



The Development of Middle Schools in England

An historical source book

National Middle Schools' Forum

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Introduction

In September 1970 the first middle school systems covering the whole of a council area were opened with considerable pride and optimism, as this extract from the Southampton Education Committee Bulletin shows:

As you know, on 1st September, 1970, First and Middle Schools were established in law and the age-range of the neighbourhood secondary comprehensive schools changed to 12 – 16 years.

At the meeting of the Education Committee held on 14th September the Chairman, Alderman Mrs H.K. Edmund-Johnson, made the following statement:-

“ I think the Committee will agree that the Chief Education Officer's memorandum on Developments in Primary Education 1969-70 marks a very important stage in the reorganisation of the education service.

It is a matter of considerable pleasure for the committee to see the recommendations of the Plowden Committee on Primary Education being implemented in Southampton through the establishment of First and Middle Schools, and to know that, with Stoke-on-Trent, we are the first Authority to establish these schools throughout our area.”

Lady Plowden visited on 16th October to formally open the new Hollybrook First School and the remodelled Hollybrook Middle School.

(City of Southampton Education Committee, 1970a)

The booklet which explained the changes to parents sets out a clear educational rationale for the reorganisation quoting directly from the Plowden committee report which had been published in 1967:

"If the middle school is to be a new and progressive force, it must develop further the curriculum, methods and attitudes which exist at present in junior schools. It must move forward into what is now regarded as secondary school work, but it must not move so far away that it loses the best of primary education as we know it now. The extended programme will require teachers with a good grasp of subject matter, but we do not want the middle school to be dominated by secondary school influences."

(City of Southampton Education Committee, 1970b)

The booklet goes on explain how the new system of middle schools will enable an increasing emphasis on the child learning, learning how to learn, rather than the child being taught, can now be extended by a year. The change would also enable pupils to learn French, Science (rather than nature study) and Mathematics (rather than arithmetic). Heads and teachers had been holding regular meetings to plan for these exciting curriculum changes.

This was the start of an explosion in the number of middle schools across England. Some, like those in Southampton, served the 8 to 12 age range following the recommendation of the Plowden Committee report. Others catered for children between the ages of 9 and 13. Twelve years later, in 1982, the Form 7 annual school census returns show that there were 1,816 middle schools. (Education Department (1975-1994))

The year 1982 represented the high water mark for middle schools in this country. The following year the middle schools in the Wirral began to close, being reorganised back to a system where children changed school at the age of 11. This was the start of a slow decline in the number of middle schools

The development of middle schools in England – A Timeline

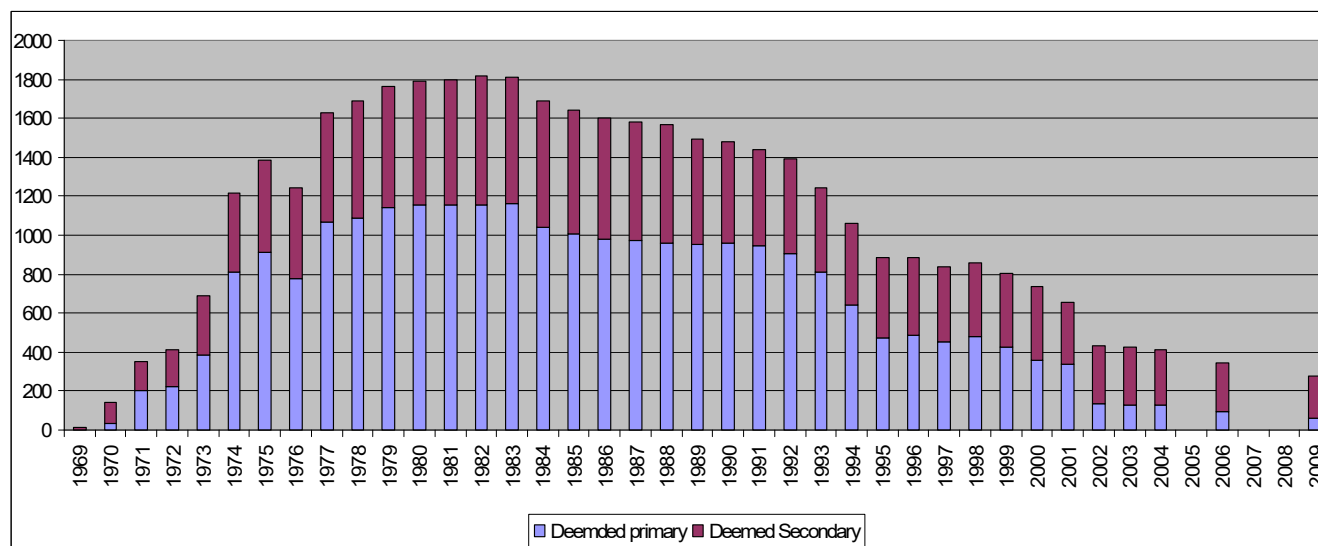
1957	<p>The Leicestershire Plan is approved by the County Council in September 1957 and is introduced in Oadby and Wigston. It provides for 11 to 14 (and 10 to 13) High Schools.</p> <p>Worcestershire proposes a system based on 9 to 13 intermediate schools for the Martley area, but it is rejected by the DES.</p>
1963	Sir Alec Clegg proposes a 9 to 13 middle school system in the West Riding of Yorkshire.
1964	The 1964 Education Act makes it possible LEAs to propose middle school schemes for <u>new</u> schools. This enables West Riding of Yorkshire to gain approval for its plan for creating a comprehensive system based upon 9 to 13 middle schools.
1965	<p>Circular 10/65 issued on 12 July 1965. The new labour government declares its intention to end selection at 11 plus.</p> <p>Six suggested ways of reorganising to achieve this – the last proposes middle schools of either ages 8 to 12 or 9 to 13. But the circular makes it clear that very few middle school proposals will be approved.</p>
1966	Circular 13/66 announces the government's intention to raise the school leaving age to 16 – and recognises that middle school systems may be a way for local authorities to introduce this alongside their plans to end selection. This opens the way for middle school proposals. The circular pre-empts Plowden and the opportunity for a new national age of transfer is lost.
1967	Plowden Committee Report discusses "The ages and stages of primary education" in Chapter 10. Recommends a national agreement about a changed age of transfer and favours the introduction of 8 to 12 middle schools.
1968	The first middle school (9 to 13) opens in the Hemsworth Division of West Riding of Yorkshire.
1969	The first middle schools in Worcestershire open.
1970	First middle school systems serving the whole of a council area open in Southampton and Stoke on Trent.
1971	Fifty local authority schemes involving middle school systems approved by government. Suffolk opens its first middle school
1974	Local Government Reorganisation leaves some local authorities with small pockets of middle school education. Three tier authorities such as the cities of Stoke and Southampton loose control of education as they are merged into County Councils.
1975	Wiltshire – West Salisbury middle schools open – "The main purpose of reorganisation is to abolish selection for secondary schools at 11 years, and so to get rid of the 11+ examination." <i>Reorganisation of Education in Wilton and West Salisbury: A guide for Parents (June 1975) p.1</i>
1982	High-water mark for middle schools, there are 1816 middle schools across the country.
1983	Publication of the HMI Survey of 9 to 13 middle schools.
1985	Publication of HMI Survey of Education 8 to 12 in Combined and Middle Schools.

