FOCUS:

**To Investigate the Place of Years 7 and 8
in Areas Schools in New Zealand**

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SABBATICAL REPORT

Bob Norrish

Oxford Area School

Executive Summary:

For my sabbatical leave I chose to look at the place of Year 7 & 8's in Area Schools in New Zealand. I believe that this is problematic in areas schools being the only schools where Year 7 & 8's are caught between the secondary and primary areas in a composite school situation. I found this sabbatical leave extremely rewarding in 3 ways.

1. It enabled me to take some time to think and read and reflect on this and other issues for us as a school.
2. It enabled me to take time to visit a number of other schools, both locally and in the North Island.
3. It did provide a break in what I had then been doing for 7 years and that is refreshing and invigorating.

There were three aspects to the project.

1. I spent some time in the College of Education Library reading literature written about Year 7 & 8's, middle schooling in New Zealand and overseas.
2. I spent time devising, sending out and analysing a questionnaire to all Area Schools in New Zealand about how their school operates in these years.
3. I spent time visiting, as stated above, schools both locally and in the North Island

In summary my findings are that there is a good case made in the literature and in the writings of academics and experts in this area for a middle school concept. I started out with this project believing that the Year 7 & 8's perhaps needed to be more closely aligned with the primary school in our situation than they are at the moment.

My thoughts currently and I believe my research has shown me that there is a case for the concept of a middle school within an Area School. I am convinced that the Year 7 – 9 should be looked on as an entity within the school.

The other major result of my investigation has been that this same problem is being looked at by all other area schools. I find that few of them are any further ahead than we are in dealing with this problem. In fact most other schools that I visited and received information on are in exactly the same situation as we are. Very few schools feel that they effectively cater well for this group of students in terms of their social position in the school or in terms of the management of curriculum for them.

Some schools are looking at the idea of a middle school concept in an area school setting. Some are looking at Year 7 – 10, some are looking at Years 7 – 9. All are very conscious of the staffing and curriculum management issues which make change somewhat difficult.

On visiting a number of other schools I am reaffirmed in believing that we do a good job here at Oxford Area School not only with our Year 7 & 8's but with the management of curriculum and other aspects of our school. This is the benefit of time spent visiting other schools, not only do you pick up good ideas but you also realise and recognise the good things that you do back in your own school. I did gather a number of very good ideas which I am using in the development of our school.

The Purpose:

An area for concern for myself as the Principal, and for the staff at Oxford Area School was the place of Year 7 & 8 within the school. Our students find some difficulties in making the transition from Year 6 to Year 7, and again from Year 8 to Year 9 in a way which reflects what should be a real feature of area schools, i.e. the seamlessness of the educational experience for them.

In a school like ours this group of students, and to some degree the staff, seem to be caught between an extension of the primary area at the top end and part of the secondary area at the bottom end. A number of initiatives in our school seem to focus on the secondary area or the primary area and leave the Year 7 & 8 area confused as to where they belong.

Examples of initiatives which we have been part of in recent years are the Numeracy Project which extends through to Year 7 & 8. We have also been part of a Secondary Literacy Initiative in 2005 which also involved the Year 7 & 8's. These conflicts can place great stress on the staff and students in this part of the school. One of the great benefits of being an Area School is that we should be achieving seamlessness throughout the educational experience for our students.

Our latest ERO reports have identified that we are not doing this as well as we might and I believe that the transitions from Year 6 to Year 7 and Year 8 to Year 9 are crucial to the achieving of a high degree of seamlessness. I therefore chose to spend time during my sabbatical leave in researching and visiting other schools to discover some answers to some key questions.

Question 1:
What did the literature say about creating and maintaining seamlessness in an Area School situation?

Question 2:
What were the implications for curriculum management in an area school to best achieve this seamlessness?

Question 3:
What were the implications for teachers in the Year 7 & 8 area in an Area School?

Question 4:
How were other schools managing this situation?

Question 5:
What changes could I implement in my school to enable us to better achieve seamlessness through the Year 6 – 9 area of the school.

Background:
On researching the Year 7 & 8 area in the Christchurch College of Education Library, I found a good starting point was the ERO Report from 2001 on students in Years 7 & 8. This report explained the structure of schooling in New Zealand and compared it with systems in other countries and outlined some of the arguments for middle schools.

This report along with other articles emphasised the fact that there is a strong argument that young adolescents are a distinct group and have specific educational needs that can best be met in an environment designed specifically for them. This theme was the basis of many of the articles written on middle schooling. The Report outlined what was considered good practice in the middle years of schooling and then looked at the overall performance of schools with Year 7 & 8 students in the New Zealand setting.

I was particularly interested in the section on composite schools which includes Area Schools. The findings of the report were that the management and delivery of the curriculum was a cause for concern at the majority of the composite schools in the study where ERO found poor or inconsistent curriculum management for Year 7 & 8 students in 60% of the schools.

