

Sustaining middle level teacher education in Australia

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Special Interest Group Middle Years Education

Abstract

Recent Australian research has focused attention on middle level education (Barratt, 1998; Luke, Elkins et al., 2003) and, in particular, the need for specialised middle level teacher education (Chadbourne, 2002; Mitchell, Kapitzke et al., 2003; Pendergast, Whitehead, de Jong, Newhouse-Maiden & Bahr, 2007). Over the last decade, 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 middle level teacher education in New Zealand. Teacher educators with responsibility for coordinating programmes of middle level teacher education in three Australian institutions were interviewed about their programmes. While there are contextual differences across the settings, the programmes each espouse and model principles and practices that promote a constructivist, student-centred and developmentally appropriate pedagogy responsive to young adolescent students.

We identify and discuss a number of factors threatening the viability of programmes. These factors are inter-related and ultimately stem from the two-tiered system of primary and secondary education that is well entrenched in Australia. We suggest solutions and conclude by emphasising the 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.

INTRODUCTION

Over the last decade teacher education programmes focused on the development of specialist teachers for the middle years of schooling have proliferated in Australian universities. The most recent statistics show that, as of 2005, twenty programmes of specialised middle level teacher preparation had been established in Australian institutions (Pendergast & Bahr, 2005). Their establishment has been in response to steady growth, since 1990, of separate middle schools for young adolescent students and the considerable development of associated research, policies and initiatives specifically focused on addressing the increasing alienation and disengagement of young adolescents from their schooling and therefore improving educational outcomes for these students in the 10 to 15 age group.

While traditionally teacher education in Australia has been divided into programmes of early childhood, primary and secondary education courses to reflect the structural organisation of the schooling sector (Chadbourne, 2002), the establishment of specific programmes of middle level teacher education has started to challenge the traditional hegemony of teacher education provision. Current middle level research advocates for a relevant, challenging, integrative and exploratory curriculum design that is responsive to the diverse needs and interests young adolescents (Australian Curriculum Studies Association, 1996; Bahr & Pendergast, 2007; Barratt, 1998; Beane, 1993; Carrington, 2006; Cumming, 1998; Dowden, 2007; Hill & Russell, 1999; Hunter & Park, 2005; National Middle School Association, 1995, 2003; Pendergast & Bahr, 2005). Advocates for middle level reform perceive teacher education as being the most influential lever for effecting change and improved educational outcomes for young adolescents in the classroom (Bishop, 2008; Carrington, Pendergast, Bahr, Kapitzke, Mitchell & Mayer, 2001; de Jong & Chadbourne, 2005; Jackson & Davis, 2000; National Middle School Association, 2006, Queensland Board of Teacher Registration, 1996). They argue that middle level teachers who have completed a generic programme of primary or secondary initial teacher education do not have the specialist skills needed to effectively meet the diverse educational needs of young adolescents.

An increasing number of Australian universities have reformed their initial and graduate teacher education provision to include programmes that are specifically focused on preparing initial and in-service teachers for teaching young adolescents across the existing range of school configurations. Some universities in Western Australia, Queensland and South Australia have been particularly proactive in responding to the growth of middle schooling and to policy initiatives aimed at reforming school structures and practices by establishing programmes of middle level teacher education. The aim of such programmes is to develop specialist teachers with the dispositions, knowledge, skills and values essential for teaching young adolescent students in Grades 5-9 of Australian schools. While teacher education programmes in some universities include specific units or papers on middle schooling within their existing primary and secondary programmes, a handful of universities have established new stand-alone programmes that focus exclusively on the middle years of schooling (Chadbourne, 2002). Although the programmes differ according to philosophical orientation, particular geographical context and the nature of their qualifications, they are committed to the principles of middle level education. The programmes are strongly influenced by the 'essential elements' of effective middle level teacher education in the USA as espoused by the National Middle School Association (NMSA, 2006) and *Turning Points 2000* (Jackson & Davis, 2000). These seminal publications articulate the essential elements of effective middle level teacher education programmes as comprising: a comprehensive understanding of early adolescence and the needs of young adolescents, a study of the philosophy and organisation of middle level education, in-depth study of middle level curriculum, planning, teaching and assessment, concentrated study in two broad teaching fields, and middle level field experiences. Embedded within these essential components are principles and practices that promote an outcome-based, authentic, constructivist, student-centred and developmentally appropriate pedagogy for young adolescent students (Pendergast, Whitehead, de Jong, Newhouse-Maiden & Bahr, 2007). In adhering to these principles, the programmes are characterised by their adolescent-centredness and their focus on the development of knowledge and the implementation of innovative and progressive philosophical and pedagogical approaches that are broadly responsive to the socio-emotional, physical, cognitive and wider socio-cultural needs of young adolescent

students. Their aim is to develop teachers who have a distinct middle level identity and who understand the differentiated needs and abilities of young adolescents so that they are able to plan and implement responsive programmes that will enthuse, engage and challenge learners. While some programmes have forged a legitimate identity and place in Australian teacher education some are struggling and in some cases have been disestablished.

