Australian Middle Schools

What makes middle schools and middle schooling distinctive, if anything?

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One type of criticism confronting the growth of middle schooling in Australia is that it lacks clear definition, offers nothing new, and is indistinguishable from what many primary and secondary schools already do. Against the background of that criticism, this paper examines whether or not middle schools and middle schooling do have a distinctive clientele, organisational position and philosophy that give them a unique rationale and imperative. It does so with reference to the international literature and what happens on the ground in this country. The paper begins by arguing that many recommended arrangements, principles and practices for middle schools apply equally to students of all ages and developmental stages. It then outlines seven possible sources and areas of distinctiveness that, could they be shown to be valid, would help make middle schools and middle schooling adolescent-specific rather than generic.

The past 15 years in countries such as Australia (Chadbourne, 2001; Luke, 2003) and the United States of America (McEwin, Dickinson, & Jenkins, 2003) have seen the growth of separate middle schools for young adolescents. Some middle schools have emerged as a result of restructuring traditional schools; others are new purpose-built middle schools. In principle, it might be expected that all of them should share a number of common features that distinguish them from other schools. For example, middle schools are designed to cater specifically for students in the middle years of schooling; that is, students in the middle of the developmental continuum from childhood to adulthood. They are also meant to be based on the philosophy of middle schooling. In practice, however, considerable variation exists across middle schools and it is questionable whether the philosophy of middle schooling applies solely to middle schools. These discrepancies need to be resolved to persuade sceptics that the rationale for middle schools and middle schooling is not flawed by lack of clear definition. They also need to be resolved to support the middle school movement which, according to some advocates, is "The movement to establish a distinctive (my emphasis) form of education for young adolescents" (Jackson & Davis, 2000, p. 1).

Against such a background, this paper examines some of the issues and developments relevant to the question - what makes middle schools and middle schooling distinctive, if anything? Data for the paper come from the research literature on middle level education in Australia and United States of America (USA) and from the author's work as a teacher educator in the field of middle schooling. In large measure the paper seeks to be explorative and raise matters for future investigation rather than offer a definitive answer to the question stated above.

LIMITS TO DISTINCTIVENESS

At a broad level there seems to be agreement on the meaning of the terms middle years, middle school and middle schooling. For example, as frequently used in the literature, the term:

- 'middle years' refers to the years of early adolescence;
- 'middle school' refers to a separate organisational unit (a school or sub-school) for young adolescents;
- 'middle schooling' refers to a particular philosophy or set of principles about teaching, learning and curriculum for young adolescents.

At a more specific level, however, as discussed below, these broad definitions might promise more than can be delivered with respect to identifying the distinctiveness of middle years, middle schools and middle schooling. Parenthetically, the term 'young adolescents' generally refers to individual students while the term 'early adolescence' refers to a developmental phase.

Are the middle years distinguished by a single developmental phase?

The literature on schools and schooling frequently refers to early adolescence and late adolescence, but rarely to middle adolescence (Curriculum Council, 1998; McDevitt & Ormrod, 2002; National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, 1996). It also refers frequently to early childhood and middle childhood but rarely to late childhood. If each of these two stages of human development (childhood and adolescence) contains an early, middle and late period, then early adolescence would be the period between late childhood and middle adolescence. However, a clear idea of what this period might cover is masked by the lack of information about when late childhood and middle adolescence begin and end.

Would eliminating late childhood and middle adolescence as distinct periods help clarify what the 'middle years' refers to? The Western Australian (WA) Curriculum Framework does this by dividing K-12 into four overlapping phases: early childhood (K-3), middle childhood (Years 3-7), early adolescence (Years 7-10) and late adolescence/young adulthood (Years 10-12). By doing so, however, it suggests that childhood has a middle period but adolescence does not, and that adolescence has a late period but childhood does not. An issue in need of further investigation here is whether these inconsistencies represent an inconsequential anomaly in terminology or something more substantial.

