

## **Sabbatical Report.**

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### ***An Exploration of Middle School Pedagogy and the Potential for Inquiry Learning to Strengthen Teaching and Learning in Years 7 to 10.***

#### **Sabbatical Focus.**

The focus of the Sabbatical was on the middle school years and more specifically how Inquiry Learning might assist teachers in the middle years to assist in improved student engagement and consequently better learning outcomes.

Wairoa College is a Year 7 to 15 Secondary school in Northern Hawke's Bay.

In 2005, as a result of an EDI review in the area, prompted by projected falling rolls and some concerns about the quality of teaching and learning in some schools in the district, the College was expanded to include Year 7 and 8 students from the town state primary schools which were decapitated and reduced from three to two in number.

#### **Considerations promoting the focus on Middle Schools.**

There are a number of triggers for the focus on middle schools.

Firstly, as a result of the EDI, Year 7 to 8s were added to the College. Staffing in these year levels led to the appointment of eight teachers from the primary sector. This meant that teaching was by either the newly appointed primary or existing secondary trained teachers. Much literature around middle schools suggests that students in the middle schools have particular needs as emerging and early adolescents. While the quality of teachers in the College is not an issue, this did raise a question about how well trained our teachers are to meet the perceived specific needs of students in Years 7 to 10.

Secondly, the middle school literature generally covers Years 7 to 10. We did not want our Year 7 and 8 age group to be simply a junior add on to the secondary structures of Wairoa College – a sort of “them” and “us” situation which was evident in the early years following the EDI (and still we hear some people referring to the primary part of the College).

It is widely recognised, and statistically validated, that Years 9 and 10 are those in which there is a spike in student disengagement. Suspensions, stand-downs, and general loss of interest in school clearly rose in those years. Our College's participation in the Student Engagement Initiative which grew out of the Suspension Reduction Initiative, only serves to reinforce the unfortunate trend.

Therefore, another consideration is to extend the Year 7 and 8 middle school concept to Years 9 and 10 and to explore whether age appropriate teaching and learning

practices are operating in the College and how guided inquiry may assist this implementation.

A further imperative for increasing our focus on middle schools lies in the reality of NCEA. Much of the traditional focus in secondary schools is on NCEA:- realigning standards, assessment practices and league tables. NCEA performance is, rightly or wrongly, taken as a major indicator about how good is a secondary school and this can and does divert attention away from arguably the real imperative for schooling.

There is perceived hiatus in Years 9 and 10. Years 1 to 8 have National Standards – Years 11 to 13 have NCEA. Years 9 and 10 fall in between and with the earlier acknowledged rise in negative indicators it suggests that a refocusing on middle school structure and practices is timely. Furthermore, many experts contend that the years between 10 and 14 are the most vital development period after the critical 1 to 5 years.

### **Sabbatical Plan.**

The sabbatical consisted of three related components:

- reading and literature review around middle schools;
- attending the MYSA Conference in the Gold Coast;
- school visits in Australia and New Zealand with a particular focus on how schools were utilising inquiry learning to deliver quality learning programmes for their students.

The intention is to synthesise best practices and explore implications in a comprehensive self review of our own middle school practice.

### **Literature.**

To increase understanding of issues around the middle school years a number of articles were read covering some historical developments in New Zealand, comparisons with overseas middle school movements in Britain, United States and Australia, and, in particular, material on adolescents and the perceived needs of early and emerging adolescents.

Included in the reading were the findings of an ERO Report into teaching and learning in Years 7 and 8 which explored the impact of the five types of provision for learning in these year levels:

- Full primary;
- Intermediate;
- Middle schools;
- Composite;
- Year 7 to 15.

The findings were interesting, but for this school, largely academic as we are a Year 7 to 15 secondary school and have, therefore, limited choice in how we operate. More significantly is what the literature suggests about age appropriate structures and the needs of students in Years 7 to 10.