This paper draws Australian data from a recent doctoral study that explored the provision of teacher education for the middle years (Shanks, 2010). The philosophy, design, structure and implementation of three middle level teacher education programmes in Australian universities was investigated. We found there are significant and ongoing systemic, school and institutional factors that influence the sustainability and long-term viability of middle level programmes. Our paper discusses the origins and nature of these influences and their impact on the functionality and sustainability of the programmes.

Systemic factors influencing programme sustainability

Despite the effectiveness of the middle level reform movement in focusing attention on middle schooling in Australia and the need for reform of existing policy, programmes and practices, implementation of change at the state level has been “patchy and unsustainable” (Luke, Elkins et al., 2003). In many states middle schooling is still viewed as a fad that “lacks clear definition, offers nothing new, and is indistinguishable from what many primary and secondary schools already do” (Chadbourne, 2003, p. 1). Some Australian states, however, have been proactive in commissioning reports, action plans and curriculum frameworks that set directions, clarify expectations and commit systemic support for reforms of the schooling sector so that there is greater alignment of curriculum, pedagogy and assessment in middle level classrooms (Pendergast, Whitehead, de Jong, Newhouse-Maiden & Bahr, 2007). Nonetheless in many Australian states the entrenched bipartite system of primary and secondary schooling prevails. The wide range of school configurations within which young adolescents experience their schooling further adds to the lack of identity or distinctiveness of middle schooling. Despite the advent of middle schools in Australia and the plethora of research and reform initiatives

that have occurred since Eyre's (1992) *Report of the Junior Secondary Review*, there is still ambivalence or a lack of recognition, at both the state level and among the general public, of early adolescence as a period of development requiring differentiated provision in the schooling sector. The concept of middle schooling is still contested ground that has yet to be embraced within mainstream education. In Australia specialised programmes of middle level teacher preparation largely exist in an environment that remains wedded to the traditional two-tiered system of schooling imported from Great Britain in the nineteenth century. There is a lack of alignment between middle level reform in the schooling sector and teacher education reform (Mitchell, Kapitzke et al., 2003). As a result teacher educators involved in the programmes constantly have to fight for efficacy on two fronts: by advancing the middle level reform agenda generally through conducting research and in implementing initiatives, as well as by providing quality programmes of middle level teacher preparation. The potential for 'reform fatigue' is considerable (Brennan & Sachs, 1998).

A further systemic difficulty caused by the entrenched two-tiered system of schooling in Australia is the difficulty experienced by some graduates in obtaining employment following completion of their programme of initial teacher education. One teacher educator participant commented on the practice of schools advertising position vacancies as either primary or secondary positions, rather than middle grades positions:

The employing authority here, such as our State Education Department, still can't get their act together to be able to cope with middle level graduates, so graduates are seen to be either primary or secondary teachers. While our [middle level] graduates are specialists in two curriculum areas, secondary schools want teachers who can teach to Year 12, and they, therefore, don't describe their vacancies as middle school vacancies. Instead they advertise their positions as secondary vacancies. And primary schools, instead of advertising their upper primary positions as middle school vacancies, actually advertise them as primary positions.

This phenomenon threatens the sustainability of programmes since the issue of future employability exerts a powerful influence on student enrolments. In countering this, the teacher educators articulated the need for ongoing marketing of programmes in order to remain viable. The hegemony of primary and secondary education prompted the participants to emphasise the need for vigorous and strategic marketing to attract students

into middle schooling programmes. In the current highly competitive tertiary environment any reduction of student enrolments in a single teacher education programme directly threatens the sustainability of all programmes of teacher education. Since middle level teacher education has not yet consolidated a recognised position in the educational mainstream, its position is especially vulnerable. As one participant put it, even in the university context advocates of middle schooling repeatedly find that they have to “constantly battle” the notion that middle schooling is “a fad”.

Influences in the schooling sector affecting programme sustainability

The landmark report on middle schooling in Australia entitled *Beyond the Middle* (Luke, Elkins et al., 2003) found that most Australian schools had neither adopted middle schooling approaches to curriculum, pedagogy and assessment nor implemented responsive practices that support student learning in the middle years. The findings showed that the only changes that occurred were those related to school structure. In addition the *Productive Pedagogies* project (Lingard, Ladwig, Luke, Mills, Hayes & Gore, 2001) found that while there were some exemplary instances of middle schooling practices in Australia, this was not widespread.

