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Meeting the Needs of Young Adolescents

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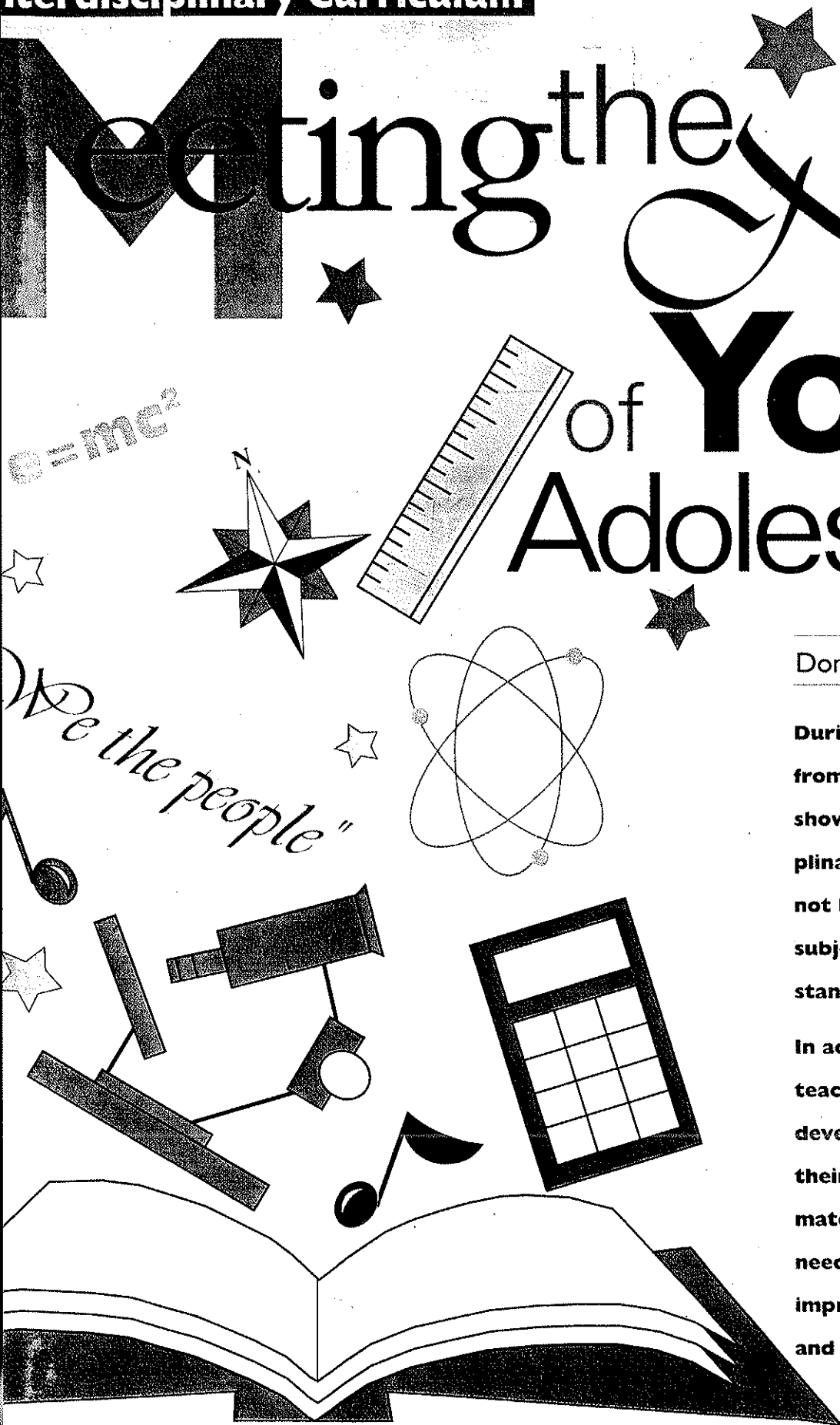
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Meeting the Needs of Young Adolescents

