Young Adolescent Learning

**In Brief:**

“The capacity of a person to learn will never be greater than during adolescence” (NIMH, 2011). The young adolescent brain encounters many growth and developmental changes during middle school years. Teachers and students are not always on the same page when it comes to their needs and wants pertaining to their period of growth. Rick Wormeli stated, “It’s easy for adults who’ve forgotten the wonder and uncertainty of the adolescent years to declare that students today are more uninterested in school and undisciplined in life than they were at that age” (2014, p. 26). Middle school years are hard for students; they experience puberty, insecurities, and entering the next phase of life. Young adolescents go through many changes during their middle school years and teachers must support and understand their students during this time.

**Teaching Young Adolescents:**

Teachers play an essential role in the lives of their young adolescent students during middle school. They are the ones that support and encourage them through the changes. When planning lessons about how to run their classroom, teachers should always remember to be aware of how the young adolescent is developing and should teach according to their needs. As Bobbie Dunn stated, “Adolescents are very capable of learning and behaving, as long as we keep our expectations clear and enforce them consistently” (2010).

**Physical Development:**

Micki Caskey and Vincent A. Anfara, Jr. described physical development as “…bodily changes including growth, improved gross and fine motor skills, and biological maturity” (2014). This growth also includes their changing skeletal and muscular systems. Students are often uncomfortable during their adolescent years because their body is changing—they might be experiencing growing pains or “fluctuations in basal metabolism [that] cause [them] to experience periods of restlessness” (Caskey & Anfara, 2014). While the young adolescent goes through puberty, they experience hormonal changes that causes them to feel uncomfortable and uncertain about their physical bodies. The brain’s prefrontal cortex has not yet developed fully, so students have a hard time with time management, paying attention, planning, and making mature decisions (Caskey & Anfara 2014). Classrooms should use “…integrated units of study and project-based learning—” according to Caskey and Ruben (2003, p. 37), to help students make connections to real life.

To help students focus throughout the school day, it is recommended that they are given opportunities to move around because during their adolescent years, “…engaging in strong, intense interests” helps students’ focus, but is short lived (Lorain, 2002). Teachers should engage their students in classroom activities that allow movement to give their brains a break. Rick Wormeli recommends “…witch[ing] activities every 10 to 15 minutes to maintain momentum” (2014, p. 28). Allowing students to have social interaction while learning content within the classroom redirects their attention to the material being taught (Wormeli, 2014, p. 28).

**Intellectual Development:**

Caskey & Anafara (2014) described the developmental characteristics of intellectual development as “…the increased ability of people to understand and reason.” Students should be involved in activities that allow them to learn about a wide range of interesting topics, such as debates in a history class, or a dissection in a science class. Young adolescents want to learn about things they are interested in and how it connects to real life. Young adolescents also “…favor active learning over passive learning experiences and prefer interactions with peers during educational activities,” (Caskey & Anfara, 2014). This is the time of their lives where they start being able to think more abstractly. It is helpful to use hands-on learning experiences with other students and discuss topics that challenge other students to think abstractly.

**Psychological Development:**

Caskey and Anfara explained that psychological development “…is characterized by identity formation and the quest for independence” (2014). Young adolescents are in the time of their life where they are searching for who they are; they want to find “their own sense of individuality and uniqueness” (Caskey & Anfara, 2014). Students are more vulnerable during this time and seek adult approval; teachers must be careful in how they critique a student and how they deal with behavioral issues. Teachers must also support their students and make it known that they are a safe person to whom the student can talk to; the school must also be a safe place to which the student comes each day (Armstrong, 2006, p. 5).

Using teams at the middle school level to ensure that every student has at least one adult advocate to support students throughout their growth is important. Teams encourage positive relationships and opportunities to form relationships with adults who understand them (Caskey & Anfara, 2014). *This We Believe* stated, “With young adolescents, achieving academic success is highly dependent upon their other developmental needs also being met” (2003, p. 3).

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This article goes into detail about how the young adolescent grows and develops socially,

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This article provides approaches for motivating young adolescents to learn.