

MIDDLE YEARS

INTRODUCTION

The term 'middle years' is used to describe young adolescents at the end of primary school and the beginning of secondary school (Year 5 to Year 8). These students, generally aged from 10 to 14 years, are experiencing the onset of puberty and have particular physical, emotional, educational and cultural needs that require special attention. *The middle years of schooling should provide opportunities for young people to learn and grow in ways that acknowledge and respect this unique and special phase of their development.* (Cumming, 1997)

Over the last 10 years there has been a number of major studies into the particular needs of this age group. Research reflects many of the views of respondents. Generally respondents identified five major areas that need to be addressed if we are to provide the best learning opportunities and future for young adolescents. These major areas are:

- a curriculum that is relevant and flexible, allowing students to make connections between learning areas
- quality teaching that is challenging and stimulating for students and keeps them engaged in learning
- effective programs that support students in their transition from primary to secondary school
- school organisational structures that allow for the flexible use of time and resources to meet student needs
- a supportive environment that is built on a commitment of respect and care for each student.

The transition to secondary school was identified by respondents as a significant time for middle years students. It is often an exciting time with many of these students looking forward to new challenges, new friends and new experiences and welcoming the changes that secondary school brings. Some, however, feel less secure than in the familiar and predictable environment of primary school and do not find the change to be a happy one.

Introduction to secondary school can be a confusing experience as students are faced with a number of different teachers with whom they are not familiar, bells indicating the end of lessons every 40 minutes or so and often a different room for every subject. Some students adjust to this more easily than others.

There is substantial evidence that if students do not have positive learning and personal experiences in the middle years they are at risk of becoming disinterested in school and learning in general (Barber, 1999). This can have long-term detrimental effects on their education and future prospects.

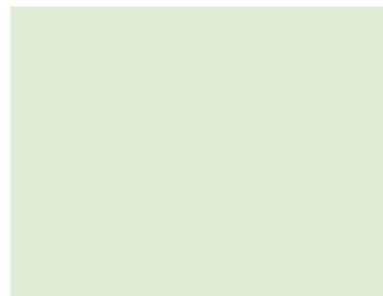
In response many schools have designed effective programs that help to address the needs of middle years students and in particular, assist them with their transition to secondary school. Integral to these programs is the transfer of information about individual student achievement.

While a number of effective programs have been established by individual schools and groups of schools, and some students assimilate the changes they experience, there is no focused longer-term systemic strategy to support schools to meet the needs of their middle years students.

Middle school years are difficult years for many reasons – changing and emotional years in students' personal lives ... where their 'identity' is often lost. (Personal submission)

THE DIVERSE NEEDS OF MIDDLE YEARS STUDENTS

The particular needs of middle years students are different from those of young children and older adolescents but like all developmental stages these students vary greatly in their learning styles, their ability to focus on particular tasks and their general levels of performance.



middle school years ... are ... seen as a "learning slump" and not much is expected or achieved. (School staff member)

There needs to be maintained (if not increased) liaison between primary and secondary schools to identify students at risk ... (School staff meeting)

... [middle years] students appreciate teachers who seek to develop a positive, supportive relationship with [them] ... (State office staff meeting)

Need to adapt to the students' needs and have a good understanding of what is happening in the child's brain at that time. (Regional principals' meeting)

Provide appropriate support staff to primary schools to reduce the number of students with low levels of literacy and numeracy skills. (NSW Primary Principals' Association)

Class sizes in these years need to be reduced ... (for) ... those with low levels of literacy and numeracy skills ... (Personal submission)

The nature of the student should be recognised and catered for to motivate students. Students at this stage are undergoing dramatic personal, physical and social change where they are trying out roles and values. They are developing a sense of personal identity, exploring questions of values, morals and ethics, finding a place and securing a level of status in their peer group, developing a balance between independence and adult figures, dealing with the impact of commercial issues, multiple expectations at home, school and with friends and developing commitments to people and causes. (School staff meeting)

Research has identified the particular needs of these students to include:

- feeling like they belong
- developing a sense of themselves
- having opportunities to act independently and cooperatively
- being recognised and valued
- feeling supported and challenged
- feeling secure (Cumming, 1997).

