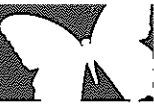


Contesting lost ground for the middle years in Australia: Using the case study of Queensland

Abstract

Over the past 20 years, Australia has witnessed the extraordinary rise of the middle years movement. More recently, however, there has been concern that middle schooling has fallen from the mainstream education agenda (Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth 2011). At a national level, evidence of this fall can be seen in the new national curriculum frameworks such as 'The Shape of the Australian Curriculum Version 2.0', where reference to middle years is significantly absent (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority 2010). At a state level, the fall is evident in the Queensland Government's 2015 commencement of junior secondary, rather than middle years, as outlined in 'A Flying Start for Queensland Children: Why Year 7' will be part of high school from 2015 (Queensland Government 2011a). This announcement came after the government had undertaken an extensive consultation exploring the possible uptake of middle years practices at a systemic level. Some may argue that these practices and philosophies are implicitly embedded in both the national curriculum and the junior secondary reform. However, the fact that they are hidden rather than explicit and broadly accepted causes us grave concern. In this paper, we argue that this is a clear indication that they are being marginalised from the overarching educational agendas in Australia.

Nan Bahr and Leanne Crosswell



Introduction

This paper provides a commentary on middle years and middle years teacher education reforms in Australia. It discusses the rise of the middle years movement from its grassroots in the schooling system to a position where it attracted interest from state education departments, governing bodies and teacher education programs. It argues that recent evidence suggests that middle schooling has lost ground in the Australian context, and mainstream education agendas are falling silent on the subject. This paper looks at ways of breaking this growing silence, using Queensland as a case study.

The rise

As early as 1993, the middle years emerged as a part of the dominant educational agendas and public discussions at the level of Australian school systems, authorities and educational bodies. This is evidenced in the 1993 report calling for reconstruction of pedagogies in South Australian schools to make them more responsive to the needs of adolescents (Eyers, Cormack & Barratt 1993) and the 1994 establishment of a Victorian education advisory group to investigate the middle years field in more depth. These initiatives prompted national action through the Australian Curriculum Studies Association (ACSA) over a sustained period starting in 1995. While this interest was directly connected to the grassroots movement of the late 1980s and early 1990s, it can be argued that it is fundamentally different and significant because it brought statewide and national attention to the subject. We contend that from 1993 to 2006, middle schooling became part of the broader educational agenda in Australia (see Cumming 1996; Hill & Russell 1999; Luke et al. 2002; Pendergast et al. 2005). During its rise, a series of new possibilities also arose in the Australian educational context. The engagement of education authorities in discussions about the middle years of schooling created a unique opportunity to establish consensus around middle years ideologies, practices, and identities. There was also an opportunity to discuss what

characterised middle years teachers, and how they differed from traditional primary and secondary teachers (see Rumble & Aspland 2009). Alongside this was the potential to establish an identity and possible career recognition for middle years teachers (e.g. being able to identify as a middle years teacher when applying for registration).

Australian momentum for middle years reform started to gain ground from 2000 onwards. At a national level, this can be attributed to the ACSA report, *From Alienation to Engagement* (Cumming 1996) and the *National Middle Schooling Project* funded by Australian Government Department of Employment, Education, Training and Youth Affairs (Barratt 1998). Coincidentally, the year 2000 also marked the opening of Bentley Park College in Cairns — the first school in Queensland that reflected the development of middle schooling as part of a P–12 campus. Since then, a number of large-scale projects have sought to map the unique landscape of middle years schooling in Australia (see Barratt 1998; Chadbourne 2001; Culican, Milburn & Oakley 2006; Cuttance 2001; Goos et al. 2008; Luke et al. 2002; Pendergast, Flanagan et al. 2005; Mills et al. 2008; Middle Years of Schooling Association 2008). Much of this literature highlights the need to enhance specific student outcomes in the middle years of schooling. This includes improving student engagement (Cumming 1996); improving specific skills and areas of the curriculum (e.g. Culican, Emmitt & Oakley 2001; Luke et al. 2002; Mills et al. 2008; Siemon, Virgona & Corneille 2001); developing lifelong learners (Pendergast & Bahr 2005); addressing issues that are unique to the middle years (e.g. primary–secondary transition, Hunter 2002); advocating for research relating to the middle years (Hunter 2007); or simply advocating middle years approaches and philosophies. While this body of research has led to a series of educational reforms that include improving the transition between primary and secondary schools, developing curriculum and pedagogical innovations aimed at enhancing student engagement, and increasing student-centered approaches, concerns