It is tempting to say simply that 'early adolescence' covers school Years 5-10 (students aged 10-15). Some of the literature uses that time span to mark the middle years of schooling (George & Alexander, 1993; National Middle School Association, 1995). As noted above, however, the WA Curriculum Framework specifies Years 7-10 (students aged 12-15) as comprising early adolescence, a categorisation that places Years 5-6 (students aged 10-11) in the stage of middle childhood, not early adolescence (Curriculum Council, 1998). The South Australian Curriculum Standards and

Accountability Framework (SACSA Online, 2003) also runs somewhat counter to the Years 5-10 proposal because it defines the four periods as: the early years (birth-Year 2), the primary years (Years 3-5), the middle years (Years 6-9), and the senior years (Years 10-12). As mentioned above, some literature suggests that school Years 5-10 delineate the outer boundaries of early adolescence. This literature also emphasises that within those boundaries there is considerable variation among students as to when early adolescence begins and ends (Eccles & Wigfield, 1997; Fry, 1994). For example, for some students, puberty starts at age 10; for others it may not be till age 13. This means that some middle school students have not reached the stage of early adolescence and others may have moved beyond early adolescence into young adulthood, a possibility that raises a range of questions. For example, while there may be agreement that puberty marks the beginning of early adolescence, is there agreement on when it ends? Is the end of adolescence biologically determined? Or, is it socially manufactured by regulatory policy on mat ters such as the age of consent, the granting of voting rights, and the end of compulsory schooling? (Cormack, 1998).

A look at what happens in the field does not provide a clear indication of what counts as the middle years, or when early adolescence starts and ends, because the Year levels covered by middle schools vary across Australia. Some middle schools cover only one Year level (e.g., Year 6 or 7 or 8); others cover two Year levels (e.g., Years 6-7 or 7-8 or 8-9); yet others cover three or four Year levels (e.g., Years 5-8 or 6-8 or 7-9 or 8-10 or 6-10). It should be noted, however, that these variations do not necessarily point to a lack of consensus among middle schoolers about the age span covered by the middle years. In some cases, decisions about the Year levels for middle schools are based on political or economic constraints rather than educational grounds. Since the nature and extent of these constraints can vary from school to school, the Year levels covered by different middle schools can vary (Chadbourne & Harslett, 1998).

As an organisational unit are middle schools distinctive?

Middle schools (e.g., Years 5-10) and senior colleges (e.g., Years 11-12) can claim to be separate organisational units for students at just one stage of human development: early adolescence for middle schools and young adulthood for senior colleges. By contrast, primary schools (e.g., K-7) cater for students across three stages (early childhood, middle childhood and early adolescence) and secondary schools (e.g., Year 8-12) cater for students across two stages (early adolescence and young adulthood).

Middle schools, however, are not alone in offering a separate organisational unit specifically for young adolescents. Some primary schools set up Year 6-7 clusters consisting of, say, two Year 6 classes and two Year 7 classes, a structure similar to a small middle school learning community or team (Power, 2002). That is, the cluster or sub-school consists of a learning community (e.g., 4-6 teachers and 100-120 students) with its own teaching and general staff; its own rooms, facilities, resources and budget; its own place and space; and its own organisational name and identity. Similar arrangements exist in some secondary schools that set up, say, Year 8-9 sub-schools. K-10 schools in rural areas have traditionally consisted of two sub-schools; a K-7 primary

and a Year 8-10 high school: the high school operates, structurally at least, as a separate unit specifically for young adolescents, as do the Year 6-7 clusters in primary schools.

At present, then, middle schools are not made distinctive by catering only for young adolescents. A range of 'separate' organisational units within conventional K-7, 8-12, and K-10 schools that do not identify or name themselves as middle schools also cater solely for young adolescents. In so far as they adopt a middle schooling philosophy, however, these schools can be regarded as de facto middle schools. They are certainly entitled to be called middle schools and in some cases, combined with further adjustments, may benefit from doing so. For example, in struggling rural towns, the viability of the Year 8-10 high school section of K-10 schools may be placed at risk by declining student enrolments. Restructuring those schools into a K-5 primary and a Year 6-10 middle school would alleviate that risk. If all schools, clusters and sub-schools that specifically cater for young adolescents publicly identified and named themselves as middle schools, this would provide grounds for middle schools claiming to be organisationally distinctive.

As a philosophy is middle schooling distinctive?

