

A Middle Years Approach to Schooling at Year 9: Positive, Negative, Interesting to see.

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Introduction

Schools engaged in reform of the middle years of schooling have attempted to implement a number of strategies as suggested both by the literature. These fall broadly into the spheres of organisation, curriculum, pedagogy and environment (Cumming 1996). In keeping with what seems a natural propensity to systematise any worthwhile initiative (thereby sowing the seeds for failure) we have seen the emergence of 'checklists' for teaching in the middle years (Scott 1998) on the one hand and prescriptions for wholesale school change (Hill & Crevola 1997) on the other. Such reforms have met with varying success and in many cases the original impetus for change has diminished in effect over time. This original impetus might have been the vision of a school leader, the enthusiasm of a committed group of teachers, and/or the short term provision of additional resources. Vision and commitment change with personnel changes and diminishing reserves of energy. Resources evaporate as educational bureaucracies and academic high flyers move on to the next best thing (Bennet 1995) Ironically the Middle Years Research and Development Project (MYRAD) in Victoria is about to finish long before any reforms can be said to be bedded down.

Many of the agitators for school reform that have focused on issues of school change have come to recognise that the any attempts to introduce a new initiative will often founder if we do not take into account the human dimensions (Hargreaves 1996, Sergiovanni 1996, Evans 1996).

In this paper the positives described are a result of the changes made to organisational features, curriculum, pedagogy and environment. These changes have not occurred evenly or in any orderly fashion but it has been possible to demonstrate improvements in student attitudes and in broad learning outcomes as a consequence.

The negatives described in this paper relate to both immovable blockages (University entrance requirements, finite resources of time and finance) and human conservatism.

It is the latter aspect that provides us with the elements that are 'interesting to see' for whilst we can acknowledge the natural predisposition of all humans to opt for security and continuity (Maris) it is the challenge of bringing people along that fascinates.

So in this paper we have chosen to focus on these interesting bits. They are:

- Transition issues: what happens when we overlay a flat management model (the concept of teacher teams) onto a traditionally hierarchical model. The introduction of new and evolving roles and responsibilities.
- Issues of pedagogy; the effects of differing teaching styles on student response and motivation both within the teams and without as Year 9 students progress to Year 10
- The discrepancy in desired learning outcomes: the broad based outcomes for human, social and work based learning at Year 9 versus the subject based learning outcomes identified for success in university entrance exams.
- Variations in team performance: communication and collaboration between teacher teams.

Background

The Year 9 program in its current form was introduced to:

- Meet the needs of students in what has been described as the 'Middle Years'. 'Students often complain that they dislike school, find it irrelevant, overly stressful, lacking in direction and that they have little choice about what they do' (Year 9 Handbook)
- Allow for a focus on 'the development of the whole student through a balanced curriculum'.(Yr. 9 Learning Program)
- Have 'students and teachers ...working together, not only to establish knowledge but "learning how to learn" in order for a deeper and richer understanding to occur' (Yr. 9 Learning Program).
- Develop 'a foundation for life long learning. This to enable our children to become better equipped to respond to a very dynamic working environment and to enable them to make a valuable contribution to all elements of social and communal life.' (Yr. 9 Learning Program)
- Have students 'begin to know themselves and to be confident in approaching all that comes before them'. (Yr. 9 Learning Program)
- Enable students to explore and begin to appreciate:
 - The theoretical underpinnings of disciplines • Reflection as a learning tool
 - Work in real life contexts • Working as an individual
 - The importance of process as well as the • Working collaboratively in flexi-groups product or result • Setting and working to personal goals
- Responsibility and independence • Individual learning styles

Enabling features of the program

To meet the objectives of the program it was necessary to establish the context in which learning outcomes for Year 9 'Middle Years' students could be attained and demonstrated:

For students

The learning environment:

- City Curriculum- Melbourne's Central Business District and environs.
- Clunes Residential- the township of Clunes and environs
- Home Campus – Glen Waverley school site

The curriculum

City (off campus): Culture, Action and Service. A project requiring investigation and research, report writing and reflection.

