



MIDDLE YEARS LITERATURE REVIEW

INCLUDING LIST OF REFERENCES

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by:

Associate Professor Roslyn Arnold
University of Sydney
Faculty of Education

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Roslyn Arnold

The Distinctive Nature of Middle School Education: Giving Students a Voice

The last decade has seen a proliferation of publications focusing on the nature and value of a middle school concept informing curricula for students aged about ten years to fifteen. As indicated in the literature review accompanying this paper, the arguments are compelling. It is timely and appropriate for curricula development now to accept the challenge to identify the middle school experiences most likely to stimulate students' learning abilities, imagination, social and communicative competencies, and their sense of uniqueness within a community and society which respects diversity

Between the ages of about ten and fifteen years old students become inwardly aware in response to the physiological and emotional changes of adolescence. At the same time, they become aware of the wider social environment and their place within it. They look for adult and peer role models for help in managing developing identity issues. Learning experiences need to be richly challenging and constructive to meet the complex needs of students at this time. For them, change is an imperative and they expect adults to be sensitive to that. Learning experiences need to help them to make sense of flux, and to find personally satisfying methods of managing and evaluating the worth of vast amounts of information available through technology. Middle school needs its own identity and focused curricula to channel the vitality of adolescent years and to give students confidence that appropriate risk-taking, creativity, the challenging of both authoritative voices of the past and the messages embedded in their own culture, can provide them with important strategies for learning in senior school and throughout life. To achieve these complex educational outcomes, at a time when students' personal agendas are very compelling, requires teachers committed to middle schooling and supportive of each other in proactive, responsive pedagogy.

It is important that teachers specially committed to this group of students are enabled to maintain that commitment without too many distractions. It is equally important that interactions between teachers and students in middle school be based on constructive, mutual respect - a quality difficult to achieve and sustain unless all parties are comfortable with the dynamics between them. Too little attention, even in the literature and research to date, identifies the complex feelings students have towards teachers and schooling at this stage. Recognising and articulating those feelings in constructive ways is an important factor in the development of mutual respect. Hence the point made here about building curricula upon sound, informed, student-centred principles. Essentially, such principles match student needs with desirable, long-term objectives of preparation for adult and lifelong learning. In the turmoil of internal and external changes, one constant is the influence on students of their feelings and aspirations. Curricula which reflect that constant will fulfil a significant criterion for holistic education.

Student-centred learning in middle school is important and feasible. By acknowledging tacitly and overtly that students can become involved with their teachers in planning the content and processes of learning, we admit them to the adult world of decision making. While they may not be aware of the wisdom of that strategy, they are likely to be responsive to its cognitive and emotional challenge. There is time and scope in middle school for both teachers and students to engage in judicious risk taking in learning. This risk taking can take many forms including integrated, thematic work across subjects, problem solving activities involving skills and content traditionally the

domain of particular subjects, and cultural and arts -based experiences. Since we do not know easily what students' needs are at this time, it is important to strike a balance between the knowledge and experiences we regard as important, and that which they value. Curricula can be broad in content but focused in helping students to articulate in various symbolic ways, their responses to their world. Their subjective responses to that world, often confusing and preoccupying, can be structured and given coherence through purposeful, aesthetically pleasing experiences of engaging with literature, art, music, dance, sport and popular culture. Such experiences can reassure them that life's complexities can be mirrored and structured through personal and public expressiveness and rationality. The exploration of values - their own and other people's - can occur tacitly and overtly, through such experiences.

Empathic educators accept that judgement about the relative worth of differing experiences develops from opportunities to express ideas and feelings. When students attune to their inner and outer world, they become reflective and meta-aware. The development of reflective thinking and meta-awareness is appropriate in middle school and provides a solid basis for mature learning. To focus on students' emerging cognitive, social and emotional needs and to construct learning experiences which engage and extend adolescent students, requires educators who value this sometimes turbulent time of personal development for its energy and potential. School learning can be open -ended and inclusive so that students learn the worth of courage and experimentation. Boundaries can be set through the expectation that students' be involved in learning, tolerant of different responses and courageous in persevering with set tasks.

For too long we have resisted becoming proactive with young adolescents in this inevitable period of biological and emotional development. The middle years of schooling were often regarded as years between childhood and adulthood in which school learning had to take second place to the demands of puberty. Few experienced teachers see Year Nine as a time of intellectual and creative development. Yet it can be, if we learn to read the students differently. Not only should we see this period as crucial for the development of significant patterns of learning, thinking, expression of feeling and creativity, but for youngsters left too much to their own growth processes, disappointment with the adult world can lead to the kinds of disillusionment and despair so often poignantly and tragically acted out. Students in middle school can develop real affection for learning, or entrenched disaffection. They are far more needy of adult guidance and informed empathy than their often defensive attitudes would signal. When teachers can work around the defensiveness student confidence increases with the recognition that the adult world is resourceful.

