

CHAPTER TWO

Literature Review

Surviving adolescence is no small matter. It's a hard age to be and teach. The worst things that ever happened to anybody happen every day. But some of the best things can happen, too, and they are more likely to happen when junior high teachers understand the nature of junior high kids and teach them in ways that help students grow.

-Nancie Atwell (1987)

from In the Middle: Writing, Reading, and Learning with Adolescents.

The Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC) notes the following definition of at-risk in the thesaurus section of this computer program. "Year term introduced, 1990. Individuals or groups identified as possibly having or potentially developing a problem (physical, mental, educational, etc.) requiring further evaluation and/or intervention." A further suggestion from this program is to reference "high risk students" again, in the ERIC thesaurus. The definition is as follows: "Year introduced, 1980. Students with normal intelligence whose academic background or prior performance may cause them to be perceived as candidates for future academic failure or early withdrawal. Prior to March '80, this concept was occasionally indexed under educationally disadvantaged."

Whatever term is used, high risk, or at-risk, the prognosis is the same: These children need interventions to help them from becoming our future high school dropouts. The statistics are bleak according to H. Craig Heller who participated in

the Carnegie Conference on Adolescent Health and who is published in Teachers College Record. Nationally, one out of every seven children will drop out of school, and, of course, there is a declining demand in the job market for the poorly educated and the unskilled. Consequently, a dropout is seven-and-a-half times more likely to be on welfare and two times more likely to be unemployed. This particular dropout will earn \$300,000 less than a high school graduate, and will pay \$80,000 less in taxes. It costs our nation three hundred billion in lost productivity for one year's class of dropouts. Add to this the fact that these citizens will be chronically underemployed and unemployed, they will most likely have no health insurance. So, the cost to the United States starts to approach one trillion dollars (Heller, 1993, p. 645). One trillion is such an incomprehensible amount to most people that a clarification may be in order. If a trillion one dollar bills were lined up next to each other with the ends touching, the distance covered would be 200 trips to the moon and back.

The dismal outlook for dropouts is also researched in The Bell Curve, the controversial documentation of the social structure of American life. Interestingly enough, in 1900 only six percent of the population of our country received a high school diploma. It wasn't until the beginning of World War II that even half of our youth graduated from a four year secondary program (Herrnstein & Murray, 1994, p. 146). The authors maintain through the entire book that the equation of low cognitive ability and low socioeconomic status practically guarantees a high school dropout. This, in turn, leads to everything from poor parenting, welfare

dependency, poverty, crime, and all the other social ills in our society. While Herrnstein and Murray 's book may be extreme, they certainly have enough charts, graphs, and footnotes to document what they have written.

As adults and as professional and educational leaders, it seems impossible for us to relegate our children to such a future. Indeed, it even seems morally wrong. Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis has been widely quoted as saying, "If you fail in raising your children, then nothing else you ever do really matters." Even for someone who has little interest in children, the crass statistics on the loss of productivity for our nation should still hit home. We simply cannot afford dropouts.

L.D. Darrell writing that "At-risk Students Need Our Commitment" in the National Association of Secondary School Principals Bulletin says that in national surveys, students themselves give three reasons for dropping out of school. The first is low grades, the second is a lack of interest in school, and last is the inability to get along with their teachers (Darrell, 1989, pp. 81-82). According to De Blois in the National Association of Secondary School Principals Bulletin when he was discussing "Keeping At-risk Students in School", additional research shows that dropouts share other characteristics which include being two years behind their peers in reading and math, having a low sense of self-esteem, and having been held back for one or more years by the time they are in seventh grade (DeBlois, 1989, p. 6). These do not seem to be insurmountable problems for our school districts and for our society to address.

Fred Hechinger, in his article “Schools for Teenagers: A Historic Dilemma” published in the Teachers College Record, reported that in the 1980's, the Eli Lilly Endowment, in Indianapolis, Indiana, researched and wrote that “...the number of students who fail in school seems to grow almost uncontrollably from fourth through eighth or ninth grades. As a result, these students fall further behind in almost every essential activity until they either drop out or struggle in remedial programs throughout their high school grades. (Hechinger, 1993, pp. 530-531). This acclaimed study points a long and strong finger at the junior high and middle schools of America.

What IS Adolescence?