Clunes (off campus, rural community): Being and Becoming: Philosophy; Community and Society; Culture; Environment; 'Propel': individually developed integrated project; Personal Education Plan; Reflective Mosaic.

Home: the Key Learning Areas taught separately and in the form of integrated or cross-curricular modules.

Teaching styles

Teacher as facilitator and guide. Outcomes and processes negotiated within an agreed framework. Individual student learning contracts entered into. Students working collaboratively in 'clover' groups. Individual and group tasks. Reflection as a learning tool. Application of knowledge to real life situations. Process valued alongside product. Responsibility and independence encouraged. Use of 'Thinking Books'.

Teacher-student relations

Teacher teams established with individual teachers meeting the same groups of students for more than one subject over the whole year. Student voice respected and trust developed. Staffroom located central to teaching areas and readily accessible to students. Pastoral needs of students met by the team. Teachers as first point of contact with parents.

For the teacher teams

Time

For formal dialogue related to work and students. To undertake professional development. To work on administrative tasks.

Space

Shared working space to provide opportunity for informal discussion about work and students.

Administrative and financial support

Campus Principal, Head of Middle Years, Curriculum Coordinator.

Community support

Community of teachers and parents kept informed as to the goals and nature of the program. Whole staff professional development, parent information evenings, newsletters, student reports and student presentations.

Professional development

Team building, curriculum development, program review, analysis of student learning outcomes, visits to other school both in Victoria and interstate.

Data gathering and analysis

The evaluation of the Year 9 program is based on data gathered from:

1. Student Survey measures for 'Empathy', 'Teacher Energy/Enthusiasm', 'Fairness/Firmness', 'Helpfulness/Responsiveness', 'High Expectations', 'Quality of Instruction', 'Appropriateness of Instruction', 'Time', and 'Feedback', 'Learning Styles and Instruction'.
2. Focus Group Interviews: 4 groups of six Year 9 students selected at random.
3. Final Word Protocol: formalised process for review of implementation issues with the Year 9 Teacher Teams.
4. Parent Surveys: expectations, concerns, understandings.
5. Year 10 Teacher Survey: teachers perceptions of students who had come through the Year 9 program in relation to: 'Responsiveness, cooperation and discipline'; 'Work Habits'; 'Student Engagement'; 'Independence'; 'Interdependence'; 'Student Awareness of Own Thinking'.
6. Year 10 Student Interviews.
7. Team Health Analysis: 'Groups v Teams' checklist.
8. 'The Wesley Experience': perceptions of students, teachers and leaders. Jean Russell, University of Melbourne.
9. Team Leaders' Perceptions.

The 'positives'

A program that met the needs and interests of Year 9 'Middle Years' students.

Middle Years research indicates the need for relevance, negotiation and integration in the curriculum. It implies that the curriculum be student centred, address real world issues and concerns, involve students in planning, goal setting and assessment, be cross-curricular and unfragmented.

The Year 9 Learning program is designed to achieve this and has received a favorable response from students:

"There was more choice in what we did and how we did it; more control.

If we didn't like it had the freedom to change. The outcomes were set but you could get to it anyway you liked. Topic is set, the due date, the criteria to be met but you can use your different talents to get the result e.g. media presentation, talk."

"It was related to real life, real problems; used the local environment."

"Like it is in life and work. We use communication, negotiation, people skills, and research skills."

"In 'Rose Avenue' (for example) we integrated Math, Science, SOSE & English."

"People learn better when interested".

Students now in Year 10 were aware of the different approaches to curriculum they experienced in Year 9:

"There were more group activities. Maths was taught differently. It revolved around solving a certain problem."

Support for the importance of eliciting student interest also came from the 'Learning styles and instruction survey'. Over 90% of students believed that they 'always' learnt best when '*I am really interested in the topic.*' Students also opted for group work over working alone with a text book.

The survey of Year 10 teacher perceptions of their students who had experienced the Year 9 curriculum were a further indication that the Year 9 program had achieved its aims in relation to student engagement, co-operative work habits, student centred learning and student negotiation. 77% of Yr. 10 teachers agreed that students like to work in groups or pairs. But as the Yr. 10 student comments show this did not necessarily mean that those were the teaching strategies adopted by those teachers.