Since quality field experiences in middle level settings has been identified as an essential component of effective middle level teacher preparation (National Middle School Association, 2006), the variable nature of middle level pedagogy and practice in the schooling sector provides a significant stumbling block for teacher educators who are responsible for implementing specialised programmes. Without infrastructural support in the schooling sector, programmes of middle level teacher education experience difficulty securing quality field placements for teaching practica. The following comment by a teacher educator participant highlights this problem:

We were advocating a particular approach to working with middle level students. We also pushed the agenda that (each student teacher has to be an advocate, that when you go out there, you're not going to walk into an environment which is already necessarily embracing the needs of young adolescents. Yes, you will see some of that and you'll see some brilliant practice with individuals, but it's not a field that is well-developed.

Another teacher educator concurred by stating:

Not many [student teachers] are going to walk into a middle school where it's actually middle schooling. I've talked to them about a number of schools around here that call themselves a middle school. It's on the sign at the front of the school and that's where it stops. There are middle schools and there are middle schools. It depends on what's happening inside rather than the bricks and mortar.

The oft-cited lack of alignment between the middle level philosophy, curricula and pedagogical approaches espoused, and often modelled in the middle level teacher education programmes; and the practices and approaches observed by student teachers on teaching practicum in school settings is problematic and creates unresolved tensions for teacher educators. Student teachers are often idealistic and want to be placed in middle level settings with mentor teachers where they can see developmentally responsive practice in action so that they have a point of reference for their course content. When this fails to occur they can become disillusioned and critical of programmes. The participants in this project all emphasised the difficulties they faced when organising appropriate placements related to the shortage of exemplary middle level practice across the range of school configurations in their states.

A teacher educator interviewed in the research project identified a lack of state-wide support for middle schooling generally and, to counter this, the need for middle level programmes to develop relationships with 'partner' schools that enact middle level philosophy and practices. Another participant concurred by emphasising the importance of aligning course content with field experiences in schools by developing collaborative relationships with targeted schools. The participants identified the variable quality of middle level teaching as a serious concern and emphasised the need for programmes of middle level teacher education to develop student teachers' critical reflection skills to counter this. One teacher educator's comment articulated the importance of developing critically reflective graduates who are able to identify and critique various ideological positions:

They learn to audit what is happening even if it is quite advanced or, you know, traditional in its approach. So we have some tools – some audit tools that students can use when they go out, they know what they're looking at. They can get a

sense of it and they can contextualise it accordingly. For example, would I use this? Does it reflect middle schooling practices? What else can I learn from this? That kind of more reflective component.

The participating teacher educators believed support from the schooling sector is integral to ensuring a sufficient supply of quality middle level placements for school practica.

Institutional factors affecting programme sustainability

At both the national and state levels universities are regularly targeted by political and economic initiatives aimed at the rationalisation of funding. As a result universities are constantly reviewing and evaluating the viability of their programmes and courses with respect to cost-cutting and streamlining. The ongoing diversion of institutional funding resources into marketing initiatives to ensure growth of student enrolments, as well as funding programmes, places many middle level teacher education programmes at risk within the fiscally constrained tertiary education context. Unless tertiary institutions unequivocally commit to middle level education, the viability of specialised programmes will inevitably come under threat. Some of the participants spoke of the lack of wider institutional support for their programmes.

There was certainly a lot of ‘anti’ feeling about whether or not this middle years programme should have launched in the first instance from some quarters. Some of that emerged out of what appeared to me, as an observer, to be sort of envy because it was all about innovation and being on a fairly new campus where we got a new building and where we did get resources. They felt perhaps that was unfair. Some of the antagonism towards it was not based, in my view, on any clear debate about the pros and cons of middle schooling.

In reflecting the attitudes of the wider community, ambivalence, lack of support and outright rejection of the need for specialised middle level programmes from other faculties and academic staff created barriers and served to undermine the value of the programmes. The participants recounted that in some instances staff in the wider university expressed hostility and resentment that funding was being diverted to programmes that they viewed as “a passing fad”. This lack of collegial support places considerable pressure on teacher educators committed to implementing programmes of middle level teacher education.