1988	The Education Reform Act of 1988 introduces the National Curriculum; Key Stages and annual assessment arrangements; Grant Maintained schools; City Technology Colleges; together with Local financial management of schools,
1990	Audit commission report <i>Rationalising Primary School Provision</i> proposes five key attractions for converting middle schools to two tier systems in order to remove surplus places.
1991	The Middle School Research Group ceases operation. The Inter-LEA Middle Schools Forum holds its opening conference at Stoke Rochford Hall. (The name is changed to National Middle Schools' Forum following the conference). See page 21 for a full list of NMSF conferences.
1994	Five of the eight middle schools in Kent close at end of summer term.
1995	The <i>Middle School Directory</i> is published jointly with NMSF. Foreword by Chris Tipple, CEO Northumberland. NMSF provides financial benchmarking data, collected from middle schools around the country. 17 Exeter Middle Schools to be retained following review by Local Authority largely due to high levels of parental support for the middle school system. (<i>The Forum</i> Spring Term 1995)
1997	Article ' <i>The tragedy of middle England</i> ' by Maureen O'Connor appears in The Independent. The article discusses the ' <i>...rise and fall of a system that became too expensive</i> ' Buckinghamshire decides to reorganise its middle school system.
1998	NMSF commission Keele University to research middle school effectiveness. The report <i>Middle School Effectiveness</i> is launched at a one day conference at Keele. The National Literacy and Numeracy Strategies are introduced.
1999	Two reports – <i>Bridging the Gap</i> (Schagen & Kerr: NFER) and <i>The Impact of School Transitions</i> (DFEE: Galton et al) raise concerns about regression at transfer from primary to secondary school at age eleven. Professor David Jesson, publishes research on progress of pupils at KS3 showing that pupils transferring at 12 and 13 make greater progress during KS3 than pupils transferring at 11. <i>Performance and progress of Pupils in Secondary Schools of differing types</i> (University of York). Bradford LEA decides to close all its 58 middle schools. Initial concerns prompting review were the number of small schools, surplus places and the 104 schools with deficit budgets. (<i>NMSF Steering Committee minutes</i>) Head refers to the full time job involved in opposing the threat of closure. Northampton – Parent power leads to proposal to retain middle schools following a review. (<i>Steering Committee minutes</i>)
2002	Estelle Morris makes speech, <i>Secondary Education: the Middle Years</i> , highlighting the lack of progress made in KS3 nationally and problems with transfer at 11 – she calls it a national scandal. HMI report – <i>Changing Schools: Evaluation of the effectiveness of transfer arrangements at age 11</i> . "Continuity in the curriculum and progression in learning as

	<p>pupils move from primary to secondary schools are longstanding weaknesses of the education system." Para 9 (HMI 550:2002)</p> <p>Proposal to pilot a shortened KS3 follows green paper <i>Schools: Building on Success</i>.</p>
2003	<p>National Strategies publish <i>Management Guide for Middle Schools: Raising Standards in Middle Schools</i>.</p> <p>Middle schools in Oxford close.</p>
2005	<p>Isle of Wight middle schools to remain open after the Liberal Democrats, who proposed changing the system to two tier, lost the local election to the Conservatives who pledged to retain the middle school system.</p>
2009	<p>There are 289 middle schools.</p>

The rise and fall of middle schools

In 1982 the number of middle schools in England reached 1816 – which was to be the peak. Already in 1982 some middle schools were being considered for reorganisation. The directory of all middle schools published in 2009 shows that there were 278 middle schools – of which 59 deemed primary and 219 deemed secondary.



(Sources - 1969 to 1979 - Table from Hargreaves and Tickle p. 24, Archived Form 7 data available from National Archives, and Edubase data)

As can be seen from the following table there were many more middle schools deemed primary than those that were deemed secondary with 1159 middle schools deemed primary compared to 659 deemed secondary.