Further validation of the program comes from Jean Russell's research: 'The Wesley Experience'. In measures related to connectedness, treatment by teachers, engaging activities, responsibility and teacher enthusiasm, the Year 9 program had clearly averted what is normally a downward trend from Year 7 to year 10 in most schools. Significantly within campus patterns the Year 9 Glen Waverley program stands out with a mean response rating of 3.65 in terms of attitude to school compared to 2.9 as the mean for schools in the Middle Years Research and Development Project (MYRAD).

In relation to the prompt 'Work I do in my classes is interesting' the mean response rating from Jean Russell's table was as follows:

Yr 7 Yr 8 Yr 9 Yr 10

3.28 3.03 3.20 3.05

This result closely mirrors that for attitude to school described above.

A focus on 'the development of the whole student through a balanced curriculum'

In the main students responded positively to their experiences on the 3 campuses- Clunes, City, Glen Waverley- and were able to identify the developmental aspects of the program:

"Yr. 9 got you thinking in different ways, style of thinking, stuff about life, social skills."

"Last year we learnt a lot about life skills, especially at Clunes." (Yr. 10 student).

"(The curriculum) was related to real life, real problems. We used the local environment."

"It was like it is in life and work. We use communication, negotiation, people skills, research skills."

"We learn about ourselves and learn to work with others. In the future we will have to deal with other people."

"We've changed. We're more mature and can get on with others better. You learn who you are and what you want out of school."

A minority of students had reservations about the program. These reservations appeared to have two origins. One, a more determinist attitude to schooling: that its main purpose is to prepare one for success in VCE. Two, institutionalised beliefs about what schooling and learning looks like based on their previous experiences or those of their parents.

Some comments were:

"In Year 10 you learn more and know the subjects better. Last year none of it made sense."

"We were not ready for the work in Year 10."

"Non-Clunes (the program for students who did not attend Clunes), needed more structure."

Relationships: 'students and teachers ...working together, not only to establish knowledge but "learning how to learn" in order for a deeper and richer understanding to occur.'

Student comments indicate a rising level of self-awareness. They are able to articulate a sense of self, of others and of the relationship between self and others:

"Yr 9 got you thinking in different ways, style of thinking, stuff about life, social skills."

"We learn about ourselves and learn to work with others. In the future we will have to deal with other people."

"We've changed. We're more mature and can get on with others better. You learn who you are and what you want out of school."

Students recognised that 'learning to learn' was being encouraged by the organisation of curriculum (integrated, cross-curricular) and cooperative learning approaches:

"We use communication, negotiation, people skills, research skills."

"We learn about ourselves and learn to work with others."

In being allowed a number of options when it came to the demonstration of learning outcomes, students came to identify their various talents:

"The outcomes were set but you could get to them anyway you liked....you can use your different talents to get the result: media presentation, model, talk, etc."

The 'Thinking Book' encouraged students to *"Think about your work problems and what you've learned; deeper thinking."* (Yr 9 student).

The Year 10 teachers' perceptions related to work habits are inconclusive given that more traditional teaching styles and differing expectations cloud the issue. As regards this particular aspect the findings of this survey make interesting reading and are reproduced here in total:

Work habits-general

Prompts related to general work habits: getting down to work, being organised, completing work in the set time, need for close monitoring, elicited mainly negative responses. An average 65% indicated need for improvement in these areas, particularly when it came to being organised and getting work done on time.

How do these responses sit alongside 90% agreement that students are cooperative?

Interestingly enough when it came to engaging in class discussion we had by the greatest positive response: 43.5% strongly agreed that students 'readily engaged in class discussion' and 43.5% agreed. What might this indicate about preferred teaching styles, student needs and interests?

