

Lessons from the Gap Closers: The Middle School Philosophy in Urban Schools

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The crucial period of identity development in adolescence is a time of great potential—for triumph or failure. Physically, emotionally, morally, socially, culturally, and intellectually, these youth are facing many changes and life-altering decisions (Gay & Hanley, 1999). Their desire for independence often conflicts with their need for structure, guidance, and nurturing. During this stage of life that is so “critical to the healthy development” of adolescents, urban middle school students “stand to gain more and to lose more, depending on the quality of their school experience” (Shann, 1999, p. 393). In addition to this challenging period, many urban students deal with higher instances of poverty, racism, crime, and violence than their suburban counterparts.

Although those characteristics do influence most urban environments, they paint an incomplete picture. Those who consciously choose to focus on the strengths of urban areas may opt to reflect on the racial, linguistic, religious, and cultural richness, diversity, and creativity. They might point out the clear distinction made between children and adults, close family ties, and pure, simple play enjoyed by children from poor and working class families (Lareau, 2003). From this perspective, the ingenuity and beauty of the survival skills, graffiti, hip hop dance, rap lyrics, rope-jumping chants, and cheers in urban schools can be viewed as strengths upon which to capitalize (Delpit, 2006; Steinberg & Kincheloe, 2004).

This is a call for urban middle schools that have abandoned the principles of the middle school philosophy to return to an emphasis on the three R's: *Relationships*, *Relevance*, and *Rigor*. Middle schools, especially those that serve large populations of minority students, have an obligation to take on the characteristics of effective middle schools still championed by the National Middle School Association (1995), which just so happen to be the same as those proven to yield the greatest results with urban students (see Table 1).

The Disconnection between the Middle School Concept and Urban Education

The middle school concept emphasizes a child-centered curriculum that allows students to discover and explore their interests. The focus on competition and individual accomplishment is replaced with a push for collaboration (Bandlow, 2001; Bunting, 2005). A shift is made to a developmentally sensitive, diverse, and relevant approach to academics, as opposed to uniform, rigid standards for all. Teams, heterogeneous groups, advisory, cooperative learning, intramurals, and inquiry are the norm. The middle school becomes a place where students are allowed to be adolescents and can reflect on what that really means.

What has happened since the 1980s when the middle school philosophy was so highly touted? In some schools, often in urban areas, relevant, personalized curricula have been reduced to scripted lessons with rote drills and repetition (Steinberg & Kincheloe, 2004). School communities are individualistic, highly stratified, and competitive. Tracking is commonplace, and course offerings for urban students are limited in comparison with their suburban counterparts. Empowering students with choices and opportunities for serious self-exploration and discovery of interests is rare. The attention is more directed towards performance on standardized tests than on the needs of the students. In short, some schools “have given up the rich meaningful education of our children in favor of narrow, decontextualized, meaningless procedures that leave unopened hearts, unformed character, and unchallenged minds” (Delpit, 2006, p. xiv).

Reconnecting

The need to nurture strong identity development is intensified in diverse urban middle schools. Gay and Hanley (1999) assert that civic, personal, and social progress can be made by embracing one’s race, culture, ethnicity, and gender. They further define multicultural empowerment as a strategy that “involves ethnically diverse students exercising genuine control over their own learning processes; incorporating personal experiences into their formal learning; critiquing current society for social injustices; and imagining and constructing a more just society” (p.364). The incorporation of the African-American philosophy of education and Afrocentric principles are promising multicultural empowerment tools for eradicating cycles of isolation and devaluation for children of color (Delpit, 2006; Perry, Steele, & Hilliard, 2003; Traoré & Lukens, 2006). The African-American philosophy of education connects students to a legacy of a resilient people who utilized education as a tool to empower, uplift, and liberate themselves. Afrocentric curricula strongly encourage collaboration, interdependence, and healthy identity development through spirituality and self-awareness. Students develop a greater appreciation of that from which they have come, who they are at present, and all they could become. Racial trust is edified, and stereotype threat is diminished in these types of school climates (Perry, Steele, & Hilliard, 2003). Middle schools with large populations of minority students that implement such middle school concepts as advisory, teaming, heterogeneous grouping, community collaboration, self-expression, exploration, and personalized, relevant pedagogy may significantly advance their efforts to promote healthy identity development in their students.

