Student-Oriented Curriculum

Asking the Right Questions

by Wallace M. Alexander
with Dennis Carr & Kathy McAvoy

National Middle School Association

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NATIONAL MIDDLE SCHOOL ASSOCIATION

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Wallace Alexander is a member of a two-teacher, multi-age (6-8) team at Sedgwick Elementary School in Sedgwick, Maine. During 1993-94, while a middle grades graduate student at the University of Maine, this former high school science teacher interned with the team that is the basis of this important monograph.

The lead characters in this real story are Dennis Carr and Kathy McAvoy, partners in directing a sixth grade team at Mt. Jefferson Junior High School in Lee, Maine. Dennis, originally a special education teacher and coach, and Kathy, formerly a K-12 health and physical education teacher, have taught together for seven years.

National Middle School Association is grateful to these three pioneer educators and is pleased to make this engaging story available to the profession and the public.

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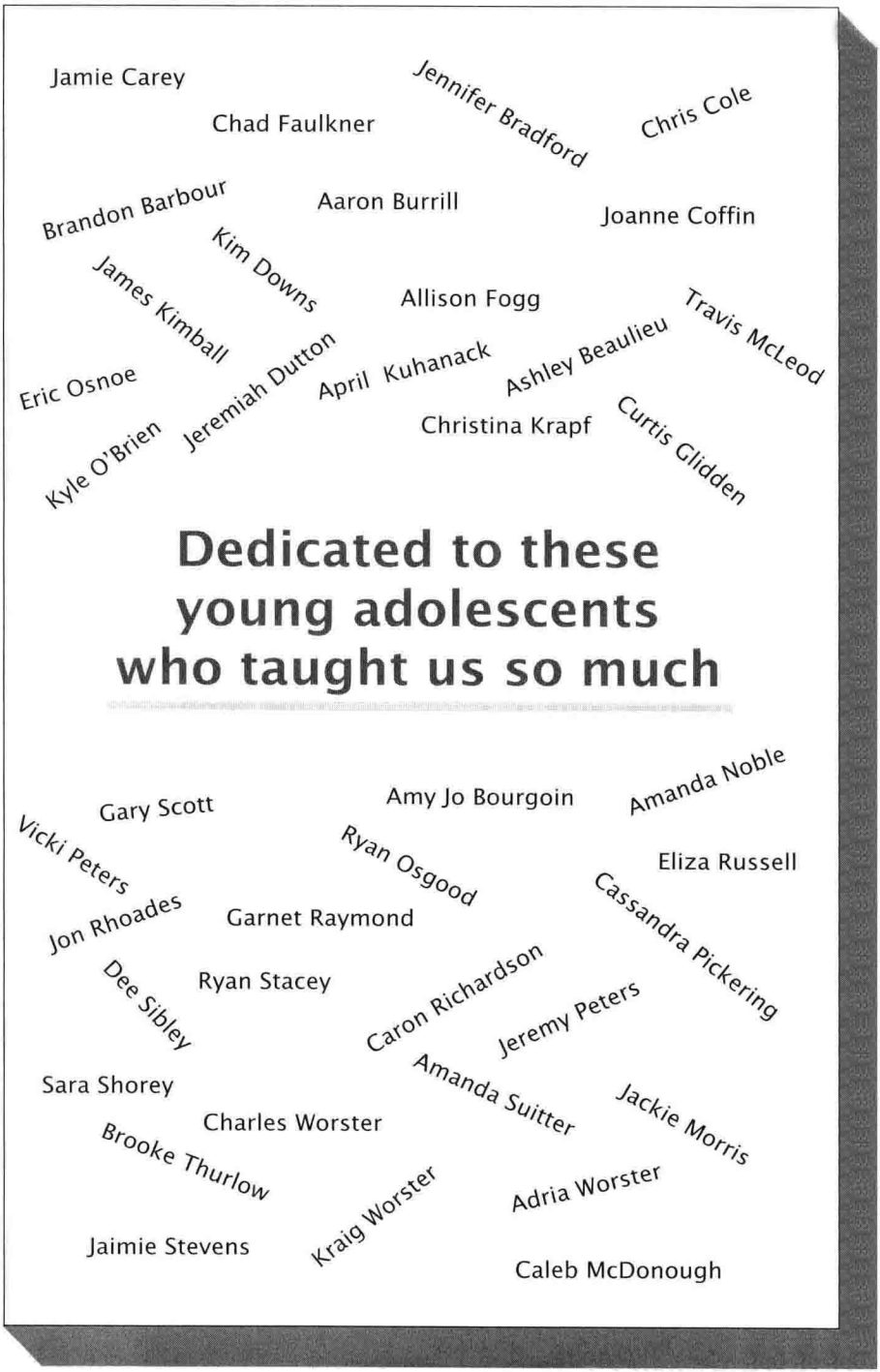
Student-Oriented Curriculum: Asking the Right Questions