Berkeley, California, around 1900, was the site of the first junior high school. Decades later the junior high idea still remains largely undefined. Most of these schools are modeled after either an elementary school concept or a senior high school concept also according to Hechinger from the previously stated article (1993, p. 532). Anyone who works with adolescents knows that using an elementary school approach just will not work. These young teens want to be grown up more than almost anything in the world. Centuries ago Aristotle wrote as quoted by E. Nightingale and L. Wolverton in “Adolescent Rolelessness in Modern Society” and published in Teachers College Record:

The young are in character prone to desire and ready to carry any desire

they may have formed into action. Of bodily desires it is the sexual to which they are most disposed to give way, and in regard to sexual desire they exercise no self-restraint. They are changeful, too, and fickle in their desires, which are as transitory as they are vehement; for their wishes are keen without being permanent, like a sick man's fits of hunger and thirst. (Nightingale & Wolverton, 1993, p. 472).

Primary schools have never in the history of the world been responsive to what Aristotle has described, and to the way many people would describe young teenagers today.

On the other hand, a look at our high schools shows what Deborah Meier has described in the following excerpt:

The typical high school is a setting in which the adults and the students are not members of the same community. Instead they exist in two unconnected communities inhabiting the same building. We have abandoned them in adolescence in which there are no adults to have an influence on them. Then we decry the fact that they create a peer culture that does not have the values we as adults want them to have (Heller, 1993, p. 656).

A secondary school without role models to guide the "changeful" adolescents simply will not work either. It is only in modern times that children have not had adult role models.

A knowledge of history and sociology shows that the whole idea of

adolescence is a fairly new one with the twentieth century. Until the early 1900's, children went to work at a very young age. In many cases they worked alongside their parents on farms practically from the time they were able to walk. In sadder cases, in urban areas, children were abused in sweat shops. Regardless of the situation, however, children were put in the company of adults, and most never had a chance for more than a rudimentary education. Improved health and nutrition and improved social consciousness along with new laws that stopped much abuse of children all helped to create the idea of adolescence. More and more secondary schools were established to accommodate this new category of people. Much of the research on adolescence is recent and ongoing. The last bastion of the human body-the brain-is finally being studied. Some scientists are beginning to carefully look into the mental development of the young teenager, and there are some facts that are emerging.

Except for the first three years of infancy, early adolescence is the time of the most dramatic human development. In a forum on middle schools, June 26th and 27th, 1995, at the Grand Haven Junior High School the presenter, Elliot Merenbloom, documented the social and emotional development of adolescents. He said that young teens must have peer approval and group membership. They have a need to develop their self-concept and sex role identification. Adolescents have to learn how to deal with turbulent emotions and multi-cultural and multi-racial issues (Merenbloom, 1995).

Our schools generally force the alienation of our children from adults and

from each other. In a typical junior high, most children are bused in and begin their school day immediately. Except for frantic passing periods there are almost no chances for social contacts with adults or peers. Lunch is often another frenetic twenty or thirty minutes where some time must be spent actually eating. Then, it's another round of academics and time to reboard the bus. Add to this scenario a boring irrelevant textbook, and a teacher who might be bored or unhappy in a junior high school setting and who has to run his/her classroom like an army boot camp. Finally, the child returns home to an empty house or a home with problems and you can hardly blame the kids for just wanting OUT. Not all adults could tolerate days like this, so who could dare to fault our children?

If, by chance, the junior high is overcrowded, there will probably be almost no chance for after school activities. Only the very best athletes will be selected for teams, or because of space, perhaps only a dozen kids can work on a newspaper or yearbook. In a medium to large school, the vast majority of children are left out and important avenues to group membership and chances for relationships with adults are closed.

If the three most valid reasons for dropping out of school are poor grades, lack of interest in school, and inability to get along with their teachers (Darrell, 1989, pp. 81-82), it is easy to see how many of our schools actually force these conditions on our children. Looking at it from this point of view, it would seem that most of our children are at-risk simply because they attend school. This is scary thinking.

Continuing, though, there are still other characteristics that dropouts share. This includes pregnancy, the mother or the father is not in the home, the father dropped out of school, or is generally negative about education, the child is below grade level in reading or math by two years or more, the child had been held back at least once by the time he/she is in seventh grade, and the child exhibits a low sense of self-esteem (Darrell, 1989, pp. 81-82 and DeBlois, 1989, p. 6).

Since at-risk children are potential dropouts by definition, this information has to be applied to these students while they are still in school. Before that can be done, however, we have to actually identify who is really at-risk. But even before this, we have to understand the years between ten and fourteen.

In the mid 1980's, society was forced to focus on this age group. The high number of teen pregnancies, random acts of violence, and higher and higher suicide statistics made everyone sit up and take notice. Professionals had to reexamine the way the junior high population was being taught and the way they functioned in school (Hechinger, 1993, p.533).