Some respondents suggested that, as a starting point in addressing the needs of middle years students, teachers need to develop a better understanding of the needs, interests and the developmental readiness of young adolescents.

Teachers need to be trained in what to expect from adolescents as they move from children to adults. (School staff meeting)

The importance of developing a strong foundation in literacy and numeracy in the primary years was raised by respondents. They noted the difficulty students face throughout their education if they enter Year 7 without this foundation. Some respondents suggested that more teachers are needed to support students with learning difficulties.

There is research that shows that by the time students are 14 years of age, their levels of literacy and numeracy are strong indicators of future success. Students with high levels of literacy and numeracy achievement are more likely to continue at school and go on to well paid jobs (Penman, 2004).

Provide better support for developing literacy and numeracy skills in primary school. Present levels of STL [support teacher learning] allocation are not adequate. (School staff meeting)

If the DET and the State Government accepts Penman's (2004) findings ..., it would be irresponsible of DET not to introduce many more STLD teachers into our primary schools and to adequately fund those schools in disadvantaged areas where literacy levels are poor and/or there are students from non-English speaking backgrounds. (School Teachers Federation meeting)

There are some middle years students who are more likely to experience learning difficulties. For example, findings reported in *The Report of the Review of Aboriginal Education Freeing the Spirit: Dreaming an Equal Future (NSW AECG and NSW DET, 2004)* show that some Aboriginal students are entering Year 7 with a deficit of about 30 months in their reading ability. In Years 3 and 5, Aboriginal

students are roughly 19 months behind non-Aboriginal students in their literacy learning.

By Year 7, for many Aboriginal students that gap increases to somewhere between 30 and 36 months of learning. (NSW AECG and NSW DET, 2004: 112)

The particular needs of students who have English as a second language (ESL) were identified by a number of respondents as requiring specific support in the middle years. This group includes students who have a non-English speaking background (NESB) as well as students who have newly arrived in Australia. Some respondents expressed the view that these students have a greater need to be accepted by their peer group. It was also highlighted by respondents that there needs to be recognition of the prior learning of these students in their first language.

Address the NESB and new arrival students' alienation from school and particularly in the middle years of school. They need to have a sense of belonging; engagement with the curriculum; practical orientation in their education ... (Migrant Interagency Group)

The needs of students with disabilities were also raised as needing particular attention during the middle years.

The middle years are a time in which the strength of peer group pressure and the push for independence can weaken relationships between students with disability and their peers. The notion of 'belonging' becomes increasingly important to middle and high school students and without active support and an inclusive culture, students who are different in some way are vulnerable to marginalisation and exclusion. (Institute for Family Advocacy and Leadership Development)

Concern was expressed that there was not sufficient attention to the needs of gifted and talented students during the middle years. Respondents felt that unless the specific needs of these students are addressed they are at risk of disengaging from school and perhaps never achieving their potential. Some people were concerned about the lack of continuity in the curriculum between Years 6 and 7 causing some students to become bored.

Gifted students are not catered for when entering Year 7. They are expected to revise subject matter already covered in Years 4, 5 or 6. This leads to more gifted students being dumbed down and consequently switching off. (Parent)

Increased use of bridging programs between feeder primary and high schools. [Our school] ran a program aimed at gifted and talented last year, which was very well received by parents and students ... (Parent)

A significant number of people commented on the needs of boys in the middle years. Many respondents suggested that boys were at greater risk of switching off. A number of solutions were offered including ensuring that the curriculum is more interesting for boys and making some same sex classes for some subjects.

NESB and refugee students have diverse levels of educational standards and preparedness. These differences need to be identified and addressed through a flexible curriculum to accommodate and respond effectively to individual ESL and other educational needs and interests ... (Ethnic Communities Council)

More students are being diagnosed with disabilities yet funding levels are not increasing and teachers are left to handle these problems themselves in the classroom. (School staff member)

Gifted students need the opportunity for enrichment, extension opportunities. (School staff meeting)

We have plenty of research on the middle years – we need to ensure it is applied or we will keep getting student disengagement, particularly from boys. (TAFE staff member)

Middle years of schooling need to meet the needs of boys more. (Joint school & community meeting)