National Middle School Association is dedicated to improving the educational experiences of young adolescents by providing vision, knowledge, and resources to all who serve them in order to develop healthy, productive, and ethical citizens.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FOREWORD

What happens when a good middle school team has the typical middle school components – a flexible block schedule, heterogeneous grouping, advisor/advisee program, and various exploratory activities – and yet is still dissatisfied with students' learning? Easy, they move to student-oriented curriculum as the next logical step. But, only the answer is easy; for the doing of "student-oriented" curriculum is the hard part, made more difficult by the uncertainty of just what student-oriented curriculum means.

This monograph combines the stances of several other excellent publications on curriculum integration in middle level schools. Most fall into one of two categories – those that tell how to create integrative curriculum and those that describe examples of various integrated curriculum activities. *Student-Oriented Curriculum: Asking the Right Questions* does both as it explains the process one team used to make learning more relevant and meaningful for young adolescents. While we thereby learn a great deal about what they did, we learn even more about how and why they did it.

Alexander allows us insight into the deliberations, discussions, and often painful negotiations that took place around each of the changes these teachers made. This inside look into teachers' thinking as they leave the safe and comfortable teacher-directed pre-determined curriculum to involve and challenge students is a real value of this book. For it is in these conversations that we understand the real struggles and the real triumphs of their work.

The teachers intended to make what originally was a "daily integrated studies block" into "the curriculum." This is no "let's-try-it-because-it-is-the-end-of-the-year-unit." These teachers aren't doing an obligatory interdisciplinary unit because it is the current "in thing" to

do. As the author explains, "The goal was for this block to become completely integrative, with students brainstorming themes, activities, and resources. The ultimate goal was to have this become the whole curriculum." By the year's end they had largely succeeded.

The beauty of this book is that it, like *Watershed* (Springer, 1994); and several schools described in *Integrated Studies in the Middle Grades: Dancing Through Walls* (Stevenson and Carr, 1993) is a prime example of a fully integrative program. While many teachers tinker with the curriculum by taking tiny steps away from separate subjects, this partnership made a commitment to improving learning for young adolescents by leaving the status quo rather dramatically.

James Beane (1995) cautions us about the appearance of change. "At present, a great deal of energy is being expended in symbolic curriculum integration. Most of this has to do with simply finding some themes to serve as a context for science, mathematics, literature, and so on, or tinkering with mild correlations among several subject areas. As we have seen, such efforts are not really about curriculum integration. Instead, they are about trying to find clever ways of repackaging our own interests" (p. 37).

The story told by Wallace Alexander in this book is a much more complicated story, going well beyond the bounds of repackaging content, time, and expectations. At the same time, it is a much simpler story about changing expectations to match the needs of young adolescents. How can Alexander's story of curriculum integration be both complex and simple at the same time? Alexander describes it "...like a rocket taking off. The energy expended to get started was immense, but the more we progressed, the more inertia took over. Eventually we could cut back on our engines, relax, and enjoy the ride."

An excellent example of the complex-simple dichotomy is explained by the author as he describes mini-courses, usually offshoots of the integrated studies, but they could also be used to cover curriculum givens that did not fit neatly into chosen themes. So many questions are asked of those working with integrative curriculum about the place

of content and skills that students don't ask about. While these questions are perfectly legitimate, we must have faith in teachers to realize that they can and will incorporate the needed pieces of the curriculum.