Having recognised the complexity of students' intersubjective and intrasubjective needs in adolescent, and developed a concept of middle schooling, curriculum developers and education systems are turning attention now to effective ways to support teachers and their students in this period of potentially rich development.

The extremes of feeling, the progressions and regressions of thinking, the swings between self-centredness and altruism, between independence and dependency, between social gregariousness and isolation, in as far as they can characterise adolescents' experiences, offer rich opportunities for innovative, student-centred, generative learning experiences. But only if we determine educational priorities for this group based on the evidence they provide. This means listening to their concerns, hopes and fantasies, and respecting the tacit reasons why they need and choose to identify with, and even emulate, certain heroes. Until the students recognise that educators accept empathically and non-judgmentally, the psychic imperatives which drive adolescent behaviour at this time, it is unlikely that effective teacher-learner partnerships will be forged. Ironically, the period of school life most likely to position teachers as modest heroes, is often the time they are most rejected by such

students. This is not inevitable. It is often a response to an unconscious disappointment that teachers have failed to recognise the students' aspirations to be accepted, albeit prematurely, as adults. In silently acknowledging that wish lies the potential to model for students, curricular experiences which transform that wish into a firm reality. In literature, popular culture and social rituals, the notion of 'rites of passage' is strongly embedded for good reason. In times of rapid change, direction is welcomed. Adolescents need to know what is expected of them and how they might meet such expectations. How else will they know what to reject? How else will they know how to define their place in the world, or their place in the adolescent sub-culture? The development of a middle school concept is a step in the direction of acknowledging the learning opportunities inherent in this period of human development.

For too long, syllabus documents have tended to stand alone, as if subjects were discrete entities, and students in Years 7-10 were essentially engaged in preparing for upper secondary school. It is important that a long term view of curricula is kept well in mind, but it is equally important that the middle years of schooling are identified in the minds of teachers and school communities as critically important years for the development of particular skills and attitudes through constructive, formative, stage-appropriate experiences. Of primary importance is the students sense that they can choose, with guidance, the kinds of learning experiences they engage in. Their fragile sense of developing autonomy is nourished by such recognition. With a firm sense of autonomy and a knowledge of discourse strategies, students can develop critical thinking abilities and communicative strategies. The aesthetics and expressiveness of the arts, experienced best as both performers and audience members, can stimulate both personal autonomy and pleasure in shared social experiences. At this stage in schooling, priority can be given to the richness of cultural experiences - including those of their own sub-cultures, as the foundation for analytical/critical thinking. Such thinking thrives upon rich, diverse, imaginative cultural experiences.

Through the literature review which accompanies this paper can be traced the recent development of the concept and practice of middle schooling in Australian education. Researchers, scholars and educators concerned about the middle years of schooling make a compelling case for school curricula to identify and take account of students' particular needs at this time. All school subjects need to be centrally concerned with many of the communicative, expressive, thinking, affective, moral and social experiences which can provide students with impetus to their holistic development as young adults. It would be a mistake, however, to think that any one subject stands alone in meeting students' complex cognitive and affective needs. It is very clear that for practical and developmental reasons, middle school curricula and syllabuses need to reflect integrated approaches emanating from collaboration between teachers of different subjects and between the teachers with their students. Students' voices need to be heard, literally and metaphorically, in middle school experiences, no matter what the subject they are studying.

While the argument for the importance of middle schooling is clear, it is somewhat less clear from the literature what is distinctive about these years of schooling, or what the priorities should be, given the usual and complex areas of development to which teachers must give attention at every stage of schooling. It is critical to the success of curricula innovation and implementation that teachers feel their professional strengths, and the daily challenges of school life are recognised in the mandating of change. As the literature demonstrates well, the most effective changes in practice occur in schools which have committed to working on the development of middle schools with long term priority given to that development, with the customary input and feedback from consultants and the community. Ultimately, effective schooling depends on the quality of the experiences engaged in by teachers and students in the classroom. The rhetoric of middle school will become a reality only if teachers believe that they can, and should, change their practices to reflect the insights of research and scholarship

in this field. For that reason, this paper will accept the challenge to identify the vision required to integrate the principles inherent in the syllabus in its middle school context, while also signaling the practical implications of this vision.

