

RICH, REAL, RIGOROUS and RELEVANT

This, the context for learning experiences for students in the newly structured Years 7, 8, 9 Middle Schools in the Northern Territory of Australia, epitomises what is happening there, the changes and the future directions of teaching and learning. It is those changes which constitute the basis for my research in examining my lead question – **“What structural/organisational changes have some Australian Schools implemented to meet the specific learning/developmental needs of 10-13 year olds?”** (In fact the Middle Schools cater for 11-14 year olds in the Northern Territory)

I am Trevor Beaton, Principal of Cobham Intermediate School in Christchurch, New Zealand. I have held that position for 12 years. The school caters for 720 students aged from 10-13 in Years 7 and 8. My sabbatical was for Term 3 of the 2008 school year. My topic arose from my long term professional passion for working with students in the middle years age group and my quest to further improve how we can meet the different needs of such students.

The Government decreed changes, made to school structures, 2005-2008, across the Northern Territory intrigued me. Naturally then my research took me to Darwin, and later to Adelaide to observe just what was happening with their Middle Schools.

Acknowledgements

First, I should like to thank the Board of Trustees of Cobham Intermediate School for the enthusiastic support given me in undertaking this study during my sabbatical. The professional response and support of my application given by the Board, plus a generous monetary donation towards travel costs, was an endorsement of what we have achieved as a school community and an investment in our future. I shall always be grateful for that.

To the Principals, and often staff members in the Northern Territory Schools who so willingly gave of their time, expertise, knowledge and allowed me to have intrusive

questions answered! Each is professional, giving great leadership in their respective schools of which they are clearly and justly proud! I thank them sincerely!

Darwin Middle School – Principal Marcus Dixon

Dripstone Middle School – Principal Lyn Elphinstone

Nightcliff Middle School – Principal Lyn Hollow

Sanderson Middle School – Principal Russell Legg

To Chris Hancock, Human Resources Director, People and Learning Division, Building Better Schools, Government Department of Education and Employment Training Darwin. Chris was very informative and gave me time from her very busy schedule. I appreciate that very much.

To Steve McDonald, Principal, Evert de Gooyer, Acting Assistant Principal and the staff of Eastern Fleurieu Middle School who hosted me for a school day. I thank them all for enlightening me about what a Middle School in a multi campus “school” can accomplish.

To all, especially my two Deputy Principals at Cobham Intermediate School, Bindy Buchanan and Kevin Rait, who carried additional responsibilities during my absence over the duration of my sabbatical.

To the New Zealand Government through the Ministry of Education which provides the opportunity for sabbaticals for Principals. For me it has been both a wonderful time to observe other school systems in action and to invigorate myself.

Thank you all.

Purpose

There is considerable world-wide current research conducted on identifying the specific learning needs of students in the middle years of schooling (10-14 years) differentiating this age group with differing needs from those of younger and older students. Physical, social and emotional developmental changes which are markedly escalated for students in the middle years, dictate greater appropriateness of teaching

and learning to accommodate these for optimum benefit for all students. My interest and research focused on how these needs were being met through the changes made to school structures throughout the Northern Territory in Australia (2005-2008) whereby today all students in Northern Territory schools are catered for in

Years 1-6 Primary Schools

7-9 Middle Schools

10-12 Secondary Schools

I have included in this paper some references to research which validates the changes made “in the best interests of the students”. DEET, The Northern Territory Department of Employment, Education and Training followed a comprehensive, consultative process based on research, discussions with learners, parents, communities and educationalists at all levels. The Australian Curriculum Studies Association in 1998 conducted national research to identify those needs specific to adolescent learners.

Rationale and Background

My passion in teaching has long been working with students in the exciting, developmental change phase in the middle years. In New Zealand this tends to be Years 7 and 8, often in separate Intermediate Schools. Increasingly Middle Schools are being developed in both state and private schools varying from two to four year structures, sometimes within bigger school structures.

Having taught in and led staff in Intermediate Schools for 33 years I have some justifiable views on what Middle Schooling should and could be. However, given the privilege of a sabbatical I wanted to explore, within a similar culture to that in New Zealand, a system which had recognised the specific learning needs of students in the middle years and had made definite changes to meet the arising challenges. This led me to the Northern Territory of Australia which over the last three years since 2005 has developed state-wide middle schools for all students.

A Secondary Education Review was conducted in 2002 by University personnel, external consultants, staff seconded from DEET (Department of Employment,

Education and Training). Led by Dr Gregor Ramsey, an experienced international reviewer, the Review had the following contexts

- (1) Under the Northern Territory commitment to “Building Better Education”
 - ensure access to high quality education for all students – rural, remote, urban
 - ensure that the delivery of education was appropriate to each schools community’s needs
 - build real pathways from school to training to skilled jobs

- (2) Examine the challenges presented by the existing diversity of school types (junior secondary, comprehensive secondary, senior colleges (Years 11 and 12 only), open education centres, area schools (primary to Year 10) and an assortment of other primary through to secondary schools in remote areas.