Work habits and student engagement

If we also examine responses to questions related to students desire to have some control over their own learning then we can gather more information about the need to engage them. With one exception teachers agreed/strongly agreed that students like to be consulted. Only two teachers disagreed with the statement that students 'wish to clear about the purpose of work'. 60% of teachers agreed that students would either seek to negotiate activities and would challenge the curriculum or set tasks. How did teachers respond to this? We don't know. Do they see it as a desirable learning habit? More information required. Would the Year 9 team find affirmation in this result? One suspects so.

Work habits-independence

The area of independent work habits proved difficult to draw conclusions from. Overwhelmingly teachers agreed that 'students are able to work independently'- 83%. However, they also indicated that students preferred 'step by step' instruction (90%) and were evenly divided as to whether students were 'confident learners' and showed initiative. The prompts do point to aspects of independence and are not necessarily synonymous but again give rise to interesting interpretation. What are we describing when we talk about students working 'independently'- thinking, questioning, creating, applying, interpreting, etc, or simply working on their own on set tasks?

Work habits-interdependence

How to teach manuals often describe independent learning as the learning outcome to aspire to. Others point out that in work and community interdependence is to be more highly valued. That has certainly been the view of the Year 9 team.

To judge by teacher responses students have been successful in achieving this outcome. 90% of teachers agreed that students 'help each other with set tasks'. 77% agreed that students prefer to work in groups or pairs. 40% did not agree that students 'respected others right to speak in turn'. Is that a good or bad result for Year 10 students eager to engage in discussion? Room for improvement there and a reminder that such skills must also be taught and learned. (And reinforced by Year 10 teachers?)

Develop 'a foundation for life long learning. This to enable our children to become better equipped to respond to a very dynamic working environment and to enable them to make a valuable contribution to all elements of social and communal life.'

From the above it would appear that there has been success in achieving some of the broader learning outcomes: students engaged in learning, cooperative work habits, student centered learning, and student negotiation. They will argue that such outcomes are desirable within the broader context of the workplace, family, community and self-actualisation.

The students themselves verify this:

"Last year we learnt lots about life skills, especially at Clunes."

"We learnt about the environment."

"We may learn less detail with each topic but we get a broader view."

Have students 'begin to know themselves and to be confident in approaching all that comes before them'.

This objective may read in conjunction with 'learning how to learn above'.

Student comments indicate a rising level of self-awareness. They are able to articulate a sense of self, of others and of the relationship between self and others:

"Yr 9 got you thinking in different ways, style of thinking, stuff about life, social skills."

"We learn about ourselves and learn to work with others. In the future we will have to deal with other people."

"We've changed. We're more mature and can get on with others better. You learn who you are and what you want out of school."

Enable students to explore and begin to appreciate:

- ***The theoretical underpinnings of disciplines • Reflection as a learning tool***
- ***Work in real life contexts • Working as an individual***
- ***The importance of process as well as the • Working collaboratively in flexi-groups product or result • Setting and working to personal goals***
- ***Responsibility and independence • Individual learning styles***

Of these specific learning outcomes all have been demonstrated to have been met with the exception 'the theoretical underpinnings of disciplines'. It is this particular aspect that is most contentious in any debate surrounding the Year 9 program and it is an issue that will be further addressed below in the 'Interesting to see' section. The Year 9 team has been careful to describe content learning in this way, not as specific subject based knowledge but as broad concepts as enshrined within the notion of disciplines. Whilst this is an educationally defensible notion theoretically it will be argued that within the context of the VCE certain accommodations must be made.

Positives: Enabling Conditions for Student Learning

The learning environment:

- City Curriculum- Melbourne's Central Business District and environs.
- Clunes Residential- the township of Clunes and environs
- Home Campus – Glen Waverley school site

This report is unable to report on the merits or otherwise of the City Curriculum experience. Student feedback here was little and equivocal. The learning environment at Clunes elicited positive responses all round and the attitude of the local community is supportive.

The Home Campus has been well resourced and designed in such a way as to enhance both teacher-student relations, teacher teaming effects and cooperative learning approaches. The teacher staffroom is nested in the middle of the designated Year 9 teaching block and its classrooms. Student working desks are specifically designed to enable both individual and group work in a unique 'clover' design. Teachers are readily accessible to students.

