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Author
Main, Katherine, Bryer, Fiona

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Essential Skills for Middle School Teachers

Katherine Main & Fiona Bryer
Griffith University

Middle schooling is an educational reform aimed to provide an educational experience that is developmentally responsive to young adolescent students, who are simultaneously experiencing many kinds of changes (physical, intellectual, social, and emotional) and who are also coping with many individual variations in the onset and rapidity of these changes. Because traditional school organisation places boundaries between primary and secondary teacher training and work, this reform raises issues about specific pedagogical skill training for beginning teachers and their application across the two-tier training and employment system. Because organisational changes to create middle schools are geared toward a more collaborative environment, this reform raises issues about teamwork skills and person-to-person communication skills needed to successfully work within this educational framework. The challenge for universities is how to skill beginning teachers in their preservice training.

Recommended practice for a middle phase of schooling

Middle schooling is one major school reform that has emerged in Australia since the 1980s. The term "middle schooling" refers to a philosophy of teaching that is responsive to the developmental needs of young adolescents (approximately 10–15 years). In some overseas literature, "middle school" refers to a third organisational level with the education system. In general usage, "middle years" refers to a chronological age range that can extend from early primary to early secondary school years rather than to either alternative philosophy or organisational structure. This new phase of schooling has been introduced into Australian policy to provide an educational experience for young adolescents that smooths the transition from the primary to secondary phases of schooling (Baer, 1999; Eccles, 2004; Roeser, Eccles, & Sameroff, 2000). The philosophy underpinning middle schooling is this educational environment can create a synergy between curriculum and pedagogy, on the one hand, and the developmental needs of young adolescents, on the other hand (Eccles, 2004).

Key American recommendations for middle schooling have provided guidance and support for the generation and identification of practices (Carnegie Corporation, 1989; Jackson & Davis, 2000). Recommended practices have included small teaching communities, curriculum integration, block scheduling, authentic assessment practices, strong relationships between teachers and students, and advisory "pastoral care" programs (Australian Curriculum Studies Association, 1993; Boland, Cavanagh, & Dellar, 2001; Braggett, 1997). Relationships between teachers and students have been identified as being an important and integral feature of this phase of schooling (Carnegie Corporation, 1989; Jackson & Davis, 2000).
When the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD) ran articles in Educational Leadership on effective middle schools, the common denominator among the schools was that they had systematic procedures in place for addressing children’s social and emotional skills. There were schoolwide mentoring programs, group guidance, and advisory periods, modifications of the usual disciplinary systems, and classroom programs that allowed time for group problems solving and team building. Of course, they had sound academic programs and competent teachers and administrators, but other schools had these features as well. It was the social and emotional learning component that distinguished them. (Elias, Arnold, and Hussey, 2003, p. 5)

There is a naive policy-to-practice assumption that middle school reform can be accomplished by the present generation of primary and secondary trained teachers. When this reform has been introduced, then the task of making conceptual and practical changes to existing systems has fallen directly upon individual teachers and individual schools. The complexities of human relationships, context-specific issues, and the individual expertise of teachers have rarely been addressed as factors that affect the selection and introduction of teacher practice (Main, B育人, & Grimbeek, in press). For example, a teacher who is appointed to a school implementing a middle school program may approach the experience in a way that is different from a teacher who volunteers. Similarly, teachers who are required to work together may approach the experience in a way that is different from teachers who agree to work together.

The absence of training for a separate and distinct phase of schooling has contributed to the ongoing challenge inherent in these policy-to-practice issues. Historically, educational systems have not required teacher certification to practice in the middle phase. Primary and secondary trained teachers have been certified to teach in the middle years in both Australia and in other western education systems. In the USA, middle schools have been established for more than 40 years and are widely accepted, but only 12% of teachers working in middle grades have obtained specialist qualifications (Flowers, Mertens, & Mulhall, 2002; Hargreaves, 1986). In Australia, several teacher-training programs have been designed to prepare some teachers for middle school practice. In 2004, a small cohort of new graduates has begun to filter into the education system from undergraduate and postgraduate middle school courses in universities in southeastern Queensland and northern New South Wales. Luke et al. (2003) expressed concern, however, that the established placement system makes it difficult to preferentially appoint these newly trained teachers to middle schools: If middle school places are not available and specific training is not seen as important to fill existing places, then formal training is likely to remain a curiosity.

