

Teaching Intellectually Challenging Social Studies in the Middle School: Problems and Possibilities

Hilary G. Conklin

“Research & Practice,” established early in 2001, features educational research that is directly relevant to the work of classroom teachers. Here, I invited Hilary Conklin to share her work on social studies education in the middle school. She focuses on the disagreement over whether middle schoolers are “ready” for intellectual challenge. Is there a mismatch between what is possible and what is practiced in middle school social studies classrooms?

—Walter C. Parker,
“Research and Practice” Editor,
University of Washington

You know, having [middle school] students discuss controversial public issues, examine primary sources, analyze social problems... [that approach] seems way more appropriate for high school students.

—Brett,¹ secondary social studies teacher

As far as controversial public issues and examining stuff like that... I think that usually works better when you are older and have been able to really live life a little more... I just think that maybe the goal of history in middle school is to prepare them for higher level work by giving them basic facts...

—Leah, secondary social studies teacher

Are middle schoolers capable of discussing the war in Iraq in meaningful ways? Can seventh graders develop informed ideas about presidential candidates' positions on health care? Should young adolescents discuss controversial public issues, interpret primary sources, and analyze social problems? Thoughtful social studies educators disagree. While some educators advocate engaging all students in challenging intellectual work, as the quotes above suggest, some teachers believe this kind of teaching and learning is not possible or appropriate at the middle school level; they believe such instruction should be reserved until high school. What, then, should social studies teaching at the middle school level look like?

On the one hand, research suggests that middle school students (grades 6–8) are highly capable of the tasks described above, and many educators and researchers agree that the kind of

thinking these tasks require is beneficial for—and possible with—learners of all ages.² Scholars have documented classrooms in which both elementary and middle school learners are interpreting historical evidence, drawing conclusions based on this evidence, and discussing controversial issues.³ Indeed, many middle school social studies teachers routinely engage their students in similar practice. As the educational psychologist Jerome Bruner explained, “any subject can be taught effectively in some intellectually honest form to any child at any stage of development.”⁴ According to Bruner, learners of all ages are ready and able to take part in substantive intellectual work.

Yet while considerable evidence illustrates that middle school students can engage in intellectually challenging social studies learning, other research has shown that many teachers believe that this kind of teaching should be

postponed until students are older, more mature, and more “intellectually ready”—in the high school grades or beyond.⁵ There are many caring educators who value intellectually challenging teaching and want the best for their students but believe that teaching involving the discussion of controversial issues and examination of primary sources is either not appropriate for young adolescents or not possible at this age level. Instead, these teachers think the middle school years should be used to introduce factual information to, as they often say, “lay the groundwork” for the higher level thinking that students can pursue in their high school years. According to this perspective, middle school is a time to prepare for the more rigorous demands of high school. As one teacher told me:

I hate to cheat middle school social studies teachers, but I think it's basically an introduction to high school. I think it's introducing students about being American citizens... I don't think you're going to get any impressive, intensive content in any [middle school] social studies course.

As a result, many students in middle school classrooms experience social studies instruction that emphasizes factual

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recall and hands-on activities that require only lower order thinking.⁶

What explains this mismatch between what is possible and what is often put into practice in middle school social studies classrooms? In this article, I examine several likely explanations for this disconnect, and then I explore the teaching and learning possibilities for social studies instruction in the middle school years.

The Problem with Hormones

The words “middle school” and “middle school teaching” conjure up powerful—usually negative—images among educators and the general public alike. Young adolescents are commonly referred to as “hormones with feet,” and many adults quiver at recollections of their own middle school years. Writer Anne Lamott describes her worst fear as she anticipates the birth of her son:

...worse than just about anything else is the agonizing issue of how on earth anyone can bring a child into this world knowing full well that he or she is eventually going to have to go through the seventh and eighth grades.⁷

Meanwhile, those who dare to teach at the middle school level are often considered ready for sainthood or the insane asylum.