There needs to be more hands-on learning. More resourcing and focus needs to be allocated to the “forgotten” group of students with learning difficulties and those disengaged with learning. (School staff meeting)

Students “switch off” due to an enforced curriculum. Some freedom of choice – electives, choice of learning activities – should be introduced. (School staff member)

More flexibility in the curriculum to cater for students individual talents/interests. (Parent)

... many schools visited during the field trips reported that Aboriginal students engaged in transition programs attended school more regularly and arrived at school on time. (NSW AECG and NSW DET, 2004; cited in NSW Department of Community Services – Communities Division)

A greater focus on boys’ education and appropriate teaching/ learning strategies ... Wider curriculum choices – why should students be limited to core subjects such as science, geography when their interests lie in areas such as wood technology, graphic design, etc. (School staff meeting)

At this age boys often begin to assert themselves which means rebelling against females in authority such as teachers and mums ... English texts should appeal to boys, Geography should include much more field work – this would require curriculum change. (Personal submission)

[Provide] opportunities for multi-age and or gender specific class or group learning, based upon current research on how boys and girls learn. (State office staff meeting)

Engagement

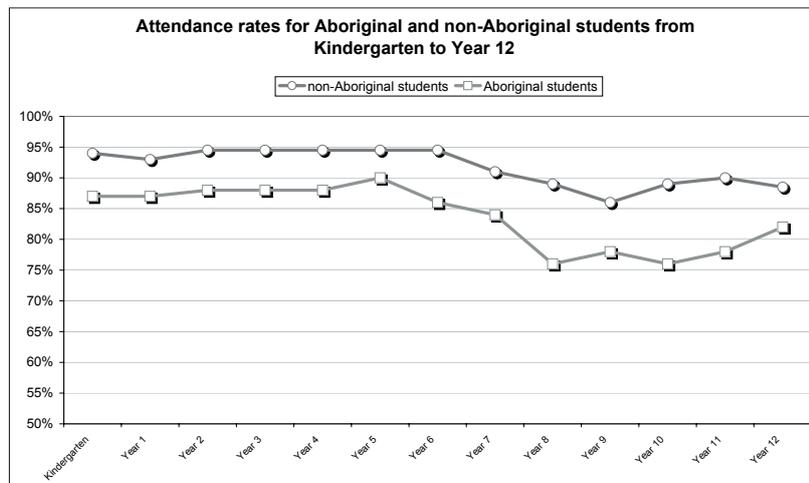
The issue of middle years students switching off or disengaging from their learning if their needs are not met was raised by a substantial number of respondents.

To keep students engaged in the middle years, we need to continue including hands-on activities that are challenging and engaging ... (Personal submission)

With regard to primary schools in particular a lot of students become disengaged as they feel they are being treated like children when they are lumped in with the rest of the school. (Personal submission)

An indicator of disengagement can be when students have numerous unexplained absences from school. The following graph contains data collected from 200 government schools. It shows the attendance rates of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students between Kindergarten and Year 12. There is a significant decline in attendance from Year 6 through to about Year 9 when attendance patterns begin to improve. There is evidence that these patterns improve after Year 9 because some disengaged students have left school.

Figure 1



Source: NSW AECG and NSW DET, 2004: 25

Respondents identified the curriculum as one of a number of reasons for student disengagement. They stated that greater flexibility is needed so that teachers can better meet the needs of these students.

Less crowded curriculum, relevance and appropriateness. Involving students in selecting curriculum topics and then structure lessons from there. Achievable and understandable outcomes for students to know what they are working towards.
(School staff meeting)

Other respondents felt that students disengage because the teaching is not always appropriate for middle years students.

While a revitalised curriculum is mandatory, the teaching practices of middle school teachers need to be modified.
(School staff meeting)

A number of respondents felt that the structure of primary and secondary schools leads to students disengaging particularly at the transition point.

From discussion with early school leavers, the reason most disengage from school during the middle years is primarily because students are required to fit into the learning environment rather than the learning environment being sympathetic to their needs, interests and learning styles of the individual. The general feeling of these young people is that they just “don’t fit in”. (Community member)

While respondents were concerned about academic progress in the middle years, they were also concerned that if the students’ social adjustment and welfare needs were not met they are at risk of disengaging. Some respondents expressed concern that some students were not emotionally ready for the significant change that faced them in secondary school.