1982	Deemed Primary				Deemed Secondary		
No of Middle Schools	8-12	5-12	9-12	9-13	9-13	10-13	10-14
1816	743	403	8	3	607	48	4

(Source: Education Department – 1975 – 1994)

In the following year, 1983, 22% of 11 year olds were educated in a middle school spread across 49 local authorities:

1983	9 to 13	8 to 12
Number of pupils	242,474	210,051

(Source: DES 1983, paragraph 1.2)

Extracts from Key Documents

1965 -The Introduction of Comprehensive Education – Circular 10/65

Circular 10/65 set out the ambition of the new Labour government to end selection at 11 and replace this with a comprehensive system. Local authorities were required to come forward with proposals for establishing fully comprehensive systems in their areas. There was no money for lavish new buildings and so local education authorities had to devise ways of creating reasonably large comprehensive schools (large enough to sustain a viable 6th form) from their existing buildings many of which were relatively new – but of modest size.

Circular 10/65 sets out six possible ways in which local authorities might reorganise their schools to create fully comprehensive systems. The last of these suggested a middle school system with transfer to an upper school at the age of 12 or 13. While the circular points to the attractions of such system, in providing relatively smaller upper schools and leading naturally to a comprehensive system, it goes on to say:

Notwithstanding the *prima facie* attractiveness of Middle School systems the Secretary of State does not intend to give his statutory approval to more than a very small number of such proposals in the near future. This is for reasons relating to the age of transfer from primary to secondary education. (Paragraph 22)

The presumption was that ordinarily transfer would be at 11, and that the system of middle schools would always be in the minority. Paragraph 30 makes this clear, “the normal age of transfer should be regarded as 11 plus. Pending the outcome of any recommendations regarding the age of transfer received from the Central Advisory Councils for Education [The Plowden Report was published in 1967].”

In the information booklet for parents explaining the introduction of the middle school system in West Salisbury in 1975, Wiltshire County Council makes the reason for the change to middle schools very apparent:

“The main purpose of reorganisation is to abolish selection for secondary schools at 11 years, and so to get rid of the 11+ examination.” (Wiltshire County Council, 1975:1)

No reference is made to any educational advantages or merits of the new system anywhere in the booklet.

1966 - Raising the school leaving age to 16 for all children

Raising the school leaving age for all pupils to 16 had been a long term goal of both political parties. The commitment was first made in section 35 of the 1944 Education Act. A year after circular 10/65 the government announced its intention to raise the leaving age for all pupils to 16 in circular 13/66. This was accompanied by recognition of the part middle schools systems could play in facilitating this change:

If justified by reference to some clear practical advantages in the context of reorganisation on comprehensive lines or the raising of the school leaving age or both. (DFES 1966, para 4)

The circular then makes it clear that the intention to limit the number of middle school schemes apparent in the 1965 circular has been abandoned in the desire to raise the leaving age within existing resources:

It had become increasingly apparent that for some Authorities the early change-over to a comprehensive system in all or part of their areas would be facilitated by the adoption of an age of transfer other than 11...He will therefore regard a change in the age of transfer for the time being as a matter for local option and he is prepared to consider proposals from Authorities on this basis. (DFES 1966, para 4 – *emphasis added*)

However the phrase 'for the time being' offers only qualified support for such schemes with the implication that middle schools might be a temporary solution. The phrase acknowledges the fact that the circular pre-empts the outcome of the Plowden Committee enquiry – which was not published until 1967, thus fatally undermining the Committee's recommendation for the adoption of a common national age of transfer at 12. This somewhat qualified support falls well short of anything that could be described as a national policy.

All this placed local authorities in an almost impossible position. There would be no additional funding for new school buildings other than where required for additional school places. Where buildings would need to be adapted then this would have to be managed within the existing resources already allocated to the authority. They were forced to propose schemes which were based on their existing stock of school buildings. This led many authorities to consider middle school schemes as the way forward.

The growth in pupil numbers.

The 1960's and 1970's saw a huge growth in the number of pupils. This is summarised well by Griffiths writing in 1971:

The total school population in England and Wales will rise from just under 7 million in 1963 to just under 9 ½ million in 1976 and 10 million by 1986. In other words, it is estimated that the school population will have increased by some 46 per cent. Until 1970 the pressure will be strongest on the primary schools; after that year the secondary schools will feel the strain. A particularly severe burden is placed upon the supply and training of teachers: it was estimated in 1965 that merely to keep pace with the increasing numbers of school children 100,000 extra teachers would be required by 1976 and 140,000 by 1986 (Department of Education and Science, 1965, p. 9). The astonishing expansion of the colleges of education, where the number of places has risen from 36,500 in 1961/2 to 94,800 in 1967/8, seems likely to meet this demand for teachers. (Griffiths, 1971, p.2)

Thus the introduction of the middle school system was intimately bound up with the need for additional school places to cater for this rising birth rate.

Critics cast middle schools as 'Compromise Schools'

According to Edwards, then, middle schools were introduced for purely administrative reasons – and were a pragmatic solution to a difficult set of challenges for local authorities at a time of limited financial resources.

The middle school has been described as the illegitimate offspring of exceedingly doubtful parentage. (Edwards, 1972. Page 99)

As Hargreaves points out (Hargreaves, 1980. Page 84) the danger of introducing a new system of schooling on purely administrative and financial grounds is that it lacks a clear educational model – and staff are left to work it out for them selves.