Popular culture and the media play a pivotal role in shaping and reinforcing these dark visions of the middle school years. Several years ago, *Time* magazine ran a special issue titled “Being 13” that featured a sullen, i-Pod engrossed young teenage girl on its cover and a lead story titled “Is middle school bad for kids?”⁸ More recently, the *New York Times* published a series of articles focused on the middle school years with titles such as “Middle school manages distractions of adolescence”⁹ and “For teachers, middle school is test of wills.”¹⁰ In a subsequent article, *Times* writer Elissa Gootman labeled middle school an “educational black hole where raging hormones, changes in how youngsters learn and a

dearth of great teachers can collide to send test scores plummeting.”¹¹

Intentionally or not, headlines and images such as these bolster negative stereotypes of young adolescents through their emphasis on hormones, the battles of the middle school years, and the challenges of engaging early adolescents in intellectual activity. As Nancy Lesko explains, “adolescents are considered under the control of hormones and unavailable for serious (i.e., critical) school tasks and responsibilities.”¹²

Similarly, the common characterization of the middle school years as a “Turning Point” in human development—a transitional time when students undergo rapid and significant changes socially, emotionally, physically, and cognitively—ironically draws attention away from the actual “point” around which this turning occurs. Focusing on the transitional nature of the middle school years reinforces the idea that middle school is a time of preparation for more challenging learning—the transition to high school—rather than a time that is worthy in its own right for pursuing meaningful instruction. This future orientation sets up the thinking that educators need to prepare young adolescents for the learning ahead of them and introduce them to the ideas they will encounter in the older grades. Yet when educators concentrate on who young people are transitioning into, instead of who they are now, they sacrifice opportunities for meaningful learning today—learning that actually engages students and challenges them to use their minds. Given these pervasive conceptions of young adolescence, it is quite understandable that many teachers come to think of the middle school years as a time that is difficult to engage students in intellectual pursuits.

Some readers may ask, however, isn't there some truth to the idea that young adolescents are going through a transition? Aren't they in the midst of profound physiological, cognitive, emotional, and social changes? One way to understand this apparent discrepancy is to recognize that the common images of young adolescence are largely social constructs. Kenneth

Saltman provides a helpful explanation about the socially constructed nature of adolescence. He says:

To claim that adolescence is a social construction is not to say, for example, that puberty is a fiction or merely a narrative with no natural scientific content. However, to recognize that adolescence is a social construction is to recognize...that the meaning of biological or psychological realities do become meaningful or relevant in different ways in different social contexts.¹³

In other words, while there are particular physical realities of young adolescence, educators can interpret these realities and their implications for classroom instruction in different ways.

Teachers can use young adolescents' physiological attributes as their defining characteristics and think of these young people primarily in terms of their hormones and their affinity for peers,¹⁴ or they can think of young adolescents first as learners, people with ideas and questions about the world, who need educators who can connect their current understandings to challenging opportunities to solve problems. Educators have a choice of whether to focus on the physiological characteristics and the stereotypes these characteristics often accompany, or whether to acknowledge these facts as partial truths about young adolescents and meanwhile engage them in challenging learning.

Possibilities for Intellectually Challenging Social Studies in the Middle Grades

If we choose to focus on the intellectual readiness, even eagerness, of young adolescents, what does this mean for middle school social studies teaching? What would intellectually challenging social studies in the middle grades look like? Again, Jerome Bruner offers a helpful guiding principle. He explained:

...intellectual activity anywhere is the same, whether at the frontier

of knowledge or in a third-grade classroom. What a scientist does at his desk or in his laboratory, what a literary critic does in reading a poem, are of the same order as what anybody else does when he is engaged in like activities—if he is to achieve understanding. The difference is in degree, not in kind.¹⁵

According to Bruner, although the quantity or level of intellectual work may be adjusted to the particular learners, the nature of the intellectual work at different age or grade levels should be marked by comparable quality. Middle school students, then, should engage in learning that is of the same intellectual quality as that of high school students, just as kindergartners should engage in learning of the same intellectual quality as middle schoolers, but this learning must be tailored to the particular learners present.

Newmann, King, and Carmichael provide some helpful defining features of high-quality intellectual activity—what they term “authentic intellectual work.” This is work characterized by rigorous, relevant learning that emphasizes higher order thinking skills and value beyond school.¹⁶ Learning of this kind demands that students—of any age—construct knowledge and manipulate information such that they arrive at new interpretations or conclusions. They are not simply receiving factual information or reciting pre-specified ideas, but instead are explaining concepts and developing hypotheses. Students engaged in this kind of learning have opportunities to develop deep understandings of concepts and solve new problems, rather than learning fragmented, discrete pieces of knowledge. And, this kind of learning gives students the opportunity to talk with one another to develop shared understandings, rather than merely responding to teachers’ questions. When students are engaged in relevant learning with intellectual quality, they have the opportunity to see connections between classroom learning and real world problems; they develop connections to their own lives and experiences. How, then,

might teachers tailor such instruction for middle school learners?