CURRICULUM FOR MIDDLE YEARS STUDENTS

Students in Years 5 and 6 experience a curriculum in six key learning areas. Their learning outcomes are described as being at Stage 3. Details of the primary curriculum are contained in the section *Primary School Years*.

Students in Years 7 and 8 experience a curriculum in eight key learning areas which contain a number of subjects. The learning outcomes are described as being at Stage 4. Details of the secondary curriculum are contained in the section *Secondary School Years*.

In an attempt to make the curriculum between Stages 3 and 4 more continuous the Board of Studies has revised the syllabuses for Years 7 to 10 taking into account the needs of middle years students.

Some respondents, including the NSW Secondary Principals Council, did not think that there was a close enough link between the syllabus for Years 5 and 6 and the syllabus for Years 7 and 8.

Junior secondary [is] frequently characterised by repeats of material already covered in primary school or in other

A teacher poorly placed can really affect an adolescent’s learning... (School staff meeting)

Try to minimise the gap between year 6 and year 7 in terms of teaching practice and assessment. ... (School staff meeting)

Any model that creates challenges in Year 6, which is often treated as a time for “treading water”... Year 6 could possibly be one of the most dangerous times for disengagement. (Federation of P&Cs’ Association of NSW)

secondary subjects, uninviting classroom lessons, low performance expectations ... (Secondary Principals' Council)

The issue (of mandatory hours) creates an overloaded curriculum in Years 7 and 8 with little flexibility to respond to local needs and contexts ... (Secondary Principals' Council).

Teachers need to teach to the child rather than to the curriculum. (NSW Primary Principals' Association)

As well within the [primary] classroom environment make the method of teaching in some way distinct from the younger years i.e. more reflective of what to expect in high school. (School meeting)

... they just need inspiring teachers. (School staff member)

This is a distinct learning group needing specialist learning strategies. (Regional staff meeting)

While a revitalised curriculum is mandatory, the teaching practices of middle school teachers need to be modified. (School staff meeting)

The Board of Studies mandates some time requirements for particular subjects. The Department sets additional mandatory course hours in its schools for Years 7 to 10 in English, mathematics and science, as well as requirements for elective hours, sport and special religious education.

A number of respondents suggested that schools could better meet the needs of Years 7 and 8 students with a secondary curriculum that has greater flexibility in time requirements as well as in subject choice.

Removal of some of the mandatory curriculum requirements to allow for local needs that fit the context of learners ... (School staff member)

Flexible syllabuses that are tailored to a school's socio-economic (etc) situation to encourage relevance to a student's learning. (School staff meeting)

In summary, respondents felt that the areas requiring attention to better meet the curriculum needs of middle years students are:

- the 'freeing up' of the curriculum to provide a greater opportunity for elective study
- resolving curriculum overlap or repetition over Years 5 to 8
- improving learning programs with particular emphasis on the needs of boys.

QUALITY TEACHING

Other respondents felt that it was not necessarily the curriculum that was of concern but rather that the teaching practice of teachers of Years 5 to 8 was not meeting students' expectations or needs.

A significant number of respondents identified that effective teaching is essential if there is to be any improvement in the education of students in the middle years. There was a view that teaching practices need to be more stimulating to students, emphasising skills development and knowledge more relevant to their everyday lives.

Many respondents felt that students disengage primarily because the teaching is not always appropriate for middle years students. Respondents identified that the teaching required for students in the middle years needs a different approach. A meeting of State office staff highlighted a range of research findings, including the following quote by J Barratt from an Australian report on middle schooling (Barratt, 1998):

Many teachers have come to realise that neither a slightly more demanding version of the early years of primary school, nor a watered down rendering of post-compulsory requirements is appropriate for these students. (State office staff meeting)

Respondents commented particularly on the teaching of Years 7 and 8 students. There was a general feeling that the teaching was too content driven and instruction-based. They suggested that early

adolescent students needed greater stimulation and challenge if they are to be engaged in their learning.