While there are different emphases in many of the writings, there are significant generalised agreements which are listed.

Early adolescence, it is generally agreed, coincides with the middle years of schooling, which are characterised by rapid physical, emotional and intellectual development. Patterns of thinking and behaviour are being established. It can be a difficult period in which achievement gaps may widen especially as they collide with inter-sector transitions.

Engagement can be loosely defined, as interactions within schools and between schools and their communities, but fundamentally it applies to relationships between teachers and students and students and the curriculum.

To be successful it requires school leaders, and teachers, to share fundamental beliefs about how children can learn more effectively. Educators in the middle school years therefore need understanding of the needs of children at this stage of development and expertise in the pedagogies which enhance learning for them. This suggests that it is best to have specialist middle school teachers with the mix of subject expertise and teaching strategies appropriate for the age, as opposed to either the generalist primary or secondary trained teachers.

The NZIMSA policy statement November 1996 stated.

*“We believe that all emerging adolescents, because of their special needs, require a form of and quality of education that is very different from that which primary and secondary students receive”.*

General agreement in the literature suggests the following prerequisites for middle year education (as well as the teacher expertise in the paragraph above) as summarised by Dorman 1984.

**Dorman’s Seven Needs of Young Adolescents.**

(From Dorman, G. (1984). Middle Grades Assessment Programme. Centre for Early Adolescence: University of Carolina.)

1. **The need for diversity.**  
Different opportunities for learning.  
Different opportunities with a variety of people.  
Different opportunities to refine thinking skills.
2. **The need for self-exploration and self-definition.**  
Opportunities to establish a positive self-concept and a sense of identity.
3. **The need for meaningful participation in school and community.**  
Opportunities to become independent and to have a role in making the rules affecting them.
4. **The need for positive interaction with both peers and adults.**  
Opportunities for association, companionship, and criticism regarding new social roles.

5. **The need for physical activity.**  
Opportunities for physical exercise and proper rest to avoid high energy levels and fatigue.
6. **The need for competence and achievement.**  
Opportunities to try out new physical, psychosocial and cognitive abilities.
7. **The need for structure and clear limits.**  
Opportunities for increased independence and self-direction, yet clear limits.

I was particularly interested in the following middle school creed “*That I Believe*” based on “*This We Believe Successful Schools for Young Adolescence*”, the position paper of National Middle School Association (NMSA).

***I believe that every young adolescent...***

- *Has the capacity to learn, grow, and develop into a knowledgeable, reflective, caring, ethical, and contributing citizen.*
- *Must have access to the very best programmes and practices a school can offer.*
- *Must be engaged in learning that is relevant, challenging, integrative, and exploratory.*
- *Thrives academically, socially, and emotionally in a democratic learning environment where trust and respect are paramount and where family and community are actively involved.*
- *Faces significant life choices and needs support in making wise and healthy decisions.*
- *Deserves educators who are prepared to work with this age group, who are themselves lifelong learners and committed to their own ongoing professional development and growth.*

*Therefore, I proudly dedicate myself to becoming the best middle level educator I can be and an active advocate for all young adolescents.*

(Acknowledgement to Owen Alexander, Principal Takapuna Normal School.)

**School Visits.**

A second significant aspect of the sabbatical was to visit schools and see the practical application of middle school theories linked especially to inquiry learning. I visited two schools in Australia, Years 0 to 12 Colleges with middle school components, and some intermediate schools recognised as having quality inquiry learning programmes.

This proved immensely valuable. While there were, nationally, individual differences reflecting different school cultures and emphases, general trends emerged around the inquiry process. These are currently part of my own school’s self review.

Key generalisations are concisely summed up in one school’s inquiry learning programme.