The report pointed out that whereas in many schools a high standard of curriculum management and delivery was found in junior departments, this was not so in senior departments and this was reflected in the different standards of curriculum delivery and management for Year 7 & 8 students according to whether they were included in the senior or junior department.

This raised the issue for me concerning our organisation here at Oxford Area School where approximately 2/3rds of the curriculum delivery is managed by

homeroom teachers in the Year 7 & 8 area and 1/3rd managed and delivered by senior specialist teachers from the secondary department.

It raised the issue for me of how well the senior teachers managing and delivering curriculum to Year 7 & 8 students were equipped sufficiently to do this well with this age group.   Area schools face the problem of delivering curriculum to a larger range of levels than in most secondary schools.

The article also raised the other problem that we face of the integration of learning throughout the curriculum. It talked about how best practice in educating early adolescents creates links between areas of the curriculum to provide students with a good understanding of the context of the knowledge.

The ERO Report found that this was happening in very few of the Area Schools. It did however find that about half of the composite schools were making some effort towards this integration and were also attempting to ease the transition between different departments of the school for their students. These are exactly the issues we are facing at Oxford Area School.

The ERO Report found that there were difficulties with transitions in many of the area schools and that in many cases the junior and senior departments operated effectively as separate schools.

Student support was raised in the Report as another area of concern for many of the composite schools, particularly the Area Schools. Evidence of disruptive behaviour or bullying effecting Year 7 & 8 students was found in 44% of the schools studied. A factor highlighted in the report was that many of these schools could not employ full time guidance counsellors which provided most common forms of student support in Years 7 – 15 secondary schools and middle schools. The report found that only 35% of area schools had even part time counsellors or guidance teachers.

We have found here at Oxford Area School that the employment of a trained guidance counsellor for .8 of a full time teaching equivalent has been tremendous benefit to the students in this and other areas of the school.

In summary the Report highlighted the principle challenges for composite schools with regard to Year 7 & 8 students.

   a) Finding appropriate mechanisms for providing high quality curriculum management and delivery in an environment where classes frequently span several year levels and levels of the curriculum
   b) How can schools best use the advantage of having students throughout their schooling years to ensure a smooth progression through the levels of education?
   c) Finding appropriate ways of supporting the different age groups attending area schools.

I found that this report gave me good background for looking at the issues at Oxford Area School and in area schools in general.

Other literature which I found particularly useful was an article prepared for the Australian Education Union by Rod Chadbourne at the Edith Cowan University in October 2001 entitled "Middle Schooling For The Middle Years – What Might The Jury Be Considering".   This was a discussion paper produced for the Australian Education Union which aimed at clarifying the definitions of middle schooling, canvassing the issues and presenting the matters for consideration in a balanced way. The article defined middle schooling, it looked at whether or not it improved student learning, it highlighted the effects on teachers work and careers and also dealt with the matter of middle schooling leading to better educational outcomes for indigenous students in Australia.   It argued that the needs of young adolescents are unique and put the case for separate schools for separate stages of development.

While the article dealt mainly with the Australian setting and drew heavily on American experience and literature, it was useful in terms of defining the needs and looking at the possibilities for the Year 7 – 10 group of students.

Another article which I found interesting and challenging was the article "Picking Up the Threads And Developing a Middle School – A Review of Where We Are At And Where we Need To Go".   This was written by Mark Richardson from Middleton Grange School who outlined the experiences of developing an effective middle school at this large composite school in Christchurch.

I was also privileged to visit Middleton Grange and to talk with Mark and to have a first hand look at the developments that have occurred over the last 6 years at this school.

In the article Mark outlines the issued of early adolescents and argues that literature clearly shows that this is a distinctive stage in adolescent development. He outlines the identified needs of emerging adolescents and looks at how the concept of a middle school seeks to meet these needs. He outlines the principles that are considered to be essential elements of a successful middle school and shows how these have been used to develop an effective middle school at Middleton Grange School.

Mark's experiences and progress in implementing an effective middle school structure at Middleton Grange along with the questions I was seeking answers to as outlined in "The Purpose" above, helped me to reflect on what I found in other area schools as I visited them throughout New Zealand.

To help understand my reason for investigating this area of schooling I also need to outline some concerns and difficulties we were facing here at Oxford Area School from the beginning of 2005.

2003 and 2004 had proved very problematic for this area of our school.   We had been operating in 2003/2004 three composite Year 7/8 classes. We had decided on the classes being composite after consultation with parents when we reduced from 4 classes to 3 classes. For one of these years we did have a Year 7 class, a Year 8 class and one composite class.

Over these 2 years we experienced considerable staffing difficulties. We had 2 of our teachers leave teaching and temporary staff picked up their classes during the year. This created instability within this area of the school and led to quite severe difficulties in terms of student engagement with learning and in terms of student behaviour. We were able to overcome these difficulties of staffing at the beginning of 2005 where we started with a completely new team lead by a highly skilled teacher and administrator. This team quickly proved highly effective and provided new initiatives in the areas of curriculum delivery and student behavioural management.