The brief was to examine the outcomes being achieved. The Reviewers found it necessary to make suggestions about the whole system because changes in one part had impact on others. (See copy of review known as Secondary Review, 2002).

A particular focus was “talking with young people”. The review team heard many times that “secondary education in the Northern Territory was in crisis” and that “there were major issues that had to be addressed – particularly for young Indigenous people and for Indigenous and non-Indigenous young people whose needs were not being met by what was being offered in regional and urban secondary schools.” Further the review saw “the way forward” – “there is great opportunity to be innovative and creative in finding solutions and alternatives that will better fit the needs and aspirations of the young people and their communities”. Clearly the Governments (both Northern Territory and Commonwealth) needed to provide the necessary policy framework and resources – they did!

The focus turned to “meeting” the diverse needs of today’s and tomorrow’s young people”. (see Review statement)

“Two stages of secondary schooling later middle years (7-9) and senior years (10-12)... these two stages need to be accompanied by changes to curriculum and pedagogy for each of them and also changes to the current organisational and physical structures of schools.”

The concept of a “Learning Precinct” was developed. The key objective was “to achieve a re-structured education system that makes the best use of available resources to meet the diverse educational needs of students, staff and the community. The LP is designed to meet the diversity and complexity of the educational, social and emotional needs of young people, to allow for the best use of both physical and human resources and to offer opportunities for greater local governance and community involvement in education.”

An LP then is “a set of schools working in partnership under one governance structure, led by one Head of Precinct with a special relationship with its collective community”. (see P10 article). It was envisaged that LPs would “make many of the problems of delivery easier to solve, such as transitions from school to school and later to work, further study or community participation”.

The review concluded that

“a bold move forward in education is essential if the next generation is to be well prepared to take on the very special challenges of the 21st Century. It argued that “the old strategies, structures and approaches are no longer appropriate. While there are no simple solutions, structures that allow people to show flexibility, enterprise and leadership are now more likely to provide solutions that will work, and systems that are accountable for what they do will serve young people best””.

Frameworks (see Page 15) were established to facilitate

- school structural changes
- building capabilities
- staffing – Training/re training

- deployment of equitable distribution of teaching expertise across the system
- definition of roles and responsibilities of teachers in differentiated areas
middle years (7-9) senior years (10-12)
- improve (DEET) the collection and analysis of data for school improvement in NT
- External expertise to assist with the processes of redesigning schooling structures
- Establishment of quality and accountability responsibilities to DEET
- Amendment of the then Education Act to effect the changes
- Setting of specific goals around
 - Student attendance
 - Leaving age 15 (minimum)
 - More integrated/strategic approach in remote areas
 - Negotiation/consultation process with all relevant stakeholders including unions (see Chris Hancock information under DEET findings)

This review, with its non-partisan, courageous stand, in the best interests of learning for students is what captivated my interest to see what has and is happening in the Middle Schools across the Northern Territory. Further I compared this with a structure in South Australia which too has differences from the scenario in New Zealand.

Activities Undertaken (Methodology)

Clearly to ascertain what the changes to school structures are, some needed to be visited, observed and those people involved spoken with. Further, to gain an understanding of the processes involved it was imperative that I met with DEET to gain the official perspectives on the changes. In addition a comparative visit to a Middle School in South Australia was logical.

Having booked flights to and accommodation in Darwin, I contacted by email the Principals of the four Darwin Middle Schools and requested opportunities to visit, observe and discuss. All were interested and welcoming. They were open and gave

significant professional time. For my action research I devised a questionnaire which formed the basis of discussions with the principals, and, in some cases, staff members. This, which also applied in South Australia, enabled me to gain insights to where each school was at and gave some indications of the benefits which students were enjoying.

Invariably Principals were proud to show their school's resources and extolled both the philosophy behind and the implementation process of the change to Middle Schools. The autonomy of New Zealand schools is not as apparent with greater influence on accountability to Chief Executives for each Learning Precinct and also directly to DEET. This 'chain' of accountability was one of the required features highlighted by the Review team (Secondary School Review, NT, 2002).

Findings

Thus, having read in detail the relevant NT papers backgrounding the changes, being cognisant of current research on the particular learning needs of the emerging adolescent (e.g. Michael Nagel's work on brain development) and being eager to meet with students as well as staff in the schools, I embarked on my visits.

Funding of the schools is based on three main sources –

- Northern Territory (State) Government
- Commonwealth (Australian) Government
- Indigenous People Funding

Each stream contributing about $\frac{1}{3}$ of the total. In addition school raised funds, including a sought donation of up to \$130 per annum per child helps off-set costs. Some schools have income streams from special funding such as the Clontarf Programme at Sanderson for Indigenous Boys. Students have the automatic right to attend the Middle School in their Learning Precinct which minimises transition issues.

Curriculum accountability has to meet the DEET demand of being "Rich, rigorous, relevant and real" and has a core of key learning areas to be delivered. This is measured in part by state-wide assessments of students in Years 3, 5, 7 and 9 annually along with destination data being collated on students one year after leaving

secondary school. Socio-economic demographic data is factored in to results which are not used comparatively but put pressure on teachers/schools. Otherwise schools have scope for developing their own curriculums. Much evidence of diversity and attending to individual students needs and interests was apparent on my visits to schools.