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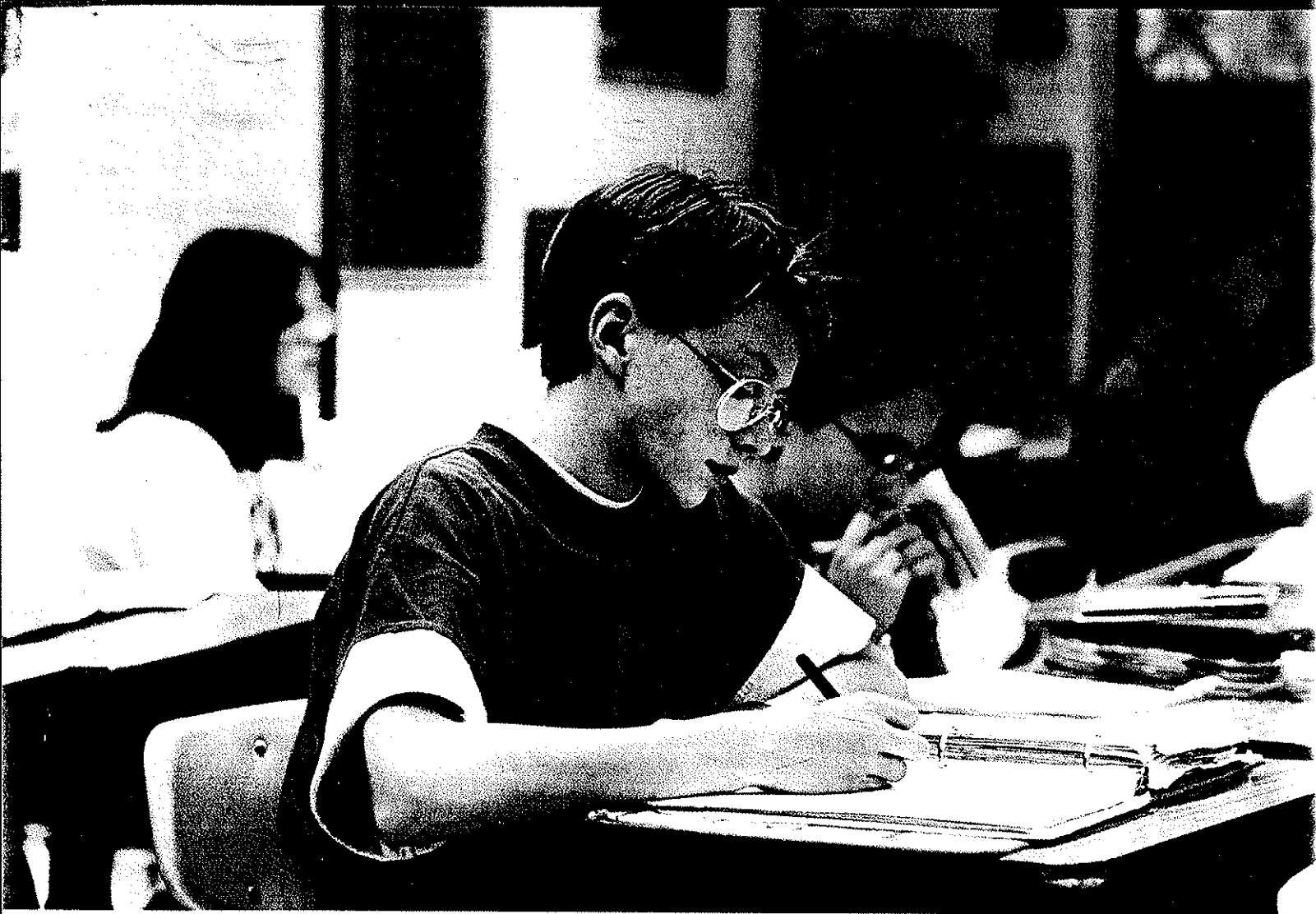
"We the people"



Donald C. Clark & Sally N. Clark

During the past 40 years, research from more than 80 studies has shown that students in interdisciplinary programs do as well as, if not better than students in single-subject curricular structures on standardized tests (Vars, 1991).

In addition, the opportunities for teachers to work together to develop learning experiences for their students create school climates that focus efforts on student needs, curriculum and instructional improvement, and reflection (Clark and Clark, 1994a).



Connecting the various subject areas also helps teachers view their content area from a much broader perspective, thus reducing the fragmentation of learning that exists in most middle level schools. Generally speaking, teachers find greater satisfaction when working together on integrated curriculum and often have renewed energy and excitement. Planning and working together also makes teachers more appreciative of their colleagues' talents and skills.

Emphasis on interrelationships across the curriculum create powerful learning opportunities in the classroom—opportunities that help students find relevance in the content and become more actively engaged in learning. Students remember more and become more

creative thinkers because they make these connections to their personal lives (Berg, 1988; Jacobs, 1991). Students are also more likely to see content areas as pieces of a whole rather than as separate entities.

In the affective areas students become more involved and excited, demonstrate less competition and more cooperation, and learn to accept differences and appreciate the strengths and talents of their classmates (Clark and Clark, 1994b).

Successful integration of curriculum is not without its pitfalls. The two biggest barriers are the high degree of acceptance and support for single-subject curricula both in education and in the community; and the amount of time teachers need to collaborate in developing integrated

curriculum and to identify or develop suitable resource materials and assessment procedures.

