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Engaging All Middle Level Learners in Multi-Disciplinary Curricula

By Marsha M. Sprague, Dale Pennell, and LeeAnne Sulzberger

The middle level school is an ideal setting for connecting the curriculum. The team approach allows teachers time to plan together, and sharing a common group of students makes multidisciplinary instruction feasible. Nevertheless, many middle level schools have had a difficult time implementing multidisciplinary instruction.

A cornerstone of the middle school concept is the use of meaningful, connected curricula with students (Muth and Aldermann, 1992). The adolescent years are particularly fruitful times to surround students with linked curricular themes (Sylwester, 1990). As the frontal lobe of the brain grows and organizes, students are better able to abstract and search out the implications of connected information.

Despite the strong support for thematic units at the middle school level, few teachers have received systematic training and guidance in planning and using thematic units. At a statewide middle school conference in Norfolk, Va., fewer than 10 percent of teachers attending an interdisciplinary session reported any training in constructing and/or using thematic units. This article describes the successful journey of one middle school toward the consistent use of multidisciplinary instruction.

Initiation

The first stage of implementing the middle school concept in York County, Va., involved the movement of sixth grade teachers and students into middle schools and the reconfiguration of teachers and students into teams. Teachers were given extensive inservice training in working as team mem-

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bers and arriving at consensual decision making. Little attention was paid to the curriculum and the type of instruction that would be delivered.

Once the reorganization was accomplished and teachers were working as teams, the goals of effective curriculum and instruction were addressed. One of the components of this phase was that all teachers would participate in the planning and delivery of an integrated curriculum, loosely defined as a common curriculum designed and taught by all (or most) members of a team.

Tabb Middle School in Yorktown, Va., approached the task of integrating the curriculum by involving teachers in the initial planning stages. The assistant principal was charged with meeting a number of schoolwide goals, including integrated curriculum. She created schoolwide committees for each goal, and requested that each core teaching team nominate a member for one of the committees. Encore (related arts) teachers were also asked to join one of the committees. In that way, teachers who were interested in integrated curricula could participate in designing ways to reach that goal. The assistant principal also targeted several teachers who were already involved in integrated curriculum projects and asked them to join the Integrated Curriculum Committee (ICC).

The committee met and elected two co-chairs, an eighth grade English teacher and a seventh-grade math teacher (later replaced by a Spanish teacher). The committee spent the first month reading articles about integrated curriculum. After reading the articles and discussing them, the committee agreed they needed a consultant to work with the staff on the principles and practices of curriculum integration. They asked the schoolwide staff development committee to identify a local consultant.

The staff development committee identified a local university consultant who agreed to work with the school under the following conditions:

1. The staff development would be a long-term project, not a one-time workshop.
2. Teachers would be given released time for the training instead of being asked to stay after school.

These conditions were embraced by the assistant principal, who wrote a mini-grant to fund the costs of the consultant and substitutes who would provide released time.

The consultant and the school committee designed an initial training session to be held in November. This half-day session was repeated in the afternoon, so a small cadre of substitutes could cover the entire day and allow more teachers to attend. The participants consisted of one member of

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each academic core team and one member of each of the encore subjects (art, music, physical education, foreign language, technology). The media specialist was also included.

The first training sessions contained the following components:

- What is integrated curriculum, and why is it important for student learning?
- What are the various forms of integrated curricula, and which type is appropriate for Tabb Middle School?
- What is the first step in planning for this type of integration?

What is integrated curriculum, and why is it important for student learning?

The participants decided that the type of integrated instruction most appropriate for the school was multidisciplinary instruction, where the content areas retain their integrity but are linked by the teaching of a common theme (Jacobs, 1989). The first step was to look for ways to identify a theme. The consultant identified four ways:

1. Curriculum mapping, where teachers lay out their plan of study for the year and search for possible overlap
2. Review of district curriculum guides to search for common areas
3. Teacher interest and experience
4. Student interest.

The participants engaged in a simulation in which they used each method to identify a possible theme for a given grade level. They were then given a checklist to assess the quality of the chosen theme.

The participants were asked to use this same process in working with their teams (or content colleagues, in the case of the encore teachers) to identify an appropriate theme. They were given two months to do this. At that time, they would return for a second training session that would lead them through the process of developing a thematic unit.

Two months later, all participants convened for a second half-day workshop. Again, substitutes covered classes. All participants came prepared with a theme that had been developed by the teams or content areas. These themes were shared and discussed. The consultant then led participants through a planning simulation of a thematic unit. The consultant had prepared a package of activities that could be used by participants as they worked within their teams to create a thematic unit.

Many of the teachers were concerned about the time required to create and teach a thematic unit. Therefore, the ICC established a liberal timeline: by the end of the school year, all teams would submit a plan for a thematic unit that could be taught any time the following school year. Teachers

agreed that this seemed a reasonable goal. The units would be submitted to the assistant principal in June.

A survey conducted by the ICC found that most workshop participants were comfortable with their training and felt qualified to lead the planning of a thematic unit. The only participants with significant problems were the encore teachers, who lacked common planning times and who found themselves creating artificial themes that had little meaning. As the planning intensified, they asked if they could attach themselves to academic core teams and add to those themes rather than develop the ones they had created initially. The assistant principal agreed.

To increase the interest in multidisciplinary instruction, the assistant principal arranged for a team of teachers from another part of the state to visit the school and present their experiences with multidisciplinary instruction. These teachers visited on a teacher work day during the spring and presented many practical examples of thematic units. Approximately 30 Tabb teachers attended this voluntary workshop and all were impressed by the enthusiasm and positive experiences of the visiting teachers.