Negative Adolescent Characteristics

There are three primary negative characteristics of these adolescent years: alienation, intense peer pressure, and unprotected exposure to risks. An adolescent's life can focus on any one of these, on all of these, or on any combination of these three negative elements.

One thing that was found according to Richard Price in his article “Webs of Influence: School and Community Programs” and published in Teachers College Record was the “fragmentation” and the total lack of support the adolescent received from the world, their family, and from their community (Price, 1993, p. 517). This could be one reason peers become so important, and, yet, research shows that adolescents need to have strong wholesome relationships with adults. Also, the adolescent does not want to be alienated from his/her family. The peer relationship is important for transitory things such as what designer jeans to buy, but that’s not how and when values are transmitted. The peer group has little to do with enduring values claims R.Takanishi in his work “Schools for Teenagers: A Historic Dilemma” published by Teachers College Record (1993, p. 461).

Yet, because of the need of peer approval, there seems to be a downgrading of studying and less risk taking in school. This can have such a spiral effect that failures from this change of attitude can tremendously erode self-confidence (Hechinger, 1993, p. 531). Take a close look at a young teen. He/she will be rollerblading upside down and off cliffs, but that same young person might very possibly never raise a hand in class to answer a question. There is physical, but not intellectual risk taking. The reason is peer pressure.

It’s hard to believe but less than seven percent of an adolescent’s waking hours are spent with adults. This isolation, which did not exist before this century has created this subculture of young teens, and they generally have no meaningful place in our society(Nightingale & Wolverton, 1993, p.476). In Third World

countries, young teens are most likely working with adults right beside them. So they, at least, have some sort of role model, and an idea of their place in the world. If it could be possible to poll all the American adults to find out what year or years they absolutely hated in school, it would not be a surprise to most of us that these middle school years would probably top the list. Most likely this is because of this sense of isolation and alienation, and, also a sense of not contributing to society. At least in high school there is the lure of the “real world”, but in middle school this is still too abstract.

Adolescence is also a period of exposure to risks. Before these years, parents could easily protect their children from outside influences. Now in these middle years it is much more difficult. The dangers include exposure to alcohol, drugs, and nicotine. Children face temptations and must make value choices every day they show up for school. There are temptations to be part of a gang and temptations for premature and unprotected sexual activity. There is also the exposure to and the possible involvement in violent behavior. All of the uncertainties that a teenager must face in dealing with these risks can cause depression, or, even worse, suicide (Hechinger, 1993, p.533).

Alienation, intense peer pressure, and exposure to risks are the true negative sides of the adolescent years. All of the reasons for dropping out of school can be slotted under one of these categories. For example, a young thirteen-year-old girl may even choose to become pregnant because she feels such a sense of alienation. The thought of a baby connects her permanently to another human being. The

inability to get along with teachers could be an undesired result of either a sense of alienation or intense peer pressure. The alienation from adults could be simply the manner in which many of our schools are structured. A low sense of self-esteem could come from peer pressure or, possibly, from not knowing how to deal with exposure to so many different risks. Most of the reasons attributed to dropping out of school can be categorized within these three negative characteristics of the adolescent years.

While all adolescents are exposed to alienation, to intense peer pressure, and to risks before ascertaining a value system, not all children qualify for the at-risk category. Joy Dryfoos, in her acclaimed book Adolescents At-Risk, gives a broad definition of at-risk kids. She says that they are, “young people who are at-risk of not maturing into responsible adults” (Dryfoos, 1990, p. 4). With further elaboration she investigates four areas of concern: delinquency, substance abuse, early childbearing, and school failure. She believes these are the specific reasons children become at-risk and eventually drop out of school (Dryfoos, 1990, p. 5). This certainly correlates with other research, and, again, these reasons that Dryfoos has spelled out can all fall somewhere within the negative characteristics of alienation, exposure to risks, and intense peer pressure.

So what does it take to mature into a responsible adult? According to Dryfoos (p.25) psychologists list the following:

1. The search for self-definition
2. The search for a personal set of values

3. The necessary competencies for adult roles such as problem solving and decision making
4. The acquisition of skills for social interaction with parents, peers, and others
5. Emotional dependence from parents
6. The ability to negotiate between the pressure to achieve and the acceptance of peers
7. Experimentation with a wide variety of behaviors, attitudes, and activities

Adolescence is where children learn to become adults, and some become responsible people ready to take their place in society and some do not. It is absolutely essential to identify the “do nots”.

Ways To Identify At-risk Children

In his work, “Rating Scale Identifies At-risk Students”, John Hoover, Jr. has devised a rating scale to identify at-risk students. He has named it HARP (Hoover Assessment of Risk Potential), and the form lists thirty social, scholastic, and personal attributes of at-risk children. It expands and clarifies what the research is showing, and it appears to be a scientific tool to identify these children.