remain about the lack of empirical evidence for the efficacy of such practices (Dinham & Rowe 2007).

The call for middle schooling reform has been taken up strongly at a school level in Australia, particularly in the non-government sector (Dinham & Rowe 2007), with a growing number of schools identifying as middle schools or adopting middle schooling practices (Chadbourne 2001; Hargreaves & Earl 1990; Hill & Russell 1999). State and territory school system authorities have also taken interest in middle years approaches with various initiatives and projects. These include the *Middle years research and development project* (State Government of Victoria 2002); the *Teaching and learning in the middle years in the ACT* project (Australian Capital Territory, Department of Education and Training 2005) and the Northern Territory Government project, *Making the most of the middle years* (O'Sullivan 2005). Such projects have led to educational artifacts such as frameworks, for example the ACT Government's *Framework for Teaching and Learning in the Middle Years* (Australian Capital Territory, Department of Education and Training 2005), and overarching strategies such as the New South Wales Government's recent publication *Our middle years learners — engaged, resilient, successful. An Education Strategy for Years 5 to 9, 2010–2012* (New South Wales, Department of Education and Training 2010). These continue to leave the uptake of middle years approaches to the discretion of a school community. Explicit directives at a systemic or policy level in Australia have been rare, with the exception of the Northern Territory which has both a Middle Years of Schooling Policy and also the project titled *Into the Middle* which has designed curriculum and assessment materials to support the policy directives and principles (O'Sullivan 2006).

We now turn to our case study state, Queensland, and specifically the state government's approach to the middle years. We have identified four distinct milestones that preceded publication of the document *A Flying Start for Queensland Children: Why Year 7 will be part of high school from 2015*

(Queensland Government 2011a). We believe that the first significant milestone was the report, *Queensland the Smart State - Education and Training Reforms for the Future: A White Paper*, which identified the middle years as worthy of far more notice. This report drew attention to the importance of the middle years in equipping 'students with the academic and social skills required in later years of learning' (Queensland Government 2002:14). The second milestone was the state-commissioned report, *The middle years of schooling in Queensland: A way forward* (Carrington 2002), which argued that 'the middle years of schooling in Queensland is poised to move towards a new generation of reform (p. 25). Carrington identified a number of actions to bring about such a reform, but highlighted the need for the 'adoption of the middle years of schooling as a 'first principle' for system and school allocations of physical resources, staffing and timetabling' (p. 25). The key impact of this report was the suggestion that middle schooling should be taken up as a systemic approach in Queensland.

The third milestone was *The Middle Phase of Learning State School Action Plan* (Queensland Government 2003). The purpose of this was to ensure that state school students in Years 4–9 in Queensland:

- engaged in purposeful, intellectually challenging learning
- were provided with opportunities to achieve success
- were supported in the transition from year to year and from primary to secondary education
- interacted with teachers who were prepared to meet the distinctive and diverse needs of students during early adolescence (Queensland Government 2003: 5).

The Action Plan had a significant, two-fold impact. First, it served to legitimise the middle years practices already being taken up by many Queensland schools and, second, it required all Queensland schools to

address middle years concerns, thus highlighting middle years at a systemic level in Queensland.

