The Middle School

By

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1. The Rationale

The 1926 Hadow Report, the principles of which had a profound influence on the Education Act 1944, argued at some length that eleven was the right age for transfer to secondary education. It appealed to psychology and to the experience of teachers to justify this recommendation.

No one can now argue that there is any 'right' age for transfer by reference to our present state of knowledge of physiological and psychological development.

On the physiological side there is for each individual a fairly well defined adolescent growth curve; there is a general spurt covering most aspects of physical growth; for most, the peak period seems to be from 13 – 15, but the important fact is that one child may have completed a phase of growth while another child of the same age may only have just started it. For example, the average age of menarche in girls is 13 years 1 month, but while it occurs in some tem year olds, in other cases it comes at 16.

The psychological aspect of development is even less reliable as a guide to the age of transfer. As in physiological development there are similar sequential phases of development, but it is even more difficult to relate these to chronological age.

It is this varying rate of development in each child, and as between different children that lies at the root of the modern child-centred approach to education in our best primary schools. It is discussed in detail in Chapter 2 of the Plowden Report and its implications are worked out in nearly all the major recommendations of the Report. The Report urges that our approach to children's education should be based not on chronological age but on the concept of 'developmental age', by which is meant the degree to which a child has advanced along the road to full maturity. A teacher dealing with any group of children is faced with a highly complex situation if he is to have proper regard to the great variations in these individual rates of development. To quote the Plowden Report 'an (educational) system on the apple sorting model does not square with the nature of the biological material'.
We cannot$_9$ therefore, argue a case for the Middle School on the basis of 8 - 12 or 9 - 13 years as marking out a distinctive phase in all children's development; and yet the Plowden Report with its emphasis on individual differences is proving a powerful force behind the new concept of the Middle School. This is not the extreme paradox that it seems at first sight. The Report bases many of its recommendations on the best current practice in primary schools, by which is meant those schools which are based on the principle of individual learning - schools in which the organisation and methods take full account of the individual differences in rates of development. In contrast most secondary schools are 'suject-centred'. The child must be fitted to the curriculum, and the organisation tends to be thought of mainly in terms of the teaching of the range of subjects which go to make up the curriculum.

Convinced of the superior educational value of the primary mode of learning. The Plowden Report arrives at the recommendation for the establishment of Middle Schools in order to prolong that mode of learning.

"If the Middle School is to be a new and progressive force, it must develop further the curriculum, methods and attitudes which at present exist in the Junior School. It must move forward in 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 … we do not want the Middle School to be dominated by secondary school influences."

The Plowden Report concludes that there is a basis for a Middle School curriculum and it is worth quoting the Report at some length in this context:

“Some of the arguments for a change of age range 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. Many children too, at the top of the primary school, develop confidence in devising experiments and using books in specific situations (often unrelated to ‘subjects’). Their progress may be slowed down by premature emphasis on class instruction, adult systematisation and precision in secondary schools. These arguments are supported by the findings of Piaget and equally the junior school curriculum is wider than it was. A foreign language, science (as opposed to nature study) and mathematics (as opposed to arithmetic) used to be confined to secondary schools. They are now taught in junior schools. Today there is a basis for a 'Middle-school' curriculum.

Other arguments from the secondary school side turn on the disadvantages to the 11 and 12 year olds and to the schools as a whole which now arise from transfer at 11. Eleven, it is argued, is too early for the educational decisions which follow from a change of school.

The second line of argument turns on the fact that so many more boys and girls than formerly stay at school to 16 and 18, The demands made by the growing numbers of these senior pupils in secondary schools are such that highly qualified teachers have little time and energy to devote to younger pupils. Specialist organisation is necessary for the older pupils. It is often extended to the younger pupils for whom it is not. It is difficult to cater in one institution for the needs of 11 year olds and pupils of 15 to 18; either the presence of children will prevent the development of the near adult atmosphere that older pupils need) or, if priority is given to creating an adult community, the younger pupils may feel lost, or even by contrast be treated as younger than they are"

There are other arguments - derived from the case tor shortening the span of secondary education and countering the tendency to increasing size in secondary schools.