The obvious factors include failing grades and physical and sexual abuse. The less obvious factors are attendance at many schools, foster care, experiences

as a runaway, and use of professional counseling (Hoover, 1989, p. 110).

Hoover continues this article with an explanation of how to use this assessment and there is an actual form included on pages 111 and 112. Math and reading level scores, the number of grades failed, participation in extra-curricular activities, single parent in the home, substance abuse, and one or both parents not graduated from high school are all important indicators of at-risk behavior on his rating scale (p.111-112).

The State of Michigan, as spelled out in State Resolution 31a in 1994, (see Appendix A) considers the following criteria an indicator of at-risk behavior:

1. Pupils whose score on their most recent MEAP reading, mathematics, or science test was: less than a category 2 in reading; less than 50% of the objectives in mathematics or science
2. Pupils who meet at least two of the following criteria

*victim of child abuse or neglect

*below grade level in English language or communication skills

*pregnant teenager or teenage parent

*eligible for free or reduced-price lunch

*atypical behavior or attendance problems

*family history of school failure, incarceration or substance abuse

Professionals have determined the criteria for at-risk children. Some at-risk students may meet all of the criteria and others may only have a few of these factors in their private lives that may contribute to potential problems. Using

Hoover's scale is beneficial because it is a black and white resource. So many points make a child highly at-risk and then teachers can make a strong case for interventions. Children with lower points can still be monitored for possible future interventions, or it can just be a way to "keep an eye on them". The HARP makes identification less subjective and educators and school boards generally like this type of resource tool. "Lucas scored in the highest percentile on the at-risk scale," just sounds better than, "I think Lucas is an at-risk kid". A master teacher's professional judgment, though, is rarely off base with an at-risk child.

At-risk Curriculum

Once these high-risk children are identified, it is imperative to develop the most beneficial curriculum and/or program to prevent them from dropping out of school. It also means finding and training teachers to help these young teens. James Bryant Conant, a former president of Harvard University and an ardent school reformer wrote:

Because of the transitional nature of these grades (middle school) teachers with an unusual combination of qualifications are needed. Satisfactory instruction in grades seven and eight requires mature teachers who have both an understanding of children, a major characteristic of elementary school teachers, and considerable knowledge in at least one subject-matter field, a major characteristic of high school teachers (Hechinger, 1993, pp. 528-

529).

Conant went on to try and persuade school boards to realize that junior high cannot be a training ground for high school teachers. It is now possible in Michigan to be granted a middle school endorsement; an advanced study of the early adolescent and appropriate curriculum. This is a positive reflection that times are changing for the junior highs and the middle schools. Conant was one of the early proponents for this reform.

There are, however, many critics of the middle school curriculum. One of these, H. Craig Heller states:

...assembly line organization of middle grades balkanizes knowledge and destroys the interconnectedness that young people are trying to find. They are asking for relevance of information, one body to another, and to themselves. Organization of curriculum along strict disciplinary lines sets some students up for failure (Heller, 1993, p. 647).

Henry Levin believes that high-risk students are not inherently at-risk. Rather, it is the structure of the school that does not accommodate their needs:

...at-risk learners are those who probably will not succeed in school because they lack the type of experiences in their community, family, and home that the school expects for success. This is according to Joseph Sanacore who wrote in the Journal of Reading, “To Treat At-risk Learners As We Treat All Learners”(1994, p. 238).

The curriculum is all wrong for these learners, but there have been only a

very few studies that have examined curricular approaches for at-risk students. There are studies that focus on counseling and therapy, but not much on what should actually be taught. What is known though, is that remedial approaches or “traditional admonishments” such as, “Get yourself organized and you will succeed,” or, “Hard work is the answer to success,” just do not work. The successful curriculum has to focus on the student’s strengths and interests according to Baum, Renzulli, and Hebert in their work “Reversing Underachievement: Stories of Success” as published in Educational Leadership (1994, p. 51).

Many teachers are finding it difficult to share ideas and to open their classroom doors to other teachers. The days are vanishing when a teacher could walk into his/her room, close the door, and nobody ever knew what was going on in that classroom. This, too, must have contributed to the sense of alienation and isolation that are negative experiences for our young people. This changing philosophy, if administrators can get their staff to buy into it, is beneficial for all children. This philosophical shift away from the structured junior high might even prevent some children from becoming at-risk in the first place.