Teaching styles

In keeping with the Middle Years literature as it relates to pedagogy, teachers at Year 9 have adopted teaching strategies and established an environment that is conducive to learning.

The teacher operates as facilitator and guide. Outcomes and processes are negotiated within an agreed framework. Individual student learning contracts entered into. Students work collaboratively in 'clover' groups completing individual and group tasks. Students are actively involved. Reflection as a learning tool is encouraged through the use of 'Thinking Books'.

Where possible 'content' is taught through the application of knowledge to real life situations. Process is valued alongside product. Responsibility and independence are encouraged.

Students are well aware of these differences in teaching approaches through their experiences in Year 8 and Year 10. These comments should be read in conjunction with the objectives above:

Year 9 - "There was more choice." "Related to real life." "...work with others." "They (teachers) listen to us instead of telling us what to do. Behaviour is not a big issue. They put themselves on the same level; it's not "I'm better than you, I'm a teacher." You're treated more equally." "We enjoyed group discussions."

Year 10- "This year its blackboard and textbook." "In Year 10 we've switched back to the old ways- teachers are older, stricter, traditional. We're back in our desks again."

The issue of teaching styles is further examined below in 'Interesting to see'.

Teacher-student relations

Teacher teams were established with individual teachers meeting the same groups of students for more than one subject over the whole year. The Year 9 teacher staffroom is located central to teaching areas and readily accessible to students. Pastoral needs of students met by the team and teachers are the first point of contact with parents.

That the student voice is respected and trust developed is verified by the student comments recorded above and by the various surveys.

In the Year 9 survey a category of questions eliciting student responses to 'empathy' allowed them to express feelings about care, empathy, acceptance and tolerance. The positive results here (only 12% of students responded negatively) are validated by J. Russel's research (see page 5 of this report).

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For the teacher teams

Time

For formal dialogue related to work and students. To undertake professional development.
To work on administrative tasks.

There will never be enough time. The continuing need for time for teacher collaboration that research suggests is necessary to sustain good teacher and good school functioning (Raywid 1993) is an issue at Wesley as it is in any school. Nevertheless the observation that there are 'Too many teachers to teach and too little time , while working in teaching to work on teaching' (Elmore 1990) continues to haunt us and not all strategies that are suggested to overcome this problem are appropriate (Moore 1995). Discussion of the need for formal dialogue (the 'discursive environment') is to be found below under 'Where to from here'.

Space

Shared working space to provide opportunity for informal discussion about work and students exists in the form of the centrally located Year 9 staffroom. There is the added advantage of having clearly designated student working space specifically for the Year 9 student cohort.

Administrative and financial support

Full support for the program comes from the senior management team: Campus Principal, Head of Middle Years, Curriculum Coordinator and Team Leaders. All are able to articulate and communicate to the broad community the rationale for the program and its design features.

The role of the campus principle has been a key element in 'unfreezing' or challenging people to face realities they have preferred to avoid (Evans 1996), developing new behaviours (skills), beliefs, and ways of thinking, and, subsequently addressing the need to realign structures, functions and roles.

The program is resourced both financially to meet professional development needs and in the allocation of time. The intensification of work for the teams of teachers in implementing new programs and forming closer relationships with students is recognised.

Community support

The whole community of teachers and parents was kept informed as to the goals and nature of the program via whole staff professional development, parent information evenings, newsletters, student reports and student presentations.

In 2000 surveys were sent to all parents of Year 9 students. Few were returned but were sufficient to support the need to keep parents informed of the rationale behind the Year 9 program. Parent attitudes were at extreme ends of the spectrum; support for traditional drill and rote learning approaches versus support for more responsive approaches to student management and learning styles. Some recognised the broad context of schooling; others demanded value for money via high VCE scores. All wanted reassurance that subject learning outcomes were being taught and standards reached. Reports would include this information.

As student comments have indicated an immediate response to some of the issues raised in the parent feedback was the setting of more homework.

There is also more work to be done in 'educating' teachers outside the program and having them recognise the validity of its specific objectives.