The fourth milestone was the 2004 directive to all state schools to allocate a student free day for teachers to focus on the middle years of schooling. This was a bold move and an unprecedented systemic initiative intended to give life to the Action Plan at a school level. Interestingly there were few directives or parameters for the focus of the day — with each school community developing a program that best suited its own 'middle phase of learning issues and effective practice' (Queensland Government 2003:12). While this individualised approach may have allowed state schools to develop a customised approach, it did not build sustained uptake of middle years practices, philosophies, or structures (Bryer & Main 2005). One of the key barriers to creating change in schools is the natural cycle of school staffing, with regular shifts in both teaching and administration staff leading to the loss of contextualised expert knowledge and possible reversion to more traditional approaches (Bryer & Main 2005). These four key milestones indicated a strong systemic interest and investment in middle years reforms by 2004, but with little sustained reform at a school level.

The fall

We contend that, at a systemic level, interest in the middle years of schooling started to fall in Australia in 2006. This is not to say that all education systems have put middle years on the backburner — the Northern Territory government, for example, has taken it up in both policy and curriculum development. Instead we are arguing that the momentum has slowed significantly on a national level, and in some states (particularly Queensland).

In that state, though the 2004 initiative was both innovative and flexible in its efforts to bring about change in the middle years, it had resulted in few sustained reforms by 2006 (Bryer & Main 2005). Arguably, in the state schooling sector, the

individualised and separatist nature of professional development regarding the middle years contributed to the lack of momentum and its subsequent falling off the public agenda. Staffing arrangements also played a part in discouraging sustained engagement with middle schooling reform. For example, as teachers were posted to secondary *or* primary school campuses, cross-fertilisation, shared practices, and transition arrangements between feeder primary schools and regional secondary schools were primarily left to the ingenuity of the teacher 'champions'. While some Queensland schools such as Forest Lake State High School and Our Lady of the Assumption Primary School (see Carrington 2003) developed unique approaches to middle years reform, many struggled. Long-term approaches to professional development on middle years issues were unusual, and most schools were running 'one-off' sessions that were not generally integrated over time. Anecdotal evidence indicates that many schools approached middle schooling reform by simply hiring a graduate teacher from a middle school teacher education program, without adjusting the supporting systemic structures of the school. These graduates were supposedly positioned as middle years *leaders or advocates*, but it was unrealistic to expect them, as beginning teachers, to initiate reforms in established school cultures. The evidence also suggests that, as a result, teachers, principals and school communities believed middle schooling reforms to be too challenging.

When funding ceased in 2006, the reform momentum in Queensland slowed considerably and the opportunity for broader discussions about establishing middle schooling as accepted practice, a philosophy, or a chosen career path was gone. Middle years discourse fell from the wider educational agenda in Australia, and particularly in Queensland.

Teacher education

The Australian teacher education sector has also been engaged in looking for ways to better prepare teachers to teach young adolescents.



Australian universities, invigorated by the growing body of research and the increasing momentum around the middle years movement in schools, developed a range of responses. A few designed full middle years 'boutique' programs at both undergraduate and graduate levels, some tinkered with undergraduate programs to add a middle years pathway, while others offered only one or two courses as electives for those interested in the middle phase of learning (Aspland & Crosswell 2002; Rumble & Aspland 2009). Commonalities in these initiatives included:

- a focus on the nature of the adolescent learner from both a developmental orientation (in many cases) and a socio-cultural orientation (in some cases)
- advocacy for innovative pedagogical, curriculum, and assessment approaches aimed at engaging middle years learners
- investigation of middle years philosophies, policies and wider youth issues
- attempts to combine expertise in one or two teaching areas with understanding of middle years learners development and sociological issues.

While most of these initiatives attempted to address some of the issues, practices and philosophies emerging from the school-based middle years movement, few were able to restructure the program in a comprehensive and holistic way; instead, most continued to reflect more traditional teacher education approaches to content, assessment and structures. However, the programs developed by academic teams at Edith Cowan University (de Jong & Chadbourne 2005) and the University of Queensland (Mitchell et al. 2003) were notable exceptions. They were given the freedom and support to design new education approaches for those who wanted to teach middle years students. These programs used innovative curriculum, pedagogy and assessment to ensure their graduates were well prepared to work successfully

in diverse middle years of schooling contexts and able to effectively engage middle years learners. Such programs were 'internationally recognised for the quality of their middle schooling teacher preparation' (Queensland Government 2010b:29). So while Australian universities did respond to the rise in interest in middle years in systemic and school agendas, it could be argued that this response was insufficient or not well implemented.