At the same time Oxford Area School had become a member of the cluster of schools taking part in a school improvement initiative called RAFA (Raising Achievement For All).

During 2004 we had spent a lot of time on looking at literature surrounding effective teaching and learning, on looking at our practices with regard to classroom teaching and learning and management across the whole school and reflecting on how we delivered the curriculum across the whole school. This led us to highlighting literacy as a key initiative for 2005.

We set up a cyclical professional development programme with the help of Teacher Support Services from the College of Education and had all of our staff learning, trialling and reflecting on literacy strategies across the whole school. This strengthened our resolve to work together across the school to improve teaching and learning and aim for more seamlessness across the transition areas Years 6 – 7 and Years 8 – 9.

Part of this initiative, which is ongoing, is also to develop sound school wide testing and analysis of student achievement data to enable more effective planning and teaching.   This major initiative also forms part of the background to my choice of a research topic for my sabbatical leave.

Activities Undertaken

1. **Research:**
    As outlined above, I spent some time researching the area of Year 7 & 8 education and the concept of middle schooling through the Christchurch College of Education Library and on the web.

2. **Questionnaire:**
    I spent time devising, sending out and analysing a questionnaire to all Area Schools in New Zealand about how their school operates in these years. A copy of the questionnaire is attached as an appendix.

3. **School Visitations:**
   I spent 2 weeks in the North Island visiting 7 schools. I also visited and talked to people in a number of area schools around Canterbury.

   I also found it worthwhile and useful in visiting a Secondary School which has a Year 7 & 8 component and as mentioned above found it extremely valuable and interesting to visit Middleton Grange School which has a clearly defined and established middle school from Year 7 to Year 10.

   I would like to thank to the Principals and the staff who I spoke to in all of these schools. One of the problems of visiting area schools in New Zealand is that of distance, they are a long way apart and the travelling in the North Island especially was extensive.

Findings

1. **Questionnaire Summary:**
   24 responses were received to the questionnaire. These came from schools with rolls varying from 533 to 108. The numbers in different levels of the schools varied considerably. In proportion there tended to be approximately a ratio of 1-2 (Year 7 & 8 Students compared with Years 9 -13 students).

2. **Questions Relating to Curriculum Management Organisation:**
   Just under 50% of Year 7 & 8 classes were composite, the remainder were separate Year 7 and Year 8 classes.

3. **Hours Spent in Homeroom Classes:**
   Averaged 15 hours per week but a wide range from 7 to 22.

4. **Curriculum Areas Taught in Homerooms:**
   English, Social Studies, Maths were the most common with English receiving the most time spent, and Maths the second highest time. Specialist secondary teachers tend to teach Technology, Music, Art, Science, Physical Education and Health.

5. **Homeroom teachers in Year 7 & 8 areas:**
   The vast majority are primary trained, only 7% secondary trained. It is common for Year 7 & 8 teachers to teach in secondary school areas covering a wide range of subjects (probably dependent on interests and abilities).

6. **Management Units held by Year 7 & 8 Teachers for Responsibility Within This Area of the School:**
   It is common for one to two units to be held by the Dean/Curriculum Coordinator in these areas, but a wide variety of situations. AP/DP is

a status quite common as the person looking after this area. In some cases no units of responsibility held.

Looking at the 7 essential learning areas and who holds the responsibility for managing this curriculum area in the Year 7 & 8 area of the school, there is no clear pattern. A Year 7 & 8 Dean managing the curriculum is common in some schools. The primary curriculum coordinator for areas like English, Social Studies and Maths is also common in some schools. Often secondary HODs look after subjects like Science, PE, Arts and Technology.

Achievement Data and Reporting

A wide range of achievement data is gathered across the schools. PAT, assTle and STAR are the most common tests used. There is a wide range of reading tests used in Years 1 – 6, e.g. Burt and Running Records. assTle is used widely in Years 7-9.

The use of Achievement Data:
Mainly used to identify needs, to use diagnostically, to influence teaching programmes and for grouping in reading and maths. Used in most schools as a means of informing teachers of a student in the following year.

Reporting of Achievement Data to Parents in Year 7 & 8:
In 55% of schools reporting in Year 7 & 8 is closely aligned with reporting in Years 9-13. In some schools Year 7 reporting is more aligned with the junior school and Year 8 aligned with Years 9-13 and in some schools there is a combination of both, e.g. one school uses a primary aligned portfolio system but also secondary model of student-led conferences. No school identified the reporting to be completely separate from other areas of the school

Transitions

In response to the question about what part of the school Year 7 & 8 students think of themselves as being, 12% of schools see this part of the school as being part of the primary area, 30% as being part of the secondary area, 18% as being somewhere in between and about 40% as being part of the whole school.

