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**The Current State of Middle Schooling:
A Review of the Literature**

**Martin Dowson, Michael Ross, Carissa Donovan, Garry Richards, and Kate
Johnson**

SELF Research Centre, University of Western Sydney

The current investigation was initiated by evidence from the literature indicating the presence of significant numbers of unhappy and underachieving students in the middle level of education (Anderman and Midgley, 1996, Anderman, Maehr and Midgley, 1999, Eccles, Wigfield, Midgley, Reuman, MacIver and Feldhlauser, 1993, Harter, Whitesall and Kowalski, 1992, Kaplan and Owings, 2000, Ryan and Patrick, 2001). The main hypothesis guiding this literature is that school structures, environments and cultures negatively affect students' motivation, producing negative psychological reactions, which in turn can lead to declines in middle-school students' engagement and achievement at school. This research aims to specifically identify what structures, environments and cultures may inhibit this (dis)engagement and (under)achievement. This paper identifies the key elements that constitute effective middle schooling through a review of recent literature. Such an approach offers a clear account of the current state of middle schooling in Australia, which is useful for school- and curriculum- level planning and program development.

Key Elements of Effective Middle Schools

A number of studies have been conducted in the last 15 years in an effort to identify salient problems associated with the middle level of education. A host of key findings, recommendations and directions have been generated which provide a framework for the reform of education. Convergences in the literature have been identified in previous papers, and these provide impetus to current efforts to produce a systemised and coordinated approach to the reform of the middle years. These areas of convergence form the basis for the current review.

Eight key elements have been associated with middle school curricula that are responsive to the developmental needs of early adolescents. These key elements are: relevance, responsibility, belonging, awareness, engagement, competence, ethics, and pedagogy. A number of key documents led to the identification of these elements of effective Middle Schools. Initially, the US National Middle School Associations' Position Paper titled "This We Believe - Developmentally Responsive Middle Level Education" (1995), and the subsequent explanation of these criteria in "This We Believe...And Now We Must Act" (2001), were instrumental in identifying the key elements. Further to this, in the Australian context, the National Middle Schooling Project conducted in 1996 helped operationalise the implementation of the key elements by linking these elements with the specific needs of early adolescents. The eight elements are also represented in a great deal of literature from a wide range of sources associated with the middle level of education. As such, the elements appear to represent important leverage points from which middle-school reform efforts can be initiated and sustained. (Sparks, 2001)

Relevance

Relevance refers to the personal meaning students derive from an integrated understanding of the world presented in middle-school curricula. Students naturally seek to understand how school relates to their real life. This sense of personal meaning is seen to be a prerequisite for effective learning. Relevance is associated with personal autonomy, and leads to students valuing the tasks that they undertake. Assor and Roth (2002), in their study on developing relevance through providing choice to middle level students, sought to identify the main teacher behaviours that clarify the relevance of school work for students and create an environment in which students feel that they are meeting personal goals. In the study, students were able to identify those specific teacher behaviours (such as identifying 'real life' applications of knowledge, and bringing knowledge 'to life' through personal anecdotes) that were associated with fostering relevance and providing choice, indicating that students are focused upon obtaining this goal through their learning.

Henderson (2000) investigated means of enhancing students' interest in Science in the post-primary school years by introducing students to relevant concepts and skills through a study of meteorology. Henderson found that when students can see personal meaning and relevance of the topic to their needs that they will be more attentive to the work. Brown and Mann (1991) also found that when students' ideas formed the starting point for the focus of the class investigation on energy, students felt more engaged and perceived their work to be of more relevance to them. Roberts (No date given) also reports the inherent value of allowing students' questions about the relevance of curricula material to take a central role in pedagogy.

Palmer et. al. (cited in Cumming, 1998) explored the value of integrated curriculum at the middle level, and described one of the key organisers of such a curriculum as being 'relevance'. Beane (1991, op cit.) likens curriculum to a jigsaw puzzle that only has personal meaning when students are shown the way that different areas of knowledge are interconnected. A common theme in all the studies above is that students' interests, questions and needs form the starting point for investigation.