Staffing, in comparison with New Zealand Middle/Intermediate Schools, was much superior. Student/teacher ratios are much lower, classes rarely if ever over 24 in number. However it is the significant numbers of additional Government funded Pastoral Care/Student Welfare, full time support teaching staff, including Counsellors, Careers Advisors, Police and Health Workers, Home Liaison and Indigenous Liaison people who make schools so much different. Such student support not only meets the real needs of adolescents but enables the teaching staff to focus primarily on their principal role – teaching.

Another common factor of all schools was that timetabling is centred on students physical/special needs for variation/movement and naturally the climate. Two schools commenced their day at 8am concluding just after 2pm with 30 minute intervals for recess and lunch. Student options particularly for Year 9 were frequently career-oriented.

School uniforms, possibly in accord with the heat and humidity, are a request of DEET but generally consist of a school logo emblazoned, colourful polo shirt. Only one demanded uniformity of other garments and none were strict about footwear. Students had a choice of up to four “colours” to wear, some opting for varying their tops day to day others being committed to wearing one colour only.

Principals being on four year contracts, with the opportunity of renewal (decided by Chief Executives and DEET) was a revelation. They were accepting of this, valuing the vitality it gave schools and “pressure” kept on them to do their jobs well.

Northern Territory Middle Schools

School: Sanderson Middle School

Principal: Russell Legg

Roll: 450 (7,8,9)

Indigenous Student%: 25-30

Site:

Former Sanderson High School, significantly fewer students creates spaciousness.

Governance: See General NT

Physical Facilities:

Built in 1985 the school has expansive buildings with superb technology, sport/physical education resources designed for older students. Numerous student and teacher teacher/learning work spaces and resource areas are a strength.

Staffing:

-22 classroom teachers FTTE

-Principal – Educational leader

-Deputy/Assistant Principals

- (1) Responsible for teaching/assessment/certification
- (2) Responsible for leading student services team, student well being and discipline

-5 Team Leaders

- (1) English (English, ESL, AL, Special Education, G E U, Library)
- (2) Humanities (Art, Indigenous Language/SOSE/LOTE)
- (3) Sciences (Science, Maths)
- (4) Well Being (Pastoral Care Groups, Physical Education, Home Economics, Careers)
- (5) Technologies (IT, Technology Studies, Special Programmes)

-Associate Director of Clontarf – From Sanderson Football Academy paid by Clontarf Foundation

-Additional “Student Pastoral Care/Well Being” Staff based on-site, working daily with the students

- 2 full time school counsellors
- 1 Health Promoting School Nurse (who teaches Health in classrooms)
- 1 Careers Advisor

- 1 Home Liaison Officer (for all students)
- 1 Aboriginal and Islander Education Worker (AIEW)
- 1 Community Police Constable

Organisational Systems:

Russell Legg comments “The Middle Years are a challenging time for many students. Research shows that students ... need a targeted approach To meet their developmental needs so that they remain interested in learning and stay in school ...[The Review team found that 65% of Northern Territory Indigenous students did not remain at school beyond Year 9] Our approach at Sanderson Middle School focuses on meeting our students needs by changing “the way they learn” and “what they learn” at school with more opportunities for hands-on learning.”

Students:

Pastoral Care groups, which meet at least once daily, at 8am for 10 minutes, are attached to one teacher for the duration of their three years if possible. Groups have a mixture of Years 7, 8 and 9 students and up to about 20 in number.

Timetabling is a vertical one with many core integrated subjects in Term 1 after which students are able to choose from six different courses from different subject areas for the other terms and each year. By the end of Year 9 students will have studied in all curriculum areas including Business Education, Studies of Society and Information Technology, Career Education, Arts and Languages.

Class times are from a 7.55am start with 45 minute lessons. A 30 minute lunch break is followed by 2 x 45 minute lessons and the 8th lesson concludes the school day at 2.10pm. This is to allow for climatic conditions (heat and the WET 6 months). Mobility and variation of activities are designed to meet the learning needs of the age group, therefore the 45 minute sessions.

Curriculum:

The emphasis is on providing “opportunities for all” and the school endeavours to makes its curriculum “Rich, Rigorous, Relevant and Real”!

All students who complete all courses over the three years receive the prestigious Sanderson Middle School Academic Medallion. Certificates of Outstanding Achievements are awarded to those completing all Year 9 courses. Much student choice of learning is apparent.

Special programmes include the Clontarf Foundation sponsored programme for Indigenous Boys at risk (Strong Men Programme). This is led by an Indigenous man, a trained teacher, who coordinates this programme which involves real learning experiences in the wider community and outback.

Another is Intensive English Language Programme for some older students who require a boost, particularly in skills and confidence.

Community involvement in all aspects of the curriculum is eagerly sought by the leadership team.

