

The Success of Middle Years Initiatives: Some important considerations

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THE MIDDLE YEARS have not been a high priority of education systems in Australia. Efforts have instead focussed on the early years, particularly related to foundational literacy and numeracy; and the senior years, with a focus on post-compulsory and vocational education.

This is partly because "early adolescence" has only emerged as a category delineated from childhood and adolescence in the past 15 or so years. This lack of focus on early adolescent education has been at considerable cost for teaching and learning effectiveness and innovation in the middle years. Indeed, the motivation for reform in the middle years is driven by an abundance of evidence of alienation and disengagement of young adolescents from learning that lacks relevance, and relies on inappropriate pedagogies and poor assessment strategies. The inevitable flow-on effect of disengagement from learning is underachievement, ultimately leading to dips in educational attainment, and sometimes even declines in levels of prior learning, as well as a lack of interest in school, the increased chance of developing inappropriate behaviour and other undesirable social changes, the culmination of such effects being an increased probability that individual and collective potential is not reached. This ultimately affects the potential for young people to become active and contributing

members of the knowledge economy, and of all aspects defining human capital in our society.

The Middle Years of Schooling Association (MYSA), the Australia-wide peak body dedicated exclusively to the education, development and growth of young adolescents, recently released the position paper *Middle Schooling: People, Practices and Places* which defines middle schooling as “an intentional approach to teaching and learning that is responsive and appropriate to the full range of needs, interests and achievements of middle years students in formal and informal schooling contexts” (MYSA, 2008:1). The middle years are described as from around age 10 to 15, spanning the years from childhood to adolescence. The position paper also specifies three elements necessary for middle schooling:

1. Clear philosophy relevant to the context.

2. Comprehensive range of signature practices to engage young adolescents in relevant, meaningful and challenging learning, along with organisational initiatives to facilitate their implementation, such as:

- Higher order thinking strategies
- Integrated and disciplinary curricula that are negotiated, relevant and challenging
- Heterogeneous and flexible student groupings
- Co-operative learning and collaborative teaching
- Small learning communities that provide students with sustained individual attention in a safe and healthy school environment
- Emphasis on strong teacher–student relationships through extended contact with a small number of teachers and a consistent student cohort
- Authentic and reflective assessment with high expectations
- Democratic governance and shared leadership
- Parental and community involvement in student learning.

3. Evidence-based approach with clearly articulated outcomes, such as:

- Developing current and lifelong learning attributes
- Enhanced academic outcomes
- Creating a love of learning.

This is a useful framework at last providing a consistent message about middle schooling and a potential platform to guide the determination of the “success” of reform in this area. The position paper draws on the work of Pendergast et al (2005) to note that middle schooling implementation typically involves three phases: initiation, development and consolidation. The elements of middle schooling should be increasingly evident as the reform is implemented over time.

The first phase lasts one to two years and typically includes the following core change variables: school vision and visioning processes; student transitions and transitioning procedures; connectedness of student learning to the world outside the school; teacher teaming; innovative leadership.

The second phase lasts two to five years and shows attention to: improved alignment of curriculum, pedagogy and assessment systems; enhanced pedagogies, espe-

cially the provision of greater intellectual challenge; sustainable innovation; linking school culture change with innovative structures; professional learning communities, with teachers as learners; evidence-based policy development processes.

The final stage requires a further five to 10 years and achieves the introduction of changes to address: changing social and economic conditions demanding a broader skill set; learner- and learning-focused programs; student engagement in learning; meeting greater diversity in adolescent needs and capacities.

At best then, a fast-track trajectory takes eight years to achieve the stage of consolidation in the middle years, but this is not a typical reform pathway, with most taking longer, with 10-12 years typical. There are two points to be made here: (1) There are many elements of middle years reform; and (2) It takes time.