With regard to the most important organisational things schools do to promote or reinforce which area of the school the Year 7 & 8 students belong to, the following responses occurred:

- ➢ Year 7 & 8 uniform
- ➢ Classrooms in the senior area of the school
- ➢ House/Whanau organisation
- ➢ Management responsible for the Year 7 & 8 area coming from a particular part of the school

- Issuing of certificates (graduation at the end of year 6)
- Sports organisation (Year 7-13)
- School assemblies. Many schools have Year 7-13 assemblies, some schools have Year 1-8 assemblies.
- Teachers attending meetings, e.g. primary syndicate meetings or secondary section meetings.
- House systems (aligning Year 7 & 8 with secondary house systems)
- Primary sports.
- Year 7 & 8's having leadership responsibilities, e.g. Kool Schools, peer mediators, leaders in sport and cultural events.
- School Council. In some schools members of the School Council came from the whole school, in some schools from year 7-13.
- Timetable interchange
- Use of ICT rooms
- Joint activities (with either primary or secondary areas)
- Teachers teaching across Year 7-13.
- Timetabling

In response to the question regarding how your school enhances the transition of students from Years 6-7, the following responses occurred:
- Year 6 teachers deciding Year 7 classes
- Shared studies and projects
- Composite classes (Year 6 & 7)
- Open Day for Year 6 students in Term 4
- Information Evenings
- Meet the Parent Evenings
- Transition period at end of the previous year
- Longer time in a Year 7 homeroom class than in a Year 8 homeroom class
- Sharing of records
- Year 6 visiting the Year 7 & 8 area in the school in Term 4
- School policy for swimming in athletic sports
- Teacher to teacher conference for each child

The following practices helped enhance the transition from Year 8 to Year 9:
- Transition sports day
- Neighbouring schools coming in for Technology
- Involvement of year 8's in Kapa Haka groups
- Sports teams have contributing schools involved
- Combined options
- More of Year 8 taught in specialist rooms
- Concentration in developing self management skills
- Staff familiarity with secondary setup
- Orientation Day in Term 4
- Teacher to teacher conferences on each child
- Information Evenings
- Specialist teachers in, e.g. Science and Technology.
- A Hand Book given and discussed in Term 4 for Year 8 students

- Year 9 homeroom
- A middle school focus Year 7-10

When asked how successful schools think they are in achieving seamlessness, the following responses occurred:
- 5% thought they were very successful
- 15% successful
- 58% partially successful
- 22% felt they achieved limited success

Responses to the question regarding what schools do to promote seamlessness were as following:
- Management team reflecting the 3 areas of the school
- Sporting cultural occasions
- Teachers teaching across the school
- Whole school activities
- Sports activities Year 7-10
- A Whanau based school environment
- Year 7-10 Diploma/Skills for Learning/Goal Setting
- Coordinated Curriculum and learning teams and schemes
- Powhori at the start of the year
- Developing whole school curriculum documents and structures
- Allocation of Management Units
- Achievement statements in each curriculum area
- Whole school curriculum teams and curriculum reviews
- Whole school assemblies
- House groupings across the school with inter-house challenges and sports
- Student Councils
- Staff visible in different areas of the school, e.g. duty
- Combined professional development
- Information and research skills programme in years 1-9
- Students allowed to mix at intervals and lunchtimes freely
- Close links with the community
- ELA meetings involving teachers from across the school
- Peer mediation across the whole school
- Curriculum leaders overseeing each curriculum area across the whole school
- Peer programmes where seniors work with juniors
- School uniforms

In response to Question 18 which asked for the greatest barriers in your school to achieving seamlessness, the following responses occurred:
- Staffing difficulties
- Timetabling – need to include Year 7 & 8's in secondary timetable to enable flexibility of subject options for secondary students
- Different emphasis on teaching practice from primary to secondary
- Staffing entitlement differences

- ➢ High number of transient students
- ➢ Distance between the school and contributing schools
- ➢ Teacher training where primary and secondary teachers view themselves differently
- ➢ Secondary teachers lack of knowledge of other curriculum areas
- ➢ Differing teacher perceptions and appreciation of what constitutes success criteria
- ➢ Varying pedagogies
- ➢ Separation of various parts of the school by barriers, e.g. roads, streams
- ➢ Attitudes of staff
- ➢ Time for teachers to interact with teachers in other areas
- ➢ Differing work loads
- ➢ Teachers working in isolation
- ➢ Differing cultures amongst the staff (primary/secondary)
- ➢ Different unions that teachers belong to (PPTA/NZEI)
- ➢ Differing non contact allowances
- ➢ Adolescent hormones
- ➢ Differing disciplinary problems and how they are dealt with between Year 6 and Year 7
- ➢ Areas of the school acting independently
- ➢ Expectations re prior learning at different levels not being met
- ➢ Wide age range requiring different teaching and learning approaches

To the last question asked for any other information which might be helpful when thinking about the year 7 & 8 area, the following responses were made:
- ➢ The struggle to get good teachers'
- ➢ Students growing up too quickly
- ➢ Getting the balance right between moving students on and protecting them
- ➢ Problems in the senior school having origins in Year 7 & 8 – poor teaching and leadership
- ➢ Year 7 & 8 is a key area for setting the tone/expectation/standards for the senior school

<u>Summary of Findings From the Questionnaire</u>

1. It was hard to see patterns in the responses that were made. This may have quite a lot to do with the questions that were asked and on reflection I don't know that the questions were the right ones to ask.

