

could avoid problems and focus on teaching. Theoretically, this book could save a teacher from the detrimental situations that so frequently occur in today's schools.

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THE WAR AGAINST EXCELLENCE: THE RISING TIDE OF MEDIOCRITY IN AMERICA'S MIDDLE SCHOOLS

CHERI PIERSON YECKE
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Reviewed by Rosann Whiting

Has the middle school concept been doomed from the start? According to Yecke, middle level instruction has served only to dilute the curriculum being taught to students in Grades 7 and 8 and has had a negative impact upon those students who are classified as "talented or gifted." The advent of educational practices such as cooperative learning, peer tutoring, and a shift away from ability grouping has caused mediocrity to become prevalent in American middle schools. Yecke sets out to prove that these practices serve to water down middle school curriculum, decrease the expectations teachers have of gifted students, and cause the parents of these students to consider other options for their children's schooling. The author presents a logical delineation of information that serves to validate this central premise.

Initially, Yecke begins by describing the history of middle schools. In doing so, the author discusses the growth of the middle school, defines the concept of middle school curriculum, describes the concepts of ability grouping and cooperative learning, and finally gives the reader an analysis of the major convictions surrounding middle schools. Yecke concludes with ethical implications for the 21st century. The author defines each concept, cites documentation from well-known authorities, cites data to support her premise, and includes quotations from parents of gifted students as well as

quotations from students to validate the premise.

While the first “junior high school” records date back to 1909, the real rise in the middle school concept (6/3/3) began because of overcrowded schools after World War I. These schools held Grades 7, 8, and 9, but organizationally were quite similar to high schools. By the early 1960s, Grade 9 was removed from the middle school and shifted into the high school, while Grade 6 was elevated to the middle school. Thus, the beginning of the 5/3/4 grouping of students developed. With this configuration, Yecke declares that the middle school finally “found its soul” (p. 25). Yecke goes on to report that between 1988 and 1989, the publication *Turning Points: Preparing Youth for the 21st Century* asserted that “all adolescents are dysfunctional” (p. 26). This report presented a “fundamental transformation” in education and set forth to prepare educators to best serve the students in these grades. Of primary importance to middle school education was the concept of inclusion. For parents of gifted students, this meant that their students were often peer-tutors, were not challenged to excel beyond the norm, and who, therefore, did not progress to their potential. By 1998, parents who “were tired of the battles for securing instructional practices that meet the children’s needs,” gave up on public schools and began to “seek educational opportunities elsewhere” (p. 42).

Ability grouping, cooperative learning, and peer tutoring are the three educational practices that appear to be most detrimental to improved performance of gifted middle school students. Citing research performed by Schunk, the author states that neither average, nor below average students suffer when the gifted students are removed from the classroom. In fact, the gifted students benefit since they can be comfortable with their abilities, have no fear of being ridiculed, and can progress at a rate that is commensurate with their ability. Yet, in most schools, heterogeneous grouping is advocated to promote the social agenda of the school. Citing research from 1965, 1980, 1988, 1995, and 2001, the author reports that ability grouping was used only for selected subjects. Consequently, as public schools move away from ability grouping and settle on improving the social atmosphere of the school, home schooling and the utilization of vouchers has increased.

Cooperative learning utilizes small groups for instructional time within the classroom. The technique appeared to be emerging during the 1980s, but by the 1990s even college professors endorsed the concept. The idea of a group working together, receiving one grade for a project seemed to minimize competition between students and allow all students to benefit from the work of the group. Peer tutoring had a similar effect upon the gifted child’s learning. Instead of being pushed to excel, the student often served to help those who had difficulty understanding the concept. As a result, all of these have served to level achievement in students.

To defend her position, Yecke has included much data collected by the National Middle School Association. One can easily see how many times cooperative learning sessions were offered per year, how often sessions about academic diversity were offered, how often teachers were instructed in learning theories, and how many times the concepts of peer tutoring, cooperative learning, and other grouping options were offered to teachers. Yecke states that now is the time for intervention to occur. Schools and teachers must foster a culture of achievement in their classrooms with particular attention given to the specific needs of gifted learners. Through close attention to data as well as a thorough understanding of the concepts stated in the book, one can understand how gifted learners are often the quiet students in the room who demand little and are frequently overlooked. For teachers to be effective, they must consistently address student needs. How that is done depends upon the methods employed by the teacher, the patterns of instruction that operate within the school setting, and the frequent analysis of data about achievement levels of these students.

This book appears to be well-researched and documented. The author makes the case for gifted education with insight, data, and logic, and asks the reader to consider each premise and to draw a conclusion about the current middle school curriculum. The book stimulates the reader to ponder situations, to reflect upon the data offered, and to read interesting anecdotal quotes from parents and students. This information raises important questions about how to design middle school instruction to benefit all students, but in particular, the gifted student.

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