School: Dripstone Middle School

Principal: Lyn Elphinstone

Roll: 650 (7,8,9)

Indigenous Student%: 16, with 20% Greek

Site:

Formerly a Junior High and Comprehensive Secondary School (in Darwin's northern suburbs)

Governance: See General NT

Physical Facilities:

The main teaching/learning block is a well designated, two storey complex housing all classrooms. An arterial "street style" centre hallway (known in the school as "The Mall") provides a communal meeting/lunch/games area for students. Covered in, it provides shelter in all weathers including the 'wet'. Practical rooms including Science, Visual Arts, Performing Arts, Photography, Physical Education, Home Economics and Technical Studies are downstairs. Furnishings are modern and plant is sophisticated. Spaciousness is obvious in a large complex!

Staffing:

- 42 classroom teachers plus Principal FTTE
- 2 Assistant Principals
- 5 Senior Teachers responsible for:
 - (1) Transitions, Year 7 Welfare
 - (2) Maths/Science, Year 8 Welfare
 - (3) Humanities, Year 9 Welfare
 - (4) Workshops, Year 8 Welfare, Physical Education
 - (5) Administration, Year 9 Welfare (Assessment etc)

One Assistant Principal heads the Student Support Team of

- 1 School Counsellor
- 1 Careers Advisor
- 1 Home Liaison Officer
- 1 Aboriginal and Islander Educational Worker
- 1 Aboriginal Resource Officer
- 1 School Nurse

-all on site

NB Senior Teachers receive \$5000pa for extra responsibilities.

Organisational Systems:

Lyn Elphinstone has the philosophy that the school needs to meet the diverse learning needs of its multi-cultural community through "a dynamic learning environment that

inspires students to reach their full potential. We strive to prepare students for life as active and productive citizens in our diverse and rapidly changing society’.

An emphasis on values (Respect, Responsibility, Integrity, Inclusiveness, Innovation and Excellence) permeates all activities and actions throughout the school.

Students:

Learning/pastoral Care groups or classes are allocated to each teacher with core curriculum responsibilities.

Roll Groups (which meet each morning 8.30-8.40am) are composed of Years 7, 8 and 9 students based on House Groups. These are solely for administrative purposes. Most often these groups are constant for the three years.

Year 7 students are taught the whole core curriculum in structured learning groups. Integrated curriculum predominates. The groups include one for “High Flyers” (very academically able) and “intervention” for the slow learners. Classification is based on literacy competency results.

Year 8 and 9 students dispense with the Integrated Studies curriculum. Each class (or group) has three teachers, one for each of

- Humanities
- Maths/Science
- Workshop/Practical Classes

Each semester they have increased options for specialisation choices with specialist teachers as well. This enables students to pursue fields of interest in some depth.

Timetabling is the same each day. Following Roll Groups,

Session 1	8.45am-10.30am
Recess	20 minutes
Session 2	10.55am-12.40pm
Lunch	40 minutes
Session 3	1.25pm-3.00pm

Therefore, block times of about 1¾ hours allows for Integrated Studies aim in depth practical work.

Curriculum:

Lyn Elphinstone claims the curriculum has “moved from the traditional three R’s to being pertinent to each child and being much more student focused”. She continues “the structure is better meeting the real needs of the students.” This is illustrated by numbers of Indigenous students being retained in the school being up markedly.

Dripstone staff believe that once students have had exposure in Year 7 to the base of the core curriculum at Years 8 and 9 they are ready for selecting specialisation options of interest and relevant for their future career paths. Previous to 2008 Integrated Studies had been taught beyond Year 7 level.

Special features include Henbury Outreach School. This school of 12 students with special learning needs is based on site at Dripstone Middle School.

School: Nightcliff Middle School

Principal: Lyn Hollow

Roll: 250

Indigenous Student%: about 30%

Site:

Former Secondary School site, Nightcliff High School

Physical Facilities:

Impressive resources include a full sized gymnasium, superb Performing Arts areas and numerous spaces for students and teams of teachers to work. Modernisation and “middle years” appropriate décor including “state of the art” lockers, personalised carpeting and bold colour schemes are features. A carport/dismantling/reassembly facility is a unique feature.

Staffing:

-18 FTTE

-Principal

-Assistant Principal

-2 Team Leaders – Curriculum Development and Staff Professional Development
- Student Well Being, Whole School Programmes

Finance:

Additional staffing to above

- several 17-19 year old “Youth Tutors” – former students to mingle, build rapport with and guide Years 7,8,9 students. They work full time and are paid for by the Commonwealth Government Funding and formal grants. Some are indigenous people.
- 1 Business Manager)
- 1 School based Community Constable) known as the
- 1 Counsellor) “Student
- 1 Home Liaison Person) Engagement
- (0.5) Careers Person) Team”
- AIEW Aboriginal and Islander Education Worker

Many staff in the change of school structure have had to make major paradigm shifts. Several have renewed their enthusiasm taking up teaching curriculum areas of interest/expertise not previously taught!

Organisational Systems:

Year levels are differentiated.

Lyn Hollow has a clear vision which permeates decision making and planning conducted through a team approach. She states “The students are being educated to become independent learners ... success is not only measured in academic achievement, but also by the mark that each student makes on the lives of others and on the world of which they are a part ... We promote a student focused pedagogy which will lead each individual to his/her best”. It is this emphasis on student decision making which drives this Middle School ethos.