Some of the literature argues that middle schools should be defined not by their organisational structure but by the philosophy of middle schooling, particularly as it relates to teaching, learning and curriculum in the school. Various aspects of this philosophy are apparent in published statements about the purpose, design elements and recommended practices for middle schools. There is little difficulty, then, finding out what the philosophy consists of. More problematical, from the viewpoint of trying to discover what makes middle schools and middle schooling distinctive, is that much of this philosophy does not belong exclusively to the schooling of young adolescents. It applies equally to schooling for early childhood, middle childhood and young adulthood. For example, in so far as the philosophy of middle schooling supports the broad principles and practices associated with constructivism, outcomes-based-education, and student-centred education, it is valid for students of all ages and stages, not just those in the middle years of schooling. The following observations on the purpose, design elements and recommended practices for middle schools also point to the generic nature of middle schooling philosophy.

Purpose of middle years schooling

Let us be clear. The main purpose of middle grades education is to promote young adolescents' intellectual development. It is to enable every student to think creatively, to identify and solve meaningful problems, to communicate and work well with others, and to develop the base of factual knowledge and skills that is the essential foundation for these "higher order" capacities. As they develop these capacities, every young adolescent should be able to meet or exceed high academic standards. Closely related goals are to help all students develop the capacity to lead healthful lives, physically and mentally; to become caring, compassionate, and tolerant individuals; and to become active, contributing citizens of .... (their country) and the world ..... Along with intellectual development, at the heart of our definition of "middle grades education" is the

requirement for equity in outcomes for all groups of students, regardless of their race, ethnicity, gender, family income or linguistic background. (Jackson & Davis, 2000, pp. 10-11)

In this statement, Jackson and Davis emphasise that middle schools have a particular purpose. At the same time, they position that purpose within the mainstream rather than on the margins of K-12 schooling. They ensure that the purpose of middle schools embraces both sides of issues that sometimes polarise advocates of different persuasions. For example, Jackson and Davis' statement of purpose argues for excellence and equity, rigour and relationships, the development of the whole child and the primacy of intellectual development, and schooling for individual growth and the betterment of society. As an inclusive statement of purpose it applies, arguably, without qualification to all levels of education - primary, middle, secondary and tertiary. It is not distinctive to the middle years of schooling. A similar claim can be made about the Australian National Middle Schooling Project's statement that three important goals of middle schooling are: engaged, focused and achieving adolescents; effective curriculum, teaching and organisational practices; and genuine partnerships and long-term support (Barratt, 1998; Cumming, 1998).

Broad design elements for middle schools

Aspects of middle schooling philosophy are embedded in sets of broad design elements for middle schools. One set, developed by the Australian National Middle Schooling Project, recommends that middle school practices should be: learner-centred, collaboratively organised, outcome-based, flexibly constructed, ethnically aware, community-oriented, adequately resourced and strategically linked (Barratt, 1998; Cumming, 1998). It can be noted that all of these elements are generic rather than year-level-specific; they apply to schooling at the primary and secondary levels rather than exclusively to middle schools. Another set of design elements, listed by Jackson and Davis (2000, pp. 23-4), recommends that middle schools should:

1. Ensure success for every student.
2. Teach a curriculum grounded in rigorous, public academic standards for what students should know and be able to do, relevant to the c oncerns of adolescents and based on how students learn best.
3. Use instructional methods designed to prepare all students to achieve higher standards and become lifelong learners.
4. Staff middle grades schools with teachers who are expert at teaching young adolescents, and engage teachers in ongoing, targeted professional development opportunities.
5. Organise relationships for learning to create a climate of intellectual development and a caring community of shared educational purpose.
6. Govern democratically, through direct or representative participation by all school staff members, the adults who know the students best.
7. Provide a safe and healthy school environment as part of improving academic performance and developing caring and ethical citizens.

8. Involve parents and communities in supporting student learning and healthy development.

Only items 2 and 4 in Jackson and Davis' list refer specifically to adolescents and middle schools. All the other elements seem to be generic. And even items 2 and 4 can be seen as generic in the sense that they would remain equally valid if the word 'adolescent' was replaced with 'young children' or 'young adults', and if the term 'middle grades' was deleted.

Most frequently recommended practices for middle schools

A further indication of what comprises middle school philosophy can be found in the particular practices most frequently recommended for middle schools. From a survey of the literature, Williamson (2001) identified twelve such practices and placed them into three categories (see Box 1). He suggests that these practices "align with developmental characteristics of early adolescents" (p. 381). We could ask, however, why they wouldn't align equally with the 'developmental characteristics' of children and adults.

Small communities for learning

1. Organise instruction around interdisciplinary teams of teachers.
2. Assign an adult adviser for each student.
3. Provide teaching teams with common planning time.
4. Modify scheduling to include flexible blocks of time for teaching teams.