To date, the middle schooling phase has been sustained by teacher enthusiasm, some student-centred values, and relatively little research support or specific teacher training. Education policy that has allowed for the introduction of a middle phase of schooling has made a place for practice designated as "middle schooling." Traditional teachers have acted upon the necessity to create practice to fill this "vacuum" in an ad hoc, instinctive, and holistic manner. Teachers have combined and prioritised organisational practices to serve particular contexts and have, thus, employed various models of middle schooling (Aspland & Nicholson, 2003). A range of collaborative practices such as joint planning, co-teaching, team teaching, and coordinating teams of specialist teachers have emerged.
as a teacher-centric medium to meet the policy expectations in this new setting (Chadbourne, 2004). That is, the teachers’ perspective on practice reform has tended to concentrate changes on aspects of curriculum and pedagogy. Changes to teacher relationships with students, therefore, have been viewed as a consequential change rather than as a driving force in the change process, and there has been little direct evidence of the nature of the benefits to student learning. Moreover, the investigation of effective practice that facilitates teacher-teacher relationships has also been slow to be targeted for review (Main et al., in press).

There are also tensions between policy driven frameworks for reform and intensification of the workload on teachers. "The literature also contains an implication that, compared with conventional practices, middle schooling imposes a higher workload on teachers (Chadbourne, 2001, p. 18). Teachers entering schools with a middle school philosophy are facing increasing expectations across many stress indicators (Main & Bryer, 2004c, this proceedings). Stress is now the biggest health issue for those in the teaching profession (Travers & Cooper, 1996). Brown and Ralph (1994) noted that the main stressors for teachers are relationships, innovation and change, school management and administration, and time factors. Awareness is growing that stress is an increasing problem for teachers (Smylie, 1999).

Extensive lists of the diverse roles of a middle school teacher have been published, restated, and redeveloped (Australian Curriculum Studies Association [ACSA], 1993; Boland, Cavanagh, & Dellar, 2001; Braggett, 1997). These lists refer to team teaching, strong relationships with students, pastoral care provision, new practice associated with middle school reform, and many collaborative nonteaching tasks related to development of within-school policy and curriculum. There is an implicit expectation that teachers entering middle school practice are able to successfully collaborate with colleagues, students, parents, and school administration. This complex web of human interrelationships, however, requires the negotiation of tasks in a way not previously encountered within the classroom (Nelson & Reigeluth, 1996). Many teachers who are unfamiliar with collaborative work and are untrained in the "art and science" of such tasks struggle with the time demands and interpersonal tensions that arise when working in a middle school environment.

Research into collaborative practices has noted many advantages. The development of supportive teacher relationships can foster school improvement (Gitlin, 1999). When teachers’ different strengths are combined, then the classroom environment can become more dynamic and exciting. Collaborative planning, development, and teaching can make positive changes in teaching practice (Australian Curriculum Studies Association, 1993; Milonopoulos & Fordred, 1997). This collaborative approach to planning, teaching, and assessing can lessen the workload. Collaboration can provide collegial support that offers different perspectives to help teachers remain objective on issues within the classroom (Milonopoulos & Fordred, 1997). Expectation of and aspiration towards these advantages can keep teachers motivated, enthused, and less susceptible to burnout (Spry, Sultmann, & Ralston, 1992).

Collaboration, however, has a range of potential pitfalls. These problems include a groupthink mentality, unnecessary collaboration that does not serve a productive
purpose, teams' increased need for planning time, and teachers' loss of their sense of autonomy (Schamber, 1999). Teachers have traditionally worked in isolation within their own classroom. In this "egg-crate" structure of schooling (Lortie, 2002), classrooms have been designed to isolate teachers and age-specific groups of students. This organization was seen as a way of "disciplining and controlling the masses" (Fullan & Hargreaves, 1991, p. 6). The considerable investment in "single teacher" classroom infrastructure makes reform efforts that move away from this mindset difficult to achieve. In many instances, therefore, "architecture" rather than "attitude" might contribute the difficulties that teachers often face in working together, learning from each other, and improving their expertise as a professional community.

Increased collegiality through collaborative tasks is becoming one of the leading improvement strategies of educational reform (Fullan & Hargreaves, 1991). Many teaching and nonteaching practices that define middle schools necessitate collaboration between teachers. These collaborative practices are a "non negotiable" part of middle schooling (Chadbourne, 2001). Furthermore, it has been argued that the pedagogy and curriculum practices identified as essential for teaching in this setting are "generic skills" that could be considered "best practice" essential for all teachers (Chadbourne, 2001). However, these generic skills that may simply be deemed best practice are now entwined with collaborative practices that are an integral feature of the middle schooling philosophy. Furthermore, Hughes, Abbott-Campbell, and Williamson (2001) noted that increasing governmental emphasis on accountability requires a higher demand for teacher professionalisation. In middle schools, where the expectation is to work collaboratively, this teacher professionalisation includes the ability to work effectively with colleagues, students, administration, and others.