As the middle years agenda fell from the dominant educational discourse in Australia, a number of issues undermined the value of these specialised teacher education programs. With no formal recognition of middle years teachers, graduates were quickly lost in secondary or primary ideologies and school sites. Most education employment authorities did not allow teachers to identify or register as having either middle years expertise or an interest in teaching this specific age group. Instead, graduates from the middle years programs and initiatives had to identify as either secondary or primary teachers, and it became impossible for universities to track them to middle years positions in state school systems. Employment in schools with a more traditional program often meant that these graduates had to comply with more traditional approaches to curriculum and pedagogy.

Thus we argue that even though the universities are producing teachers well prepared to teach middle years students using middle schooling approaches, because of the lack of clear direction and policy about the middle years in Queensland, these teachers are being absorbed into more traditional schooling programs.

Contested ground — *A Flying Start for Queensland*

The opportunity to revisit the discussions about the middle years of schooling came as collateral with Commonwealth attempts to align the various state schooling systems, at least superficially, by adjusting the age of school entry and the number of years a

student will study in primary and then secondary school throughout their now 13 years of schooling. In Queensland, the state government's publication, *A Flying Start for Queensland Children: Education Green Paper for public consideration* (Queensland Government 2010a) recommends a fundamental change in the transition point between primary and secondary schooling. Students had previously begun school at the age of five, spent seven years in primary school, and then moved to secondary school from Years 8 to 12. In 2008, a preparatory year was added for students prior to Year 1, extending the schooling experience to 13 years. Traditional schooling structures in secondary schools, where students moved between disciplinary specialists were different from those in primary schools where a single teacher nurtured a class of about 25 students for each academic year. The green paper called for a shift with students moving to secondary school a year earlier in Year 7. Though the government's intent was not necessarily to reinvigorate middle schooling debates, this is precisely what happened. Over the past year, the government and middle schooling researchers, experts and advocates (including the authors of this paper) met many times to discuss the efficacy of middle years practices and philosophies.

About the same time, the federal government established an authority to develop a national curriculum — the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority. The first discussion documents from this Authority (2010) noted the need for careful consideration of formal learning between the early and senior years. Although this (again) was not intended to reinvigorate middle years of schooling debates, it offered advocates (who were invited participants at the forums and roundtable discussions) the opportunity to call for reconsideration of the unique needs of middle years learners.

Over the past 12 months, these advocates have argued for the middle years philosophy and practices with key stakeholders from both the state schooling sector and the government (Queensland Government 2010b).

Our key aim has been to develop a shared understanding about the possibilities and urgent need for middle schooling reforms.

This paper now outlines and critiques the key premises presented in the Flying Start document.

Key Premise 1: 'Too many students are underachieving'

The green paper notes that 'Too many students are underachieving' (p. 2). Student underachievement was a key issue that prompted the original interest in middle schooling reforms in Queensland, and was a concern raised over a decade ago by the Queensland School Reform Longitudinal Study (QSRLS) (Lingard et al. 2001), which identified a serious dip in achievement over the transition between primary and secondary years. From the position being argued in this paper, the green paper highlights the fact that not much has changed in Queensland in the last decade to systemically address student underachievement, including addressing the transition from primary to secondary contexts.

On a positive note, the above premise reopened the discussion about the efficacy of middle years practices. It presented the opportunity to revisit the research commissioned by the Department of Education, Science and Training that identified that middle years practices and approaches effectively addressed the aforementioned achievement dip between primary and secondary contexts (Pendergast, Flanagan et al. 2005). The evidence was clear that in schools with strong middle phase of learning leadership, achievement developed seamlessly across the transition. The research also highlighted that in traditional secondary schools without a focus on middle years practices, achievement was marked by a severe back tracking of progress, with students at the end of their first and second years achieving worse outcomes than they had in their last year of primary schooling. Intellectual rigor, connection to the real world, and higher-order thinking outcomes were all depressed against the same student group's benchmark at the end of their primary years.