In the Australian study *From Alienation to Engagement* (1996), a series of curriculum strategy initiatives were formulated to promote greater effectiveness at the middle level. One of these strategies focuses on relevance as a key area. In a particular example, a teacher describes how he seeks to provide relevance in Mathematics by posing real and everyday problems and viewing the subject as a tool to learn about the world rather than as an end in itself.

Responsibility

This element refers to the exercise of appropriate self-control over learning. When such self-control is exercised, students develop a "perception of themselves as accountable and responsible in ways that approximate adulthood." (Stevenson, 1998, cited in NMSA, 2001, p.65) Key words associated with this element are 'initiative', 'dependability' and 'resourcefulness'. The specific developmental need that is attached to this element is "empowerment". This need refers to students viewing the world critically and acting independently, cooperatively and responsibly within it (Cumming, 1998, p.14).

Responsibility implicates democracy. Kubow et.al. (2000), studies the impact of teachers practicing democratic pedagogy that sought to recognise and validate the individuality and responsibility of each participant. This approach to education emphasises and promotes creative-active participation, a sense of personal power, and decision-making and problem-solving choices. The opportunity to express one's opinions and beliefs also forms an important aspect of the concept of responsibility-in-democracy (Marshall and Arvay, 1999). Marshall and Arvay (1999) sought to identify factors implicated in boys' and girls'

experiences of powerlessness when being silenced or not listened to by those in authority. They suggest that 'voice' and equality are essential for creating and maintaining democratic classrooms that facilitate greater responsibility on a student's behalf. Moreover, Ames and Gorrell (2002) state that educators must take at least part of their agenda for educational reform from the students' own accounts of their school experiences.

Webb et.al. (2002), implemented a study to gauge the conditions necessary for effective helping in group-work activities. They found that a first step was to raise student *and* teacher awareness of their own responsibilities. A second step was to design instruction and practice activities that enabled participants to carry out their responsibilities. The results indicated that students' engagement in learning and ownership of their work was maximised under conditions of recognised and practiced responsibility. Zant and Bailey (2002) also described peer tutoring – where responsibility for learning is shared by the student-tutor and the student-tutoree - as an effective way of promoting learning through ownership of activities by students.

Belonging

Belonging refers to the sense of acceptance and affirmation received within the context of a supportive and safe learning environment. Cumming (1998) cites the results of the National Middle Schooling Project, and describes safety as one of the specific developmental needs of adolescents. Safety implies "a caring and stimulating environment that addresses issues of discrimination and harassment (eg. racism.)" (p.14)

Morocco et al. (2002) conducted a study in which they identified three effective urban Middle Schools in the United States where students expressed a sense of belonging to the active learning communities of the schools. In these schools, both academic excellence and belonging were embedded in the culture of the school. The study identifies seven common features shared by the schools. One of these features was a "shared language of learning and inclusion" that formed a common educational vocabulary and was reflected in many ways throughout the school, from teachers' discussions with students to classroom posters.

At the heart of belonging is the need for early adolescents to become part of a network of meaningful relationships within the school community. Dowson (2002) states that relational isolation is a critical problem associated with adolescents, and needs to be addressed on a number of levels. For schools to become more developmentally responsive, they will need to foster a greater sense of belonging amongst the school community. Students need to be "reconnected" with their peers and teachers through relevant curriculum experiences that seek to integrate knowledge in relevant ways. Similarly, Newman and Newman (2001) state that, for belonging and connection to take place on a more significant level in schools, there needs to be a greater understanding and valuing of group affiliation, rather than an over-emphasis on self-reliance. One of the major benefits of group affiliation is the provision of security and confidence to engage with the world. Thus, Middle Schools need to find ways of promoting and expressing positive peer group interactions within their community.