However Blyth goes further in arguing that one of the principal attractions of middle schools for local authorities was that they were able to provide secondary education on the cheap:

By prolonging 'the best of primary education as we know it', it could be said that society has avoided the costs of even the average secondary education while appearing to adopt a child centred approach. (Blyth, 1980. Page 26)

Middle schools constituted little more than a relatively cheap, convenient, and inoffensive means of introducing comprehensive secondary education, and of earning the new school places needed for raising the school leaving age. (Blyth, 1980. Page 25)

The twist in the tale – Local Government Reorganisation

Following the 1966 Circular many local authorities worked hard to develop coherent middle school schemes for their areas. These schemes were based on local need and available buildings. All this was thrown into the air by Local Government Reorganisation in 1974 which took no account of such factors.

Two of the earliest proponents of middle school systems were Southampton and Stoke on Trent. They had both established completely middle systems that opened in 1970. Both lost control of education when they became non-metropolitan district councils as part of Hampshire and Staffordshire respectively.

A progressive force in education – Plowden Report 1967

The Plowden Committee had been asked to consider the best age of transfer to secondary education:

'11+' seems now as firmly fixed in Englishmen's minds as 1066. One of the matters referred to us, the age of transfer to secondary education, forces us to ask whether it should soon become as much a matter of past history. It is no longer to be the dreaded landmark marking off the grammar school child from the modern school child. Should it also cease to mark the transition from small primary to large secondary school? (Plowden Report, paragraph 365).

The case set out in the Plowden report for a change of age of transfer from 11 to 12 is based on the desirability of extending some of the best of recent developments in primary practice into the secondary age range:

Some of the arguments for a change of age arise from a belief that the junior school course now ends at too early an age. The experience of teachers and other educationalists suggests that for many children the changes of curriculum and method associated with a break at 11 cut across a phase in learning and in attitudes to it. An unselfconscious period in art, dramatic movement and writing, for example, may last till 12 or 13. (Plowden Report, paragraph 371).

If the middle school is to be a new and progressive force it must develop further the curriculum, methods and attitudes which exist at present in junior schools. It must move forward into what is now regarded as secondary school work but it must not move so far away that it loses the best of primary education as we know it now. (Plowden Report, paragraph 383.)

However there were already proposals for middle school systems with transfer at 13 – and the opportunity for a new nationally agreed age of transfer had already been lost when circular 13/66 pre-empted Plowden and gave the green light to middle school proposals with varying ages of transfer.

The Plowden Report also argues for a semi-specialist role for teachers in middle schools which would span the gap between the ethos of the primary classroom with its single teacher and the many subject specialist teachers of the secondary school:

It is also necessary to consider whether transfer at 12 or 13 is more likely to produce the kind of middle school we wish to see. Eleven year old pupils often transfer from a school based entirely on class teaching to a secondary school which, because of the needs of the older pupils, is organised for specialist teaching. A school with semi-specialist accommodation shared between cognate subjects, and teachers skilled in certain areas of the curriculum rather than in single subjects, could provide a bridge from class teaching to specialisation, and from investigation of general problems to subject disciplines. The influence of semi-specialist teachers primarily concerned with the older pupils might be reflected in more demanding work being given to nine and ten year olds, while the primary tradition of individual and group work might advantageously be retained for a longer period than at present, and might delay streaming. (Plowden Report, paragraph 381.)

Discussion of the role of semi-specialist teachers is a major theme of the recent Cambridge Primary Review.

The Department launches middle schools

With two circulars in 1970 the Department of Education and Science launched middle schools

The decision to undertake a major reorganisation of an established educational system inevitably prompts mixed feelings - excitement, enthusiasm, apprehension, bewilderment. No responsibly-minded education authority or body of teachers embarks on reorganisation without detailed preparatory planning - but the problems can be formidable and the validity of the preferred answers can ultimately be confirmed only in practice. One of the most exacting forms of reorganisation is the adoption of a three-tier system in which the 'middle school' is, for English teachers, a largely unknown quantity. Some fifty local education authorities intend to introduce this pattern, most, though not all, favouring a four-year age range from either 8 to 12 or 9 to 13 years.

The West Riding of Yorkshire is one of those first in the field. In its Divisional Executive No. 15 the process is now well advanced. The decision to adopt a three-tier system for this area was taken as long ago as 1965. Planning and preparations, which included a substantial measure of new building and adaptations, occupied the next three years, and the first stage of reorganisation took place in September 1968. The final pattern, reached a year later in September 1969, is a middle tier of 9-13 schools, but to ease the change the first stage was deliberately made a transition year in which for one year only the age range was from 8 to 12 years. DES. (1970). *Launching middle schools*. Education Survey, 8.

DES. (1970). Towards the middle school. *Education Pamphlet*, 57.

The middle years – a distinctive stage of child development?

Sir Alec Clegg's original proposal for a three tier system in 1963 was primarily concerned with designing a system of comprehensive education which made the best use of the existing building stock. However it also proposed that a middle school system would have a number of educational advantages:

- Less able pupils would be better served by a continuation of primary methods for 11 and 12 year olds.
- The middle school system would prevent pupils being pressurised by exams, and consequent pressures for specialisation, at too early an age.
- High schools would become a more adult institution with a full three years to prepare for public examinations.