Employ a variety of teaching strategies that meet the variety of learning styles and needs of the students and attend to their interests. (School staff meeting)

Forget about the traditional subjects and concentrate on success. Life is about learning, not about whether you're good at Maths or Science or Geography. Train teachers to teach these subjects in an integrated way with learning skills as the primary focus. Find out what the students are interested in. Give them assignments based on their interest. Access their level of effort, their passion. A love of learning comes from the passion and inspiration of a teacher. Those qualities are few and far between in schools. (Parent)

There was strong support for middle school teaching practices which are more practical and relevant to students' everyday lives. Some respondents also felt that if students had more input into what they were learning, they would be more engaged.

To keep students engaged in the middle years, we need to continue ... "hands-on" activities, that are challenging and engaging ... (Personal submission)

Activities varied in lessons to motivate and encourage students to set benchmarks for individual improvement rather than see ranking in the cohort as the main gauge. (School staff meeting)

In meetings held by the NSW Commission for Children and Young People, children and young people felt that learning needed to be fun:

When lessons are fun it's easier to learn.

Good teachers make learning interesting and fun. (NSW Commission for Children and Young People)

There were varied opinions of what 'fun learning' was all about but the activities that the children identified as fun were all about making the learning relevant to them.

Several respondents identified the need to ensure that teaching is not just subject based but makes links between learning areas in a way that better reflects the way these students think and learn.

We are at present examining our curriculums for middle school 2005, and trying to incorporate themes for a holistic approach – similar to primary – instead of separate KLAs. ... One difficulty is the need to meet the curriculum demands from each KLA, including primary – as there is little flexibility in what must be taught at the time. (School staff member)

High schools need to cater to middle year students more holistically (as primary schools do) rather than as dealing with them as a teacher of one subject. High schools need to implement strategies so that the teacher can come to know each child as a whole. (School staff meeting)

Children need to be engaged, excited, challenged and TAUGHT in the middle years. It would be nice to see children encouraged for GOOD work as much as is done for the miscreants. (Parent)

Working in groups and teams so that students can develop confidence, interpersonal skills, team work, [and] group leadership is vital in the middle years. (School parent meeting)

The answer is always inspired teachers and good practice ... our problem is an established culture in junior secondary that Years 7 and 8 are 'a bludge' ... (DET staff member)

Teachers in these years need to teach the student, not the content. (School staff meeting)

Children to have more say in what they are doing. (Joint school and community meeting)

Integrate learning at every opportunity. (Personal submission)

Teachers teaching the middle years require specialist training in how to meet the specific needs of pre-adolescent and adolescent students. (School staff meeting)

... any primary or secondary teacher should be given special training in this age group. (Parent)

Quality Teaching approach should be more thoroughly supported and endorsed as policy. (State office staff meeting)

... staffing for the next year should be organised as part of the transition process ... (Joint school and community meeting)

The transition process for targeted students has worked well ... (School P&C meeting)

Meaningful transition for all stage 3 students into stage 4 [requires] teacher professional dialogue ... (School staff meeting)

Professional learning

Professional learning opportunities for teachers of middle years students were identified by respondents as essential if teachers are to adapt their teaching practice to meet the needs of these students.

Support for teachers implementing syllabi in a way that gives students ownership of their learning and helps them see relevance in the curriculum should be provided through ongoing professional development opportunities. Some flexibility of syllabi is needed... (Personal submission)

Low literacy and numeracy could be addressed by common training opportunities for existing and new teachers. Teachers should be given time to learn about the methods of their colleagues in primary or secondary schools. ... (School staff meeting).

Some respondents expressed support for the Department's *Quality Teaching in NSW Public Schools (NSW DET, 2003)* framework. This framework was developed to provide a renewed focus on appropriate teaching particularly in the early years of secondary school. These respondents expressed strong support for the focus on collaborative planning and its value as a professional learning experience.

The 'Quality Teaching' model has many effective strategies to target engagement. A strong focus on the implementation of this model may provide some answer. (Personal submission)

TRANSITION

Transition Programs

The transition from Year 6 to Year 7 was identified as a major issue for students. Many parents, while recognising that some schools operated effective transition programs, called for more meaningful programs to ease students' transition.