Since we have discovered that a sense of alienation, intense peer pressure, and exposure to dangerous risks are the negatives of the adolescent experience, the curriculum must address each area. It stands to reason that by trying to change these negatives to positive experiences, our children-both at-risk and successful-should have even greater support in school. Whatever is beneficial for an at-risk

child will also be good for the rest of the school population.

Teachers need to be careful with textbooks. Many of the books are not relevant to what the adolescent is experiencing. Even many newer texts, that are simply gorgeous and well illustrated are nothing more than mini versions of a high school textbook. Sometimes, they can be four or five hundred pages of vocabulary lists and not much else (Heller, 1993, p. 647). Certainly, the books we use and the materials we bring to the classroom can create a sense of alienation if they are not meaningful.

Mentoring

Another way to attack alienation or isolation is through a mentoring program. Gordan M. Ambach says, “The schools must provide a special relationship with at least one caring adult.” It is the responsibility of this adult to be a coach and confidant and to get the right information to the student when it is needed (Heller, 1993, p. 653).

Richard Price supports this by describing mentoring, “The mentor role is one that can convey all three aspects of the supportive relationship: material aid, a sense of affirmation, and positive affect and emotional support” (Price, 1993, p. 510). Deborah Meier speaks of her school where, “Youngsters stay with the same small cluster of teachers for at least two years. Each child has a principal adviser who knows him or her and his or her family well” (Heller, 1993, p. 656).

Larry Putbrese's "Advisory Programs at the Middle School Level" as published in the National Association of Secondary School Principals Bulletin lists a number of reasons that advisory programs work:

1. They improve teacher/student relationships on a personal level
2. They give students a feeling of more control
3. They promote an atmosphere of equality
4. They provide opportunities for group work
5. They maximize the altruistic nature of early adolescence
6. They improve the sharing of feelings between students
7. They make teachers more attentive to students' behavior
8. They reduce the incidence of smoking, and/or alcohol abuse (Putbrese, 1989, p.112).

"Teachers who are most effective in reversing the underachievement pattern take time to get to know the student before initiating an investment" (Baum et al., 1994, p. 52).

Finally, according to Carolyn Bunting in her article "At-risk Early Adolescents", teachers are so important to at-risk kids that they must be trained how to develop strong interpersonal skills with these students. Teachers must have professional competence, as well as patience, open-mindedness, honesty, and respect for young people (Bunting, 1994, p. 140).

The research is conclusive that at-risk children must have a mentor relationship with an adult while they are in school. Certainly, this is a step to

reducing the sense of isolation that adolescents have, and a mentor would be beneficial for all middle school children, not just at-risk students.

Other Ideas

There are other concerns about the middle school curriculum. Fred M. Hechinger believes that these schools should have programs set up for nonviolent conflict resolution, instruction in human biology, and that school related health centers had better be available to these teenagers. By incorporating these three items into a middle school, Hechinger believes the following will be addressed:

1. The risks to which children are exposed
2. The temptations children face
3. The fateful choices children must make in shaping their values and behavior
4. The dangers of alcohol, other substance abuse, nicotine, premature, irresponsible and unprotected sexual activity, poor nutrition, and involvement in violent behavior (Hechinger, 1993, pp. 533-536).

Gordon Cawelti wrote in an article titled, "High School Restructuring; What are the Critical Elements?" that was published in the National Association of Secondary School Principals Bulletin a list of seven critical restructuring elements for secondary schools:

1. Performance standards

2. Authentic assessment
3. Interdisciplinary curriculum
4. School-based shared decision making
5. Block scheduling
6. Community outreach
7. Instructional technology

These seven ideas, if incorporated into a curriculum, should make schools more responsive to students, and this is what parents and politicians (as well as teachers) really want (Cawelti, 1995, p. 5). Cawelti also writes of a Ralston, Nebraska, high school which has performance-based standards for graduation that also features an I.E.P. for each student.

Robert DeBlois believes, “The major component of the curriculum should be interdisciplinary team projects and the main academic focus should be communication skills.” He makes further claims that teachers need to be working in teams. It is also imperative that students must be given alternative ways for success and that kids must have a chance to demonstrate their multiple intelligences (DeBlois, 1989, pp. 9-10).

“Putting together or relating of things either conceptually or organizationally,” is the definition of interdisciplinary team projects and curriculum integration. Both phrases mean the same thing. The idea dates back to the time of Plato (the more things change, the more they stay the same), and it’s a way to help a student realize that almost all knowledge is interrelated. It eliminates

subject boundaries, helps teachers with the mass of requirements that must be taught, and it helps a child make sense of what he/she is learning according to Martin-Kniep, Feige and Soodak in their work, “Curriculum Integration: An Expanded View of an Abused Idea” and published in the Journal of Curriculum and Supervision (1995, pp. 228-230).