Professional development

Professional development support, specific to the program, took the form of team building workshops, curriculum development, program review, analysis of student learning outcomes, and visits to other school both in Victoria and interstate.

There was evidence to support a growing cohesiveness in the two teacher teams (Team Health Questionnaire). In 2000, conflict, a natural and some may say welcome stage of team development, was managed by the team leaders after consultation with an outside facilitator and the teams became more productive as a result.

Negatives

It would not be healthy to describe implementation issues as 'negative'. If schools were to attempt to anticipate every eventuality they would initiate nothing. Better to adopt a 'Ready, Fire, Aim' approach and work the detail out along the way (Hargreaves 1996 Mohr 1997).

It is equally true, as Nancy Mohr of University Heights said of the radical reforms introduced at her school: "You can't win them all. Only a school that stands for nothing can please everybody".

All this is probably little consolation to those actors – principal, middle years coordinator, team leaders and team members - who had to justify their actions the broader community. It is not only parents who grow nervous when the middle school no longer looks the way it did before or to teachers at other levels who feel challenged by the changes. Some students also have to have their preconceptions of schooling challenged. However, we will put these teething issues into the context of 'interesting to see'.

That leaves only one 'negative' on the horizon and that is the dead hand of university entrance requirements and their corollary the highly institutionalised subjects, subject associations and vested interests within universities and boards of study. May well we describe the delineation of subjects as 'fiction' but it is unlikely that we will see their demise in the near future.

Perhaps it is not that subject departments are of themselves a bad thing but that they provide cover for those unwilling to counsel other means of designing subject matter, pedagogy and assessment that engage students.

Interesting to see

Issues of pedagogy

There is every reason to believe that in Yr 10 the preferred teaching style of some teachers may be an impediment to the students developing confidence. We contribute some of the concerns of the Yr 10 teachers voiced above to the desire of students that teaching be explicit about desired learning outcomes, that there be room for negotiation and discussion, and a preference for their voice to be heard. Having been given some autonomy and having their views respected in Year 9 the following comments do not surprise:

"Year 10 its 'detention, detention, detention; last year they'd negotiate."

"We listened because we got more respect from the teachers."

"Whether this year we have any control over what happens in the classroom depends on the teacher. There is no negotiation."

"In Year 10 we've switched back to the old ways- teachers are older, stricter, traditional. We are back in our desks again. There is a change in the style of teaching not the content."

There is reason to believe, based on student comments and the survey of year 10 teacher perceptions, that the more traditional teaching approaches employed by some Year 10 teachers has been a potential source of conflict in Year 10:

"In Year 9 the teachers were closer, more friendly and you could joke without them getting upset. In Year 10 some students tune out or make the teachers angry. (But) some teachers don't mind you giving your own opinion."

"Year 10 it's 'detention, detention, detention': last year they'd negotiate. Some react angrily to the treatment."

"We listened because we got more respect. Last year the teachers came around and asked us if we needed help and we felt more comfortable. Now we have to put our hand up and feel intimidated."

The analysis of Year 10 teacher perceptions survey relating to issues of responsiveness, cooperation and discipline is reproduced here in full:

Responsiveness, cooperation, discipline

The survey indicated positive responses in this area. Students were judged to be cooperative, responsive in general, responsive to constructive feedback and good listeners. Teachers did not believe, however, that students appreciated their help.

The specific prompt 'students respond well to instruction' was agreed to by two-thirds of teachers.

Responses related to disciplinary issues were somewhat ambivalent. Whilst it may not be a major issue for most (one third of teachers could get 'upset' by students) it does become apparent that the teacher is not regarded as 'omnipotent'. Their willingness to challenge some decisions made by the teacher, their 'keen sense of fairness', their negative reactions to discipline, can either be seen as a positive or a negative according to one's personal viewpoint. Irrespective of what behaviour patterns may have been influenced by the ethos generated by the Year 9 teacher-student relationship; these results should not surprise. Students are of an age and in a time when authority is not given but earned.

Another statistic which is open to interpretation is that which saw an evenly divided response to the prompt 'students are more manageable when working alone'. Are we managing noise levels, time on task, potential conflict or the learning process? Need for a better question or some qualitative research?