Students:

Classified by Year level, classes meet as a group for “Check In” at 8.00am and “Check Out” 1.00pm daily.

Following the “umbrella” of “Rich, rigorous, relevant and real” and requirements of the curriculum by DEET, two inspirational teachers have designed a student focused/choice curriculum to directly meet the specific learning needs of students in the middle years.

Students are able to sit Baccalaureate qualifications. Pastoral care is a strength, exemplified by the initiative to employ “Youth Tutors” who give all students from all backgrounds full opportunity to meaningfully engage with people from other age groups. This was particularly so for Indigenous students but for all others too.

Competitive sport in school hours is not a feature of this school’s curriculum. The belief is that it is an out of school activity of choice. School sports time is scheduled on Wednesday afternoon.

Timetabling:

Catering for the multiplicity of choices for students dictates a comprehensive system of both allocating options/teachers and timetabling them. Clearly this comprehensive task is well managed.

Each year level has its own timetable. (Copy of Year 8, 2008 included with this paper). The school days starts at 8.00am, includes 30 minutes for both interval and lunch breaks and concludes at 2.30pm. Again climatic considerations are significant factors.

Curriculum:

Convolutd but appropriate!

Integrated Studies based on themes e.g. Graffiti, Sea Change leading to a schoolwide musical production or exhibition at the end of each semester.

THEME

- Science
- Maths
- English
- International Languages (German, Indonesian, Italian, Japanese)

Which is combined with semester long courses 4 hours weekly in

STUDENT CHOICE
EACH SEMESTER

- Arts – possible for a student to select Music or Drama through all 3 years (Drama, Music, Textiles, Architecture)
- Life Work Skills
 - Choice 1 (Woodwork, Visual Art, Food and Cooking)
 - Choice 2 (Woodwork, Graphic Design, Health and PE or 2 semesters Car Mechanics)

Stipulations for all are

-each option in LWS Choice 1 compulsory for 1 semester during Years 7 & 8.

Year 9 free choice.

-languages 1 each year

-Year 9 1 semester of careers education (e.g. Surf Life Saving module) and

“Learning Without Walls” – “work experience” for 1 week in community during the term. Year 9 trial the “all Day immersion Concept” e.g. in English some in

class, some off site, involving community expertise such as authors workshop e.g. Thursday. Another time Science all day.

School: Darwin Middle School

Principal: Marcus Dixon

Roll: Currently 450 Years 7 and 8
First Year 9 cohort 2009 will realise the predicted roll of 600

Indigenous Student%: 12%

Site:
Brand new school on a new subdivision of higher cost housing

Physical Facilities:

A multi million dollar project! Designed specifically and purposely built as a Middle School, the buildings are architecturally modern and multi purpose. Superb technology rooms, sport and physical education resources and plentiful space for students and staff are features. On appointment Marcus Dixon had much influence over the layout particularly in the two storeyed “six fingered” wings of the cohesive complex. A central, covered courtyard provides shelter in all weather conditions for all students. Rooms are well furnished, frequently with multi-purpose furniture and up to date technology. Currently sharing the School Hall and Gymnasium with a neighbouring secondary school.

Staffing:

23 currently and being increased step by step as roll increases. E.g. Technology staff being increased in number presently. Despite being brand new, Darwin Middle School benefits from the same legacy of Secondary School Pastoral Care Staffing ratios as the other Middle Schools on former Secondary School sites. That is Counsellor, Careers Adviser, Indigenous and Islander Liaison Person, Home Liaison, Community Constable etc.

Leadership responsibilities and senior positions are in proportion to staff members and are similar in “portfolio” distribution to the other Darwin Middle Schools.

Students:

The classes are at differentiated levels as each year level enters with particular groupings according to learning needs e.g. higher ability, learning support in some

curriculum areas. Technology options are emphasised as is integrated curriculum teaching where appropriate.

Timetabling:

In contrast to the other middle schools in Darwin a full school uniform is worn. Students elect from 3 different coloured “polo shirts” but other garments must be black. Footwear however is by choice.

Curriculum:

Currently based on the DEET requirements, however opportunities to cater for individual needs are emphasised and being developed.

As with all new schools, plus the advent of the Middle Schooling philosophy, state wide, establishing the “culture” takes time. Marcus Dixon is conscious of this and has set about by asking staff to consider the acronym REAL.

- R** – relationships (trust, respect, student social/emotional wellbeing)
- E** – educational outcomes (evidence based decision making focus on
Literacy, Numeracy, Science, IT holistic education)
- A** – authentic learning (learning centred based on needs, interests,
concerns authentic assessment and standards)
- L**- learning communities (teamwork shared vision of mission and
goals)

Marcus Dixon states “Higher-performing middle schools build a culture of success by consistently maintaining these common elements.”

Unique Features:

Spaciousness of new buildings! Staffroom and Administration areas are expansive and attractive. This “model” will no doubt be a focus for the future judgements about structures and organisation for the Middle Schooling concept in the Northern Territory and Australia.

