

Middle Schooling – Thoughts and Wonderings!

Sabbatical Report:

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This sabbatical report is a co-constructed report. Why? We have been and are colleagues in a variety of contexts, the most important being principals of two very different schools in distinct parts of the country, two intermediates that while different share many things; school leaders who share their professional learning and school development, students who compete on the sports field, students leaders who share their training and development as leaders and staff who enjoy getting together when we have these exchanges. We independently applied for sabbaticals and we found that our professional focus areas had a very similar focus. Through our professional and personal connection we agreed that this was an opportunity for us to take our professional relationship a little further and to also challenge our personal relationship with several weeks of travel and close contact in Vermont, USA. Why Vermont? For a number of years we have had a close relationship with Dr Penny Bishop, Director, Middle Level Teacher Education, University of Vermont. This was our opportunity to spend time with her and her colleagues in her home state, talking middle schooling, visiting schools and living with those professional colleagues we had previously met during their visits to New Zealand, both in Hawkes Bay and in Auckland. The strength of Penny's work in Vermont and in New Zealand as a visiting policy fellow hosted by the Ministry of Education and a recognised US expert in middle schooling strongly validated our reasons for visiting Vermont.

On embarking on our sabbatical we each had these overarching Key Questions:

1. (PF) How are middle schools and their systems responding to the developmental needs of students in years 7 – 10?
(DC) The relationship between pedagogy and student learning and the importance of teacher affinity in ensuring that learning and teaching for the emerging adolescent is successful.
2. (PF) What Professional Development, pre-service teacher training is required to ensure teachers can engage, motivate and inspire young adolescents?
(DC) How important is specialist pre-service training specific to Middle School teaching and leadership?

3. (PF) Does the structure and organisation of a Middle School influence student achievement?

(DC) What impact does school organisation (leadership) and age group specific professional development have for teaching and learning in the Middle School context?

What quickly emerged was that the vast amount of research related to Middle School education and how so much of it was related to the complexity of dealing with this age group and how the historical review shows that many of today's concerns about young teens and the proper way to educate them are similar to the concerns that have been expressed for the past 100 years. The issues and the solutions that were endorsed at any particular time, including the concept of an intermediate school between primary and high school, often had more to do with labour market needs or the capacity of school buildings than with educational or developmental considerations. There has also been an ongoing debate about the proper role of the Intermediate / middle school, with tensions between

- the need for intermediate / middle schools to ease the transition from primary school, with an emphasis on the developmental needs of young teens, versus the need to facilitate the transition to high school, with an emphasis on academic rigor
- the need to increase educational attainment by providing schooling for all, versus the need to improve preparation for high-achieving youth.

1. How are middle schools and their systems responding to the developmental needs of students in years 7 – 10? Why is teacher affinity with the age group so important?

Some research suggests that the onset of puberty is an especially poor reason for beginning a new phase of schooling, in as much as multiple simultaneous changes (for example, the onset of puberty and school transfer) are stressful for young adolescents and sometimes have long-lasting negative effects. Furthermore, the few studies that compared schools with different configurations suggest that young teens do better in Full Primary schools than in schools with configurations that require a transition to an intermediary school.

For many middle school students, school is about everything except academics. Students become socially and emotionally focused and academics, while still important to some students, take a backseat to the pressures of being a teenager. Middle school students are thrown into a world where they are ready to be independent, but have yet to gain the social and emotional skills to be truly secure in that independence.

Most teens simply want to fit in. During the middle school years, students become more focused on being loyal to their peers than their families. This means that middle school

students are willing to test the limits of acceptable behavior in order to fit in and will often accept poor treatment or make bad choices to keep friends or be accepted into a group. Teens who do not conform can find themselves the victim of bullying or shunning.

Intermediate / Middle school education has long been criticized as being unresponsive to adolescents' developmental needs. Interdisciplinary team teaching, flexible timetabling, and advisory programs have been suggested as ways to address adolescents' distinctive needs.

However, the effectiveness of these interventions—and all others—depends on whether they fit with a school's culture and leadership and how well they are implemented. In spite of their good intentions, few middle schools have implemented flexible timetabling. There is evidence that advisory programs and interdisciplinary team teaching are frequently enacted at only superficial levels, often because they require fundamental shifts in the beliefs and operating modes of schools and teachers. Thus, these strategies seem promising, but they are not easy to implement within current structures.

Particularly relevant for young teens are motivational and social emotional indicators of well-being that are related to academic performance. Disengagement and social alienation are not only related to low achievement but also predict dropping out, whereas concerns about safety predict emotional distress that can compromise academic performance. Such findings underscore the need to examine a variety of student outcomes, in addition to academic indicators, for middle school students.