There remains for some students a sense of ambiguity about their contrasting experiences as learners. These students are of a view that perhaps the approach to learning adopted at Year 10 is for their own good:

"It's because of Year 11, 12, the need to meet deadlines."

"Last year there were no tests and little homework (but) we got more in term 3". (This comment a reflection of the teams response to parent feedback voicing some concern in this area.)

The issue of desired learning outcomes

The successful attainment of the broad learning outcomes identified by the Year 9 program has been verified by the teacher teams, parents and the majority of students themselves (see above).

However, as the survey of Year 10 teachers' perceptions of Year 9 students indicates, different learning outcomes (subject specific) are valued by those teachers. The perception that students are under-prepared for year 10 exists in some subject faculties more than others.

In addition some students were unable to acknowledge the value of their Year 9 learning experiences:

"In year 10 you learn more (content) and know the subjects better. Last year none of it made sense."

"Year 10 is subject focused. Year 9 more laid back. We were not ready for the work in year 10 (workload). In year 9 we had more group activities and lots of time to do them. We are not in the habit of getting things done (on time/in time)."

A false dichotomy

To conclude that one view of schooling is right and another wrong is to establish a false dichotomy. On one hand we have developing knowledge about students and student learning found in the literature about the Middle Years and exponential discoveries in the area of cognitive psychology. On the other we have the highly institutionalised conception of knowledge being encapsulated within 'subjects' and demonstrated in the assessment design of the VCE.

The 'trick' then is to acknowledge both perspectives and seek agreement on the 'middle ground'. And when we seek out that middle ground let us not ignore the students.

Transition issues

Evans (1996) describes the experience of change at 'Overton':

The consequence for staff, as in Overton's conversion to a middle school model is confusion, uncertainty, and even suspicion. Often during innovation there will develop misunderstandings about responsibility and authority ("I thought you were handling that"; "This decision is ours not yours"). A chronic complaint by faculty is that their input is solicited then ignored ("The administration doesn't listen to us and respect us")...(p66).

Team members readily identified with the Overton experience but in being able to identify where confusion and frustration lay are on the way to redefining roles and responsibilities in a flatter, team oriented management structure.

Issues have arisen in the evolutionary stages of the program as the transition was made from a traditionally hierarchical model of school management to one where responsibility was devolved to the teams. Team discussion of a chapter in Evans (1996) entitled 'Implementation: Tasks of Transition' elicited the following responses:

"The changes are both positive and welcome but we know it's evolutionary. There are different ideas about what the structure should be, how decisions are made. Clarity of roles, expectations, etc, will help eliminate some fears."

"We agree with the direction. It depends on structures and planning. Angst and confusion getting there. Needs time and forward planning"

"Fantastic to have freedom in the planning."

"Sometimes support is available and sometimes its not. There's been support without clarity as regards responsibility and decision making above us. What decisions can we make?"

"Devolution has created confusion. Who do we go to? What are our roles? Outside impositions have handicapped pastoral issues. Appreciate that the group has developed its own pathway but others have acted to rein it in."

"Need time to promote and explain to rest of staff."

Variations in team performance

An interesting but unintended outcome of the Year 9 student survey was the marginally different results for the two teacher teams (see attachments). When taken in conjunction with the student interviews it became apparent that the differences were attributable to a different teaching style adopted by one or two teachers within one of the teacher teams. The anomaly is that whilst this resulted in less positive responses for such measures as 'empathy', 'helpfulness/ responsiveness', higher responses were given for 'high expectations'.

Two questions need to be answered: one, how can we maintain communication between teams as much as within them; two, is it possible to adopt an empathetic approach to students and demand excellence at the same time?

The Grange P-12 school at Hoppers Crossing, is in the process of addressing this challenge. Their solution may be to appoint 'team supporters' to each team. However, the 'team supporter' would be a teacher from another team at that year level. This provides a 'critical friend', a vehicle for cross fertilisation of ideas, and a mechanism for developing alignment and accountability.

