

Star Trek: The Next Generation: Exploratory Mission of Our Middle Schools

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The author reemphasizes the importance exploration has for the early adolescent mind.

"Its continuing mission is to explore strange new worlds, to seek out new life and new civilizations, to boldly go where no one has gone before" so the Star Trek: The Next Generation saga begins (Roddenberry, 1989). Or is this the continuing mission of our schools in the middle? Early adolescents are allowed and encouraged to explore a strange, new world. These new lives and civilizations are their own, wondering what their next experience will be and what they will become. "To boldly go where no one has gone before" illustrates the new experiences middle level students will encounter. Exploration is the core mission of middle level schools.

Exploratory programs, such as computer science, art, home economics, music, industrial arts, library skills, and foreign language, are offered outside the scheduled core subject team which all students at all grade levels are required to take (Lounsbury, 1991). Young adolescents are beginning to think about life careers and want to explore their interests in many ways during middle level school years.

The inclusion of a curricular exploratory component is one that most directly and fully reflects the students' needs during preadolescence and early adolescence (Lounsbury, 1991). Lounsbury noted that during this developmental period, youth need to ascertain their special interests and aptitudes, to get a broad view of life and the world, and to experiment. . If this exploratory opportunity is missing, students may be needlessly

restricted in their future lives. The middle level years offer the students the opportunity to sample the world before they become committed to a particular program in high school..

Barnhart (1986) wrote that exploratory programs offer younger adolescents a means to deal with life, interest changes and uncertainties. Most exploratory program activities are a vocational or hobby-oriented and allow students to identify how such activities meet their growing and changing individual interests. The opportunity for youngsters to explore their needs, talents, and interests is no less important than a school's commitment to develop excellent academic and intellectual learning.

Exploratory education is essential to help middle level youngsters find out who they are and what they want to become. The opportunity for students to define and explore their changing and maturing interest is a significant and important part of both their middle school education and their personal growth and development. . (Barnhart, 1986,p. 105)

Merenbloom (1988) in his book Developing Effective Middle Schools Through Faculty Participation describes the exploratory concept for an effective middle level program. Exploratory experiences offer opportunities for youth to enrich learning and to satisfy their ever-changing interests and natural curiosity. The model Merenbloom explained originated with the desire to introduce various short-term courses during the middle grades, providing a path for more informed decisions on high school electives. The exploratory also provides students opportunities to assess their strengths and weaknesses. Student participation in a required complement of experiences allows the student to identify likes and dislikes, This exploratory participation allows the student to note potential areas of expertise. The Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development in the 1989 book Turning Points echoed success's importance by stating that schools should "ensure success for all students" (p. 9). The

report further noted that "... opportunities (for students) to exhibit excellence may lie outside the core program, in exploratory courses" (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1989, p.49).

Middle level students are much more likely to participate in active learning experiences in exploratory courses rather than in the academic classes. These classes are normally measured by individual outcomes; and, therefore, students are assessed on their individual abilities and performances. This results in exploratory classes having a greater impact on enhancing a student's self-esteem (Gill, 1995).

The exploratory program should be available for all students as middle school proponents' Alexander and McEwin (1989) recommended. Schneider (1986) wrote that exploratory programs used in middle level schools may provide stability to all programs.

Given the inquisitive nature and divergent learning needs of early adolescents, the middle school curriculum must be relevant and satisfy students' individual needs as well as those prescribed by school officials. An exploratory program is an essential curriculum component for meeting these needs. (p. 24)

Clark and Clark (1994) describe a developmentally appropriate curriculum for young adolescents as one that provides the opportunity to explore the intellectual, emotional, social, and physical dimensions of adolescence. Commonly done through middle level schools' exploratory curriculum, fewer structured learning experiences provide students the opportunity to explore their aptitudes, interests, and special talents and to develop an accurate and positive self-concept.. The exploratory curriculum's major purpose, according to Clark and Clark, is to allow young adolescents to achieve and demonstrate competence in numerous areas such as art, athletics, academics, and technology. An exploratory allows every student the oppor-

tunity to excel and be successful.. In order to accomplish these purposes, exploratory programs are organized around a sequence of required and elective courses that students take throughout their years in the middle level school.. Frequently these activities allow the students to make practical application of facts, skills, and information learned in the content area.

Exploratory programs should be a significant component of the middle school program according to Steffans (1991). The program should focus on three major middle school characteristics: (a) adolescent physical, emotional, and intellectual needs; (b) creativity and exploration; and (c) positive self concept development.. An imbalance or omission of any of these characteristics dramatically reduces exploratory programs' effectiveness and provides a disservice to adolescents.

In order to accomplish the middle schools mission, exploration is a must.. Similar to the Star Trek episodes, the exploratory program's success may not be completely understood for years to come.

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