

February 2021

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Recommended Citation

Harrison, Lisa and Bishop, Penny A. (2021) "The Evolving Middle School Concept: This We (Still) Believe," *Current Issues in Middle Level Education*: Vol. 25 : Iss. 2 , Article 2.

DOI: 10.20429/cimle.2021.250202

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.georgiasouthern.edu/cimle/vol25/iss2/2>

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The Evolving Middle School Concept: This We (Still) Believe

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In 1982, approximately two decades after the start of the middle school movement, the Association for Middle Level Education (AMLE), formerly National Middle School Association, published the inaugural edition of *This We Believe*. Since its release, *This We Believe* has served as the landmark position paper that frames what is widely known as the middle school concept. Outlined in the text are education practices specifically designed to guide the teaching of young adolescents, both to advance their learning and to support their overall well-being.

The middle school movement is not static (Schaefer et al., 2016) and thus *This We Believe* serves as a living position paper that reflects the maturation of the middle school concept (Lounsbury, 2010). What remains consistent across the various editions of *This We Believe*, however, is the clear advocacy for an education that is responsive to the needs of young adolescents. As we release the fifth edition, titled *The Successful Middle School: This We Believe* (Bishop & Harrison, 2021), this most recent iteration increases the utility of the text and, more notably, reflects a more responsive approach to the vast range of experiences and diversity of young adolescents.

What's New

One significant change within *The Successful Middle School* is the inclusion of research throughout the text. While research has historically informed the practices shared in the text, previous iterations of *This We Believe* relied on a companion book that provided research and resources in support of the middle school concept. Within this edition, endnotes enable readers to more easily access supporting research to further advance their understanding of concepts and practices discussed in the book. We have also paid increased attention to the diversity of study samples, researchers, and sources that inform the recommended practices.

Another change found within the text is a reconceptualized section on young adolescents' developmental characteristics. A four-part framework from which to view young adolescent development addresses the complexity and possible limitations of relying solely on developmentalism while simultaneously discussing the value of developmentally responsive practices. In addition, each developmental domain now includes implications for practice that support readers' understanding of how various developmental characteristics influence teaching and learning.

The most substantial and consistent change found within *The Successful Middle School* is the integration of equity throughout the position paper. One of the largest critiques of *This We Believe*, and the middle school movement at large, has been the absence of a focus on culturally responsive practices and an overreliance on developmentalism to explain the experiences of young adolescents (Brinegar, Harrison, & Hurd, 2019; Busey, 2017). Agreeing with this critique and as a response to the mass global protest largely ignited by the murder of George Floyd in the

United States, the Association for Middle Level Education made a commitment to allyship and advocacy for racial equity and social progress. One concrete action outlined by AMLE was to “Ensure that equitable best practices are a central theme woven throughout the updated edition of our foundational text, known over the years as *This We Believe*” (AMLE, 2020, para 4).

Research indicates that globally the education system has failed many youth, particularly youth impacted by poverty, Black and Brown youth, immigrants, and those who are part of the LGBTQ community (Ainscow, 2016; Carter Andrews & Gutwein, 2020; Cornu, 2016; Gorski, 2017; Osler, 2020). However, research also points to the transformative nature of education (Coffey & Fulton, 2018; Davis & Hall, 2020; Nojan, 2020; Reyes, 2019). It is with recognition of this duality of education that *The Successful Middle School* takes up equity. In order to disrupt the status quo, transformative middle level educators ask, “Who is education not working for?” and “In what ways?” Answering these two important questions requires educators to examine their practices in order to move towards equitable education for all young adolescents. *The Successful Middle School* intentionally weaves equitable education practices throughout all characteristics of an effective middle school, acknowledging that equity, diversity, and inclusion are not isolated concepts, but rather commitments that middle level educators must reflect upon in all aspects of teaching and learning. This focus also prompted the creation of two new characteristics, “Policies and practices are student-centered, unbiased, and fairly implemented” and “School safety is addressed proactively, justly, and thoughtfully.” A final notable change is the inclusion of the term *diverse* to the description of curriculum for young adolescents. This addition calls for a responsive curriculum that exposes young adolescents to diverse perspectives, while also sustaining students’ cultural and linguistic backgrounds and experiences (Paris & Alim, 2017).

The Utility of *The Successful Middle School*

As a living document, the position paper not only is designed to change and grow but also to be actively used. Though there is no prescriptive way to use *The Successful Middle School*, we offer three approaches that advocates of young adolescents can employ to make the most out of the text. The first is to engage in a small group book study of the text during common planning time, team meetings, professional learning communities, or other school-wide structures. Implementation of the practices within the text are best supported through school-wide application. Book studies, in particular, can provide preservice and in-service teachers with opportunities to reflect on their current practice in a non-threatening way, moving beyond superficial reviews of a text (Burbank & Kauchak, 2010). A book study of *The Successful Middle School* can create a space for middle level educators to collaborate and share ideas on ways to better support teaching and learning.

Another way to engage with the text is for middle level school leaders to use the 18 characteristics as a framework for school assessment. By gathering data from varied stakeholders (including students) on the extent to which their school embodies the responsive education described in the position paper, a leader can capture a nuanced view of the current status. The results of the assessment can be used to inform school improvement plans and guide the creation of meaningful professional development. This can help transition the practices found within *The Successful Middle School* from aspirational to operational.

Lastly, sharing *The Successful Middle School* with community partners and policymakers can be a powerful way to inform various constituencies about young adolescents and the

research-based practices that advance their learning. Middle level educators have a duty to advocate for young adolescents and to push against policies that do not support the overall well-being of all students. *The Successful Middle School* can serve as a key resource, to disseminate or cite, that explains developmentally appropriate and culturally responsive approaches to educating young adolescents.

The Successful Middle School builds upon many decades of commitment to the middle school concept. The fifth edition of AMLE's landmark position paper amplifies the importance of responding both to young adolescents' developmental needs and to their social identities. The edition's release amidst a global pandemic and increasing protests against racial injustice reminds us that responding to the full diversity of student experience is not optional. It is critical to helping young adolescents--and indeed the world--to thrive, now and in the future.

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This article was published originally in the November 2020 issue of *Bridge in the Middle*, the annual journal of the European League for Middle Level Education. It is published here in *Current Issues in Middle Level Education* in collaboration with the authors, the Association for Middle Level Education, and the European League for Middle Level Education.