The constant and most critical element in ensuring that the emerging adolescent gets the best out of these critical years is having teachers who can make a difference through their capability to deliver a curriculum that engages, motivates and excites. They have to have what can simply be called affinity for and with the age group. In its simplest form they have to like the age group, genuinely like and want to teach young adolescents. Bishop describes the Concept of Teacher Affinity through these four key aspects:

- Affinity: Genuine Liking of Young Adolescents
- Knowledge: Developmental Stages & Domains
- Skills: Responsive Pedagogy
- Dispositions: Affect and Relationship Building

We would do well to ensure that these key aspects are critical element of any pre-service and teacher selection process for any person who wants to teach the emerging and early adolescent. Do we have the courage to make the need for 'affinity' the most important criteria for selection? Then through quality systems and infrastructure, targeted and specific professional development, flexible and responsive timetabling, and a pedagogy that is responsive to the age group we may have the right ingredients for schooling that is truly responsive to the needs of students in the middle years.

2. What Professional Development, pre-service teacher training is required to ensure teachers can engage, motivate and inspire young adolescents?

Many middle school advocates believe that improving the education of middle school students hinges on improving the training of teachers. Much of the current policy debate related to middle schools concerns the lack of subject-matter expertise among teachers and a perceived need to have a separate middle school certification. In New Zealand this has only recently been examined and in May 2010 the then minister of Education, Minister Anne Tolley presented her vision for Middle Schooling. Within this vision was the mention for pre-service training for those wishing to focus on teaching in middle schools. In the USA only about one-quarter of middle school teachers are certified to teach at the middle grades; the majority of the rest are certified to teach at the elementary / primary level.

This means that teachers are likely to lack both subject-matter expertise and formal training on the development of young adolescents. Although improvements in professional development can potentially compensate for some of the inadequacies of pre-service training, research suggests that professional development is often fragmented and unsystematic—that it is brief and lacks focus and alignment with standards.

In middle school, the curriculum often changes from basic identify and recall activities to requiring students to exhibit critical thinking and creative skills. Not all teenagers develop these mental abilities at the same time, so it can be difficult for middle school students to complete some of the higher-level activities required of them. At this age, teenagers are focused on themselves more than academics so learning must be relevant. Teachers must work hard to appeal to the interests of middle school students and clearly explain why information is important

If student engagement in the middle years is not about what type of school one attends, the question of a 'middle years' identity becomes increasingly complex. Given that the middle years of schooling are a critical intervention opportunity for increasing student engagement and thereby reducing potential early school leaving later on, how can schools increase student engagement during these years? How do schools build institutional affiliation within their young adolescent populations? How might schools foster positive relationships between learners and teachers? More and more evidence points to the effect of the teacher, in terms of teacher qualification or "what teachers know and can do," on the lives of learners.

Research is increasingly clear that the most influential point of leverage on student outcomes, in partnership with parents and caregivers, is *quality teaching*.

What happens in classrooms through quality teaching and through the quality of the learning environment generated by the teacher and the students is the key variable in explaining up to 59%, or even more, of the variance in student scores.

Conducting five separate, decade-spanning studies on middle schooling practice, Lounsbury and colleagues found that: These five studies reconfirmed a central truth: *The teacher makes the difference*. It is not the grade organization, interdisciplinary teaming, or anything else that is *the* essential factor in improving middle schools, it is the quality of the classroom teacher.

Further research revealed that:

Teachers who participated in specialised middle grades teacher education programs and are teaching in schools that have teaming and high levels of common planning time are more likely to be involved in effective team and classroom practices. Subsequently those teachers have the potential to effect greater gains in student learning, as defined by student achievement scores. A teacher's education - both initial and ongoing - is therefore a crucial arena through which to effect change in schools. The ways in which teachers are educated or trained to "cause learning" are an important part of changing the culture of schooling.

Ministry of Education guidelines, procedures and priorities pertaining to teacher quality, therefore, are key policy levers for school change and, subsequently, student learning. The question of appropriate teacher credentialing for the middle years is complex. Years 7-10 straddle the primary and secondary levels and ownership over them is both complicated and political. One Post Primary Teachers' Association representative explained, "We believe strongly that secondary education begins at Year 7 yet most teachers of Years 7 and 8 are primary trained." Professional rivalry between primary and secondary teachers' unions, a shortage of funds, competition for resources, and administrative convenience have all played powerful roles over the past century in revising the approach to educating young adolescents in New Zealand, including repeated calls for re-capitation and the closing of schools.

Where do the middle years belong in teacher preparation? Should teachers of this age group be educated as primary teachers? Should they be prepared as content specialists as is the case for the secondary years? Or is preparation specific to the needs of the early adolescent age group necessary? Current data on student engagement in the middle years suggests a potential mismatch between some learners' needs and their learning opportunities. Examining the evidence for effective schooling practice in these middle years therefore may offer useful policy directions to address this potential lack of fit.

TEACHER EDUCATION AND THE MISSING MIDDLE Middle Years teacher Credentialing in Aotearoa / NZ, Penny Bishop July 2008

The policy document New Zealand Curriculum (NZC) outlines key competencies, learning areas, and achievement objectives for the schooling sector.¹⁶⁹ The NZC identifies five learning pathways: early childhood, Years 1-6, Years 7-10, Years 11-13, and tertiary education. These learning pathways are described within the NZC as exhibiting unique foci and attributes, while at the same time providing for smooth and positive transitions.