As Sharp points out, '...very little emphasis was placed on physiological or psychological factors. No claims were made that middle school children would be qualitatively different from other children.' (Sharp, 1908. p. 36)

At the Joint Four Conference of 1969, organised by the four secondary teaching associations, Mr. L. J. Burrows, H.M.I. questioned whether there were in fact distinct stages in children's development:

Are there in fact any ages at which transfer is easier and more natural than others?
Are there any stages of education which make a better unit than others? For myself I doubt that there are; the more important factors seem to me to be the size of a school and the general compatibility of the age groups within it ... What is certain is that the educational process within the child is continuous and, whatever age or stages we adopt, we must not forget this. (Burrows, 1969. p.5)

The closest the Plowden Report comes to a discussion of a distinctive stage in children's development reminds us that any talk of distinctive phases obscures the very wide differences between the development of individual pupils:

The important thing is to remember how extremely wide the range of variation is. This means that wherever the age of transfer is fixed, there will be some children who would have been better left in the primary school, and some for whom the reverse would be true. There is, therefore, need to treat the years immediately before and after transfer as a transitional period. (Plowden Report, 1967. paragraph 378)

This lends credence to Hargreaves contention that, for 9 to 13 middle schools in particular, the development of an educational rationale for the new middle schools followed, rather than preceded their creation:

As the first middle schools were to be inaugurated in 1968, debates about their *general* viability were rapidly becoming redundant. To many headmasters, teacher and parents the middle school would be presented as a *fait accompli*. The urgent economic reasons for their implementation were widely acknowledged. Now there was a need for the creation of post hoc rationales to legitimate what seemed to be quite a novel educational concept. (Hargreaves, A. 1980. Page 85.)

A distinct rationale for middle school practice – A teacher for the ‘middle years’

That it would be helpful to define middle school practice on its own terms, without reference to accepted primary and secondary practice, is clear in this opening statement from the Building Bulletin 25 on the design of middle schools:

...it would be misleading and unimaginative to think of these [middle] schools simply in terms of a compromise between the primary and the secondary approach. If they eventually establish themselves as a permanent part of the public system of education then it will probably be because they have learned from the primary and secondary traditions but have also developed a character and mode of work which is distinctively their own. (DES, 1966b. Page 1)

Sir Alec Clegg seems to have the world of the primary school firmly in mind in his discussion of the planning of the 9 to 13 middle schools in the West Riding when he said in a speech to the Joint Four Conference in 1969:

The danger in establishing these schools was that specialisation might be extended downwards to 9+. It was therefore suggested that there should be no specialist teaching, except in Music, during the first and second years, and that even in the third year the class teacher would spend one third of his time with his class. Differentiation into separate subjects would be limited. Separate sciences, for instance, would not be introduced, nor would there be formal class experiments. Laboratories would not be provided but there would be sinks and work benches under the windows in every room to allow space for individual experiments. The only subject in which an agreed syllabus seemed necessary was Mathematics. (Clegg, 1969. p. 2)

This becomes even clearer when he goes on to suggest that the middle school will not have a timetable:

...which can offer to children the opportunity of moving into all the major areas of educational experience at levels appropriate to their abilities, and to achieve this within the framework of a secure pattern of teacher-child relationships and in such a way that the need for a predictive timetable such as that which we now know in the majority of secondary schools is kept to a minimum so that it can be the judgment of the teacher about the value of a particular activity for a particular child at a given time which is the deciding factor in determining the rhythm of the child's day. (Clegg, 1969. p. 3)

Just how this was to be achieved and the balance between a more cross curricular approach with one generalist teacher and the more specialist subject teaching goes to the heart of the debate about the distinctive nature and identity of middle schools. If they were to adopt primary classroom teacher based methods in the earlier years followed specialist subject teaching in the later years then nothing much has been gained. But the question of what should be distinctively different about them, to legitimate their existence, would be critical to their continuance. They needed a clear rationale for their existence.

Planning for the new middle schools

1) Joint Four Conference 1969 – Extended primary school or junior high school?

The tone of the debate is illustrated by two papers from the same conference in 1969 organised by the Joint Four group of secondary teaching unions.

a) Sir Alec Clegg was a prime mover in the creation of middle schools and an influential voice. He argues for the extension of primary practice throughout the 9 to 13 age range – with very little by way of specialisation or subject teaching – see quoted passages on the previous page.

It is striking that Clegg thinks that a science laboratory and school timetable will not be required in a school catering for pupils up to the age of 13.

b) This is in contrast to another contribution to the conference where a timetable and some setting are envisaged throughout the school from the age of nine. Mr. G. F. Mitchell, Headmaster of Setting Dyke High School, spoke about the planning for the establishment of 9 to 13 Junior High Schools in Kingston upon Hull. While suggesting that the school should most nearly represent the best of junior school practice he goes on to suggest:

Basic organisation.

- (a) Unstreamed classes "set" for certain subjects or groups of subjects on ability grading.
- (b) Some type of specialisation at all levels progressing to something approaching full specialisation in the fourth year.

Time table

We decided to divide the day into nine periods, each of 30 minutes, understanding that these would often be grouped to form longer sessions. It was appreciated that the first section up to 11.00 a.m. would need to provide varied activity for the younger classes. Times: 9.20-12.15 — 1.30-3.45.

(Mitchell 1969. page 9)

These two prescriptions seem incompatible and start from different assumptions about what is desirable!

2) A conference organized by Exeter University and Dorset LEA 1968

A conference organized by Exeter University and Dorset LEA in which delegates were tasked with designing a 9 to 13 middle school programme, prior to the first middle school opening in Dorset the following year.