Moreover, multicultural empowerment should also help to enhance community-building efforts and a culture of caring in urban middle schools. It is important to instill in students the realization that we are all interconnected and interdependent (Gay & Hanley, 1999; Traoré & Lukens, 2006). Theresa Perry contends that African-American students, in particular, thrive within environments with a strong sense of group membership in which there is an explicit and regularly communicated expectation that everyone achieve (Perry, Steele, &

Hilliard, 2003, p. 107). The fact that minority students from low socioeconomic groups are more motivated by their need for affiliation than for achievement has been supported by research (Delpit, 2006, p. 141). Students need to feel valued by and connected to their teachers and their peers in school. Urban middle schools that implement the principles of teaming, advisory, collaboration, and community-building can provide a caring atmosphere, increase students' sense of belonging, and may combat the lure of gang involvement, divisive cliques, and other negative peer and mass media temptations.

Furthermore, establishing a true culture of caring and belonging should set the stage for good teaching and high academic achievement (Shann, 1999). An examination of what quality, effective teaching might entail in an urban middle school is necessary. First, instruction has to take the developmental and cultural needs of young adolescents into account. Classrooms that allow and provide opportunities for movement and interaction are particularly complementary to the learning and social styles of African-American boys (Delpit, 2006). This becomes even more important during the sometimes uncomfortable physical changes brought on by puberty. Also, lessons that include the necessary skills and practical application of problem-solving and decision-making are essential (Bowers, 2000; Gay & Hanley, 1999). To be sure, the demand for these skills is increased during the early adolescent years, and cooperative group settings provide optimal conditions in which to hone them. In addition, lessons should be practical, culturally relevant, and validate students' prior knowledge, languages, and experiences (Bowers, 2000; Delpit, 2006; Gay & Hanley, 1999). Field trips and community involvement are also part of the regular curriculum (Bowers, 2000; Steinberg & Kincheloe, 2004). This type of teaching requires a keen awareness of self, individual relationships with students, deep content knowledge, and creativity. Urban middle schools that encourage, expect, and reward collaborative, culturally relevant, personalized, and developmentally sensitive teaching can anticipate greater student engagement and higher academic achievement.

KIPP Gaston College Preparatory

KIPP (Knowledge Is Power Program) Gaston College Preparatory School (KIPP GCP) in Gaston, North Carolina is a model with tremendous potential for bringing relationships, relevance, and rigor back to the forefront in schools that serve large populations of minority students. With 85% of its predominantly African-American students receiving free or reduced lunch, KIPP GCP emphasizes the "five pillars" of the existing KIPP Schools: high expectations, power to lead, choice and commitment, extended time on task, and focus on results (KIPP Gaston College Preparatory, 2004). Although this school is located in a very rural area, the community is plagued by many of the same issues as urban pockets of poverty: crime, drug abuse, drop-outs, low aspirations/attainment, and the like.

First, relationships are clearly important—student-to-student, teacher-to-student, teacher-to-teacher, administrator-to-student, administrator-to-teacher, faculty-to-parents, and school-to-community. Students receive a personal phone call when they are absent to ascertain the reason. The principals know students individually and are a physically present force throughout the school. They lead a weekly seminar, *Pride Time*, during which they address issues concerning the school. Students then take those issues back to their same-sex advisory groups, which are each led by a teacher, and decide how best to resolve them. They also use advisory as a safe space in which to confidentially share anything they need to discuss. Trust is obviously a priority as there are no locks on students' lockers. Even the school uniforms seem to contribute to the unity within, while still allowing for self-expression on Fridays without them. Teachers are heavily involved in decision making and problem solving in the school. They commit to spending extended days and some Saturdays with students and have the rare privilege to get to know every student well. Teachers are supported with financial compensation and a great deal of staff development throughout the year. Parents have bought into the vision of the school and participate regularly in bringing it to fruition. Recognizing the importance of community relationships, KIPP GCP has many partnerships with businesses, higher education institutions, and other organizations. The school has put considerable time and effort into creating a community of trust and personal relationships.

Second, relevance is reflected throughout the school. Quotes and posters of African-American “heroes” can be found throughout the building. Every effort is made to maintain a faculty of at least 50% teachers of color, including recruiting from historically black colleges and universities. Pictures of KIPP GCP students, their murals, and other work are displayed on every hall. Students are part of the teacher recruitment team, and potential teachers are required to present a sample lesson for their feedback. Students also get to select the paint color of their classrooms and have their own personal mailboxes in them. Hands-on, student-centered lessons are the norm. Curricula are highly personalized, acknowledging students' deficits and strengths through tutorials and enrichment. Enrichment courses include a wide variety of offerings, including hip hop dance. One hundred percent of KIPP students will participate in a community service project. Moreover, they will create and implement a four-year social justice plan as they move to the high school. KIPP GCP students have been empowered to embrace their identities and make a difference in their school, community, and world.