South Australia

School: Eastern Fleurieu
a (Middle) School with a Difference!

Campus: Years 7, 8, 9 and 10, 11, 12

Principal: Steve McDonald

Assistant Principal: Jill Newman

**Acting Current
Assistant Principal:** Evert de Gooyer

In rural, Strathalbyn, South Australia, Eastern Fleurieu School is a multi-campus school to which R-Year 6 students attend Primary Schools. (Ashbourne, Langhome Creek, Milang and Strathalbyn each with its own Principal – Head of Learning and Teaching school sites). On one separate site in Strathalbyn co-exist two district schools –

the Year 7-9 Middle School) Eastern
the Years 10-12 Secondary School)Fleurieu
School

Each of these too has its own Principal – Head of Middle Years or Head of Senior Years. Coordinating the four contributing Primary Schools, the Middle and Secondary Schools is the overall Principal, Steve. He has a complex role, however he has a clear vision of the ways in which this somewhat unique structure can be further developed. The concept is different from the Middle School option taken in the Northern Territory and from the Intermediate/Middle School system in New Zealand. Probably it is most akin to an Area School concept, in this case on five different campuses/towns.

Cohesion is facilitated by the Principals from each campus meeting with the overall Principal weekly and he visiting each in proportion to need. One school Governing Council oversees all. Historically this structure arose from small school closures and this current model was devised after much consultation in order to preserve reasonable student numbers.

In total there are 650 students based on the Eastern Fleurieu Years 7-12 campus of which just over 200 are enrolled in the Middle School. Indigenous student numbers are low at about 2%. Students in years 7 and 8 are in mixed level and ability classes which are homeroom based for half of their curriculum delivery. (English, Social Sciences, ICT) A strict adherence is made to a traditional full school uniform for both boys and girls. Year 9s in separate Year 9 classes. However they still have much of the curriculum delivered in integrated studies. Jill Newman, Head of Middle Years states that they have “a strong focus on meeting the social, emotional, cultural and intellectual needs of young adolescents, and with it come a different structure based on teaching teams.”

The curriculum purports to have “coherence, clarity and value to all participants.” Through integrated curriculum, as well as separate subjects in practical areas, students are able to negotiate aspects of their work and the “thinking curriculum” is given emphasis. A blocked timetable creates a degree of flexibility. Staffing, because of the cohesion with the Secondary Campus and the nature of the school, of 18 including specialists in the Middle School, enables the maximum class size not to exceed 24 students!

Teachers work in teams being responsible for pairs of classes. Most are multi-skilled teaching more than one curriculum area.

Classes remain as one with key teacher for two years (7 and 8) and wherever possible are taught in their own room to promote “ownership”.

An intriguing staff role is Pedagogy Coordinator. This person a “classroom teacher of excellence” has no direct classroom teaching responsibility but leads the “Committee for Training Development”. She looks, with staff at Changing Classroom Environments by getting alongside teachers

- asking about “what are the things that promote student learning?”
- Sharing the “big picture”
- Building professional relationships
- Modelling effective teaching
- Analyzing school data – proactively having teachers act upon it

- Looking at practices relevant to boy's learning
- Leading professional development/performance management
- Reporting to Principal/Leadership Team regularly
- Meeting weekly with School Improvement Team (PAPs coordinator)

NB. All teaching staff must register 28.5 hours of Staff Development training per annum or work an additional week doing that at the end of the year after school being "open for instruction".

NB. As for Nightcliff Middle School a large car bay is set aside for students to pull apart and reassemble cars. At Eastern Fleurieu the students have been very successful in community car races with vehicles made from scratch. This and the on site farm with milking cows, goats, sheep, at times pigs, breeding of these, growing feed crops, grapes (which in the viticulture programme are made into wine) at Strathalbyn exemplify the diverse programmes on offer. A staff member oversees the farm management with even the tractor work being enthusiastically undertaken by the students.

Technology classes in Food and Hard materials in all schools were similar to those we provide in Intermediate Schools in New Zealand. Obviously much of the plant, the currency and sophistication is superior, along with the vastness of teaching space. Presumably these results from the legacy of most being on former Secondary School sites.

NORTHERN TERRITORY – DEET

Department of Education and Employment Training

Clearly in any reflection on the process of change to the current Middle School structure it was imperative that I researched the instigators, DEET.

I was privileged to spend time with Chris Hancock, the Human Resources Manager who oversaw the process for DEET.

The process, following the recommendations made by the 2002 Secondary Schools Review team in the Northern Territory, was never going to be easy! Their findings, researched best evidence of the needs of students in the adolescent years (Years 7, 8, 9), obviated advantages for Years 10-12 students, assessed demographics and identified the need for uniformity of structures for consistency – all aimed at “Building Better Schools” meant change was going to occur from 2005-2008.

Chris Hancock developed a staged approach. She established focus groups, facilitated workshops and consultations wherever possible and emphasised open communication. Clearly groups with vested interests, primary teachers, secondary teachers, their unions, many members of the public and people whose jobs might be redundant eg. ancillary staff members were anxious at best about the changes!