Primary and secondary schools need to be offered a framework for transition programs and additional funding to release teachers to implement it. (School staff meeting)

The jump between primary and high school no matter how much preparation is huge. Children progress from having one teacher solely responsible for them; that teacher has to make the effort regarding discipline, nurturing and genuine care, to having an abundance of teachers more than happy to see the last of them after a 40 minute period. They have been in a state of 'consistent' education and then thrown into one of inconsistency and unsettled organisation. (Personal submission)

Some respondents noted that many students found the adjustment to secondary school easy, particularly when systematic efforts had been made to assist students' entry to secondary school before enrolment.

Schools already have many specific primary to secondary transition programs in place. Our College programs commence in February and often involve staff working outside usual school

hours by attending P&C meetings, parent forums, etc. (School staff member)

Some respondents described transition programs that are operating successfully in some primary and secondary schools. These programs include aspects of:

- Years 7 and 8 teachers adopting some primary teaching practices including introducing interactive and group learning
- having fewer teachers involved with each core class group
- team teaching across faculties
- establishing homerooms and transition support options.

The work of teachers in developing and maintaining such practices was acknowledged.

The profile of middle years teachers needs to be raised. They are the unsung heroes of the profession, and good teachers in these years provide the foundation of a good education system. (Parent)

Some respondents stated that they wanted transition practices applied more effectively and evenly across the state.

... formalise transition programs and properly resource them! So far, NSW DET just expects everything to be done on a shoestring by the schools! (School P&C meeting)

Some respondents suggested that future professional learning initiatives could be built on the best practice data gathered by the Department of Education and Training's 2000-3 *Linkages* program. This statewide program, supported by locally based consultants, was a focused strategy to improve transition practices among particular groups of schools, and gather information on exemplary existing transition programs.

In 2002 the school participated in a very successful program called Linkages that helped to bridge the gap between high schools and primary schools. Targeted funding was available ... to participate in a range of orientation activities that supported Year 6 in their transition into high school. The funding has subsequently ceased and the successful program has been downgraded significantly. (School staff meeting)

Tracking student achievement

The need to track student achievement particularly across primary and secondary school was raised by a number of respondents. Concern was expressed that there is currently no standard way in which this occurs. It was felt that many students' achievements remain unrecognised in Year 7 resulting in teachers reteaching the same knowledge and skills and students feeling unchallenged and unsupported.

Some formal assessment or hand over to go from primary school to high school. This caters for individual children's needs and formally recognises children at risk (ESL, Aboriginal, learning difficulties). (School staff meeting)

Have involvement in high school life on a regular basis, not just one off. (School student meeting)

While a number of focused strategies and initiatives have been implemented...there is yet to be a co-ordinated approach which addresses the full range of middle school issues. (State office staff meeting)

A common, simple, state-wide electronic tracking of support and programs undertaken by students needs to be developed and made available to all schools for consistent tracking and monitoring of student support and progress. (NSW Primary Principals' Association)

Student records need to be able to travel with the student from school to school (including when a student moves) and should be in a standard format to indicate to the new school what level each student's abilities are at. (Personal submission)

SCHOOL STRUCTURES

Some respondents suggested that middle schools should be established so that there is a focus exclusively on these students. It was argued that this would allow teachers to specialise in the learning needs of middle years students.

Where the opportunity exists, middle schools should be established. (Joint school and community meeting)

Yes. Students come from many different primary schools and backgrounds. They are not jig-saw pieces who fit comfortably together in the one-size-fits-all system we currently have. (Parent)

The majority of respondents, however, were not in favour of establishing separate middle schools. Some of these respondents noted that middle schools would create additional transition points for students between Years 4 and 5 and between Years 8 and 9.

Separate middle schools are definitely not the way to go. They only create more exit points from the public education system. (Regional principals' meeting)

Respondents who did not think that there should be separate middle schools, made a number of suggestions to assist these students using the current primary and secondary school structures.

... Working in partnership between primary school teachers of years 5/6 and the high school teachers of years 7/8 on a rotation basis and utilising both school settings will not only provide staffing flexibility (to keep them motivated) but will enhance effective learning outcomes for students. ... (School staff member)

It is important that class groups are taught by only a small number of teachers in the first two years of secondary schooling ... taught by teachers who see themselves as teachers of students rather than teachers of specialist subjects. (State office staff member)

SUPPORTIVE ENVIRONMENTS

Relationships

While adolescents are beginning to become more independent of adults and could be distancing themselves from adult authority, research indicates the importance of these young people having a strong bond with supportive adults (Hargreaves et al, 1990).