2. There are differences in responses because of size of schools and it would seem that schools are finding solutions to the placement of Year 7 & 8 in line with the size of the groups involved to some degree.

3. Physical and historical influences would seem to be quite strong in determining organisation of this part of area schools

4. All schools are aware of the issues surrounding their Year 7 & 8 areas.

5. All schools are making efforts to reduce seamlessness and promote a smooth transition of students with their learning through the Years 6 – 9 areas.

6. There are significant barriers with regard to delivering seamlessness which are present in most schools.

It would appear that the special strengths and advantages area schools have to deliver a seamless education to Year 7 & 8 students also provides these schools with significant challenges in providing quality curriculum delivery and pastoral care to this group.

Summary of Findings From School Visits

I visited 7 schools in the North Island and will talk about this group of schools first.   A good deal of the information gained is included in the summary above of the questionnaires but I would like to refer to some specific things about schools that I visited. I will not mention schools by name.

Most of the schools visited are developing ideas centred around essential learning area teams and changing the nature of curriculum leadership. One of the major objectives of this exercise is to overcome the situation where area schools have in the past tended to be almost 3 separate schools – Year 0-6, Year 7 & 8, and Year 9-13.

A number of schools are trialling new structures many of them involve flattened leadership models.   For example, one school has set up ELA teams, each led by a curriculum leader and also has a coordinator to develop links between the primary and secondary area.

Another school has a flattened leadership structure with a Principal, a Deputy Principal and Senior Leaders in Years 1-3, Years 4-6, Years 7-8 and Years 9-13.   A person has responsibility for developing seamlessness throughout the curriculum in the school.

One school is working towards a middle school structure with Years 0-6, Years 7-9 and Years 10-13 being the divisions. This school is aiming to have more of a homeroom type situation in Year 9 with Social Studies, English, Science and Maths taught by the one person.

Another school in 2006 is aiming to have homeroom teachers in their 3 Year 9 classes next year with students being in their homerooms for all of Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday mornings where they will do their English, Maths, Science and Social Studies as a core class with one teacher teaching all subjects.

A number of leaders in the Years 7-10 area that I talked to spoke very strongly about the need for students to have stability in this area of the school

and a common theme throughout the schools was the need for teachers to understand the learning needs of the Year 7 & 8 group, especially those teachers who are secondary trained and teaching Year 7 & 8 students for specialist subjects.

A number of staff emphasised the struggle that many students are having transitioning from the Year 7 & 8 area to the secondary school. In all schools a good deal of information is being passed on about students and their abilities and the collection, analysis and sharing of data is progressing in all schools.

One school was overcoming the transition from the Year 6 -7 area by setting up a reading programme where Year 7's come and buddy up with someone in Year 5 & 6. This is also being done with year 9's & 10's. This school also placed a strong emphasis on relationships and ensuring that students were not cut off when they move into Year 7 from the year 0-6 area.

Some schools found that having no barriers in the playground was a help in ensuring greater integration and seamlessness. This school was also using restorative justice practices in classrooms and this was being very effective in improving relationships within the school.

Three of the schools talked at length about setting out expectations for students' right across the school and emphasised how this will help in bringing about seamlessness from the Primary through the Year 7 & 8 to the Secondary.

One school had developed a very clear junior goal setting programme and an impressive social skills programme (called Kiwi Can).

A number of schools emphasised the structural changes being brought about including a change in emphasise from one of management to one of leadership.

A number of the schools talked about the problems provided by the restrictions of timetabling. Some emphasised the need for homeroom classes being in the first part of the day.

One school operated with their secondary and primary areas having different interval and lunch hours.

One school Principal felt that their management structure was too flat in that they had a Principal, Deputy Principal and 12 Assistant Principals. This was in one of the larger area schools.

A major point of interest for me was to visit schools with a high Maori population and I was privileged to be welcomed in one school with a Powhori. A number of the North Island schools that I visited had immersion classes and some of these were models for middle schools where Year 7's to 10's or such

similar groupings were immersion classes and had been operating that way for some time.

All Principals I spoke to highlighted the importance of attracting good staff and that the quality of staff was paramount in bringing about change and new ideas into schools. A common theme through the schools also was that student behaviour was posing a problem with the year 7 & 8 area and that the changes that were being planned were designed to improve student engagement in learning and enable easier and smoother transitions for students as they move through the school.