Teamwork skills and person-to-person communication skills are essential skills that are needed to help teachers not only to overcome some of the identified stressors for teachers but also to succeed in this new environment. Moreover, more successful outcomes for students have been reported where there has been an increased investment in teacher knowledge and, also, skill (Darling-Hammond, 2003). Personal communication skills are somewhat removed from the pedagogy and curriculum delivery focus of middle schools teacher training programs. In a review of middle school programs offered by universities in southeastern Queensland, Main and Bryer (2004a) noted that a major focus of these programs is instruction in pedagogy and curriculum practices that are adapted to this new environment. Despite collaborative practices being a major part of the reforming practices of middle schools, these skills have not been given a priority.

In a summary review of best practices for a middle phase of schooling strand (Main & Bryer, 2004b), it was noted that teachers needed to develop skills in five contributing areas: (a) interpersonal skills, (b) group decision making skills, (c) effective meeting strategies, (d) goal setting and related skills in evaluation and reflection, and (e) interdisciplinary instructional planning skills. It was also noted that, regardless of specific teaching environments, all teachers would experience "collaborative" tasks of some sort (e.g., part of a teaching partnership, member of a team project or committee). Chadbourne (2004) pointed out the need for explicit teacher skilling in personal and
group communication skills in his outline of a typology of teacher collaboration in middle schools. He identified six areas that include, but are not restricted to, (a) political and industrial collaboration (provide team support), (b) social collaboration, (c) technical collaboration (sharing of "tricks of the trade"), (d) collaborative planning (joint planning decisions), (e) academic collaboration (professional dialogue regarding educational ideas and philosophies), and (f) joint classroom-based work (team teaching).

Survey of essential teacher skills
A professional development day for the Mt Gravatt educational district provided a sample of teachers (N = 26) who attended a presentation on middle schooling (Main & Bryer, 2004d). The participants were primary (n = 12) and secondary (n = 14) teachers. They completed the "Essential Skills Evaluation Survey" designed by the first author from current literature on middle school practice. Item design concerned teacher perception of their skill level for various identified skills essential for middle school practice. The 40 survey items were focused on 10 skill areas (viz., key learning areas, integration of subjects, student centred focus, behaviour management, awareness of child development, assessment skills, and collaborative skills to do with attitude, goals and roles, perception of benefits, and individual communication skills). For each area, a series of four Likert style questions were rated from 1 = lowest to 5 = highest level of skill. Teachers rated all items and were then asked to "add" their responses to give themselves a score for each skill area (viz., low skill level = to or <9; average skill level = 10 – 15; high skill level = to or >16, with a maximum of 20 points per section).

All teachers reported a "high" score (average = 18.4) in the first eight essential skill areas, which included attitudes to working in a collaborative environment and attitudes about goals and roles when working within a collaborative environment. Despite extensive literature supporting the inclusion of collaborative practices in middle schools and reporting benefits of collaboration, the average scores dropped to 13.2 on questions about the benefits of collaboration and, specifically, on teacher expectations for workload to lessen in this environment. Similarly, these teachers rated their own individual communication skills as quite high (average 15.2), but a large proportion of them reported that they agreed or strongly agreed that they "just kept the peace to make things easier" in team meetings (42%; n = 11) and agreed or strongly agreed that they were unable to express concerns freely and openly with other staff members and also that they did not feel confident speaking up if they disagreed with others (38%).

The number of participants in this survey was small, but these teachers had chosen, for reasons mainly associated with general interest in this emerging area of teaching practice, to attend this session. Although these results, therefore, are tentative, they suggest a considerable lack of confidence in the interpersonal skills to successfully collaborate with other members of staff. One teacher noted that a pitfall in collaboration is the "groupthink" mentality (Fullan & Hargreaves, 1991; Pounder, 1998). Groupthink occurs when individuals fail to "speak up" and keep quiet just to "keep the peace." Fullan and Hargreaves (1991) argued that the "unthinking self-suppression of one's own intuition and experiential knowledge is one of the major reasons why bandwagons and ill-conceived innovations flourish" (p. 7). This pitfall occurs in two instances: First, when
teachers are inexperienced and untrained in the specific communication skills necessary to have their say without being confrontational; and second, where familiarity between team members leads teachers to a point where they don't want to "rock the boat." In both instances, specific skill training would help overcome this issue. For beginning teachers, who are enthusiastic and have a lot of current research and policy knowledge to offer, despite a lack of experience, these communication skills would be particularly helpful (Main & Bryer, 2004c).

Conclusion
Relationship issues and time issues have been identified as two teaching stressors. Without a "fundamental change in the way we conceptualise time, especially for teachers, our best efforts at teacher participation in school reform will probably wither" (Cambone, 1995, p. 512). Explicit teaching of collaborative skills might not only help to reduce an individual's stress in relationships with other teachers but also might help to free up "time" and contain "explosions" in workload. With the introduction of a middle school reform requiring teachers to undertake many collaborative tasks, training in interpersonal and group collaboration skills is essential.

References


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