In addition, many teachers are afraid essential subject matter will be shortchanged or compromised in the process of developing integrated curriculum. Also of concern is the perceived lack of expertise on the part of many teachers who were not exposed to planning for interdisciplinary curriculum in their initial teacher preparation programs.

In spite of the advantages of an interdisciplinary curriculum for both middle level students and teachers, these barriers provide a strong force in mitigating against its widespread implementation. Integrated curriculum, in fact, is found in very few middle level schools (Lounsbury

Interdisciplinary Curriculum

and Clark, 1990). Middle level schools in America, for the most part, are still organized around the single subject curricular approach that is steeped in tradition and valued by many educators, parents, and community members.

Because each middle level school exists in a unique context of values, expectations, and cultures, it is difficult to prescribe exactly what form the interdisciplinary experiences should take, how the curriculum should be organized, or how much of the student's day should be spent in interdisciplinary classrooms. What is crucial, however, is that middle level principals and teachers become familiar with successful interdisciplinary curricular structures and through collaborative efforts begin to take the necessary steps to modify current curriculum and instructional practices in ways that make schools more responsive to the needs of their young adolescent students.

In this issue of *Schools in the Middle*, articles written by middle level principals, teachers, and university professors address teacher preparation for interdisciplinary teaching, administrative leadership in developing interdisciplinary



curriculum, interdisciplinary curricular approaches to parental involvement and service learning, and interdisciplinary curriculum and performance assessment.

There is very little initial teacher preparation in the use of interdisciplinary curriculum and teaching. Lack of teacher preparation becomes even more acute when one examines the level of interdisciplinary curricular expertise of most teachers currently in middle level schools. In most cases, making interdisciplinary curriculum

work for young adolescents requires that principals play major roles in the creation of professional development programs, programs that create safe environments with which teachers can study, investigate, and learn.

Janet Altersitz describes a successful professional development program in Phoenix, Ariz. As principal of Desert Sky Middle School, she was able to change a very traditional metropolitan junior high school into an award-winning middle level school where integrated learning is the focal point.

Altersitz identifies and reflects on five processes she used to bring the school to its current focus and commitment to integrated learning. The article concludes by emphasizing the active leadership roles principals must play to bring about change.

Examples of a successful interdisciplinary curriculum are the focus of the next article. Service learning

Emphasis on interrelationships across the curriculum create powerful learning opportunities in the classroom—opportunities that help students find relevance in the content and become more actively engaged in learning.

makes a natural link to interdisciplinary learning, contend Sally Clark of the University of Arizona and Marina Welmers, language arts/mathematics teacher at Tortolita Junior High School, Tucson. They report recent research about the effectiveness of service learning activities in bringing about improved student social skills, attitudes, and self-esteem.

In describing service learning at Tortolita Junior High School, they emphasize the processes used to develop the program, basic planning premises, advantages to students, and some examples of experiences.

Thomas Erb, professor of curriculum and instruction at the University of Kansas, focuses on the important issue of addressing "diverse learning needs through interdisciplinary curriculum." He reports that interdisciplinary teams of teachers can look for ways to address diversity within the context of a learning community. Teams can provide a core curriculum, yet provide for a variety of learning options for students.

Erb presents three principles for designing and implementing the curriculum—principles that can serve as guidelines for teachers and administrators as they develop interdisciplinary curriculum.

He reminds us that for both individual planning and planning for interdisciplinary teams, the total curriculum should provide for student outcomes of basic skills and

knowledge, exploration of new possibilities, and personal growth.

James Aseltine focuses on the relationships between curricular integration and performance assessment. Aseltine, principal of Irving Robbins Middle School in Farmington, Conn., suggests that performance assessment, used as a bona fide tool to improve teaching and learning, may also help foster authentic and effective curriculum integration at the middle level.

In developing this premise, Aseltine describes the advantages of interdisciplinary curricular structures and some of the factors that make it difficult to implement. He follows this discussion by giving an overview of performance assessment and how it has served as a vehicle for authentic curriculum integration in his school.

In the final article, Ed Lawton, professor of education at the College of Charleston (S.C.), touches on the theories and concepts that are the bases of the programs, processes, and practices described above.

Summary

It becomes immediately evident from these articles that certain unifying concepts and ideas make interdisciplinary curriculum work for early adolescents, such as:

- The need to make connections with subject areas, with "the real world," and with each other
- The need to create supportive, collaborative environments where teachers, administrators, students, and parents can explore ideas and implement new programs
- The need to investigate, explore, reflect, and learn in integrative environments

- The need to set expectations and reinforce interdisciplinary learning

- The need to focus on the special needs and characteristics of young adolescents.

The advantages to both students and educators offer a strong rationale for developing and implementing an interdisciplinary curriculum. Using the insights presented here, middle level educators can begin to plan and participate in successful interdisciplinary programs.

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