No doubt, many secondary teachers will refute some of these arguments, and it must be admitted that some of the statements about secondary schools are a little tendentious. The fact remains that over half the secondary teachers interviewed by the Council agreed that they started subject-centred teaching with pupils immediately on entry to the secondary school. This sudden break in modes of learning and teaching may have some bearing on the fact that the highest incidence of pupil absence occurs at 11-plus. Discussions about curriculum and organisation in secondary schools tend to start with the examination requirements of the senior pupils, and to work backwards from that point. Rarely does it happen that the needs of the younger pupils are taken as the starting point for the development of curriculum and organisation. There is a tendency to think in terms of giving each child an appropriate share of each area of subject teaching. The 'period time-table' involves fragmentation of the day which often cuts across the needs and interests of the children.

The Plowden Committee claim that all their arguments are based on 'first principles'. This seems a very large claim, similar to that made by the Hadow Report in the case of transfer at 11-plus. It might be more accurate to describe the arguments as pragmatic. No appeal to first principles can overcome the fact that whatever age of transfer is fixed it will be wrong for some children. However, we have to organize the educational system in stages. Whatever the stages, there should be flexibility in transfers to allow for the extreme variations in individual rates of development. The real question is whether in general terms, one of form of organization is preferable to another; whether it is likely to benefit the majority of children. In this sense the Plowden Report has argued a very strong pragmatic case for a ‘Middle School’ type of organization.

If we accept the fact that any chronological age of transfer is wrong for some children for some of the time, this does not necessarily preclude us from trying to base an organization on what we know of the general characteristics of the majority of children at any given age. By the age of 8 or m9 most children have a fairly adequate mastery of reading, (whereas at 7 years, 30% are still non-readers.) They are usually well into the stage of what Piaget calls ‘concrete operations’. They have usually acquired skills in counting and ordination, but may still be in difficulties about multiplication and division. Somewhere between 8 and

11 for most children there are the beginnings of logical thinking, although the processes are still very much tied to the concrete. Then by 13 years of age the capacity to establish hypotheses and to deal with abstractions usually begins to emerge. Children are entering the stage of development described by Piaget as 'formal operational thinking'. The years of middle childhood also see other changes, such as children becoming less dependent on the family relative to the school. These developments postulate certain educational needs. It may be argued that these *needs* are the same whatever the type of organisation. The question then is, are these likely to be better met in a 'Middle School' rather than in the present system of the upper Junior School and the lower Secondary School? The arguments rehearsed above strongly suggest that the former is the case. As Professor Ross puts it 'the ingredients are the same but the resultant 'Middle School' cake will be different - a little less spongy than the primary school; a little less rocky than the secondary school".

If it is accepted that there is a good case for the 'Middle School', as a school in which the needs of the 'middle years' can be met and development fostered without undue pressures, the next question is, ought it to be 8 - 12 years or 9 - 13 years? The Plowden Report examines this issue in some detail and decides that though the arguments in favour of 12 and 13 are fairly evenly balanced, the 'balance of advantage is just with the 12 year old transfer'. The Plowden Committee was much influenced in this decision by the desire to prevent undue secondary school influence on the younger children in the 'Middle School'. If this is so then the 8-12 'Middle School' is to be seen mainly as a prolongation of the primary mode of learning. As such this is a rather different concept to the 9 – 13 school which would not only prolong the primary mode of learning but would allow more time for the transition to the secondary mode. Having its roots in the primary school, allowing for the gradual introduction of the more disciplined studies of the secondary school, but not dominated entirely by either, would not the 9-13 'Middle School' form a more effective bridge than the 8 – 12 schools and achieve a better sense of continuity when the time comes for transfer to secondary education?

In concluding this section it might be as well to avoid being too precise about the rationale for the Middle School. There are dangers in generating a new orthodoxy about institutions which have yet to be tested in proactive. If we bring children of 9 to 13 together in one school the real question is, can such a school develop an organization which will satisfy the needs of the pupils more effectively than the present schools with the break at 11-plus. Head Teachers given the responsibility for establishing Middle Schools will answer that question in the affirmative. There can be no stereotype. A variety of patterns will emerge but all Middle School Heads will have to face a number of problems ad to express their solutions in terms of curriculum and organization.