A unit on Africa, for example, can be taught as an interdisciplinary team project. A language arts teacher can focus on African literature, a social studies person can discuss the geography of the continent, a math teacher can work with distance or square miles, and a science teacher can introduce the subject of AIDS. It all comes together very naturally, and each teacher reinforces what the other teachers are doing.

There are problems for the teachers, however. Time is a great factor because it can take hours to plan such a curriculum. At least one of the teachers needs to have experience with curriculum development, and if there is a lack of administrative support, it can be difficult to put such a program together (Martin-Kniep et al., 1995, p. 248).

Another thought on an interdisciplinary presentation is that if a student can excel in one class, such as a study of African literature, he/she may be motivated to work harder in the science area as they study AIDS, or any other subject area for that matter. Individual teachers on their own can never accomplish as much as team teaching can (Heller, 1993, p. 647).

Curriculum integration (interdisciplinary team presentation) is probably the

best program for teaching in the middle school. There isn't research that disputes the team advantages for children. This approach has to help alleviate some alienation for the students just because so many adults have to become involved, and, consequently, there are more people working together for the greater good. A couple of ideas from additional authors can help to refine curriculum integration.

In 1983 Howard Gardner wrote Frames of Mind and proposed the theory of multiple intelligences. Gardner believes that mathematical and linguistic ability-the only two intelligences we test kids for- are only part of the entire picture. The other five intelligences include spatial, musical, body-kinesthetic, interpersonal and intrapersonal.

In a later book, Multiple Intelligences: The Theory in Practice, Gardner discusses students "at-risk for school failure". He and his colleagues designed a project aptly called practical intelligence for school (PIFS), and it was just for middle school children. There are three components of training for the pupils:

1. A child had to know his/her intellectual learning profile, learning styles and strategies
2. The child had to know the structure and learning of academic tasks
3. The child had to understand the school as a complex social structure

(Gardner, 1993, p.123)

Then, Gardner put these three components together with his theory of multiple intelligences (MI), and something he called "infusion curriculum", which is really the idea of curriculum integration. He then recommended that children be allowed

to choose a project. Under this model, children can study a topic, and demonstrate their understanding of their work all in conjunction with their personal knowledge of their multiple intelligences (p. 127).

“Children do not leave their multiple intelligences behind once they reach puberty. If anything, the intelligences are more intense especially bodily-kinesthetic and interpersonal intelligences,” states Thomas Armstrong (1994). This author in “Multiple Intelligences: Seven Ways to Approach Curriculum” and published by Educational Leadership recommends some guidelines to aid teachers in planning for multiple intelligences in a classroom:

1. Linguistic: how can I use the written or spoken word?
2. Mathematical: how can I bring in numbers, calculations logic, classification, or critical thinking?
3. Spatial: how can I use visual aids, color, art, metaphor, or visual organizers?
4. Musical: how can I bring in music or environmental sounds or set key points in rhythm or melody?
5. Intrapersonal: how can I evoke personal feelings or memories or give students choices?
6. Body-kinesthetic: how can I involve the whole body or hands-on experiences?
7. Interpersonal: how can I engage students in peer or cross-age sharing, cooperative learning, or large group simulation? (Armstrong, 1994, p.

27).

Also tying in with Gardner's idea of "choosing a project" are Joan M. Savoie and Andrew S. Hughes with their work "Problem Based Learning As Classroom Solution" and published in Educational Leadership. These authors propose, "Give students a problem that really connects them with the world and empower them to generate solutions." All of the subject matter is then organized around the problem. They list six steps for their model:

1. Begin with a problem
2. Ensure that the problem connects with the real world
3. Organize the subject matter around the problem
4. Give students the major responsibility for shaping and directing their own learning
5. Use small teams as the context for most learning
6. Require students to demonstrate what they have learned

through a product of performance (Savoie & Hughes, 1994, p. 54)

Some other ways to make the curriculum even better include *The Total Talent Portfolio* and standards for authentic instruction. *The Total Talent Portfolio* is documentation of each student's strengths. Related to an I.E.P., it lists interests, best areas of academic performance, learning preferences, and preferred ways of expression (Baum et al., 1994, p. 51). Knowing this information about each student should help teachers in the planning of interdisciplinary units. Teachers then have the luxury of knowing and teaching to the strengths of their students.