- Inquiry learning: supports differentiated learning  
 (allowing learning to some extent to be self-paced):
- : requires digital technologies;
  - : requires a structure and process (it is **not** laissez-faire project based learning);
  - : allows students to
    - work on the basis of prior knowledge and experience,
    - see a real purpose in real contexts,
    - understand their own process of learning,
    - be directly involved in gathering information,
    - construct their own knowledge framework,
    - have some choice to follow interests and needs,
    - see links between theory and action,
    - take risks,
    - reflect;
  - : allows teachers to develop and use:
    - student centred learning;
    - develop frameworks for guiding the process;
    - analyse learning needs for funding, using and communicating information;
    - strategies to teach information skills to meet student learning needs.
  - : allows the school to:
    - provide professional learning for teachers which has long term benefits for student learning;
    - be consistent across the school, in information skill learning processes;
    - be effective in resource provision;
    - plan relevant curriculum experiences for learning.

(Acknowledgement: Takapuna Intermediate Normal School.)

The process involves:

- development phase while working on and refining the big picture within the overarching theme;
- selection and planning which involves prior knowledge, purpose and audience;
- investigating possible sources and collecting material to use;
- selecting and recording relevant information which will answer the big question(s);
- defining audience and preparing a presentation (this is one aspect which provides significant student choice);
- reviewing and evaluating.

These elements were common to all schools visited. The process is always guided. There is an immersion period initially as students need to know things before they can formulate appropriate inquiry questions. There is, therefore, of necessity, a focus on questions and types of questions necessary to work the process and achieve the goals.

A further necessity is digital technologies to allow research and information gathering and recording, and teachers who understand fully the process and are dedicated to its implementation.

### **MYSA Conference 2011, Gold Coast.**

The MYSA Conference was invaluable with its emphasis on twenty-first century learning alignment of curriculum with the needs of learners in the middle years. It reaffirmed the need to develop life long learning dispositions through exploring trends in social learning and behaviour, digital culture and learning, positive learning relationships, knowing our students and their needs, connections between home and school and involving the students in initiatives for learning improvements.

Further, the conference emphasised the importance of digital technologies, habits of mind and positive learning dispositions, relevant and authentic data sources to improve learning, and differentiation through an inquiry approach especially on global themes or topics which are real (authentic) and relevant.

Conference keynotes by Costa, Fuller and Jacobs stressed the necessity for schools to utilise Twenty-first Century technologies, curriculum mapping, implementing a thoughtful curriculum.

Both the conference themes and school visits highlighted the connections between middle school theories and practices in successful schools.

Andrew Fuller presented a model for brain based learning (the GET IT model).

Art Costa's two presentations were around his well known Habits of Mind and five thoughts for a thoughtful curriculum which involves helping students to learn to think, think to learn, think together, think about their thoughtfulness and thinking big.

Perhaps most revolutionary were the presentations by Dr Heidi Hayes Jacobs on the needs for a relevant twenty-first curriculum with a key focus on digital technology, and Curricula Mapping which she defined as a calendar-based procedure for collecting and maintaining a data base of the operational curriculum in a school or district encompassing content, skills, assessments, and framed by essential questions (i.e. inquiry).

She framed her address around key questions:

- \* how can we design curriculum to prepare our learners for their future?
- \* how can curriculum mapping support our formal collaboration and increase student performance?
- \* four phase model:
  - laying the foundation;
  - launching the process;
  - sustaining and integrating the system – arranging assessment data into maps;
  - advanced mapping tasks.

The conference themes based on the keynotes provided a strong theoretical base which was reflected in the best practices of schools visited.

### **Summary.**

In relating the explorations of the Sabbatical to my own school's processes I note:

our current initiatives and programmes, such as Te Kotahitanga; PB4L (Positive Behaviour for Learning) building on literacy and numeracy; Professional Learning Assessment for Learning and ICT developments will be strengthened as we develop and implement our inquiry learning process.

