

Review: Chamberlain's *Middle Schools for a Diverse Society*

Angie Koppang

Kathleen Chamberlain
Middle Schools for a Diverse Society
New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2003
159 pgs.
ISBN 0-8204-6370-1 (paperback)

Contemporary middle schools are becoming more diverse, even in rural areas. This increasing diversity poses many challenges for teachers and administrators attempting to achieve educational accountability while simultaneously trying to meet the needs of this diverse student population. In her book *Middle Schools for a Diverse Society*, Kathleen Chamberlain addresses the challenges of meeting the developmental needs of adolescents in our increasingly diverse schools. Chamberlain is quick to point out that she did not grow up in a diverse community and has not had extensive experience working with other cultures, but indicates that she is an example of the type of person for whom this book is written. The book is a mixture of theory and practice and uses examples from her experience as a former middle school teacher and administrator to illustrate diversity issues through her own personal journey of development. Qualitative comments from middle school students gathered in her dissertation research also add the student voice to the issues addressed in the book. The author presents a progressivist and social reconstructionist philosophical orientation in her views of dealing with diversity in schools and classrooms. The issues and perspectives addressed in this book would be of interest to any teacher or administrator working with young adolescents.

The book contains nine chapters, which divide into three different purposes. Chapters 1 and 2 lay the foundation for the topics to be discussed in greater detail in the remainder of the book. Chapter 1 lays groundwork for the evolution of the challenges for middle level educators and sets the stage for the discussion of the issues regarding diversity. Chapter 1, entitled *Understandings*, provides the author's

personal perspectives regarding her understanding of multicultural education and the development of her own definitions of diversity to include the following: gender, language diversity, religious diversity, racial and ethnic diversity, and social and economic diversity. This framework is used to inform the discussion in future chapters.

To assist in understanding adolescents and middle schools, Chapter 2 reviews developmental theory, learning environment, and the development of the philosophy of middle schools. While this chapter provides historical and contemporary perspectives, the complex concepts and theories are addressed in about 20 pages. The reader with significant background in adolescent development and middle school philosophy may find this an interesting review of the theories and concepts. However, those readers with less background may find this chapter more difficult to follow. Ten major adolescent identity theories are presented in six pages, often with the major concepts reduced to a one or two paragraph synopsis. This may not provide sufficient understanding of the theory for those with little or no previous knowledge in this area. A table is provided to summarize the adolescent development theories and is helpful for synthesizing the major concepts of each theory and theorist. This chapter identifies five challenges for middle level education from the research that are addressed in greater detail in the next five chapters.

The five identified middle school challenges of identity, success, relationships, community, and dialogues become the major focus for the discussions in chapters 3-7. Each of these chapters follows a pattern in which the topic is discussed through a reflection of personal experience and the research literature. A middle school perspective is drawn from research and recommendations by the National Middle School Association (NMSA), National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP), and the Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development. Perspectives for each topic based on gender, ethnic, racial, and socioeconomic diversity are represented followed by student comments in a section called “what do students say.” Each of the five topic areas provide research and perspectives that challenge the reader to reflect on their personal experiences and beliefs and the influence this has on their own practice as an educator. The discussion in each of these chapters illuminates key issues to consider and the student

comments provide insights into the needs and perspectives of adolescents. Each chapter concludes with a challenges section that serves more as a summary of the issues discussed in the chapter.

In the final section of the book, Chapter 8 includes a discussion on flexibility and change that addresses systemic change in schools and classrooms, as well as the teacher's role as a change agent. The most helpful section of this chapter is the "nuts and bolts" section in which practical suggestions are made for schools and administrators in supporting schoolwide change to address diversity. In addition, the author recognizes that there is also a need for individual action, and a list of strategies is provided for individual action. While the majority of the book deals with philosophical issues, values, and beliefs, the action plans included provide a concrete set of strategies that could be used by any individual or school system to address diversity issues. Finally, Chapter 9 is a recommended reading list that includes 15 books along with the author's notes about the books and how each of these has informed her thinking about issues of diversity. The books on the reading list are varied and present perspectives representing autobiography, critical theory, feminist theory, constructivism, curriculum theory, and research. The book also includes an extensive bibliography that would be helpful for those wishing to do more reading and research on the topics addressed in the book.

Middle Schools for a Diverse Society provides a thought-provoking view of diversity issues as they relate to developing adolescents. The book would provide an excellent resource for individuals or groups of staff members in their attempts to understand how issues of diversity impact student achievement, educational aspirations, and behaviors in middle schools. While the book does not provide specific answers, it challenges you as the reader to view your own practice within the context of your students and school when searching for answers to the diversity issues facing contemporary middle school students and educators.

Angie Koppang is an assistant professor in the Educational Leadership Department at the University of North Dakota. She is a former middle school teacher and administrator. Tammy