Believe in Them

Perhaps most important, teachers must believe that middle school students are able and willing to engage in challenging instruction. Like all students, young adolescents are able to develop informed opinions about public issues or historical dilemmas, reason about them, and con-

struct possible solutions. Middle school students are at a time in their lives when they are developing values and gaining new ways of thinking,¹⁷ making it a particularly rich time to explore complex social issues with them. As James Beane notes,

Those who really listen to early adolescents know that at both personal and social levels many are

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concerned about the environment, prejudice, injustice, poverty, hunger, war, politics, violence and the threat these issues pose to the future of our world.¹⁸

Indeed, as a teacher said to me:

I think the hardest thing that middle schoolers face, in terms of getting in the way of what they're capable of, is underestimating their ability. I think that middle schoolers are capable of pretty much anything they put their minds to....

Focusing on young adolescents' intellectual abilities and interests does not mean that educators should ignore their physical, cognitive, social, and emotional changes. Instead, by taking into account middle school students' characteristics and showing compassion and appreciation for their sometimes enigmatic qualities, teachers can capitalize on what they

bring to the classroom setting and use this understanding to guide instruction towards sophisticated learning. Indeed, at one moment, young adolescents may exhibit sophisticated, higher-order thinking, but at the next moment ask basic, concrete questions that appear incongruous with their previous thinking. Their minds are changing and developing, and this kind of incongruity is to be expected. Their height and physical development may appear out of sync with the ideas they express; they often seem to possess boundless energy. Further, young adolescents are exploring their identities and navigating who they are in relation to their peers. In part, simply by showing warmth, a sense of humor, and an understanding of these characteristics, teachers can establish an environment that sets the stage for exploring complex social studies learning. Teachers can also build on young adolescents' natural inclinations (rather than resist them) by doing things like carefully structuring opportunities for young adolescents to socialize and collaborate with their peers—around challenging academic tasks.

Scaffold Instruction

Another way to facilitate young adolescents' engagement in challenging social studies learning involves scaffolding instruction to help them accomplish higher order thinking. Scaffolding is, admittedly, a marker of high quality teaching at any grade level, but it can be particularly helpful in the middle grades. For example, many teachers who lead Socratic seminars post written discussion norms to guide the conduct of the seminar;¹⁹ providing this visual aid along with modeling these norms helps middle school students develop the skills required for engaging in complex discussion. Similarly, if we want middle school students to analyze a political cartoon, we need to help them learn the steps or other questions embedded in this task. We can provide them with guided questions that will lead them

to the kind of thinking we want from them—from assessing the content and message of a cartoon to judging their own opinion of the cartoon's message. Breaking long-term assignments into smaller, manageable chunks is another way to help young adolescents develop the organizational skills they need to engage in more complex learning. As one teacher explained, "...you have to build [middle school] kids up to do a good number of tasks—pretty much everything—including behavior, including class discussions."

Further, because of the tremendous variation in reading abilities among middle grades students, teachers need to find ways to make texts accessible to young adolescents. There are a variety of literacy strategies that teachers can use to facilitate students' comprehension of texts, including previewing essential vocabulary, giving a clear purpose for reading, helping students use graphic organizers to relate concepts to one another, and using pictures, film clips, and other visual aids to help students understand the key concepts embedded in a text.²⁰ Also, social studies materials are available that provide readings at different levels.²¹

Conclusion

By bringing together a vision of intellectually challenging social studies, instructional strategies like those described above, and a belief in middle schoolers' intellectual capabilities, teachers can successfully engage young adolescents in learning that takes advantage of their higher order reasoning capabilities. Analyzing, evaluating, interpreting, and synthesizing information are those reasoning abilities that help young people develop the skills to think for themselves and make decisions in a complex democracy.

Educators of young adolescents have a responsibility to engage students in interesting, challenging intellectual work during the middle school years. Arguing that such work should be saved until later, risks the possibility that

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learners will never have the opportunity to take part in work that captures their interest and pushes their thinking. Dropout rates and school disengagement—crises that often have their roots in the middle grades—are increasing, and it is the lack of opportunities to be intellectually engaged that many high school dropouts cite as a central reason for leaving school early.²² When it comes to engaging students in challenging social studies learning, this evidence illustrates that educators cannot afford to wait. 🌐

Notes

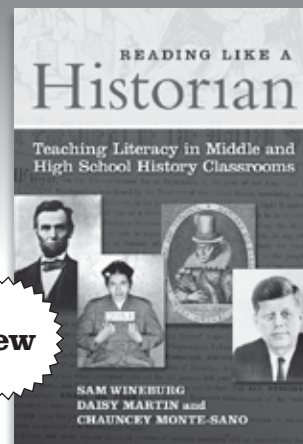
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