A core of common knowledge

1. Integrate subject matter across content lines.
2. Design and offer a full exploratory program.
3. Offer a challenging curriculum for each student.
4. Equip students with skills for lifelong learning, including the ability to think critically.
5. Provide opportunities for students to be active citizens.

Success for all students

10. Modify instructional practices to include mastery learning and the increased use of technology.
11. Utilise cooperative learning strategies.
12. Implement ability grouping only when it is temporary and flexible.

Box 1: The most frequently recommended practices for middle schools (Williamson, 2001)

A case can be made, then, for arguing that, as a philosophy, middle schooling is generic rather than middle-years-specific; that is, because this philosophy applies equally to students of all ages and stages it does not make middle schools or middle schooling distinctive. As a result, would it be better then to call middle schooling something more general such as progressive education or student-centred learning? One reason for not doing so is that the term 'middle schooling' provides a basis for emphasising that a school can not simply change its structure and then claim and name itself to be a middle school. Such a school, it can be argued, must also ensure that the teaching, learning and curriculum within the new structure are underpinned by a clear and explicit philosophical base, namely middle schooling.

SEVEN POSSIBLE SOURCES AND AREAS OF DISTINCTIVENESS

The points made so far in this paper suggest that middle schools and middle schooling are not distinctive in a pure sense. However, it is possible to propose other sources and areas of distinctiveness. Seven are outlined below. None of them makes middle schools and middle schooling absolutely distinct from all other levels of schooling but collectively they could represent a form of distinctiveness that helps clarify the rationale and imperative for middle schools and middle schooling. It should be emphasised that the accounts of these seven sources and areas are presented as propositions in need of further investigation rather than claims of indisputable fact.

Proposition 1. While the philosophy of middle schooling in itself is not distinctive, its application to young adolescents is. That is, although middle schooling principles and practices may be common and central to all progressive education programs, their application can and should be context-specific. To push the point further, if treated in a decontextualised way, the meaning, authenticity, relevance and power of middle schooling philosophy could be seriously weakened, if not entirely lost. Therefore, middle schoolers can insist that the concept of middle schooling be seen as inseparable from the context in which the term was originally coined. This means, for example, that rather than embracing student-centred education in general, middle schooling may be more appropriately conceived as a philosophy that refers specifically to adolescent-centred education. Put differently, perhaps the concept of middle schooling should be defined as much by its particular contextual application as by its general philosophical principles.

Would defining middle schooling as adolescent-centred education make it distinctive? Yes, if it can be established that adolescents have distinct needs, experiences, interests, concerns, expectations and aspirations; and if a clear connection can be shown between these things and the teaching/learning activity in middle years classrooms. Williamson (2001, p. 382) makes a relevant observation here by claiming that:

The hallmark of the middle level school is its emphasis on aligning these (12 most frequently recommended) practices (see Box 1) with the characteristics and needs of the middle level students. The very best middle level schools are those that are attentive to student needs and respond with understanding and flexibility.

An anonymous reviewer of this article made another relevant observation by noting that "education has traditionally focussed on the early years as the groundwork for learning success and the higher stakes exit years". By contrast, pointed out the reviewer, middle schooling focuses on adolescents at a time when students "are more sensitive about themselves and their development. Therefore, focussing on middle schooling allows attention to those years when students are more likely to be alienated from school and suffer from low self-esteem showing students that they are important".

Proposition 2. While the principles recommended by progressive educators may apply equally to students of all ages and stages, proportionally more middle schools implement more of these principles than do other schools. This applies particularly to areas such as the transition from primary to secondary schooling, integrated curriculum, cooperative learning, collaborative teaching, authentic assessment, pastoral care, small learning communities, teaching for higher order thinking across subjects, mixed ability and flexible student groupings, parental and community involvement in student learning, democratic governance and shared leadership. Similarly, proportionally more middle schools implement more of the thirteen interlocking principles of best practice identified by Zemelman, Daniels, and Hyde (1998) than do other schools. These thirteen principles comprise a philosophy that children learn best when schools, teaching and learning are: student-centred, experiential, holistic, authentic, expressive, reflective, social, collaborative, democratic, cognitive, developmental, constructivist, and challenging.