With respect to the elements of middle years reform, many have argued the need for a comprehensive approach. For instance, "Middle schooling practices are inter-dependent. In other words, practices depend upon one another for success" (DET 2005:50); "It is increasingly recognised that for reform to have any cogency and impact on the educational experience of students and the workplace conditions of teachers, it requires the articulation of all key aspects rather than isolated change" (Pendergast 2005:5); and, "Implementing sustainable reform in the middle years is asking schools and teachers to change many of the long accepted practices as they relate to school organisation, pedagogy, and curriculum" (Taylor 2001:9). De Jong and Chadbourne (2007) convincingly argue that there needs to be a critical mass of features of middle schooling — there is a need to go the "whole hog". They refer to a colleague who argues it in this way: if the recipe for a cake contains 10 ingredients and the chef chooses to use only five of them, then no one should be surprised if, when cooked, the cake collapses into a pile of crumbs. It is generally agreed then that for reform to be effective requires the articulation of all key aspects rather than isolated change.

With respect to time, it has been up to states and territories and to sectors to determine their approach and timing of reform in the middle years. Some initiatives are very recent while others have been in place over a considerably longer period. For instance, the Northern Territory Government announced a three-year plan (2006-8) to implement middle years in government schools across the territory. It is being directed by *The Framework for the Principles and Policies for the Middle Years in the Northern Territory* (DEET, 2006) and is considered to be "one of the most significant educational reforms undertaken in the Territory" (DEET, 2006:np). The Queensland Government launched the *See the Future: The middle phase of learning state school action plan* in 2003 in response to the Ministerial Advisory Committee for Educational Reform (MACER) report *The Middle Phase of Learning* (Queensland Government, 2003). The action plan sets the direction, clarifies expectations and accountabilities, and commits systemic support for reforms in every Queensland state school. It requires the alignment of curriculum, pedagogy and assessment to bring greater consistency and rigour to middle year classrooms.

In Victoria, all sectors have been actively implementing middle years and middle

schooling innovations with a strong research culture and evidence based reform since the late 1990s. The Middle Years Pedagogy Research and Development (MYPRAD) project was instrumental in this approach. MYPRAD is a strategy for planning and implementing change in the middle years of schooling. During 2003, materials were developed and trialled to support teachers to reflect on their classroom practice, develop their professional learning teams and promote whole school change. Following the successful trial of MYPRAD materials in nine clusters during 2003, MYPRAD was made available to all Schools for Innovation and Excellence clusters from 2004. It could not be expected then that in Victoria enough time has elapsed for the majority of schools to have achieved a consolidation phase and hence to consider the “success” of middle years reform.

So, the question of the success of middle years initiatives at this moment in time is somewhat tricky. Firstly, it is unlikely that enough time has elapsed to accept that most schools have achieved a level of consolidation in the reform of their middle years, so any measurement of success will need to be interpreted as a point in a journey. Second, in order to determine the success of middle years reform, it is necessary to identify schools and systems where comprehensive reform incorporating the range of elements has taken place, rather than piecemeal innovations. Thirdly, there is the question of what measures of success are useful and for whom are they useful — a discussion beyond the scope of this brief paper. Fourth, success must be considered within the context in which the middle years initiative has taken place. A recently-released special report, *The Status of Programs in Florida Middle Schools* (George, 2008-9), offers some insights into successful large-scale organisational implementation of reforms such as middle years education. Three aspects are regarded as essential for success: clarity of mission; authentic commitment; and skilful execution. In the Florida scenario, it is reported that at a systemic level there was “critical insufficiency in each of these three essential areas” (George, 2008-9:9), inevitably impacting on the measurable “success” outcomes.

When considering success in the Australian context, there is a paucity of research that makes a clear connection between success factors such as student learning outcomes and teacher satisfaction with comprehensive middle schooling innovation where consolidation has been achieved. For instance, in a study conducted on behalf of the Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA) to investigate what practices, processes, strategies and structures best promote lifelong learning and the development of lifelong learners in the middle years of schooling context, of 25 schools around the nation that were recognised for their innovative work in middle schooling and lifelong learning, only one was determined as having entered the consolidation phase of middle years innovation (Pendergast et al, 2005:8). A larger scale study in Queensland, expected to be released in 2009, promises to offer greater insights. There are also pockets of research being conducted in clusters and in individual schools around Australia, many providing promising glimpses of the success of their initiatives.

What is needed is a comprehensive investigation taking into consideration the ele-

ments and timeline for innovation. At the same time, the success of relevant systemic/organisational implementation of middle years reform in terms of the three aspects — clarity, commitment and execution — must provide a balance to these findings. Only then can the success of middle schooling be gauged with some degree of confidence.

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