Many respondents noted the importance of students' social adjustment and welfare during the middle years. The need for allowing students more independence and giving them greater say over their learning was raised by a number of respondents.

We believe that a true middle school should exist. (School P&C meeting)

Trial the establishment of middle schools. (School staff meeting)

In terms of current structures, they can be and are appropriate – it is what we do within the structures that really counts. (Joint school and community meeting)

A good relationship will need to be developed between teacher/student – to achieve this we feel there should be a “home” teacher who teaches core subjects and sees the students a couple of times a day. (School staff meeting)

We should allow our children more space to express their views and set their learning goals. (Community member)

Respondents also recognised the importance of the relationship among students and between student and teacher at this time.

[Teachers] need more specialist training in behaviour, living skills, music... (School staff member)

The important things [for middle school kids] are about relationships; how to get needs met without hurting others; how to work harmoniously with others to reach shared goals; how to resolve conflict effectively without violence; how to relate to people who may be different to you (other sex, other culture, with a disability). ... RELATIONSHIPS are a focus for this group. (Community member)

The submission from the NSW Commission for Children and Young People stated that when children and young people were asked about teachers they were:

... unanimous in explaining that good teachers are those who know how to create and maintain quality relationships with students and how to maintain fair boundaries of acceptable behaviour without demeaning, bullying or being disrespectful. (NSW Commission for Children and Young People).

The children and young people described the relationship as follows:

Teachers should know how to talk to you, to communicate with you and get along with you just like friends.

Teachers who talk with you like an adult and connect are good.

I like my teacher 'cause he listens to what you have to say and lets you explain.

Need to reach a balance between being nice to students and in control of the class. (NSW Commission for Children and Young People)

Respondents expressed the view that participation levels of parents and community members are essential as the middle years student progresses through the early secondary years. Many of the secondary schools that have well established middle years programs have included strategies that help develop better home/school communication and support.

A planned approach to include the community into all phases of the development and implementation of middle years initiatives has the potential to grow confidence in public education, enhance parent-teacher-student communication and draw on local expertise across a range of areas, for example, curriculum. (State office staff meeting)

Specialisation in middle schooling

In recognition of the particular needs of early adolescent learners respondents suggested that they would like to have greater flexibility in their staffing around the middle years. Some respondents suggested that with flexibility, staffing arrangements could be organised across Years 5 to 8.

I think young adolescents need teachers who are interested and enjoy their jobs. (Parent)

Middle years – a tough time on a personal level, they are going through many adolescent changes physically which may affect their learning. (School staff meeting)

Build and maintain effective relationships. (School staff meeting)

Close relationships with the families help prevent alienation. (Personal submission)

Need to be creative/flexible. Not just wedded to K-6 and 7-12 structure ... (School community meeting)

Already some universities are offering a specialised middle school teaching degree. (School staff meeting)

Specialist “middle school” teachers within a more flexible high school structure could be very beneficial. (School staff meeting)

If specialist middle school teachers were introduced, would it attract sufficient teachers? (School staff meeting)

We do not believe there is a need for special middle years teachers ... (Joint school and community meeting)

... there was concern that teachers would be trapped in middle or senior years and unable to transfer. (School student meeting)

Differing employment conditions for primary and secondary teachers ... all staff should operate under the same conditions. (Joint school and community meeting)

The research and studies seem to suggest that there are specific learning needs for middle years students. As a teacher of years 4, 5 and 6 for over 20 years, I would like very much to extend my knowledge and skills by working with year 7 and 8 students, and associated staff. It seems to me that my wealth of experience, expertise and continuing enthusiasm could be a real asset in the quest for improved middle years learning and teaching. There must be many years 5-8 teachers who would feel the same way. (School staff meeting)

From my work with schools across the Riverina and South Coast areas of NSW it is evident that there are some schools which have overcome systems formulas, such as the staffing formula, in order to operate some type of middle years programs. This means that schools are providing programs based on their own situation which requires examining local needs. In most cases such ideas are not easily transferable into other locations but never the less these initiatives should be promoted within the department ... (Personal submission)

Respondents were divided on the issue of whether or not there should be specialist middle years teachers. Some suggested that a number of teachers are particularly skilled at teaching in the middle years and that there would be value in recognising these skills and creating a category of middle school teachers.