The sense of isolation mentioned by Dowson (2002) can become the seedbed for a range of negative behaviours such as racism, bullying, harassment and violence. Murray-Harvey et.al. (2001), investigated the impact of stress and support on bullying and adaptation to school. They describe factors such as a sense of belonging to school, and positive relationships with other students, as essential experiences that promote healthy adaptation. This adaptation to school is naturally of paramount importance at particular transitions within the life of the student, and also predicts the prevalence of anti-social behaviour, such as bullying and harassment, within a school environment.

Awareness

“Awareness” refers to both self and social awareness and is another critical feature of effective middle schools. It is defined by the keywords, ‘identity’ and ‘relationships’. ‘Identity’ is acknowledged as another specific need of adolescents (Cumming, 1998). Relationships are developed in environments that respect difference and diversity. Allard and Cooper (2001) address the balance between building and reinforcing learning communities that promote the common good, and accepting of individual differences within these groups – especially where there may be unequal relations of power that need to be challenged through effective pedagogical processes. This reflects the understanding that early adolescents need to carve out their own identity, while remaining vitally connected to their peer groups. Schools are in a position to facilitate this interdependence successfully.

When considering the concept of ‘awareness’, the reality of the individual’s gender takes on importance. Reimer (2001) states that gender is a critical factor in negotiating the transition to adolescence. Girls and boys face unique challenges and an understanding of these difficulties will promote greater effectiveness when seeking to guide students through this transitional time. Supporting this point, Reed and Rossi (2000) conducted a study in which students were asked to indicate what they would choose if they were given three wishes. One of the main ‘wishes’ indicated by students related to the search for personal identity – especially in relation to personality and body image.

The Middle school Curriculum is an effective forum to engage students in discovering their identities. Holloway and LeCompte (2001) argue that instruction in the language arts provides opportunities for middle school students to express themselves, articulate their frustrations and conceive of alternatives in a society that “generally finds adolescent students’ needs irrelevant, bothersome and even dangerous.” (p.388). William et.al. (2002) also promote the use of literature in helping students to clarify their own personal identities, to critically examine the stereotypes projected onto them from various sources, and to clarify the inappropriateness of violence. Relating to relevance, McPhail et.al. (2000) report the importance of placing student interests at the centre of the curriculum and the role that this plays in promoting students’ identities as competent learners.

Engagement

Students need to be engaged in learning experiences within the curriculum. This will be the case when students’ developmental needs are met through tasks that are motivating and challenging and that invite affiliation. The specific need of ‘purpose’ is collinear with engagement. Purpose is defined as “having opportunities to negotiate learning that is useful now, as well as in the future.” (Cumming, 1998, p.14). Substantial research addresses the link between the classroom environment and structure, instructional practices and student motivation and engagement (Ames and Cooper, 2001, Anderman, Eccles and Yoon, 2001, Anderman and Midgley, 1996, and Anderman and Maehr, 1994). The main hypothesis for the current investigation is that inappropriate school structures, environment and culture negatively affect student motivation and engagement, which in turn leads to a decline in academic achievement. Support for this hypothesis from the literature is extensive, and is particularly applicable during the transition into middle school (Anderman and Midgley, 1996, Anderman, Maehr and Midgley, 1999, and Mansfield, 2001, Eccles, Wigfield, Midgley, Reuman, MacIver and Feldhlauser, 1993, Harter, Whitesall and Kowalski, 1992, Kaplan and Owings, 2000, Ryan and Patrick, 2001). Marchant et.al. (2001) also state that school context has a significant impact on student achievement through the avenue of perception and motivation, which leads to academic self-competence (discussed below).

Competence

Students identify themselves by the things that they do well. They express a need for developing personal expertise. Stevenson (Stevenson, 1998, cited in NMSA, 2001) states “good curriculum from students’ perspectives assures that they grow steadily in competencies that they acknowledge as useful and worthwhile” (p.65). The National Middle Schooling Project (Cumming, 1998) identifies two areas that relate to “competence”. One of these areas is “success”, which is defined as “having multiple opportunities to learn valued knowledge and skills as well as the opportunity to use talents and expertise that students bring to the learning environment” (p.14). Another specific need is that of “rigour”, which is defined as “taking on realistic challenges in an environment characterised by high expectations and constructive and honest feedback” (p.14). The importance of students’ perceptions of competence on achievement is supported by Kaplan and Midgley (1999) and Mansfield (2001).