Schools were trailing different ways of smoothing that transition. One school had run a very successful evening for parents of Year 6 students going into Year 7 at the end of the previous year with holding a dinner with enabling a good amount of time for parents to ask questions and be present with their student to explore the new situation as they moved up a level in the next year.

I also visited 5 area schools in the Canterbury region. While many of the findings were similar to those in the North Island, there were some interesting differences.

One school visited thought there was real possibilities of area schools having more interaction through video conferencing to look at the solutions for the middle school area.

One school again emphasised the problem of delivery of specialist subjects to the Year 7 & 8 group where tasks were often seen as not appropriate to where the student's learning was at. This school also emphasised the need for students in Year 7 & 8 still to have numeracy and literacy as a priority in their learning and that there is an ongoing need for more consultation between the Year 7 & 8 area and the Year 9 area.

Another area school in Canterbury has appointed a person with specific responsibility for promoting seamlessness. This is a person who has had experience at teaching all levels and firmly believes that students need to be scaffolded through the year 7 – 10 period to enable them to successfully cope with the skills, strategies, work habits and attitudes needed to be successful with NCEA. She sees that the Year 7 & 8 area have responsibilities to see that students are prepared for literacy and numeracy in the secondary school and to her the key important ideas for Year 7 & 8 are consolidation and creativity with a need to increase independence in these years.

A visit to a secondary school which has a Year 7 & 8 area provided some interesting insights. In this school each Year 7 & 8 had 11 to 12 hours in a home room for their English and Social Studies and classes were streamed for their Maths and Reading. The Dean of this area emphasised the need to establish language, ground rules etc in Year 7 & 8 to lead them into Year 9 and above. A big emphasise was placed on setting high expectations with statements such as, "*By the end of year 8 they should be able to ………..*".

This school has had a lot of professional development centred around formative assessment over the last couple of years.

As mentioned earlier in this report, I am indebted to Middleton Grange School in Christchurch and especially to Mr Mark Richardson, the Head of the Middle School at Middleton Grange.
Middelton Grange has developed a clear middle school structure incorporating Years 7 – 10.   They have a clear philosophy of what a middle school is and what it should provide.   Their philosophy acknowledges a number of changes that occur in terms of spiritual, physical, social and cognitive development in these years and their structure seeks to respond to these needs.

They state that these years of schooling are marked by growing independence and responsibility but also by a vulnerability and innocence. One way they respond to the needs of this group is through integrated theme based units.   The amount of time that each year level teacher spends with his or her form class decreases as they move up through the middle school.

Emphasise is placed on the strength of pastoral relationships and creating a positive learning and working environment.   The philosophy is that as students grow and mature they become more independent and therefore spend less time with their form teachers.

Parental involvement in this area of the school is encouraged and goal setting is a part of the programme.   A very clear Parent Information Booklet is produced each year which explains the middle school set up at Middleton Grange.

For anyone interested in middle schooling I believe that this school is a model and once again thank Mr Mark Richardson and Mr Mark Larsen, the Principal, for allowing me to have insight into their school.

In summary my visits to a number of area schools throughout New Zealand were enlightening and interesting.   These visits reinforced my understanding that the achievement of seamlessness in an area school setting is not an easy task but one being looked at closely by administrators and teachers in all schools.

Implications

A. For Area Schools Generally:
The strengths and advantages that area schools offer as educational institutions catering for students of all ages also provide problems unique to area schools. We have a greater opportunity than any other type of school to provide seamless education, but few schools are achieving this.   This leads to the problems of engagement and achievement in the middle years of schooling that are identified in the ERO Report mentioned at the start of this report.

I believe that investigations show that all area schools are aware of this problem and are working constructively towards overcoming it.   I believe that the greater emphasise being placed on collecting and analysing student achievement data is helping the transition from year 6 through to Year 9. Teachers are now more aware of the individual needs and progress of students and therefore programme planning is being based on more accurate information.

Structural changes are also occurring in schools to meet the challenges that this situation provides.   There are less clear divisions between primary and secondary education in area schools today than in the past and the development of curriculum delivery across all areas of the schools is much more structured than in the past.

A number of schools are addressing the problems of transition from Year 8 to Year 9 in creative ways and I believe the development of (middle) schools within the area school setting will become more common in the near future.   It seems to me that there is a very real need for specialist secondary teachers to become better equipped to deal with the learning needs of Year 7 & 8 students as this is a common part of teaching in an area school setting.

It is encouraging to see the development of school wide professional development being common in area schools.   School wide initiatives in, e.g. literacy and numeracy, will help break down the barriers between the secondary and primary trained teaching. While Year 7 & 8's having access to specialist teaching and facilities in the secondary school is one of the strengths of an area school, there has perhaps in the past been a reluctance on the part of secondary teachers to realise that Year 7 & 8 students have different learning needs and need different teaching strategies than secondary students.

The issue of whether Year 7 & 8 students are more part of the primary school setting or the secondary school setting is still one to be addressed in many schools including my own.   I believe that schools need to be aware of the importance of the Year 7 & 8 group in terms of preparing them for a more secondary orientated education, but also being very aware of their distinct learning needs and stage of development.