Proposition 3. While the philosophy of middle schooling is equa lly valid for students of all ages and stages it was middle schoolers who formulated it. Also, proportionally more middle schoolers make their philosophy more explicit more frequently than do their counterparts in other schools. More middle schoolers use their philosophy, rather than rely on tradition, to inform their school development plans and evaluate their teaching than occurs in other schools. More middle schoolers work within a common overt philosophy, compared with other schools. And more middle schools break with century old traditional practices than do other schools.

Proposition 4. While a variety of initiatives has been used over the past fifty years in Australia, and other countries, to introduce progressive education and break the mould of traditional practices, middle schools stand out as offering most hope for a wide and enduring impact. For example, attempts at de-schooling, free-schooling and re-schooling came and went during the 1970s, or remained on the margins. The same could eventually happen to middle schooling but this seems unlikely because its growth has been steady for over a decade now in Australia and for over three decades in the USA. In 1999, one observer claimed that "The middle school movement is ... the most successful grassroots movement in American educational history" (George, 1999, p. 3). A similar observation may be warranted for most states in Australia.

Proposition 5. While the boundaries of primary and secondary schooling are based on historical developments that make them dated, middle schools are based on a particular phase of student development - early adolescence. Until the 1950s, most students attended primary schools up to the age of 14; only a minority attended high schools. The

move to mass education and a rise in the school leaving age led to a reclassification; 13 and 14 year old students ceased attending primary schools and had to attend secondary schools. Recent reconstruction of some state curriculum frameworks into four phases (early childhood, mid childhood, early adolescence and young adulthood) challenges the long-standing compartmentalisation of schooling into primary and secondary divisions. The rationale for the middle years division is clear and in alignment with recently developed state curriculum frameworks. The rationale for primary/secondary compartmentalisation is less certain and less in alignment with these curriculum frameworks.

Proposition 6. While the days are long over when it might have been meaningful to talk of a primary or secondary school movement, it is still legitimate to talk of a middle school and middle schooling movement. This is because, unlike primary and secondary education, further pioneering work is required to gain ground for middle school expansion. Moreover, a group effort is required to keep middle schools and middle schooling on track and prevent them from being derailed. Over half of Australia's states now have a formal middle school association which provides a vehicle for the middle school movement in this country. These associations conduct conferences, publish newsletters and journals, make submissions to policy makers and play an advocacy role for middle schools and middle schooling. Equivalent associations do not exist for primary and secondary schooling.

Proposition 7. While in some parts of Australia and the USA all schooling levels (primary, middle and secondary) are supported by level-specific teacher education preparation, the middle school teacher education programs are developing characteristics that distinguish them from the other programs. In broad terms these characteristics include: more focus on early adolescence, more focus on crossing the primary/secondary school divide, more focus on working within a small middle school learning community structure, and more focus on making generic principles middle-years-specific (Aspland & Crosswell, 2002; Chadbourne, 2002; National Middle School Association, 2003).

CONCLUSION

This paper may have made middle schools and middle schooling appear less distinctive than some advocates believe is warranted. Alternatively, critics may believe it overstates the degree of distinctiveness. In response, the following points can be put. A low degree of distinctiveness is not necessarily a bad thing. It can help ensure that middle schools and middle schooling remain in the mainstream of educational reform rather than suffer relegation to the fringe as a development of marginal value. Also, commonalities with schooling at other levels can enhance whole system development, seamless K-12 education, and the prospect of educators in other schools taking middle schools and middle schooling seriously. That said, a certain degree of distinctiveness is needed to provide middle schoolers with a sense of direction, keep them on track and ensure that their contribution to educational reform inside and outside of the middle years of schooling is not diluted by a drift into 'anything goes'.

If further investigation finds the seven sources and areas of distinctiveness outlined above, and/or other types of distinctiveness, to be valid, we would be left with the question - where to from here? Two broad options can be suggested. One option would be to regard middle school distinctiveness as divisive and seek to remove any perceived dichotomy between middle schooling and traditional schooling by either replacing one with the other or forging both into a composite model. A second option would be to regard middle school distinctiveness as desirable, foster a pluralistic view that traditional schooling and middle schooling are different but equal in value, and encourage parents and their children to welcome a choice of models. Decisions about which of these two broad policy options to adopt should be based on what is in the best interest of young adolescents, particularly what secures the best educational outcomes for each and every one of them. On that we hope all stakeholders and shareholders agree.

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