The issue of team performance and its links to teaching style are further explored in the analysis of the 'Learning styles and instruction table':

The items listed here were an addition to the student satisfaction criteria and were inserted to gather some information about prevailing pedagogy. The importance of interest, choice and relevance emerge clearly. Of interest are figures relating to individual and group work/project work. How can we account for the differences between the teams?

Students in Team A indicated a stronger preference for group work, experimentation, project work and choice. Given the unlikelihood that the two cohorts of students were remarkably different we must conclude that students familiarity with and degree of comfort with these modes of learning stems from factors related to their learning experiences.

Taken in conjunction with the student satisfaction survey we saw that Team A also indicated a greater degree of satisfaction with factors such as 'empathy', 'teacher energy/enthusiasm', 'fairness/firmness'. To a slightly lesser degree they also indicated greater satisfaction with other factors: 'helpfulness/responsiveness', 'appropriateness of instruction', 'time' and 'feedback'.

These results then confirm other research data that concludes that:

(a) the success of any teaching methodology is dependent on teacher commitment, skill and energy (Hill 1995).

(b) cooperative learning is a skill that must be taught and reinforced (Cohen 1992).

They also give rise to the question of more traditional teaching methods such as direct teacher instruction and text book based learning. If there is still a place for this then the value of it must be conveyed to students just as we espouse the value of cooperative learning and project work. However, it should not be the province of one or two teachers among many but another weapon in everyone's armory.

Summary and conclusions.

Year 9 has been structured and resourced to establish an environment conducive to the learning needs of students in the Middle Years. The teams have established supportive and caring relationships with students. Curriculum is relevant, with elements of negotiation and integration. Their pedagogy encourages a sense of engagement, encourages active participation and teachers and students work cooperatively. Timetables have been structured to allow for maximum flexibility.

The teacher teams are emerging as both collaborative and productive in an atmosphere of trust that allows ideas to be shared and differences aired and resolved.

From the Year 9 perspective it would appear that there has been success in achieving the broader learning outcomes: students engaged in learning, cooperative work habits, student centered learning, and student negotiation. They will argue that such outcomes are desirable within the broader context of the workplace, family, community and self-actualisation.

In the more narrow context of 'academic' success (I place the word 'academic' in parentheses as it often is used to justify the reproduction not production of knowledge) the program at Year 9 is open to challenge. And debate.

The perception of most year 10 teachers is that students have advanced to year 10 under-prepared. These perceptions are based on two foundations: one, the students' grasp of subject prerequisites; two, teacher beliefs about students, what students should learn and how they acquire that learning. They also operate within the context of an assessment system beyond their immediate control-VCE- and parental aspirations.

Teachers, as individuals, will also feel disturbed by what they perceive as fundamental challenge to their patterns of work and the foundations on which they are built. As Peter Marris points out: "Humans are innately conservative in the sense that we build up orderly, predictable lives within which we construct meaning for ourselves. And, when we ask people to change in dramatic ways, that predictability, that orderliness, is broken, is disrupted." (Marris, in Sykes 1994). Other teachers in the college have not been asked to change but some may fear that they will be asked to change. It is only natural then that they will seek out the flaws in any innovation that threatens to restructure their work

For Reflection.

These questions are put forward as a basis for further reflection:

Are the objectives of the Year 9 program fully understood and disseminated within the school and broader community?

Are the objectives of the Year 9 program sanctioned by the school and the broader community?

Can the Year 9 program engage students whilst at the same time satisfy subject based learning outcomes and report on them? What support is required?

What is the responsibility of the Year 10 teachers to meet the learning needs of their students? How do they do this?

What does the college stand for?

A way forward

What might 'learning community' look like at Wesley College?

One scenario

Teachers would meet in small learning teams formed across year levels and across faculties to:

Examine student work samples with a view to engaging in critical discussion about student learning, student learning outcomes and appropriate teaching strategies.

Collectively develop clarity, consensus and commitment regarding the school's basic purposes.

Individually articulate a philosophy of teaching as preface to their teaching portfolio, which in turn is subject to peer review.

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