campus. There is a functioning museum on the property that the students helped to establish. A video produced with the assistance of the students is shown several times daily to large groups of tourists. The Ambassador Caffery project could serve as an example of postmodern eclecticism, integration, and cultural and aesthetic awareness. While certainly not a perfect model, it is, none the less, a beginning.

It is important to note that simply creating an interdisciplinary curriculum is not sufficient for creating an appropriate middle level education. Integrated units can be implemented using bureaucratic and authoritarian structures or they can be implemented in cooperative, multicultural, inclusive, and holistic environments. The essential element of postmodern middle schooling is a social imagination that examines every aspect of the teaching and learning environment from the perspective of a just, caring, and ecologically sustainable global culture. Middle school educators can contribute to the creation of such a global community or they could perpetuate the technical and bureaucratic power arrangements of the modern world. Having the opportunity to be involved in such a process can be exciting, rewarding, and often dangerous. For the sake of those “caught in the middle,” I would encourage educators to move beyond the linear philosophies that have trapped modern schooling in segmentation, hierarchy, bureaucracy, testing, outcomes, and control and accept the challenge to build a just, caring, and ecologically sustainable global culture that is multicultural with multiple perspectives for the middle school children we love so dearly.

Discussion Questions

1. Consider postmodernism and investigate conceptions of the middle school experience in light of this philosophy.
2. What might a postmodern middle school look like?
3. Why have issues of middle school education often been excluded from mainstream schooling practices?
4. How would you design a middle school program to meet the needs of the diverse population of our society?
5. What accounts for the discrepancy between middle school theory and practice?
References