However, such a trend was not evident in schools with a clear commitment to middle phase of learning reforms. In these schools, achievement continued to track positively and student engagement with learning continued to improve throughout the secondary years of learning (Pendergast, Flanagan et al. 2005). This indicates that students in the middle phase need different learning contexts and teachers with specialist knowledge of early adolescence and learning in that phase. It also suggests that is important to ensure that students are 'supported in their transition from year to year and from primary to secondary education' (Queensland Government 2003:5). The strong message is that *simply changing the transition point between primary and secondary schooling will not have a substantial impact on student achievement.*

Key Premise 2: 'Quality of teaching influences student learning'

The green paper's next key premise is that 'within schools, the quality of teaching is the biggest influence on student achievement' (Queensland Government 2010a: 3). While this comment highlights the value of our teachers, it does not identify the attributes that contribute to high quality teaching — especially during the middle phase of learning. It has been well established, both in Australia and the United States, that excellent teaching draws on much more than disciplinary expertise and related pedagogical content knowledge (Darling-Hammond 2006; 2010). It also relies on specialist understanding of the needs of the students being taught. To raise achievement in the middle phase of learning, teachers need full and comprehensive preparation and professional development, and the learning contexts need to support their engagement with learners in new ways. Middle years approaches have characteristics that align with the developmental attributes of young people, and connect to learning environments common in both primary and secondary schooling. Rumble and Aspland (2009) contend that the middle years teacher is a specialist in adolescence by being a designer of a wholesome curriculum and a passionate advocate for the

middle years learner and middle years reform. Another way to conceptualise the attributes of a middle years teacher is to look at the unique skills they need. In this phase of education teachers need to:

- balance teaching for sequential development of disciplinary understandings and for real world application
- bridge the difference in nurturing that is possible when students work with a single teacher for a full academic year, against what is possible when they have to deal with a parade of discipline specialists each working on their area of the curriculum
- work and plan learning as teams of teachers focused on exploiting, extending and building understanding of how disciplines connect to make sense of the world
- provide appropriate pastoral and advisory arrangements directed at the needs of students to develop resilience, agency, independence and team skills.

While the future direction and uptake of middle schooling philosophy and practices in Queensland is uncertain, the issue of providing quality teaching in this field remains problematic. However, Queensland universities *do* continue to prepare middle years teachers, albeit in a context of uncertainty and inconsistency about approaches (Queensland Government, 2010b). To improve the quality of middle years teachers in schools, the *Review of teacher education and school induction* (Queensland Government, 2010b) recommends that:

- employing authorities provide clear policy directives about the future of middle schooling
- universities build partnerships with schools that demonstrate a commitment to middle schooling
- pre-service programs focus on student-centred approaches such as cooperative learning



- schools focus more on middle schooling so that 'on practicum' preservice teachers can consolidate their theoretical understanding.

We argue that the issue of ensuring the quality of middle years teachers *will not be addressed by simply relocating young people to secondary school campuses from Year 7*. These sentiments are echoed in the *Middle Phase of Learning Action Plan* (Queensland Government 2003) which noted that 'effective programs in middle phase of learning do not result specifically from structural change' (p. 4). Instead, we argue that what is needed is a clear policy on the future direction of middle schooling in Queensland, and an overarching position on the essential attributes of middle years teachers and addressing their ongoing professional development. That is to say, ensuring the quality of middle years teachers requires some cohesion and consistency about accepted education practices and approaches.