I take the following considerations from my sabbatical experiences:  
the need to focus more on consistent across-the-school practices around inquiry, IT, values and formative assessment; high expectations; big investment in planning time to embed cross-curricula competences (and whole staff buy in); big investment in targeted IT; manageable class sizes under the guidance of highly expert middle school practitioners, and an inquiry approach which delivers appropriate curriculum content and contexts, develops more independent learners, and differentiates to cater for gifted and remedial needs.

Effective teaching in middle schools requires interdisciplinary teaming of teachers, integrated study programmes linking across subject boundaries, teachers who combine subject expertise with understanding of the needs of emerging adolescents.

Schools need to pursue collaborative discussion making and hold shared understanding about goals and within schools, leadership commits to the education of the whole child, emotionally, intellectually, socially and personally.

Currently there is an emphasis in the need for teachers in twenty first century classrooms to adopt more discursive pedagogical practices replacing the traditional secondary transmission models. Learning dispositions need to be developed as we endeavour to assist our students with learning how to learn and life long learning.

Inquiry learning, properly and systematically implemented, provides an ideal forum in which to develop these dispositions. The middle years of schooling are ripe for the inquiry approach.

### **Implications for Wairoa College.**

While there was recognition of the importance of inquiry learning, it was essential that our staff took ownership of the process and how that process would be implemented in the middle school years.

Prior to this sabbatical our staff have been involved in the following ways:

- in-school staff learning around the theory and practice of inquiry learning and middle school focus (readings and discussion);
- initial attempts at planning overarching cross-curricula theme / topics around which to formulate an inquiry approach to curriculum delivery;
- individuals had attended district-wide Inquiry Learning with Lane Clark and Trevor Bonds as facilitators;
- Island Bay Primary School under the leadership of Perry Rush presented their journey to a selection of teachers from Wairoa schools, including Wairoa College.

As a result, there was an awareness of the fundamentals of inquiry learning and some of the pedagogical orthodoxies promoted by proponents of middle school.

However, implementation, up to this point, has been inconsistent.

Inquiry “big picture” topics had been introduced and developed in Year 7 and 8 and by two Year 9 teachers who taught the same class for both English and Social Studies.

The need is, therefore, to embed practice, in line with theory, in a process that is developed and owned by Wairoa College staff and especially in Years 7 to 10, building on what currently operated.

We have identified the following as framework big question topics (see below) around which to build our inquiry learning and our middle school teachers have had two teacher-only days dedicated to developing our school approach to inquiry learning and the associated content, context and pedagogies necessary to ensure its ownership and implementation.

The linkage between best evidence middle school theory and practice and on inquiry learning approach has been clearly identified and reinforced by the findings emerging from the sabbatical, both from the MYSA Conference and school visits.

Inquiry learning in the classroom demands of learners, and teachers, the learning and utilisation of the skills so necessary to meet the demands and expectations of twenty-first century learning as set and in the New Zealand Curriculum.

The sabbatical clearly identified the need to install and embed in our teaching and learning culture learning dispositions which will allow our students to engage in real life learning, developing and utilising the competencies which take engagement and learning beyond the mere organisation of content into an environment of genuine inquiry and life long learning as articulated, typically, in school charters.

The implementation of the findings in the middle school is expected to improve engagement, foster the love and for learning, raise foundation skills and set a strong platform for increased success in senior school qualifications.



**2012 Planning: Junior Topics**

<b>Topic</b>	<b>Year 7</b>	<b>Year 8</b>	<b>Year 9</b>	<b>Year 10</b>
<b>Topic</b>	Discovering ourselves and our school.	Words of wisdom.	Past, present, future.	Nga korero o te nehera. Talking about how things were created.
<b>Topic</b>	Pacific people.	Transport through The Ages.	Dangerous planets.	Earth, wind, fire and water.
<b>Topic</b>	That's entertainment!	Where have all the flowers gone?	Where in the world?	Licorice allsorts.
<b>Topic</b>	Time tourist.	What's next door?	Super heroes.	Fast forward.

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**Further Acknowledgement.**

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