Miss S. M. Co Duncan H.M.I., outlined a number of key aspects of the 9 to 13 age group – one being the children's interest as a spur to learning:

...interest is a powerful incentive to learning, though not the only one. Children's interests do not fit tidily into subject boundaries. I often wonder if any persons do, except under the pressure of examinations. Adults with deep, narrow interests may be concerned with only a small part of a subject. More often, I believe, adult interests cut right across subjects. We are hearing a great deal about humanities' courses for 14-16 year olds, and about general courses for 6th formers. How long can the emphasis on single subjects remain for the 11 - 13 year old? Twenty years ago the A.A.M. criticised "formal academic teaching of separate subjects by a number of different teachers" for children of this age. "The rigid separation of subjects, the brief periods, the lack of activity, the isolation of school work from the rest of the child's life

and from the outside world do not encourage spontaneous and sustained activity for its own sake. Even these may reach a point of mental saturation and become mere absorbers of knowledge". This quotation and the passage that follows make several points. They counter the still prevalent idea that single subjects make for depth of study. They may make for sequence in study. Often they lead to mugging up facts that are too oversimplified to be useful in adult life. Even more important, attitudes and skills learnt in solving a general problem are more likely to be transferred to other situations than those pigeon-holed as belonging to a particular school subject. Yet, whatever the disadvantage of compartmentalised learning, we have an obligation to introduce children to the broad areas of human experience. Whatever the virtues of choice, and there must be plenty of opportunities for children to choose, they cannot choose what they do not know.
(Duncan, 1968. Page 23)

The other factors she asks delegates to consider are

- The wide range of ability – some children in the first year of middle school will be more able than some in the final year.
- Children in this age range, perhaps more than any other, enjoy working in groups.
- Children will expect their growing up to be reflected in gradual changes in organisation.

She concludes by posing a central question for the middle school:

'We come to a problem we have been skirmishing around. How much of the curriculum can we expect any one teacher to cover at various stages of the school?'
(Duncan, 1968. Page 26)

If the new middle school curriculum was to offer something distinctively different from the traditional primary and secondary school – then teachers would have to step out of the well understood roles of the generalist primary class teacher and that of the single subject secondary teachers.

Her concluding remarks sum up what must have been an exciting moment in education as delegates debated what could be achieved through the introduction of this new type of school:

No-one would suggest that a reorganisation of the educational system can of itself create a new educational Jerusalem, what it might do is free us briefly from convention; give us a stimulus to think again from scratch of an organisation which will approach more nearly to realising our objectives. (Duncan, 1968. Page 28)

Middle schools and the Education Reform Act 1988

James Callaghan's Ruskin College speech in 1976 was followed by a series of eight regional meetings as part of the 'Great Debate'. The agenda for discussion included the suggestion of national tests at ages other than just 16:

Is there a case for tests in English Language and mathematics to be taken by all pupils...at certain ages, possibly 8, 11 and 13? (DES, 1976. Page 4)

If only the age for the secondary assessments had been set at 13 then the story might have been very different for middle schools.

As it is the key stages, with their associated testing at age 11 and 14, raised a number of questions about the "fit" of middle schools to these newly created arrangements. Chris Tipple, Chief Education Officer for Northumberland, was one of those who sought to argue that the lack of alignment of the middle school with the ends of Key Stages is actually an advantage:

Superficially, therefore, middle schools in the 90s face an uncertain and difficult future. The reality, however, for those prepared to think carefully about the educational implications of a middle school system, is very different.

Firstly, a middle school system ensures that, since national curriculum testing will not occur at the end of an organisational phase of education, it cannot be misused as a selection device. With the government still intent on introducing league tables at the end of key stage 2, when they judge the tests to be satisfactory, this must be a very real possibility. At whatever point in a school's life league tables appear they are naturally likely to influence parental choice but the edge will certainly be taken off the situation when the testing is one or two years away from the point of transfer. Given that the ostensible purpose of testing is diagnostic in relation to the needs of individual children, anything which mitigates the misuse of results must be an advantage.

Secondly, because pupils will remain with their teachers for at least one year after the end of key stage 2, the diagnostic purpose of national curriculum assessment can be fully developed.

(Tipple, 1995. page 6)

As a paper for the first Inter-LEA Middle Years Forum conference put it in 1991:

A major aim of the National Curriculum is to ensure continuity of education from 5 to 16. Testing at 7, 11 and 14 would seem to separate education into defined segments. The three tier system is able to transform this fragmented approach into a sound educational structure. (Inter LEA Middle Years Forum, 1991.)

The effect of falling rolls and rising surplus places

The Audit Commission Report "*Rationalising Primary School Provision*" was published at the end of 1990. Authorities with high proportions of surplus places were required to find ways of reducing them through reorganising their schools. Where first schools, in three tier systems, had surplus places the report advocated the advantages of reorganising them to primary schools as a way of reducing surplus places without increasing primary age journey times.

Consider the Audit Commission's 'five attractions' for a reversion to a two-tier system:

1. It removes the misalignment which a three-tier system has in relation to the key stages and ages of assessment for the national curriculum
2. It can tackle surplus capacity in all phases simultaneously
3. It can reduce home to school journeys for older primary aged pupils, because middle schools commonly serve wider catchment areas than first, infant/junior or alt-through primary schools
4. It can remove the difficulty experienced by middle schools with falling rolls in sustaining an appropriate range of specialist subject teaching for their secondary age pupils
5. It may release whole sites.

