The University of Virginia’s Youth-Nex Center and Curry School of Education and Human Development have launched the Remaking Middle School Initiative, an effort to elevate the middle grades and realize their promise for all students. To achieve these goals, the Initiative commissioned a set of four working papers that synthesize a robust body of research on early adolescence, informing supports and resources that can help the field make the most of this developmental phase. This brief highlights key ideas from the third paper in the series, which focuses on what schools can do to optimize teaching and learning in the middle grades.

Belonging, competence, and autonomy have long represented core educational needs for young adolescents. These needs have been at the center of a century of efforts to reshape schools to meet the needs of this age group. Yet, teachers have been challenged to fully meet these needs as they balance competing demands and policies in their interactions with young adolescents.

The problem with middle school curriculum is that we ask students to answer questions we have not asked.

Explicitly focusing on these needs can help inform developmentally-responsive, evidence-based teaching and learning experiences that (1) support autonomy, (2) foster belonging, and (3) promote academic and social competence among young adolescents.

Teaching to Support Autonomy

Given young adolescents demonstrate an increased need for independence in the middle grades, educators should provide learning opportunities that support student agency and have the potential to foster engagement, motivation, and deeper learning. Similarly, implementing instructional approaches that prioritize student-centered learning and prompt the use of cognitive strategies and metacognition can support young adolescents’ learning capabilities.

Student-centered learning environments are designed to provide students with opportunities to take a more active role in their learning by shifting the responsibilities of organizing, analyzing, and synthesizing content from the teacher to the learner.

Middle grade educators play a central role in this shift, offering instruction that enhances students’ cognitive development and self-awareness. By building strong, trusting relationships with their classes, young adolescents can exert greater ownership over their learning goals, actions, and outcomes, contributing to a stronger sense of autonomy.
Teaching to Foster Belonging

Young adolescents’ feelings of school connectedness are predicated on the extent to which they believe that their teachers respect and value them. Because of this, positive teacher-student relationships in the middle grades are essential to fostering the sense of belonging that young adolescents must experience at school. Positive relationships with teachers can be especially valuable for young adolescents from historically marginalized backgrounds, leading to more equitable academic achievement.

While peer relationships in adolescence are often viewed as a negative influence, building a strong peer culture in the classroom can actually position young adolescents to realize greater academic success and a positive sense of belonging. Educators can also address young adolescents’ needs for belonging and strong peer relationships by shaping meaningful, collaborative learning experiences that reflect a growing interest in local, national, and even worldwide events.

School connectedness is the strongest protective factor for students against school absenteeism, substance abuse, early sexual initiation, risk of unintentional injury, and violence.

Effective efforts to foster belonging and school connectedness also extend to curricula, which should incorporate culturally relevant pedagogy; formal social-emotional learning opportunities; and formal opportunities for civic engagement that encourage young adolescents to imagine their future selves and realize a greater purpose.

Teaching to Build Competence

The sense of competence that young adolescents feel, and their tendency toward self-criticism, is influenced by many factors—including how they compare themselves to others and how they believe others perceive them. This tendency can be amplified at school, particularly when they are tracked according to academic ability. This kind of tracking can be especially damaging to young adolescents because it determines the social comparison group students use to develop their academic identities.

Educators can mitigate the negative impacts of tracking by grouping middle grades students in flexible, varied ways and promoting more personalized learning approaches.
Additionally, empowering young adolescents with a broad sense of academic and social competence is vital to their success in school. Educators can effectively instill this sense of competence by using iteration and clear, constructive feedback to encourage young adolescents to develop a growth mindset or mastery goal orientation. In doing so, they can help young adolescent students view mistakes as critical learning opportunities.

**Identity as Curriculum**

A middle school curriculum should invite students to meaningfully explore their myriad identities and speak to the diversity of their peers. It should also include opportunities for young adolescents to explore postsecondary education and career options, ensuring they can navigate the many possibilities of their future selves. By structuring personalized job shadowing opportunities, mock interviews for careers of interest, and apprenticeships, educators can build developmentally responsive curricula that address young adolescents’ emerging interests and capabilities.

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**Optimizing Middle Grades Teaching and Learning in Practice**

Schools and middle grades educators can align teaching and learning with the educational needs of young adolescents by:

- **Enabling students to integrate their myriad identities, spanning race, gender, ethnicity, class, and sex, into their learning identities.**

- **Promoting student-centered learning approaches that support early adolescents’ need for autonomy and positively influence their engagement and achievement.**

- **Leveraging approaches that help foster students’ sense of belonging and connection such as culturally relevant instruction, service learning, and social-emotional learning.**

A full list of specific implications for practice are included in the corresponding working paper.