Chris, not a parent herself and with a professional background in Health rather than Education, was the ideal person for leading the processes for change.

Barriers were not necessarily from the most likely sources. The teacher unions posed none and worked to ensure the best outcomes for their members. Funding by a committed Northern Territory Government to facilitate the changes was not an issue either. The Education Act was provisionally amended to expedite the changes. Primarily resistance arose from the fear of change amongst teachers, largely resulting from many of them failing to read the relevant material explaining processes and changes – emails, websites etc. Workshops on change management were held, leadership appointments made, historical staffing formula gains were preserved and a comprehensive range of “upskilling” professional skills were provided.

A timeframe was established. Teachers were given choices – Primary, Middle or Senior Schools and transfers were given a six month trial period with review options including returning to the school they had come from. Very few sought reviews.

When asked what she would have changed in her procedures in hindsight Chris thought perhaps she “would really have liked to have got the material for teachers to them for discussion forums earlier and to have got “on site” to meet with teachers in schools more”.

As a “Safety Net” for DEET signed agreements about role changes were drawn up for everyone involved. Overall, a general acceptance of the structural changes reflects a discerning State Government determined to “Build Better Schools” for all its children!

Implications

Based on the researched needs and experiential modern education practice, specific different structural and organisational strategies are required to optimise learning for 10-13 year olds. In contrast with New Zealand educational providers for middle years students, the Middle Schools in the Northern Territory and South Australia visited for this study have set about meeting those needs with the impetus of philosophy, policy and the essential financial inputs from the State Government.

Structural/physical provision is in general similar between those Australian schools visited and New Zealand Intermediates. That is formal classroom spaces, specialist technology rooms/Science designated areas for the Arts and Music, Gymnasiums (often within a traditional School Hall), IT complexes and playgrounds/covered areas for students according to climatic dictates. Noticeably in Australian schools there was much more “spare space” for students activities and leisure time and also for teacher teams for planning/working and sharing. Another significant difference was the multiplicity of “other” learning spaces eg. for car dismantelling/reassembling, vegetable/grape growing and rearing of livestock on school sites.

It has also to be acknowledged that four of the five Middle Schools are situated on sites that previously were Secondary School campuses and physical advantages

accrued. Financially the schools visited seemed to have been generously funded, especially the newly erected school. Commonwealth and State funding with the emphasis on “Building Better Schools” are boosted by Indigenous Peoples funding.

Organisational changes are where the greater differences between New Zealand and the Australian schools visited differ.

Pastoral care/social support is the glaring area of difference. The schools visited, proportionate to student numbers, are well endowed with support staff (on-site) to complement the work of the teaching staff teams. All had at least a School Counsellor, Policeman (Community), Indigenous and Island Liaison person, a Home Liaison person a ESOL person, a Business Manager and some a Health Nurse! All were full-time positions paid for by the State Government. In addition 17 year old youth support workers were employed in one school!

Curriculum tended to be much more diversified despite the “umbrella” of DEET’s accountability demands, assessment structures and testing at Years 3, 5, 7 and 9 levels. Impressive integration where it was “rich, rigourous, real and relevant” of subjects was thoroughly planned by teachers. Specialisation was provided for all but greater opportunities for “in depth” study was provided in several schools for those with “talents or a bent”. This was so in academic, cultural and practical curriculum areas. Physical Education and particularly competitive sport received less value and emphasis than in New Zealand by what I saw and heard. Inquiry Learning methodology was widely used.

Timetabling was comprehensive. Classes rarely exceeded 24 students in number, often many fewer. Individualised timetables were essential for each student as the complexity of catering for options in many areas meant movement between class groups was common. Block times of 90 minutes were favoured over 45 minute slots in most schools and the daily “contact times” were adjusted to meet climatic pressures eg. 8.00am start, ½ hour lunch break, 2.10pm finish. Classes were often mixed level 7, 8, 9 or 7,8 and of mixed abilities.

Year 9 students enjoy a “smorgasbord” of learning opportunities and are able to explore careers through work experience (Note that in some schools 14/15 year olds would leave Year 9 to take up apprenticeships/jobs in the work force without attending Senior (Secondary School). They had less structured timetables with little integrated curriculum area study.

Staffing differences are centred on teacher/student ratios being much lower, less “contact” release time than the teachers in New Zealand Intermediate Schools currently experience, the need to “specialise” in some areas of interest and often teaching in perhaps a maximum of three curriculum areas to use strengths. This may be a legacy of the transferring from Secondary to Middle School teaching for many when they had to make a choice.

A high emphasis on Staff Development, particularly internal training, and, in South Australia, the requirements of 28.5 hours per annum of personal times is a difference.

A comment on uniform. In all Middle Schools in the Northern Territory students wear the logo and name emblazoned school polo shirt, within a limited (up to four) base colour choice range. These are modern and are proudly worn by the students and in some cases staff! One school requires other apparel to be black, whatever form it takes. In my opinion, even allowing for the pressures of climatic conditions the “looseness” contributes to an already “laid back” approach by some students and would be an area in that I would institute change to a full school uniform. Of course climatic factors would dictate the style/materials.