I think that there can be a very strong case made for looking at a Year 7-9 part of an area school as a middle school with special emphasis on meeting the needs of students of that age.

B. For Oxford Area School:
This study has enabled me to look more knowledgeably at what we are doing at Oxford Area School in the year 7 & 8 area.   I am encouraged to find that we are not alone in dealing with the issues of seamlessness and transitioning our students through this part of their education. We are in the process of developing more meaningful collection and analysis of student information

data and enabling teachers to use this more effectively in programme planning. We have developed common class profiling and the use of common unit plans across the school to help us with this.

Our Year 7 & 8 is currently more aligned with the secondary part of the school rather than the primary however our Year 7 & 8 teaching team work closely with the Year 0-6 team in some aspects and we are strengthening our professional development across the school with a major literacy initiative over the last 2 years. I believe that these developments will help us further move towards a more seamless education.

I now want to work with the Year 7 & 8 teaching team and School Leadership in looking at further possibilities of implementing ideas gained through my sabbatical study.

One idea that has become significant for me from this study has been that the transitioning process is not only one of transitioning students through these years, but also how important it is to transition parents. In an area school there is a danger of parents of students in the years 0-6 area being focused solely on that part of the school and not always seeing the school as an Area School. When their students progress to Year 7 & 8 and into the secondary school there is an important job of transitioning their thinking and how they see the school. Good information and communication is extremely important in this area.

Conclusions

As stated at the beginning of this report I found the sabbatical leave extremely rewarding in 3 ways.

    (a) It enabled me to take time to think and read and reflect on this and other issues for us as a school.
    (b) It enabled me to take time to visit a number of other schools, both locally and in the North Island, and
    (c) It provided me with a break in what I had been doing for 7 years and that was refreshing and invigorating.

In summary I believe that there is a good case made in the literature and in the writings of academics and experts in this area for a middle school concept. I started out with this project believing that the Year 7 & 8 perhaps needs to be more closely aligned with the primary school in our situation than they are at the moment.

My thoughts currently are that I believe my research has shown me that there is a case for the concept of a middle school within an area school. I am convinced that the Years 7-9 should be looked at as an entity within the school.

The other major result of my investigations have been that the same problem is being looked at by all other area schools. Very few of them are any further ahead than we are in dealing with this problem. In fact most other schools that I visited and received information from are in exactly the same situation as we are. Very few schools feel that they effectively cater well for this group of students in terms of their social position in the school or in terms of the management of curriculum for them.

Schools are looking at this problem in a variety of ways. The idea of a middle school concept is a common theme, some are looking at Years 7-10, some are looking at Years 7-9. All are very conscious at the staffing and curriculum management issues which make change somewhat difficult. I have been reaffirmed in this study in believing that we do a very good job at Oxford Area School, not only with our Years 7 & 8's, but with the management of curriculum and other aspects of our school. This is the benefit of spending time visiting other schools, that not only does one pick up good ideas but you also realise and recognise the good things that you do back in your own school.

I would like to thank the Ministry for providing this opportunity for me to look at these issues, it has been rewarding, challenging and of real benefit to me as an individual and I hope to Oxford Area School.

References

I found the following articles and references of particular help.

- *"Middle Schooling for the Middle Years – What Might the Jury be Considering*"
  Prepared for the Australian Education Union by Rod Chadbourne, Edith Cowan University October 2001
- *"Picking up the Threads and Developing a Middle School. A Review of Where We Are At a nd Where We Need To Go."*
  Mark Richardson, Christchurch College of Education, Education Management Centre 2002.
- *"Students in Years 7 & 8"* ERO Report 2001
- *"The Big Leap – Transition from Year 8 to Year 9"*
  Margot Crate, Christchurch College of Education, Centre for Educational Leadership 2003.
- *"Middle Schools: A Case Study". – Research Report*
  June Strachan. University of Waikato, Educational Leadership Centre. 1995
- *"Focus on the Wonder Years. Challenges Facing the American Middle School.*
  Joana Juvonen. 2004

Bob Norrish
Principal
Oxford Area School

APPENDIX

QUESTIONNAIRE

To: Principals and Deans of Years 7 & 8:

My name is Bob Norrish and I am the Principal of Oxford Area School in North Canterbury.   I have been awarded sabbatical leave for this term and am undertaking a study of the place of Year 7 & 8 in New Zealand Area Schools. I am sending this questionnaire to all Area Schools in New Zealand and later in the term hope to visit a number of schools to find out more information first hand.

I would be very appreciative of you completing this questionnaire and either emailing it back to me at <u>bob@oxford.school.nz</u> or posting it to me at 11 Weka Street, Oxford, North Canterbury.