Third, a simple stroll through the hallways reveals an incredible shared vision and expectation of success. One of the most common criticisms of the middle school concept is that it sacrifices rigor for relationships and relevance (Bandlow, 2001; Bunting, 2005). There is no shortage of rigor at KIPP GCP. All students sign a college preparatory commitment. Graduation and college memorabilia decorate the walls. Field trips are taken to colleges and universities. Standardized testing goals are stated in definitive terms: “__% of students *will...*”

Equally important are the supports KIPP GCP has in place to help lead their students to excellence. The extended time, tutorial, and enrichment activities are key ingredients. Posters with students' photos and their internship, scholarship, and enrichment opportunities are displayed. Challenging classes involve a high degree of critical thinking and inquiry. Middle school students move to KIPP Pride High School expecting to be challenged in Advanced Placement and even community college courses for some. Based on 2006 state-mandated standardized tests in reading and math, KIPP GCP is the "highest performing public school" in its county (Knowledge Is Power Program, 2007). The majority of its students identified as having learning disabilities prior to enrolling in KIPP GCP in fifth grade eventually test out of the Exceptional Children's services. They, too, perform above the state averages of non-disabled students across the state (KIPP Gaston College Preparatory, 2004). As ninth graders, 94% of them passed the state's English I exam, 93% passed the Algebra I exam, and 96% passed the Algebra II exam.

Although time will surely tell the complete story, the KIPP GCP model appears to be quite promising. To be sure, the size and extra hours of KIPP may not always be feasible in every situation; however, employing the already-established principles of the middle school philosophy, KIPP GCP has seen great success. Why struggle to reinvent the wheel when we know what typically works with early adolescents and what the achievement "gap closers" have found to be generally effective with urban/minority youth (Perry, Steele, & Hilliard, 2003, pp. 148-149)? Urban and other middle schools with large minority student populations must build upon a strong foundation of relationships. Relationship building is critical to students' sense of belonging and identity development. Further, these schools must be places of relevance. Developmentally appropriate and culturally relevant policies, practices, and pedagogy are essential to meaningful learning. Finally, urban middle schools must still emphasize rigor by establishing an explicit, shared culture of success, while equipping students with the tools to get there. We owe these students of promise a change from the rote memorization and drill that has become so prevalent in urban middle schools with the return to the true middle school concept of relationships, relevance, and rigor.

Editor's note: For more information on the Knowledge Is Power Program, see <http://www.kipp.org>. For more information about the KIPP Gaston College Preparatory School, see <http://www.kippgcp.org>.

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Table 1

Middle Level Curriculum: A Work in Progress

We believe learning experiences for young adolescents should:

- address their varied intellectual, physical, social, emotional and moral development
- help them make sense of themselves and the world about them
- be highly integrated and connected to life
- include their questions, needs, developmental issues and ideas
- involve them in rich and significant knowledge about the world
- open doors to new ideas that evoke curiosity, the desire to explore, and, at times, awe and wonder
- challenge students and encourage them to take maximum advantage of educational opportunities
- develop caring, responsible, and ethical citizens who practice democratic principles

Further, we advocate learning experiences which:

- value the dignity and diversity of all individuals
- allow students to learn and express themselves in a variety of ways
- use the full range of communication skills and technologies in purposeful contexts
- engage students in problem solving through a variety of relevant experiential learning opportunities
- involve students in meaningful service which encourages them to make a difference in the world around them
- involve students in setting goals, planning, and assessing their own learning
- include continuous, authentic, and appropriate assessment of students' progress in academic achievement and the
- acquisition of desired behavioral attributes

Such learning experiences, which must be accessible to all students, require environments in which:

- challenging content in partnership with appropriate learning strategies becomes the key to significant learning
- students and staff are safe, cared for, understood, trusted, and respected
- each young adolescent can experience success
- faculty is empowered and supported in creating developmentally responsive curriculum and instructional approaches
- staff are positive role models

- the family is actively involved in students' educational endeavors
- the learning community expands beyond the school

Because of these convictions, we believe the following conditions should be evident:

- all areas of knowledge and skill are viewed as important and are integrated throughout the student's school experience
- students explore integrated themes which engage them in serious and rigorous study
- curriculum is developed by careful and continuing study of students, social trends and issues, and research-supported school practices
- flexible learning groups are based upon students' needs and interests
- active collaborative, self-directed learning is used
- a variety of educational materials, resources, and instructional strategies are used
- staff development promotes and supports developmentally responsive practices
- the staff is organized in ways that encourage ongoing collaboration
- all staff help plan and participate in long-term professional growth opportunities

Note. From National Middle School Association, 1995

About the author - A National Board Certified middle school teacher in Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools, Tarra Ellis is pursuing a Ph. D. in Curriculum and Instruction in Urban Education while working with teacher education candidates at UNCC.