Student-Oriented Curriculum reads like a story – engaging, witty, and solid. Solid in the understanding about the type of learning that young adolescents should experience. Written in an extremely readable style, it gives readers practical advice on all facets of integrated curriculum. In the context of the units described the reader is able to follow a two-person team's planning as they solve scheduling problems, work with reluctant parents and colleagues, decide how their new and evolving curriculum fits with the required one, and allow students to find their comfort zones with ever-increasing responsibilities. The year-end reflections of students, scattered throughout the text, add an additional touch of reality and validity.

Although often neglected or included as an afterthought, assessment is an integral component of integrated studies. While still obligated to use the traditional grade card, the teachers had to consider how to measure student learning when students were doing different things at different times. They planned assessment strategies that were parts of the ongoing teaching and learning process and actively involved the students. Assessment activities were viewed as opportunities for students to discover their strengths and weaknesses.

An essential aspect of this focus was on student self-assessment, which came about when teachers learned to ask the right questions and help students develop legitimate assessment criteria. Key components of student self-assessment described are weekly self-evaluations, reflective journals, daily plans written by students, weekly conferences, product and presentation assessments, grade conferences, and family conferences directed by students. Each of these tools is described with examples of assessment rubrics given.

One issue emerges time and time again, and it answers the tough questions about seriousness of purpose, academic integrity, and rigor of integrative curricula. No one reading this book can miss this theme

that runs through every section, as both students and teachers noted the powerful learning that occurred.

At one point, describing some group inquiry projects like initiating a school-wide recycling project, investigating the relationship between various methods of forest harvesting and wildlife habitat, and exploring endangered species, Alexander says, "And some say these kids aren't concerned about important issues!" More than anything else, we see in this book just how serious this type of work becomes for students and teachers.

As helpful as the descriptions of the various units are and the planning process that brought them to fruition, perhaps the best part of this book is the discussion centering on the sixteen lessons learned. In this section the simple-complex nature of integrative curriculum becomes apparent as we recognize that these conclusions are neither a scope and sequence nor a cookbook for change. Rather, the lessons represent what we know to be true about change that begins with changing our beliefs, even before we change any of our practices.

While none of the conclusions are new, that does not diminish their importance or power. In fact, this section is a primer for those serious about integrative curricula. Readers may want to read this especially powerful chapter first. Here you will find the framework around which the rest of the book revolves.

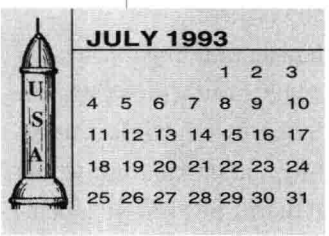
Alexander, and the teachers he writes about, Kathy McAvoy and Dennis Carr, are excellent examples of the practitioner/scholars who do important work with young adolescents in real settings. It is a valuable contribution to the growing body of literature that explores the difficult, challenging, yet rewarding task of matching young adolescent needs to curriculum.

— Edward N. Brazee

August 1995

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION



An idea whose time came

This monograph contains the courageous story of an experiment in student-oriented curriculum. It began as a practicum proposal submitted by the author as a part of a Master of Education program at the University of Maine in Orono. After a year of intensive study of middle level philosophy and practices, I was "chomping at the bit" to try out my ideas with some real kids in a real school. My original proposal was to work with the sixth grade team at Mt. Jefferson Junior High, a small rural middle school in Lee, Maine. Our focus was to implement an integrated studies approach in a daily block, with the long-range goal of having it become "the curriculum." I was to work with Kathy McAvoy and Dennis Carr, a pair of dedicated, progressive middle level educators. In preparation for this program, Kathy, Dennis, and I spent several weeks working together during the summer of 1993 including a week at the Middle Level Education Institute in Orono and two intense weeks at a Foxfire Level I class. My role with this team became one of providing support, ideas on topics, connections with experienced people, reassur-

ance that they were doing the right thing, and the slight push that made these people decide that now was the time to "take the plunge." I was involved in planning, implementing, teaching, and assessing this new curriculum. As it turned out, for me, this project became the focus of a year's research into student-centered learning, integrative curriculum, authentic assessment, and student empowerment.

