

## A Brief Background to the Development of Middle Schooling in Australia

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*Middle Schooling can be delineated in a number of ways. Centrally, it is concerned with developing an approach to the education of young adolescents and pre-adolescents which is based in an understanding of their developmental needs. More prosaically, the middle years of schooling can be described as those relating to a particular age range. It is here that we shall begin.*

### **Locating Middle Schooling within the overall educational framework**

Middle Schooling focuses on the education of students in the 10 to 14 year old age range. Given variations between Australian states, this translates to beginning round Years 5/6 and extending to Years 9/10. Consequently, the years of middle schooling include the upper years of primary education and the lower years of secondary, and generally involve a transition midway from a primary school to a secondary school. However, there are now many purpose-built, or purpose-designated, middle schools in the private sector, and an increasing number in the public sector, which do not require a transition from one school to another. These purpose-built, or purpose-designated, middle schools usually exist as a 'school' within a larger K to 12 or 5 to 12 college.

The papers presented in this edition of *New Horizons in Education* represent a number of models of middle schooling. For example, middle schooling at Our Lady of the Assumption School at Enoggera in Brisbane, is conducted within the primary school context of Years 6 and 7. By way of contrast, the purpose-built middle school at Forest Lake State High School focuses on Years 7 to 9 within a Year 7 to 12 structure. Then there is the Middle School at the Anglican Church Grammar School which focuses on Years 7 to 9 within a 1 to 12 framework, and which comprises two campuses, one in Brisbane and the other at Warwick.

The development of middle schooling is relatively recent in Australia and has occurred mainly over the last decade. For example, Our Lady of the Assumption School first adopted a specific 'middle years of schooling' approach in 2000, while the Middle School of the Anglican Church Grammar School comprising the East Brisbane campus and the residential Slade campus at Warwick, was established in 2000.

However, the conception of the middle years of schooling as having a particular identity within the overall structure of schooling is not really a new concept as such. In America the National Middle School Association was established in 1973 after middle schools were developed to replace junior high schools as a separate educational tier between nursery schools and senior high schools.

### **Why Focus on Middle Schooling?**

Given the introduction of middle schools in America over 30 years ago why has there has been such an apparently long gestation in introducing a focus on middle schooling in Australia?

Perhaps one reason can be found in the realisation that the concept of the middle years of schooling represents more than just structural changes. As mentioned briefly in the introduction, the middle years of schooling is now almost a form of shorthand for referring to a particular kind of schooling, a more appropriate kind of schooling for young adolescents and pre-adolescents in the age range approximating 10 to 14. It is not merely a process of carving up grades into operational units termed 'junior school', 'middle school' and 'senior school' and then proceeding with business as usual. Rather, the recent emphasis on middle schooling, both here in Australia and America, represents a reconceptualising of what education for young adolescents and pre-adolescents should be like.

The impetus to reconsider the goals of middle schooling can be traced initially to America, and in particular, to an investigation of middle schooling undertaken by the influential Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development in 1989. The report by this Council titled, *Turning Points: Preparing American Youth for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, strongly recommended that standards in American middle schools needed to be lifted. The Council recommended the introduction of a core academic program that also enhanced the sense of individual and collective responsibility required for active citizenship. Fundamentally, the Carnegie report suggested that the schools themselves needed to become more flexible in their pedagogies and structures to cater for the particular needs of students within the middle years as they moved into, and through, the developmental and social changes and challenges of early adolescence.

The findings of the Carnegie Council were mirrored in the findings of a number of Australian studies undertaken during the 1990s. These included *The Report of the Junior Secondary Review* conducted for the South Australian Department of Education by Vivian Evers (1992), a national report on middle schooling by the Schools Council entitled, *In the Middle* (1993), a national study of students in the middle years produced by the Australian Curriculum Studies Association (1996) called, *From Alienation to Engagement*, and the more recent study by Barratt (1998), *A Report of the National Middle Schooling Project*. These reports have suggested significant problems with schooling in the middle years which have been confirmed by other research such as the Victorian Quality Schools Project (cited in Hill and Russell, 2000, p.1) conducted between 1992 and 1995. This Victorian study provided data on 931 teachers and 13,909 students and showed that reading progress for most students in the middle years stalled between Years 5 and 8 and that there was actually a decline in school achievement for students in the lowest 25% according to academic results, especially in the first year of secondary school. There was palpable evidence of student disengagement and downright alienation of significant numbers of students during the middle years of their schooling.

The realisation that all was not well with the education of young adolescents fortunately coincided with a period of expanded understanding of the developmental needs of this age group. Research in the cognitive and social sciences relating to early adolescence provided a base from which to devise potential remedies to the malaise of middle schooling. Therefore, Australian reports such as Barratt's (1998), mentioned above, were able to suggest an approach which took account of the generic features of early adolescence while still being flexible enough to recognise individual differences in development and contexts. Barratt's report (ibid, p.30) suggested what might almost be considered a general blueprint for the development of middle schooling in Australia in recommending that the middle years of schooling should be characterised by being:

#### *Learner-centred*

Coherent curriculum is focused on the identified needs, interests and concerns of students, and emphasises self-directed and co-constructed learning.

#### *Collaboratively organised*

Teams of teachers who know and understand their students will employ powerful pedagogical strategies to challenge and extend students within a supportive environment.

#### *Outcome-based*

Progress and achievement are recorded continuously in relation to explicit statements of what each student is expected to know and be able to do.

#### *Flexibly constructed*

Arrangements are responsive to local needs and circumstances, and reflect creative uses of time, space and other resources.

#### *Ethically aware*

Justice, care, respect and a concern for the needs of others are reflected in everyday practice of students, teachers and administrators.

#### *Community-oriented*

Parents and representatives from other community institutions and organisations beyond the school are involved in productive partnerships.

Barratt (ibid, p.30) says that these principles emerged from Australia-wide consultation as being the essential components of Middle Schooling. But of course, it is how these principles are put into effect that will determine the effectiveness of school reform in the middle years of schooling. That there are many ways of implementing the vision will be obvious in the various articles that follow in this edition of *New Horizons in Education*.

## **References**

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