Implementation

By June, all Tabb Middle School teams had submitted plans for a thematic unit, and two teams had taught the required units. These two teams had very successful experiences and shared them with the ICC. One team taught a unit on the Roaring Twenties and the other taught one on the Rain Forest. Both units were very visible in the school—teachers and students dressed in costumes, wore special T-shirts, and displayed bulletin boards with photographs of student activities. These early implementers were positive influences toward the adopting of multidisciplinary instruction.

Fortunately, there were few changes among teams and team members as the new school year got underway, although there was some concern that the teams might have lost interest and momentum since they first planned the unit. Therefore, the university consultant was rehired in September to review all units and meet with teams individually to discuss the thematic units that had been submitted. This was done during team planning time and consisted of a 45-minute roundtable discussion. The consultant led the teams through a “talking paper” that focused on the strengths of the unit and invited team members to identify potential problems. In addition, teams were asked to identify when the unit would be taught.

Members of the two teams that had already taught their units shared with the consultant what parts of the planning guide had been most helpful. One team had developed an evaluation worksheet for students, which was distributed to all teams. One of the early implementing teams had

decided to create and teach a second unit.

All teams taught at least one multidisciplinary unit during the course of the year, involving almost all teachers and students at the school. The ICC continued to meet on a regular basis and shared experiences of the various teams in teaching the multidisciplinary units. Teachers were asked to submit the final units they had taught to the ICC, which bound them in three-ring binders.

Institutionalization

The goal of the ICC was to have all teams engage in at least two multidisciplinary units each year—one that they developed and one (or more) that was “borrowed” from another team. To that end, the ICC put the bound copies of each unit in the media center and distributed a list of available units to all teachers.

Unfortunately (and inevitably) several factors occurred during the following two years to obscure the emphasis on multidisciplinary instruction. First, a new principal was hired, who instituted a major staff development effort around *Dimensions of Learning* (Marzano and Pickering, 1991). The principal had little experience with integrated curriculum and did not see it as necessarily compatible with the *Dimensions* framework. Second, a new middle school was built and one-third of the teachers at Tabb Middle School were reassigned, resulting in the creation of many new or reconfigured teams. Both changes had the potential of diluting the work that had been done in using a multidisciplinary curriculum. Therefore, faculty members who had been leaders in the ICC instituted several activities to ensure the thematic units would continue.

First, one of the co-chairs demonstrated the bound copies of the thematic units that were available at a schoolwide staff development day. Teachers who had taught the units were asked to comment on their strengths. Since many teachers were on new teams or teaching at new grade levels, they were interested in the material that had been developed.

Second, the ICC chairs suggested that teachers who planned new units using the *Dimensions of Learning* framework be encouraged to develop thematic units. This was endorsed by the new principal.

Third, the teachers continued to display bulletin boards showing student participation in multidisciplinary units. One of these bulletin boards was near the entrance to the school, so every teacher, student, and parent could see student performance in multidisciplinary themes such as “M.A.N.: Minorities Are the Nation.”

The goal of the ICC was to have all teams engage in at least two multidisciplinary units each year...

Finally, the assistant principal and staff members created an outdoor laboratory in an interior courtyard of the building. This area included a butterfly garden, a fish pond, and a variety of vegetation. Teachers of all subject areas were encouraged to think of ways to use the outdoor laboratory for multidisciplinary themes. Suggested topics were "Colonial Herbs," "The Mathematics of Gardening," and "Butterflies: Art and Economy." The area provided a "virtual laboratory" for multidisciplinary instruction.

Conclusion

It appears that the attempt to engage all learners (and teachers) at Tabb Middle School in interdisciplinary curriculum has been successful. This success may be attributed to the tenets of Fullan (1991) and other staff development experts who have argued that sustained change requires a combination of elements. Some of the factors that have proved especially helpful in this program include the following:

✓ *Innovation requires a long-term commitment.*

The scope of this innovation was at least three years, and probably more. Teachers knew it was a long-term effort that would not be replaced by another project at the end of the year.

✓ *Teachers need to drive school change.*

The use of the schoolwide subcommittee to plan and schedule the effort made it more palatable to teachers. The subcommittee members used their own experiences to decide what was reasonable and effective, and teachers were responsible for most of the training, since the initial group led their team members to plan the thematic unit.

✓ *Change requires support.*

The commitment to provide extended training and some released time was an important factor in teachers' participation.

✓ *Some pressure helps.*

The fact that there was accountability, both to the schoolwide committee and to the school administrator, definitely caused team members to participate and fulfill their tasks. They knew their work would be viewed by peers and supervisors, and that it might be used by other teams.

✓ *Collaboration is critical.*

Neither the administrator, nor the school subcommittee, nor the university consultant working alone could have accomplished all the necessary tasks. It was the synergy of all three components that allowed the change to succeed.

✓ *Involvement of an administrator is key.*

Since the early studies of Berman and McLaughlin (1978), it has been clear that an involved administrator is an effective catalyst in school innovation. The dedication of the assistant principal was necessary to create the schoolwide committee, to hire the consultant, and to obtain financial resources for released time.

✓ *Training can and should occur in many forms.*

At least four different types of "training" were used to help all teachers learn about thematic units. The first was the traditional "input" sessions held during the fall of the first year and conducted by an external trainer. The second type was the team meetings in which the initial group of trained teachers shared this information with their teammates and led them through the planning and design process. A third type was the demonstration and sharing of successful thematic units by a team from a different middle school. A fourth type of training occurred during the reflective review of the draft units during a roundtable discussion.

It was the combination of all these factors that led Tabb Middle School to the point where every teacher participated in planning and implementing interdisciplinary units. Most of the teams have reported that students responded enthusiastically and this has given them the incentive to repeat the effort. One teacher summed up the experience by saying, "I haven't had this much fun in 20 years!" ~**B**

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