For several years, Kathy and Dennis had had an ongoing discussion about the necessity of middle level curriculum becoming more responsive to the needs of early adolescents. They acknowledged the importance of linking the subject areas and relating the curriculum to the interests of the students and the world around them. Second-year principal, Martha Witham, a dynamic instructional leader, became very supportive of this project. She saw the possibility of this sixth grade team's leading the rest of the school into a curriculum that would be relevant to the students and responsive to their needs.

The goal of this project was to provide an opportunity for students to study thematic units, working cooperatively to integrate all subject areas within a daily block of time. Since these were novel ideas for the students coming into this school as well as for the teachers, several days at the beginning of school were devoted to working on social skills, trust-building, team-building, decision-making, and modeling of the brainstorming process. These areas needed to be developed before starting the first unit that had been selected by the team. Plans for the opening unit on the environment included choices of activities so as to model the kinds of things that can be part of this type of curriculum. We were not sure how strictly to adhere to these unit plans but wanted to have them in hand if needed. The block eventually would become the whole curriculum, completely integrative, with students brainstorming themes, activities, and resources.

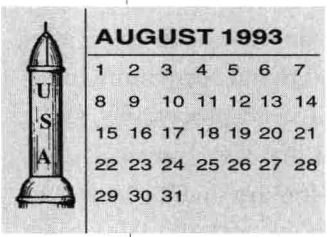
In the interest of fairness to readers of this document who are struggling in schools with organizational structures that make curriculum change very difficult, it is important to point out that the team described here already had several very significant organizational pieces

in place before attempting this change. They had experience with a completely flexible block schedule, heterogeneous grouping, advisory programs, and portfolio assessment. More importantly, they had always worked as a two-teacher or partnership team, an organizational structure very conducive to integrating curriculum (Alexander, 1993). For them, the move to student-oriented curriculum was just a matter of taking the next logical step.

This monograph, then, tells the story of two dynamic teachers and a group of young people who were willing to take risks to find a better way of learning. It tells of challenges, successes, and failures. It tells of frustrations and revelations. It includes the reflective words of many of the involved students.

Although I am listed as author, I want to make it explicitly clear whose story this monograph tells. While I have a deep interest and involvement in this project, and these are my words describing it, this story does not belong to me. This story belongs to Kathy McAvoy, Dennis Carr, and forty exciting, creative young people who spent the 1993-94 school year as sixth graders at Mount Jefferson Junior High School. The accomplishments of these people far exceeded my expectations. Yes, these theories do work – the results were astounding. My hope is that you, the reader, can absorb a portion of what these people have taught me about teaching, learning, and the nature of young adolescents. My hope is that this story will help you face the risks and challenges of change and prepare you to "take the plunge." ◆

PREPARING FOR IMPLEMENTATION



How do we start this thing?

While this project started as an experiment in integrative curriculum, it rapidly grew into one of empowering students in every aspect of their learning and classroom life. Like a rocket taking off, the energy expended to get started was immense, but the more we progressed, the more inertia took over. Eventually we could cut back on our engines, relax, and enjoy the ride.

Actual preparations for implementing this project started at the Middle Level Education Institute at the University of Maine during the summer of 1993. One of the most difficult parts was deciding where to start. Much of our early discussion revolved around how much of the school day would be devoted to this project, how much power would be shared with the students from the onset, and what kind of skills the students would initially need. While everyone agreed on the goal of a completely integrative curriculum, the teachers were not ready to walk in on the first day of school without some definite plans. We also felt that the students would need some preparation for

making decisions and working cooperatively. (As it turned out, we were right – it took several weeks to break the students' mind-set that teachers make the decisions and tell the students what they need to know to pass the tests.)

A major step was to decide how far we could go without forcing the teachers out of their comfort zone. It was decided that, initially, one of the three 100 minute blocks each day would be devoted to integrated studies, while maintaining a more traditional curriculum (a literacy block, including reading, writing, and word processing, and a math/social studies block) during the rest of the day. It was also decided that we would choose the first theme (environment), locate resources, and plan some activities. The intent was to build in as much student choice as possible, model a variety of activities for students who would come in with a very narrow view of what is done in school, and avoid driving the teachers over the edge from the stress of feeling unprepared.

The remainder of the summer was spent planning the unit, deciding how to break in the students to a drastically different school experience, and discussing an endless array of "what-ifs." ◆