F.M. Newmann and G.G. Wehlage believe that students have to act like “practicing professionals”. They recommend five standards for authentic instruction:

1. Is the emphasis on higher-order thinking?
2. Is the stress upon in-depth knowledge?
3. Is the subject matter closely related to questions of the human condition?
4. Is the inquiry focused and coherent?
5. Are teachers and students committed to mutual respect, strong effort, and good performance? (Newman & Wehlage, 1993, p. 8)

Ideas like cooperative learning, the theory of multiple intelligences, organizing subject matter around a problem, or even *The Total Talent Portfolio* in conjunction with an interdisciplinary approach (curriculum integration) is THE way to teach middle school children today. The most important thing is to use an interdisciplinary approach and enhance it with some of these other teaching tools.

To fine tune these creative ideas, Joseph Sancore writes, “Treat At-risk Learners As We Treat All Students” in the Journal of Reading, that “...a heterogeneous environment is especially effective for at-risk students since it provides them with positive peer role models, enriches them with varied social contacts, and rewards them with beneficial academic experiences.” He also believes that a heterogeneous environment permits kids to think at “different levels of understanding” and that there will be greater classroom opportunities for “equal access to learning” among all children (Sancore, 1994, pp. 240-242).

The United States Department of Education has issued a summary, published in 1990, of the ways schools respond to at-risk students (see Appendix F). The article states, "In the area of tracking, efforts to reform remain rare. This is despite research evidence that tracking does not necessarily work and despite reform pressures that call for its modification." The suggestion is that homogeneous grouping be postponed as late as possible in a student's career and then, only track in basic subject areas.

The research does show that at-risk kids need to be in a heterogeneous classroom rather than tracked in possible isolation from their peers. So, what do you do when kids do fail? The following describes one school program that assists kids who need help.

In this vast area of curriculum development the research shows, too, that traditional summer school programs are limited in their success. It is a chance for an at-risk student to make up credit, but unless these programs are flexible and carefully designed to meet the needs of the students, they cannot offer their greatest potential (Cale, 1992, p. 106). Cale continues by highlighting a Warrensburg, Missouri, summer school program in the National Association of Secondary School Principals Bulletin called "Flexible Summer School".

In this program, core teachers contracted with students who were selected for the summer session. The staff initially chose kids who had averages within ten percentage points of a passing grade, and then, they only looked at the failing grades of the classes within the core curriculum. A conference was held and the

student, a teacher, and a parent together decided the amount of work to be done and the level of proficiency to be reached. The work was independent and was determined by reviewing exactly what the student had failed. There was no rehashing of anything that had been mastered so a child's time was not wasted.

The flexibility was one of the strengths of the program and one of the best ideas. The building was open four hours a day for six weeks with the school library used as the workplace. Four teachers representing the four core classes, were in the library to act as resources. The students had to complete the assigned tasks that they had contracted for and they had to log thirty hours of attendance over the six week period. This program gave these teenagers a second chance to stay in school and another chance to graduate with their class (Cale, 1992, pp. 107-109).

The curriculum has to be modified for at-risk students. Research is showing that listening skills of these high-risk children are usually greater than their reading skills. When presenting a lesson, a teacher can give more nonverbal clues (vocal inflections, or pauses, or changes of facial expressions). A teacher can use tape recordings, and have the children follow along with the textbook. Other things that help are advance organizers, highlighting, glossing in margins, and dividing assignments into smaller units. Study guides are critical pieces of information according to Knight and Wadsworth in their article "Accommodating the At-risk Student in the Middle School Classroom" and published by the Middle School Journal (1994, p. 26).

Assessment

There has to be some method of assessment for an extended year program and the curriculum that is developed for it. The work of the students and the effectiveness of the program has to somehow be monitored and evaluated. There is not one method of grading that will serve all purposes, and grading is always somewhat subjective.

Thomas Guskey writes in Educational Leadership his article about “Making the Grade: What Benefits Students?” “The cut-off between grade categories is always arbitrary and difficult to justify. If scores for a grade of ‘B’ range from 80 to 89, students at both ends receive the same grade, even though their scores differ by nine points. But the student with a score of 79—a one point difference—receives a ‘C’” (Guskey, 1994, p. 15). Since grading is so subjective, if a teacher happens to have a bias for a student, then more problems can result. A child with discipline problems who is on the borderline of failing probably will, if he/she has met up with a teacher who happens to have a bias. Guskey believes that low grades generally do not make a child work harder, but, rather, they usually cause him/her to withdraw from learning. He writes, “Rather than attempting to punish students with a low mark, teachers can better motivate students by regarding their work as incomplete and requiring additional effort. In addition, Guskey does not believe in using the curve for assessment. “Grading on the curve pits students against one another in a competition for the few rewards (high grades) distributed by the

teacher. Under these conditions, students readily see that helping others will threaten their own chances of success. Learning becomes a game of winners and losers" (Guskey, 1994, p. 16).

