

AARE 2010 INTERNATIONAL EDUCATION RESEARCH CONFERENCE - MELBOURNE

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Welcome to the **Australian Association for Research in Education (AARE) 2010 conference**. The 2010 conference will celebrate AARE's 40th birthday and will be held at The University of Melbourne from Sunday 28 November to Thursday 2 December 2010.



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Australian Association for Research in Education, AARE 2010 INTERNATIONAL EDUCATION RESEARCH CONFERENCE - MELBOURNE

Sustaining middle level teacher education in Australia
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Abstract

A spate of recent Australian research has focused attention on middle level education and, specifically, the need for specialised middle level teacher preparation (Barratt, 1998; Cumming, 1996, 1998; de Jong & Chadbourne, 2005, 2007; Hayes, Mills, Christie & Lingard, 2006; Luke, Elkins et al., 2003; Mitchell, Kapitzke et al., 2003; Pendergast, Flanagan, Land & Bahr, 2005). The extant middle level literature unequivocally links quality teaching in the classroom with improved educational outcomes for young adolescents. Since

2002, programmes of specialised middle level teacher education have been established in response to the steady growth of middle schools in Australia (de Jong & Chadbourne, 2007). The rationale underpinning these programmes is that middle level teachers require specific preparation in order to meet the diverse and specific needs of young adolescents (10-15 years old or Grades 5-9).

This paper draws from a recent doctoral study investigating the provision of teacher education for the middle years in New Zealand to examine specialised middle level teacher education programmes in three Australian universities. Using qualitative methodology, teacher educators with responsibility for coordinating programmes of middle level teacher education in the three institutions participated in comprehensive semi-structured interviews to explore the philosophy, structure, pedagogy and implementation of their respective programmes. While there were contextual differences across the three settings, several commonalities characterised their design and implementation. These common features were consistent with the essential elements of middle level teacher education programmes espoused in the USA by the National Middle School Association (NMSA, 2001) and *Turning Points 2000* (Jackson & Davis, 2000). Embedded within the essential components of effective middle level teacher preparation are the principles and practices that promote an outcome-based, authentic, constructivist, student-centred and developmentally appropriate pedagogy for young adolescent students. The participants emphasised the importance of contextualising the generic 'effective teacher' dimensions since it is this integral element that provides middle level teacher preparation with its point of difference and distinguishes it from early primary and secondary programmes of teacher education. All three participants were committed to a philosophy of middle schooling and to providing programmes of teacher education that embraced progressive and innovative approaches to the teaching and learning of young adolescent students in Australian schools.

Despite the apparent effectiveness of the three specialised teacher education programmes, the participants identified a number of ongoing systemic and institutional factors that influence the sustainability of the programmes. Some of these barriers stem from the traditional two-tiered system of primary and secondary education that is still well entrenched in Australia, despite the growth of dedicated middle schools and delineated middle and upper levels within secondary schools in many states. There is a lack of widespread consensus supporting the concept of middle schooling within the educational community as well as in the public domain and, as a result, middle level education is still struggling to obtain a legitimate place in mainstream education. Participants in this study spoke of an ongoing need for vigorous and strategic marketing to attract students into middle level teacher education programmes, since in the highly competitive tertiary education environment any reduction in student enrolment numbers is likely to threaten the viability of programmes. Additionally, the shortage of quality school placements and effective associate or mentor teachers who are modelling the principles of effective middle level philosophy and practice results in a mismatch between the objectives espoused by middle level teacher education programmes and that which student teachers experience during teaching practicum in middle level settings. Other related systemic barriers include issues related to the future employability of graduates in an environment that is predicated on the two-tiered system of primary-secondary schooling. We also identify institutional factors influencing the long term feasibility of middle level teacher education programmes in Australia. These factors include the attrition of key staff involved in the establishment of programmes, the lack of institution-wide support in the establishment and ongoing resourcing of programmes, other staffing issues, and the 'watering down' of middle level content in dual degree qualifications. This paper explores the origins and often problematic nature of these influences and their impact on the functionality and sustainability of programmes. We conclude by suggesting the pressing need for a robust

model of middle level teacher education inclusive of all stakeholders if educational outcomes for young adolescents in Australia are to be improved.