Key Premise 3: 'Adolescence is a time of great change'

The Flying Start document comments that:

Adolescence is a time of great physical, psychological and social change. Children and young people learn best when they are in age appropriate settings. They need to be engaged and challenged by their learning experiences. As they get older and spend more time at school they are better prepared to pursue in-depth learning in more specialised subjects. (Queensland Government, 2010a:15)

It goes on to state that adolescents 'will have a better chance of benefitting ... if they have access to the specialist teachers and facilities ... in secondary school' (Queensland Government 2010a:16). We argue that while it is true that specialist teachers and facilities make an incredible difference in student outcomes, for the middle phase of learning specialisation is not the same as disciplinary expertise. Differing views based predominantly on historical anecdotal legacies have proliferated between advocates of disciplinarity (teaching discrete subjects, e.g. maths)

and interdisciplinarity (e.g. teaching thematically and drawing from across disciplines). However, research into the nature of learning strongly suggests that learners need disciplinary foundations alongside interdisciplinary connections with broad application at their level of understanding (Van Bergen, Bahr et al. 2009). That is, both disciplinarity and interdisciplinary have a place. In the middle phase of learning where students are moving to more abstract thought, and particularly in a generation where disciplines are forming and reforming at an incredible rate (e.g. robotics connecting maths, physics, technological arts), imagining learning without interdisciplinarity is particularly limiting. The approaches need to be carefully balanced with a slight lean toward expertise and specialisation, but with the attributes of the individual learner paramount in any discussion.

As we have outlined above, a number of contested areas have emerged from the green paper. Over the past 12 months of consultation with the Queensland Government, middle years researchers, experts and advocates have lobbied for consideration of:

- support for the move of Year 7 to secondary contexts with a tangible commitment to effective professional development, and supportive leadership and systemic structures (e.g., shared planning time)
- reinvigorated discourse and public communication about the distinctiveness of the middle phase of learning, and cessation of the promotion of purely discipline expertise as the singular vital element in raising student achievement in the middle phase of learning
- the learning and development of students across the middle phase (Years 4–9) and tangible support for the distinctive requirements of teaching and learning throughout the phase, not just at an arbitrary transition point
- the systemic structures that support effective teaching for the middle phase of learning.

This initiative will be effective only if the government commits to supporting professional development, developing career reward systems for specialists in this phase, through work and staffing formulas, enabling teams of teachers to collaborate meaningfully between primary and secondary campuses and to share planning time.

Junior secondary — marginalising 'middle years' from the agenda

On 9 June 2011, the Queensland Government announced the move of Year 7 to secondary school in 2015 (Queensland Government 2011b). Though highly anticipated, this announcement had a severe sting in its tail for middle years advocates as the government had named the new approach 'junior secondary'. This deliberate rejection of any reference to middle years in the documents supporting the announcement is a clear indication that this approach has lost ground in Queensland. The state has shifted from being the one regarded as best placed to lead the new wave of much needed middle years reform (Carrington 2002), to the one ushering in the new 'junior secondary' approach. The strong support for middle years philosophy and practice in Queensland over the past year was not enough to convince key government stakeholders that it is a valid and proven approach to addressing the issues raised in the green paper. (Though raised as new issues, the initiatives were the foundation of middle schooling reform at least 20 years ago.) In our opinion, this recent announcement heralds a deepening silence around middle years education in Australia.

Conclusion

Though the *Flying Start* initiatives and the new National Curriculum alignment agenda appeared to be significant backward steps for the middle years agenda, their publication has reinvigorated discussion about middle schooling in Queensland. These discussions have highlighted the need for a different level and type of support to ensure continued achievement for students across seamless transitions throughout their schooling. The

Director-General of Education Queensland and the Assistant Director hosted forums, invited stakeholders to comment and provide feedback, and commissioned status documents from researchers. Over the past 12 months there has been frenetic activity and excitement around the possibilities for middle schooling in Australia, and Queensland especially. However, the June announcement that Queensland state schools will be taking up a junior secondary approach to schooling has dashed the hopes of even the most optimistic middle years advocate. It is

obvious that in the current education environment, policy makers and government decision makers still consider middle years philosophy and practices to be highly questionable. Research that documents the ability of middle years practices to successfully address the continuing issues of today's schools continues to be overlooked. As a result, middle years of schooling advocates have witnessed the middle years agenda losing significant ground in Australia.

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