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NMSA Research Summary #5 Young Adolescents' Developmental Needs (1996)

Question: What are the specialized needs of young adolescents ages 10- 15? (i.e. Why develop curricula and educational programs tailored to these unique needs?)

Seven key developmental needs

The uniqueness of the phase of early adolescence stems from a variety of developmental needs, variations in the maturation rate, and complexity due to their simultaneous occurrence. Seven key developmental needs (Scales, 1991) characterize early adolescence:

- positive social interaction with adults and peers
- structure and clear limits
- physical activity
- creative expression
- competence and achievement
- meaningful participation in families, school
- communities, opportunities for self-definition

Expressed another way, "Every child wants to believe in himself or herself as a successful person; every youngster wants to be liked and respected; every youngster wants physical exercises and freedom to move; and youngsters want life to be just" (Stevenson, 1992). Not meeting these needs often results in alienation from school, loss of general self-esteem and a sense of belonging, and destructive methods of coping, including delinquency and drugs.

Why develop educational programs to meet these needs?

Growing numbers of at-risk students

Growing numbers of at-risk adolescents and recognition of early adolescence as the last primary bulwark of intervention have focused attention on developmentally appropriate education and the effect of school setting on adolescent development. Scales (1991) noted that about 80% of young people do not experience a stressful adolescence. Yet, a growing number of these young people are "at risk of being unprepared and unsuccessful in the modern social and economic world" (p.3). These growing numbers of at risk students accentuate the importance of helping young adolescents form coping strategies, a positive self-esteem, and a social support system.

Decline in self-esteem and self competence

Wigfield & Eccles (1994) found a decline in young adolescents' self-esteem, values towards school subjects, and competency beliefs in the transition from an elementary sixth grade setting to a departmentalized junior high setting. Of special concern was the negative change in competency beliefs which may indicate the potential for some young adolescents being at risk for school failure.

A growing body of research addresses young women and minority students achieving a sense of identity. Researchers noted early maturing females score lower on measures of self-esteem than do early maturing males, indicating the need for addressing gender role socialization at the time when young women discover the disparity in power and prestige associated with life options for males and females (Gilligan et al., 1989; Offer et al., 1988; Orenstein, 1994). When conflicting messages from the majority culture are particularly confusing to minority youth, addressing ethnic issues is another area of importance in helping all students develop a sense of identity (Phinney, 1989).

Inappropriate school environments

Causes of decline in beliefs, values, and self-esteem have been explained in part by school settings not meeting the developmental needs of young adolescents (Wigfield & Eccles, 1994). On the one hand, young adolescents possess an increasing desire for autonomy, a growing orientation to peers, a concern about social acceptance, an increased need to resolve identity issues, and an increased tendency for an egocentric orientation. On the other hand, these attributes are at odds with traditional junior high settings of larger and less personable schools, less positive teachers student relationships, stricter assessment measures, more competitive and controlled environments, fewer opportunities for decision-making, choice, and self-management, with more whole class practices, and more social/ability comparison.

Wigfield and Eccles (1994) concluded, "As schools change in ways that may better match early adolescents' developing characteristics, perhaps the declines in adolescents' achievement beliefs and values observed... will diminish" (p. 133).

Programs which meet developmental needs

Middle school programs and practices address developmental needs through a variety of activities and strategies. As young adolescents have an orientation toward peers and a concern about social acceptance, work in small groups and advisory programs promote opportunities for interaction with peers and adults. Task-focused strategies divert attention from social and ability comparison to task completion and achievement (Urdan, Midgley, Wood, 1995). Interdisciplinary team organization fosters feelings of belonging to a group of 100-140 fellow students, while advisory groups allow time and a small group for discussion of issues. Achievement and competence is achieved through authentic assessment based on personal goals, progress, and improvement, challenging intellectual material focused on relevant problems and issues, and with recognition by peers and adults.

The increase in the desire for autonomy and resolving identity issues can be addressed through learning strategies involving choice, a curriculum based on social and individual interests (Beane, 1990), opportunities for exploration of topics in exploratory programs, and the prevalence of a safe environment for experimentation. Non-competitive intramurals, flexible classroom structures, and hands-on activities incorporate the need for physical activity and movement. Service projects and project-based learning strategies capitalize upon young adolescents' creative expression and

need for meaningful participation and experimentation with aspects of identity within a community, including the need for ethnic expressions of identity.

Such a curriculum combines the needs of young adolescence with societal expectations and forces to provide learning experiences which promote healthy self-images and relationships, academic stimulation and challenge, and moral and physical development.

Related Articles

1. Summary of Young Adolescents' Developmental Needs, from "Creating a Developmental Framework: The Positive Possibilities of Young Adolescents," in A Portrait of Young Adolescents in the 1990s, by P. Scales. Minneapolis, MN: Search Institute Center for Early Adolescence.
2. "Tasks of Adolescence" by R. Simmons and D. Blyth, 1987, in the introduction to Moving Into Adolescence. New York: Aldine de Gruyter.
3. "Meeting the Developmental Needs of Adolescents," by F. Loda (January, 1995) in Principal, 74(3).

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