When considering the debate between subject-centred and learner-centred curriculum, Manning and Bucher (2000) state that students need to have the opportunity to obtain subject matter competence at the same time as demonstrating academic achievement. There is a need to adopt both foci to develop students’ skills and respond to their developmental needs. Conversely, Anderman, Eccles and Yoon (2001) state that adolescent students need to be exposed to structures that orientate them towards obtaining skills rather than relative ability, which emphasise comparative assessment. Lumsden (1994) also reinforces the need for intrinsic, as opposed to extrinsic motivation in increasing student performance. Whether the focus should be on skills and ability, or skills over ability, the development of student competence has become an increased focus in Middle School curricula, and includes programs that cater for competencies in information technology (Feenan, 1997), social and emotional competence (Richardson-Coombs, 2000), decision-making competence and self-esteem (Brown and Mann, 1991).

Ethics

The ethical element of Middle Schooling acknowledges that there is no such thing as ‘values-neutral’ education. This being the case, students need to be guided morally as they seek to discover their personal identities within community. Without a focus on ethics, Middle Schools may produce self-serving people who will be foreigners to the values upon which communities are built.

The concept of ‘ethical’ awareness and development is an important principle upon which the middle level curriculum ought to be built upon. Cumming (1998) defines ethical awareness as a focus on justice, care, respect and concern for the needs of others in the context of the every-day practice of students, teachers and administrators (p.15). Stevenson (1998, cited in NMSA, 2001, p.67) similarly refers to the ‘ethical perception of self’ as being an important aspect of adolescents’ development. Lawson (2001) laments that ethical awareness has been a low priority for Australian public schools, and represents a vacuum which needs to be filled to ensure that students grow up to be responsible citizens capable of confidently leading our communities in the future. At present, Lawson states, we have a condition of moral illiteracy amongst a large number of students, which can result in a disconnection from society and its core values.

Coleman (2001) reports that one of the most important current trends taking place in the Middle School movement is a widening of focus from academic areas to areas that include social, emotional, vocational and moral development. Shapiro (1999) states that values curricula need to move beyond teaching isolated virtues and moral exemplars to direct applications of universal principles through the acquisition of moral reasoning skills. Instruction in character development must also be developmentally appropriate (Texas Education Agency, 2000)

Pedagogy

The final element within this framework refers to the pedagogy employed by teachers within the curriculum. Many of the references cited throughout this literature review have referred to different instructional methods. A key focus in Middle School curriculum is that educators seek to engage students in active learning rather than passive reception of knowledge. Pedagogies consistent with active learning include peer tutoring (Zant & Bailey, 2002), cooperative learning (Webb et.al., 2002), personalised learning (Jenkins and Keefe, 2002), social-emotional learning (Elias, 2001), and direct instructional approaches (Eisele, 1996).

Conclusion

The main task of the Middle School is to meet the developmental, social and educational needs of early adolescents by providing a curriculum and a school community that is committed to certain principles and beliefs consistent with these needs. A framework of key elements designed to promote such a curriculum and community was drawn from recent literature and discussed in this paper. Indeed, many school and curriculum plans emphasise selected elements only, while others feature several of these elements but only to a limited extent. While the development and implementation of an integrated approach to middle-school curriculum which maximises each of the key elements can be complex and time-consuming, the benefits can potentially impact not only individuals but entire school communities. Further, it should be recognised that each of the elements provides further support for the others, so that the function and impact of each of the elements in an integrated approach is likely to be far greater than the implementation of only a selection of the elements. Together, then, these elements should provide concrete markers defining processes and practices most likely to result in happy, well-adjusted and high achieving adolescents in the middle years of schooling.

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