Middle school is a speciality that requires training. However there is no career path for these teachers wishing to specialise. There needs to be a senior position at each campus for upward movement of these specialists. (School P&C meeting)

The NSW Primary Principals' Association also expressed support for specialisation of teaching.

Specialist teaching is required ... this could be provided as an option in the teacher training course, like early childhood. (NSW Primary Principals Association)

Other respondents felt that all teachers should be able to teach effectively and relate to students at all levels.

No, all teachers should be able to cope with any age group and learning styles. (Parent)

Having specialist middle years teachers would have more disadvantages than advantages. The idea suggests that a senior high school teacher is not able to change their teaching to suit junior school and vice versa. This is not the case. (Personal submission)

Some teachers were particularly concerned that specialisation is not in the best interests of the teaching profession.

[In relation to establishing middle schools] ... on the whole, no. Most students progress to Year 7 with no problem. ... Teachers do not want to specialise because it locks them into teaching a certain age group. (School staff member)

Schools should be free to organise for the particular needs of the middle years without restricting the options for teachers to teach across Years 7 – 12. (NSW Secondary Principals' Council)

IN SUMMARY

The middle years of schooling has been the subject of extensive educational research over the last 10 years. The NSW Department of Education and Training has been raising awareness of the issues around the middle years of schooling for much of this time. Many schools have established targeted projects to enhance the learning for students in the middle years. These projects have involved aspects such as:

- transition programs across primary and secondary schools
- establishing home rooms for students in Year 7 for core subjects
- a focus on teacher/student relationships
- raising the confidence and motivation of students
- improving literacy levels
- addressing the fragmentation of the secondary curriculum
- providing targeted professional development.

The schools involved found many positive outcomes of these projects, including a reduction in truancy and suspension rates, improvement in teachers' knowledge of the individual needs of students and better teacher/student relationships.

It is clear, however, that the Department needs to do more to ensure a coherent and coordinated strategy to assist schools in delivering the best possible learning and support throughout the middle years.

A major Departmental strategy around the middle years of schooling should support successful current practices and ensure the needs of middle years students in government schools are addressed. This was expressed as a recommendation in the Secondary Principals' Council's submission:

That DET adopts the middle years of schooling as an important priority. That DET develops and implements a coordinated approach to the middle years of schooling that encompasses all the elements that need to be addressed, including teaching and learning, curriculum, student welfare, professional learning, school organisation, parent partnerships and system wide needs and issues. (NSW Secondary Principal's Council)

While there were divergent views on the merits of establishing separate middle schools there was sufficient support by respondents to further investigate the value of such structures. For this reason a pilot program could be conducted in a number of supportive communities so that the benefits or otherwise can be properly evaluated.

Decisions about any such structural change should only be contemplated where communities are supportive.

The concerns of some teachers, particularly in secondary schools, to having specialisation in the middle years were clearly evident in responses. However there was far greater support for teachers to be able to focus on teaching in these years. Establishing a category for specialist middle school teachers has clear support however careful consideration would need to be given to the implications this would have on both primary and secondary teachers. Any changes to staffing allocations should have sufficient flexibility to ensure that teachers who choose to teach in the middle years are able to move after a time within their classification as either a primary or secondary school teacher.

While supporting the creation of specialist middle years teachers, respondents recognised a need to ensure that targeted professional learning opportunities are provided. This should help ensure that these teachers are well prepared to meet these students' particular needs.

One particular aspect identified for professional learning by respondents was the need to support middle years teachers to deliver programs that cross more than one key learning area or subject.

There has been some resistance by teachers and parents to establishing electronic processes to track student achievement. Effective transition from primary to secondary school would benefit from secondary teachers having access to students' prior achievements. Without a common, effective electronic tracking system a student continuum of learning cannot be assured.

It is timely for the Department to better recognise and provide for the needs of young adolescents in the middle years of schooling.

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