(Audit Commission 1991. Paragraph 54)

Chris Tipple. Chief Education Officer for Northumberland at the time proposed 5 advantages of the three tier system to counter these suggestions:

Now consider five much stronger attractions to retaining a middle school system:

1. It ensures that, since national curriculum testing will not occur at the end of an organizational phase of education, it cannot be mis-used as a selection device
2. Because pupils will remain with their teachers for at least one year after the end of the key stage, the diagnostic purpose of national curriculum assessment can be fully developed
3. Leaving an organizational system well alone reduces the wrecking possibilities of opting out across all phases
4. Teachers and children need stability in at least one element when virtually all other aspects of education are the subject of rapid and fundamental change
5. Because either one-third or two-thirds of the preparation for key stage 3 assessments will take place in the middle school there is a built-in incentive for liaison between tiers, which is vital in any educational system, given that any organizational device is just a way of making a continuous process more manageable. On the other hand, the potential finality of assessment at the end of key stage 2 is likely to reduce liaison in a two-tier system. (Tipple 1991.)

None of these issues raised by Chris Tipple are considered in the Audit Commission Report but it ends warmly urging local authorities to consider the option of reorganisation:

Such a change will not be appropriate in all cases. If a significant number of first schools or of high schools cannot readily be adapted to their new functions, this will reduce the attractiveness of the change. Nonetheless one LEA has decided that a change from a three-tier to a two-tier system is its preferred strategy for a large city and put forward an impressive - and largely popular - case. Others should consider the option. (Audit Commission 1991. Paragraph 56)

How effective were middle schools?

i) HMI 9 to 13 Survey - 1983

The central findings of the first HMI survey, that of 9 to 13 middle schools, mirrored similar findings in primary schools:

They were taught a wide range of basic competencies but the schools often did not extend the work sufficiently to challenge their more able pupils nor were children often observed to be finding their own way to the solutions of problems posed, pursuing their own enquiries or making choices about which way in which the work was to be tackled. (DES 1983. Paragraph 2.2)

They found schools achieving a range of standards:

A few schools achieved good standards in almost all parts of the curriculum and a further third achieved generally satisfactory standards...In a small number of schools performance was considered less than adequate in most parts of the curriculum, often because the curriculum was too narrowly based and lacked extension. (DES 1983. Paragraph 2.2 – see also paragraph 2.31)

In the conclusion, however, the report makes clear that the standards found 'revealed many of the same strengths and weaknesses found in the inspections of primary and secondary schools'. (DES 1983. Paragraph 8.20)

The report noted a wide variation in the ways the schools were organised:

Except in a very small number of schools where subject teaching was the predominant mode throughout, the schools provided a transition between class teaching and subject teaching. (DES 1983. Paragraph 2.3)

Two consecutive paragraphs in the 9 to 13 survey presented challenging conclusions. The first undermined the argument advanced in the Plowden report for the establishment of middle schools based on advancing primary practice into the secondary age range:

The findings of the survey, revealed an association between higher overall standards of work and those schools with a greater use of subject teachers, an arrangement which occurred mainly in the third and fourth years. In seven schools substantial use of subject teachers was introduced into second-year classes. Five of these were among the schools which achieved significantly higher standards of work. (DES, 1983. Paragraph 8.11)

The report went on to consider the implications of these findings for primary schools – would not pupils in the upper primary years also benefit from more specialist subject teaching? (Para 8.22)

The next paragraph of the 9 to 13 HMI survey painted a rather gloomy prospect for middle schools as the bulge in pupil numbers passed up the system and the numbers of pupils in middle schools began to fall:

The fall in the number of children of school age is likely to lead to smaller middle schools. With less than three forms of entry, 9-13 middle schools are unlikely to be able to provide the range of specialist teaching required to cover the curriculum and to cater adequately for all their pupils, unless their staffing ratios are considerably better than the average (20:1 in January 1983). (DES, 1983. Paragraph 8.12)

ii) HMI 8 to 12 Survey 1985

The survey of 8 to 12 middle schools found a variety of forms of organisation, with French offered in four fifths of the schools surveyed (16 combined schools and 33 were 8 to 12 schools). However home studies were only offered in half the schools and craft, design technology only in a third of schools as a separate subject. (DES 1985, paragraph 6.15) Three quarters of schools had facilities for teaching science and home studies with half having rooms for music and CDT. (DES 1985, paragraph 6.15 Appendix 2 paragraph 15) The report recognised:

The significant achievements of the schools in the survey in respect of the good standards of pastoral care and interpersonal relationships, and the satisfactory standards in the basic competencies of reading, writing and computation. . (DES 1985, paragraph 8.1)

However the principal concern was the development of consistent policies and, in particular, comprehensive schemes of work in schools where the curriculum was principally delivered by class teachers.

iii) Middle School Effectiveness – Keele University Study - 1998

The National Middle Schools' Forum commissioned the Centre for Successful Schools within the Department of Education at Keele University to conduct a study of the effectiveness of middle schools, drawing on the Ofsted database of school inspections, headteacher questionnaires and pupil attitude surveys

The report found the analysis of the first round of Ofsted inspection data from 1993 to 1996 showed small differences when comparing middle schools with other forms of schooling:

- At KS2, average pupil achievement in MDS [middle deemed secondary] is graded higher than in other forms of schooling for all core subjects. This pattern is still evident at KS3, however, in both cases the differences are often small and close to the margins of error for the data.
- At Key Stage 2 OFSTED data for general school matters shows a mixed pattern of strengths and weakness for all forms of schooling with middle schools performing particularly well in terms of the 'content, breadth and balance of the curriculum' and showing slightly better pupil 'progress'.
- At Key Stage 3 OFSTED data for general school matters shows a mixed pattern of strengths and weakness for all forms of schooling although a higher percentage of middle schools are reported as having satisfactory or better 'expectations' and 'accommodation' than other forms of KS3 schooling.
- The grades awarded to all forms of middle schools for 'ethos' are significantly higher than those for secondary schooling and as good as, or better than those for primary schools.
- 98% of middle schools are considered by OFSTED to give 'satisfactory' or better value for money. (Denning et al, 1998. page 3)

There was disappointment from some of the middle school community that the data did not show middle schools to have gained a clear advantage through the deployment of specialist teaching in KS2. The differences might be small; however in the context of increasing scrutiny of middle school effectiveness these findings were important. Middle Deemed Secondary schools were found to be judged slightly higher than primary schools for pupil achievement and this was true for all core subjects. The particular strength of the middle school sector appeared to be the high rating for 'ethos' at KS3, with middle deemed secondary schools achieving the highest proportion of 'very good' grades when compared to all other forms of schooling.