A prevailing theme throughout the literature on students in middle school, is naturally, one of change. The years between primary and upper secondary school have always been identified as a turbulent time for students, and the common practice has been to let the physical and emotional changes experienced by students take some precedence over the demands of rigorous school life. We tended to think it inadvisable to expect too much from students when life itself makes extensive demands at this time. Maybe now is the time to reflect that in acting with such apparent sensitivity, we might tacitly have let students down. Instead of capitalising on their developing and sometimes baffling sense of their potential place in the world we have let the agenda slip. This is the time when students need to have a voice in the classroom. The middle school classroom provides a transition point between the world of childhood and adulthood. This is a time when students experience ambivalence in disarming ways. They might like to go boldly into adulthood, but the comfort of the known is equally alluring. Peer esteem can outweigh other rewards and teachers can be both admired and feared. As the adults whom students are likely to engage with most apart from parents, teachers have a vitally important role to play in offering entry to the adult world. Implicitly, they can act as gatekeepers to the adult world of work. They need to model and articulate the behaviours, thinking patterns and affective awareness concomitant with adult maturity.

The ability to do this provides students with implicit benchmarks which influence them more constructively than even verbalised outcomes. In short, teachers have to know how to allow students to find their young adult voices. When they have articulated that voice in private and in public, they then need to be encouraged to reflect on the value, importance and timbre of their individual voice. Middle school could well be characterised as the time when students need to learn how to speak up in appropriate ways. When they do so, they need to know that they are listened to. When this happens, they feel they are participating in an adult world and are therefore more likely to accept the expectations laid down by that world. Interestingly, while much of the literature on middle schooling urges us to attend to students needs, few young adult voices can be heard throughout the texts. If middle schooling is truly going to be authentic and constructive, that silence has to be broken. Teachers need to invite students into the processes of determining how curricula are to be implemented- Set texts are not mandated at this stage by Boards of Studies so choice can be exercised. The process of decision making involved in choosing class texts can be a learning experience in its own right. Teachers who invite students to be participatory, and guide them through the thinking and communication skills needed to make their choices influential, signal respect for their ideas and responses while modelling the required procedures.

The middle years of schooling have become valued in their own right. They are not simply educationally fallow years between primary and secondary school. They are years rich in learning potential because of their dynamism. The challenge is to harness that energy so that students are aware of both their individual capabilities and the expectations of the adult world of responsibility, work and leisure. They need to know that they can be 'heard' and 'read' by responsive adults, but that they will be able to communicate their meanings and messages effectively and purposefully if they are informed, sensitive and adept at articulating themselves. To that end, the middle school years can be a purposeful improvisation for life.

The key to successful middle schooling lies in engaging students' attention by guiding them to find meaning and coherence in their sometimes chaotic experience of rapid and persistent personal, emotional and social changes. Teachers who derive satisfaction from educating and inspiring students in middle school will be able to

model ways through the challenges. They will also know how to support learning with rich inputs from the world of knowledge and experience. Such inputs provide a solid foundation for the development of critical, informed awareness.

From current literature, research and thinking about middle schooling, it is possible to determine some emerging principles to inform the development of a distinctive middle school curriculum

- that literacy development for students needs to be broadly based, recognising that students need to be able to 'read' in the fullest sense of the word, verbal and non verbal communication and symbolic systems. Their writing will become gradually more public and other aware, provided they can work through their own self awareness. Narrative and argument can serve both public and private purposes. Given opportunities, students will shift across media and across genres according to need and purpose. 'This is the time for exploration and experimentation with multi-media and multi-genres.
- that interpersonal and intrapersonal issues will be foremost in students' thinking. Learning experiences which build upon that as a starting point likely to enhance students capacity to think and feel deeply and with critical awareness.
- that teachers' abilities to engage students' attention will depend very much on whether they are respected by students as wise mentors offering access to adult knowledge, power and experience. Teachers' attitudes towards middle school students are powerfully influential in the development of affection for or disaffection with school. The quality of relationship between teachers and their students will be important beyond what is well understood or articulated in the literature to date
- that students' active participation in planning some of the content and processes of their own learning will affirm their worth and mirror their ability to be proactive and collaborative. In turn, the nature of adult responsibility will have real meaning for them. Some kind of leadership role should be identified for each student so that they experience some suitable period of responsibility. It might take some imagination to identify a wide variety of leadership' roles but students could nominate positions.
- that profiles of students' strengths and weaknesses in thinking, learning, problem solving and communication need to be well documented in middle school and used as a basis for the planning of individualised strategies in later years
- that students' voices need to be heard in order for teachers to connect with their students' feelings and aspirations, as well as to give students the lift in self esteem which occurs from being truly heard
- that students in middle school are offered opportunities to take on roles of responsibility and status within their peer group and the school at large.

If the middle school concept successfully informs curricula for this stage in schooling, it should be possible for the graduate from middle school to be able to identify distinctive learning processes experienced at that time, distinctive abilities developed and distinctive social relationships enjoyed with peers and teachers. Both the student and the school should have appropriate quantitative and qualitative records of such processes, abilities and relationships as part of a profile to inform future learning and to address the challenges facing students.