The International Reading Association (IRA), and the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) have jointly published standards for assessment in the November 1994 issue of *The Journal of Reading*. According to these professional organizations, the goals should be:

1. To improve teaching and learning and it should be done in the best interest of the student
2. To allow for critical inquiry into curriculum and instruction
3. To be fair and equitable
4. To first consider the validity of the assessment and its consequences
5. To recognize the intellectual and social complexity of reading and writing and the important roles that school, home, and society have in a student's development
6. To recognize that the teacher is the most important agent in student assessment
7. To involve multiple perspectives and sources of data
8. To realize that parents must be active, essential participants in the assessment
9. To realize that everyone involved in the children's schooling must have a voice in all stages of the assessment (p. 242)

Before 1850 grading simply did not exist. Students orally demonstrated what they had learned. By the end of the nineteenth century, teachers were writing down skills that their students had mastered in order to move them along to the next level. Shortly after, high schools started using percentages and this was immediately challenged, as it still is today. In the 1930's, teachers started to grade on the "curve" and it seemed fair at the time because researchers had recently determined that I.Q. followed a curve. It was also in this time period that some schools started to use a pass-fail or mastery option. In 1958, a man by the name of Ellis Page did much research on assessment and he showed that grades can have a positive effect on student learning, but only when the grades are accompanied by positive comments from the teacher (Guskey, 1994, p. 8).

Guskey also states, "The key question is what information provides the most accurate depiction of students' learning at this time? In nearly all cases the answer is 'the most current information'. If students demonstrated that past assessment information doesn't accurately reflect their learning, new information must take its place" (Guskey, 1994, p. 18).

The newest innovation is portfolio assessment. The use of individual portfolios for children is supposed to be more equitable, to focus more clearly on student outcomes, and to provide parents and the community with tangible results of a child's achievement according to Herman and Winters in "Portfolio Research: A Slim Collection" published in Educational Leadership (1994, p. 48). However, there is almost no research to support this. The authors claim that in researching

information for portfolio assessment over a period of ten years, they could find only seven articles that report technical data or actually used scientific methods for research on the validity and reliability of portfolios (Herman & Winters, 1994, p. 49). This is a problem because portfolios sound like a great idea but without enough research, no one can be certain if they really are a powerful alternative to traditional assessments.

Conclusions

There are almost 1300 educational articles on at-risk children. By narrowing this information to include only middle school children, the literature became manageable. There is conclusive data on at-risk middle school children. First of all, at-risk children are here to stay, and our schools must be able to identify them and offer programs especially for them. There is at least one assessment tool (HARP) to identify at-risk children, and states, such as Michigan, are beginning to offer guidelines to help teachers and administrators recognize these children.

Secondly, there are things that really do help these children. An advisory or mentoring program is recommended by almost every one as a means to help teens feel less isolated and alienated (a major reason for school failure) and as a way to get important information to these children. This does not even necessarily have to be academic information, but it could be life skills or life management

information. The research shows conclusively that an interdisciplinary team approach is the best way to organize a curriculum. Once this is implemented, other useful and important ideas can also be made part of the curriculum. This includes things like cooperative learning, peer tutoring, and teaching to multiple intelligences. These aids to teaching are the icing on the cake.

Finally, the concept of grading or assessment has never reached a professional consensus. It is subjective and subject to bias. It is arbitrary and sometimes inaccurate, and, yet, it is a requirement from parents and the community. Portfolios are the newest alternative, but there is almost no research to support their reliability and validity.

Because the at-risk label is fairly new in our vocabulary, it seemed important to me to find current literature sources. I did not read anything written before 1987. As school districts and professionals start to focus on these children, the best research and ideas should be the most current.

Joy Dryfoos' book Adolescents At-Risk became my text for all the fundamental ideas I wanted to explore. "At the Crossroads: Voices from the Carnegie Institute on Adolescent Health" by H. Craig Heller offered a wealth of research from a variety of sources. Elliot Merenbloom, an authority on middle school structure, spoke in Grand Haven on June 26th and 27th, 1995, and from him I had an excellent review of the psychology of adolescents. These three sources enabled me to focus and explore the ideas that I learned were crucial to instituting an extended year program.

The remaining sources expanded on these three primary authors and speakers. For example, J. Hoover, who actually devised a rating scale for at-risk children, Howard Gardner and his theory of multiple intelligences, and J. Cale with his documentation of a very unusual summer school greatly added to my personal knowledge. Every listed source in this literature review was beneficial to me. I felt very prepared as I next began to organize an at-risk program for the summer of 1995.