Principals impressed through their awareness of the needs of Middle Schools students, their commitment and development of strong identities for their respective schools. They are contracted for four year periods which are subject to review at the end of that time. I am ambivalent about that. Clearly, as each of them is doing a tremendous job, I wonder about the wisdom of that threat to job security. Perhaps it is a strength and change does have the advantage of freshness. Entrenched New Zealand Principals know nothing of the pressures associated with that situation. Conditions in other ways, such as provision of a new car for school and personal use, plus running costs provides inducements.

DEET, needs to be congratulated on initially conducting the relevant research, making structural decisions in the best teaching/learning interests of all students (not only those in the Middle years) and enacting the transition to a state wide system largely without major fallout! Desirably New Zealand decision makers too could similarly discard partisan “comfort zone” and uninformed public pressures and demonstrate the courage to make future schooling development choices to best serve the particular needs of each developmental age group of students. Viz

Pre 5 year olds

5-9 year olds

10-14 year olds

15-18 year olds

Clearly each groups teaching/learning needs are different and all discussions should centre on the learners needs!

Three Year Middle Schools – Years 7, 8, 9 (Australia) 11-14 year olds.

The implementation phase 2005-2008 has just concluded. Certainly all students spoken to relish their Middle Schools, the organisation, opportunities and teaching/learning styles. DEET personnel, parents and Principals spoken to see advantages and disadvantages but believe the outcomes to date vindicate the changes and are optimistic about better futures for all students now!

Conclusions

In New Zealand it is timely, (21st Century) to critically analyse what our traditional school structures have to offer now and in the future for pre school, primary school, middle school and secondary school students. **Are there better models/structures to better meet the specific needs of our students? If so when and how is there to be action/change?** I conclude that a truly responsible Ministry of Education under the Minister, should spend money, having independent researchers analyse the data, learn from what successful changes others are making and have made (such as Northern Territory). Then, be courageous enough to set out and initiate changes to structures if indeed they are proven to better meet the needs of students!

Changes in education structures **must** be based on the needs of the learners!

This is a comprehensive process requiring

- evidence based research as the premise for change following thorough review
- identification of the specific teaching/learning needs of each sector in the system
- community consultation with informed, non-partisan facilitators
- clear enunciation of the process and diplomatic but strong facilitating with affected groups
- clear timeframes, allowing adequate/realistic time
- opportunities for re-training/upskilling personnel involved in changed circumstances
- planning of structural and organisational changes, including professionals having a say in new structures (physical)
- support mechanisms for the ‘dis-enfranchised’
- courage to do what is in the best interest of what teaching and learning is about

Organisational changes made to enhance educational delivery for students in the Middle Years need to

- nationwide and decreed by Government
- be
- age appropriate

Have students

- experiencing “rich, real, rigourous, relevant” learning
- connecting learning with their current and future lives
- building and sustaining strong, effective relationships with peers, teachers, members of the wider community
- controlling their own learning as much as possible
- valuing understanding their work
- feeling motivated to learn
- knowing how to be better learners

Quality education delivery and services needs to be maintained and improved. The system of DEET having an agency to monitor schools with relevant factors being considered seems to be effective. Such accountability in some valid form is clearly imperative for any tax paid system.

References

While this was largely an action/research paper the following readings/sources provided background and purpose for the paper and confirm the need to investigate current schooling structures in New Zealand for 10-13 year olds.

Brough, Chris. (2008) Student-centred Curriculum Integration and The New Zealand Curriculum. SET Magazine, NCER Press.

Charles Darwin University. (2003) Future Direction for Secondary Education in the Northern Territory (Referred to as the “Secondary Education Review”).

DEET, (Department of Employment, Education and Training). Policy Middle Years of Schooling. The Middle Years of Schooling – A guide to Planning, Teaching, Assessing and Reporting Learning. Making the Most of the Middle Years. Report 2005 and Why We Need the Middle Years. File Document 2006/000496, Version Number 4.

Hislop, Doug. Education Today. Issue 4, 2008, Term 3. Editorial Page 1.

Nagel, Michael C Dr, (2007) Boys Stir Us and It’s a Girl Thing, “Brain development, enhancing the school environment and student voice in decision making”

Nolan, Pat (Prof). (September 2008) If the system’s not working, replace it! Editorial pages 2 and 3 Middle Schools review Magazine, Issue 5 “Youth – putting young people first”.

Prendergast, Donna, Dr, The University of Queensland, 2007 Australia. Middle Years Basics: What, Why, How (Paper)
A Study of Reform Initiatives in Queensland Schools (Paper 2008) and
Benefits of Middle School –Action Based Research (Paper 2007)

Useful Web Sites

www.betterschools.nt.gov.au (students learning – middle years)

<http://education.qld.gov.au/etrf/pdf/midaction03.pdf>

www.lea.co.nz/citest/index.asp

www.mysa.org.au (Middle Years of Schooling Australia)

www.nzaims.co.nz

www.sofweb.vic.edu.au/mys (learning modules)

<https://staff.det.nt.gov.au/middleyears>