The distinctive nature and needs of students in Years 7-10 are depicted in the NZC in the following way:

A responsive curriculum will recognise that students in these years are undergoing rapid physical development, becoming increasingly socially aware, and encountering increasingly complex curriculum contexts. Particularly important are positive relationships with adults, opportunities for students to be involved in the communities, and authentic learning experiences. Although teachers are prepared through teacher preparation programmes to teach in the other learning pathways in the schooling sector, there are no distinct programmes to educate teachers for Years 7-10 in New Zealand. Instead, teachers of the middle years are divided across primary and secondary teacher preparation, mirroring how the learners are spread across school types.

This situation presents interesting questions:

- What is the potential for successful implementation of the NZC without explicit preparation or professional development in the teaching of all of its identified learning pathways?*
- Is the set of professional knowledge and skills gained from primary or secondary teacher preparation sufficient for teaching middle years learners?*
- Can teachers effectively engage students during the middle schooling years without acquiring knowledge, skills and dispositions specific to these learners' needs?*

Considering that “the New Zealand Curriculum is a clear statement of what we deem important in education,” and is “the foundation policy statement covering teaching, learning, and assessment for all students in all New Zealand schools,” the lack of emphasis on the preparation of teachers.

Whilst visiting the University of Vermont, College of Education in 2011, it was apparent that the early adolescence, ages 10 – 15 were important years for their pre-service training providers. Preparing teachers to work with this age group was seen as vitally important and of high priority. The work that Dr Penny Bishop had done in New Zealand had provided her with the vision for pursuing the programme and focusing on improving the quality of not only the graduates from their programme but to also improve the quality of the teachers working with the middle years across the State of Vermont. Middle Grades education and teacher training for Middle Schooling is given high status and this is evidenced in the second edition (2011) Task Force Report “Middle School is not a Building – Educating Vermont’s Young Adolescents in the 21st Century”. This document deliberately sets out a pathway for improvement in the education that Vermont’s middle grade students receive in their wide variety of schools. This kind of

document and the reasons for it are needed in New Zealand if we are to have truly responsive middle schooling philosophy and practice. Current changes and direction in education, despite what is said in our NZC, would indicate that this is unlikely to happen.

New Zealand does have an excellent education system. Schools are indeed fortunate to be self-managing but what we do require is for the training providers to place a priority on developing an initial teacher education programme that caters for the middle years.

3. Does the structure and organisation of a Middle School influence student achievement?

'Conditions for learning' refers to factors that can enhance or diminish a student's ability to learn. Particularly relevant for young teens are motivational and social emotional indicators of well-being that are related to academic performance. Disengagement and social alienation are not only related to low achievement but also predict dropping out, whereas concerns about safety predict emotional distress that can compromise academic performance. Such findings underscore the need to examine a variety of student outcomes, in addition to academic indicators, for middle school students.

What is also important is to consider the aspects of the Key Competencies that are often entwined throughout many of the intermediate / middle school programmes. For many of our emerging adolescences, if the competencies are developed at this age then they are more likely to set them up for life and life long learning.

The challenges that NZ schools that deliver the NZC to years 7 – 10, the so called middle years, are those that involve the 'merging' of ideas and approaches that reflect a primary and / or a secondary approach to schooling. More often it seems that the direction is one of a secondary model. We have a variety of school types, that is a given in our education system. Intermediates schools sit truly in the middle and our teachers must be specialists at being generalists as opposed to being specific curriculum specialists. What structure and organisation that makes the best schooling opportunity for the emerging adolescent may be highly debateable but research and our own beliefs indicate that schools for this age group need to:

- Have a clear and defined middle schooling philosophy and pedagogical approach.
- Understand the need for student engagement through teachers who have the required 'affinity' for the age group, who are trained specifically for the role and who have on-going professional development to improve the capacity and capability in specific curriculum areas.
- Allow for interdisciplinary and team teaching, not be locked into solely home room teaching.
- Give students true voice and opportunity to influence how their school supports them in their learning and growth as life long learners.

- Follow an inquiry or project based model of learning – for students and for teachers.
- Use co-operative learning methods alongside and partnered with individualised and competitive learning.
- Provide opportunities for risk taking and challenge that come from areas of the curriculum outside core literacy and numeracy.
- Understand the need for specific opportunity to be creative, to have fun, to try new and exciting things.
- Have learning spaces that can be used flexibly, that allow for students and teachers to work in ways that are appropriate to the occasion.
- Have high levels of pastoral care support that is delivered by a team of specially trained and supported staff, not necessarily just a teacher based team.
- Access to quality technology for teaching, learning and professional development. Have teachers who are capable, confident and engaged through the use of eLearning, blended learning and can engage students through their personal knowledge and skills.
- Have leaders and leadership systems and practices that support all of the above through a school culture and environment where high expectations, professional behaviour and a desire for continual improvement are the norm.

Of course the structure and organisation of a Middle School can and will influence student achievement for the better. The challenge is getting it right for our own schools, our own students, our own community and doing it in a way that makes school a great place for the emerging and early adolescent. If all of the above (and no doubt many more things not listed) are actually happening beyond a 'superficial' level then we will more likely be making a critical difference to student learning and achievement.