The outcome for middle deemed primary schools was more mixed:

The average achievement grades in English for MDP schools at KS2 compare favourably with those for primary schools however the achievement grades for mathematics and science are marginally poorer. (Denning et al, 1998. page Ofsted-4)

The findings of the research were launched at a special one day conference at Keele University on 22nd February, 1998. The notes of the meeting show that three questions arose out of the discussions that very well captured the changed landscape for middle schools in the late 1990's

1. Are we now beyond being 'transition' or 'bridging' schools? Curriculum is attainment and standards driven; parental expectations are higher. Have middle schools moved to a more specialist taught approach to meet these challenges?
2. Children are more sophisticated now than when middle schools began. Are we addressing their needs educationally and socially?
3. The 'imposition' of Literacy and Numeracy pose considerable challenges to the broad, balanced, relevant curriculum provided by middle schools. Both KS2 and KS3 will be affected.

National Middle Schools' Forum Conferences

	Venue and organisers	Key speakers	Notes
1991	Stoke Rochford Hall,	First conference of the Inter LEA Middle Schools Forum (later to become NMSF) Dennis Williams, Bradford LEA Chris Tipple, CEO, Northumberland	Title: Working together for excellence Workshops on Middle Schools & the National Curriculum Impact of LMS upon Middle Schools Rationalising Primary Provision – Response to Audit Commission report.
1993	Woolley Hall College, Wakefield. West Yorkshire	Less Hall, Drummond Middle School Gavin Graveson, SEAC	Title: Key Stage coherence and quality
1994	The Savoy Country Club, Yarmouth, Isle of Wight	Mike Tomlinson Professor Jeff Thompson Nick Tate	Title: The language of success
1995	Cranfield University, Beds Organised by Bedfordshire	Chris Woodhead Chief Inspector of Schools Professor John Tomlinson	Keynote sessions include: Middle schools in the market place The new settlement – the new framework for the organisation of schools in the wake if the 1993 Act
1996	Wessex Hotel, Dorset Organised by Dorset		
1997	Newcastle Airport, Organised by North East Association of Middle Schools.	Professor Richard Pring Professor Carole Fitz-Gibbon Colin Richards, HMI	Title: Schools fit for children.
1998	Centre Parks, Elvedon Forest, Suffolk Organised by Suffolk	Nick Tate Anthea Millett Tim Brighouse	Title: School Leadership & Management – recognising success and achievement
1999	Birmingham, Norfolk		
2000	Northamptonshire	Launch - CD-ROM <i>In Celebration of Middle Schools</i> David Bell, CEO Bedfordshire John Turner	Title: Today's success – Tomorrow's Solution
2001	Sandbanks Hotel, Poole Organised by Poole/Dorset/Wilts	Michael Barber Ken Robinson Ralph Tabberer	Title: The distinctiveness of Teaching ad Learning on the Middle Schools
2002	Wood Norton Conference Centre, Evesham, Organised by Worcestershire	Roy Leighton Richard Pring Rosemary Camphill	Title: Excellence through the broader curriculum.

2003	Gurnard Pines, Isle of Wight	David Bell, Chief HMI Alistair Black Michael Marland Ted Wragg	Title: Inspiring Learning through Creative Teaching. Professor Thompson suggests a 9-14 middle school might be a preferable model for schools to consider.
2004	Organised by Staffordshire	Alastair Smith, Cheryl Travers, Ralph Tabberer John Dunford.	
2005	Corus Hotel, Bristol Organised by Somerset	Edward Davey MP Kate Moorse, QCA Ken Dyson David Triggs	Title: Schools for the Future
2006	The Robinson Centre, Wyboston, Organised by Bedfordshire	Maggie Farrar, NCSL Sian Carr, NCSL	Title: Leading for the Future
2007	NCSL, Nottingham	Steve Munby, NCSL Toby Salt, NCSL Mick Waters, Director of Curriculum, QCA Dr Eva Hoffman	Title: Building on our strengths, Leadership in the middle Years Conference led to a joint QCA/NMSF project promoting good practice at KS3.
2008	NCSL, Nottingham	Elizabeth Schroeder Mick Waters, Director of Curriculum, QCA Sian Carr, NCSL	Title: Meeting the needs of Adolescents, Success in the middle years Included report of joint QCA/NMSF project.
2009	NCSL, Nottingham	Mike Hughes Ceri Morgan, HMI Sir John Jones	Title: Middle Schools fit for the 21st Century, Keeping it exciting in the middle years The session with Ceri Morgan led to a day conference on the middle school SEF.
2010	NCSL, Nottingham	Tim Rylands Marcus Orlovsky Maggie Farrar	Title: Celebrating 40 Years of Middle School Education, Looking forward to the next 10 years

Materials from NMSF conferences back to that in 2000 are available through the NMSF website – see the ‘*conference reports*’ page.

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