The reason for my choice of looking at this area of our schools is because we at Oxford struggle somewhat in terms of curriculum management and where we see the place of the Year 7 & 8 group of students in our school – should they be more closely aligned with our primary area or our secondary area and what does this mean for us in terms of achieving seamlessness.

We are also concerned about how well we manage the transitions from Year 6 to Year 7, and from Year 8 to Year 9 in our situation. These things may or may not be problematic for you but I hope that through collecting information and through an analysis of it that I will be able to write a report and send it to all Area Schools at the end of this term which may be of use to at least some of you.

Thank you in advance for completing this questionnaire and returning it to me. I would like it returned by Friday August 26th if possible. Thank you for your time and consideration and I do appreciate it.

Bob Norrish

QUESTIONNAIRE

Name of School: _____

Total School Roll: _____

Numbers in: Years 1 – 6 _____
                Years 7 & 8 _____
                Years 9 – 13 _____

Questions relating to Years 7 & 8 Curriculum Management/Organisation:

1.　　Number of Year 7 classes

2.　　Number of Year 8 classes:

3.　　Number of Year 7/8 combined classes:

4.　　Hours per week each Year 7 /8 class
　　　　spends in a home room situation:

5.

Curriculum Areas	Taught in home Room	Hours Allocated to this Area
English	Yes / No	
Social Studies	Yes / No	
Maths	Yes / No	
Science	Yes / No	
PE / Health	Yes / No	
Arts	Yes / No	
Technology	Yes / No	

6.　　Yr 7 & 8 Curriculum area taught by specialist secondary teachers;

Curriculum Areas (Please list)	Hours per week teaching in these areas

7.　　Home Room teachers in Year 7 & 8 areas:

Number of Primary trained Teachers

Number of Secondary trained Teachers

If Yr 7 & 8 teachers also teach in other areas of the school please list here.

Area of School e.g. Yr 1-6, Yr 9-13	Subjects taught if secondary	Hours per week teaching in these areas

8. Management Units held by Year 7 & 8 teachers (for responsibility within this area of the school)

Unit Responsibility	Number of Management Units held

Curriculum alignment in Years 7 & 8:

9. For each of the 7 essential areas please list who holds the responsibility for managing this curriculum area in the Year 7 & 8 area of your school.

Essential Learning Areas	Responsibility held by (e.g. Secondary HOD, Yr 7/8 Curriculum Dean, Primary Curriculum Dean, etc)
English	
Social Studies	
Maths	
Science	
PE/Health	
Arts	
Technology	

Achievement Data/Reporting:

10. Achievement data gathered e.g. PAT, asTTle, Running Records, STAR, etc. Please describe briefly

Achievement Data gathered in Yr 6: _____
_____
_____
_____

Achievement Data gathered in Yr 7 & 8: _____
_____
_____
_____

Achievement Data gathered in Yr 9: _____
_____
_____
_____

11. Please comment briefly on how data gathered in each of these areas is used in the area above:

Year 6 data used in Year 7 & 8: _____
_____
_____
_____

Year 7 & 8 data used in Year 9: _____
_____
_____
_____

12. Is Reporting of Student Achievement to Parents in Year 7 & 8:

    (a)   Aligned with reporting in Yrs 1 – 6   Yes / No

    (b)   Aligned with reporting in Yrs 9 – 13   Yes / No

    (c)   A combination of both. Please explain. _____
           _____
           _____
           _____

    (d)   Completely separate from other areas of the school.   Yes / No

Transitions:

13. In general do your Year 7 & 8 students think of themselves as part of:

(a) Primary area of the school ☐

(b) Secondary area of the school ☐

(c) Somewhere in between ☐

(d) Part of the whole school ☐

14. Noting your response to the question above please list the most important organisational things your school does to promote/reinforce this situation.

_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____

15. Please briefly describe the things your school does to enhance the transition of students from:

(a) Year 6 to Year 7: _____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____

(b) Year 8 to Year 9: _____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____

16. A unique opportunity exists in Area Schools to enable students to experience a seamless education. How successful do you think your school is at achieving this?

Very Successful	**Successful**	**Partially Successful**	**With Limited Success**	**Unsuccessful**

17. Please list the 3 most important things you think you do to promote seamlessness.

(i)_____
_____
_____
_____

(ii)_____
_____
_____
_____

(iii)_____
_____
_____
_____

18. Please list the 3 greatest barriers in your school to achieving seamlessness

(i)_____
_____
_____
_____

(ii)_____
_____
_____
_____

(iii)_____
_____
_____
_____

19. In the light of the introduction above is there any other information about your Year 7 & 8 area you think might be helpful:

_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____

20. If I felt I required further explanation to any points above, would you be happy if I contacted you by email later this term.

Yes / No

Names and positions of people completing questionnaire:

_____

_____

_____

Email address of person responsible for Yr 7/8 area in the school:
_____

Please note all information will be treated as confidential and no schools will be named in the resulting report.

Thank you for your time

Regards

Bob Norrish
Principal
Oxford Area School