A further key institutional factor influencing the integrity and sustainability of specialised programmes of middle level teacher education is the ‘watering down’ of middle level content in many dual degree programmes. Chadbourne (2002) stated that “although middle schooling principles and practices are common and central to all progressive programs, their application needs to be context-specific. If treated in a decontextualised way, their meaning, authenticity, relevance and power [for the students] will be weakened, if not entirely lost” (p. 7). One of the participating teacher educators identified the dominance of the discipline-specific Bachelor of Arts or Bachelor of Science degrees over the Bachelor of Middle Schooling qualification within the structure of the dual degree at their institution. Similarly the secondary subject specialisation typically dominates the teaching practicum placement because graduating teachers are unable to get a rating or obtain employment unless they have completed sufficient field experience in secondary schools within their particular curriculum specialisation area. One of the participating teacher educators involved in implementing a dual degree qualification stated:

I suspect the secondary subjects’ dominance of ‘prac’ placements is one of the biggest issues and not one that’s going to be resolved.

The teacher educator went on to describe the dominance of the specialist subject degree as a significant threat to the integrity of their middle level qualification because of the gradual diffusion of middle schooling understandings within the wider programme.

A further factor that often influences the sustainability of specialised programmes is the attrition of key personnel who have been responsible for gaining approval in designing and implementing programmes. This is particularly evident when a key teacher educator, who may have provided the initial intellectual impetus and overcome various external and institutional obstacles to establish a programme of middle level teacher preparation, leaves the institution. In these instances the whole momentum, the knowledge of state and institutional politics, and the intellectual capital invested can be lost and may therefore threaten the viability of the entire programme.

Pragmatic considerations frequently characterise appointments of academic staff to programmes of specialised middle level teacher preparation. Often wider institutional demands take precedence over more specific programme requirements such as teacher educators with middle level experience and expertise. This is particularly prevalent in the staffing of dual degree programmes where teacher educators are often appointed because of their discipline-specific knowledge rather than their specialist interest or experience in middle level education. Accordingly, there is a constant tension between achieving optimal staffing requirements within specialised programmes and balancing the needs of the wider institution and other qualifications. When a critical mass of teacher educators, who have a commitment to the philosophy of middle level education and expertise in implementing programmes of teacher education that are focused on the principles of effective middle schooling, is not maintained, the integrity and long term viability of programmes becomes compromised.

Discussion

The traditional dominance of the two-tiered education system in Australia, from which many of these barriers originate, is a systemic obstacle that is not easily overcome, despite the existence of a vigorous reform movement. This paper identifies the school sector, systemic, and institutional factors impinging on the viability of programmes of middle level teacher education. While we have discretely described the negative influences, they are inextricably linked. As such it is vitally important that stakeholders in Australian middle level teacher education are cognisant of the wider socio-political and economic influences at national and state levels. Our findings identify approaches and processes that may mitigate some of the influences that serve to undermine the implementation and integrity of programmes of middle level teacher preparation. These approaches need to be considered prior to implementation when programmes are being designed.

Teacher education reform should be aligned with school reform by developing robust and collaborative professional relationships between tertiary institutions and the schooling sector. The establishment of such relationships will have reciprocal benefits for both

teacher education programmes and school communities. The provision of targeted professional development for individual teachers as well as school clusters would facilitate alignment with campus coursework, so there is greater connection between the objectives of the programmes and school-based initiatives. This would involve exemplary middle level teachers participating in the programmes as well as presenting seminars. Teams of teacher educators would deliver university professional development to teachers as well as sessions for parents and caregivers within the community. Action research could be conducted in schools and teachers could enrol in postgraduate programmes. The cross-fertilisation of expertise and innovative ideas could generate new approaches to the teaching of young adolescents. When institutions do not invest expertise, energy and resources in building infrastructural support within the schooling sector, programmes of teacher education become vulnerable. The collaborative professional development model adopted by progressive programmes is effective in mitigating the mismatch that student teachers sometimes experience between course content and their experience on teaching practicum. The adoption of this model requires reconceptualising teacher education in terms of its role in middle level reform. The adoption of such a model could reduce the need for marketing a programme, and allow institutional resources to be deployed more efficiently thus benefitting both schools and the programme.

A related finding of this project is the need for a commitment at the senior level of tertiary institutions to middle level teacher education programmes. This commitment by senior management needs to occur when programmes are conceived by providing tangible support and resources to teams of teacher educators responsible for programme design and implementation. Without such support programmes are not sustainable. Middle level teacher education is relatively new and is still contested in many faculties of education. The ongoing support of senior managers in institutions is essential to removing obstacles, providing resources, recruiting staff with middle level expertise, and generally in smoothing the pathway.

We found that adopting a collaborative team approach to the design and implementation of programmes is more effective, and ultimately more sustainable, than relying on the expertise of one or two key individuals. Where a solid core of teacher educators, with a specific interest and commitment to middle schooling pool their ideas, energies and collective knowledge in conceptualising, designing and implementing middle level teacher education there is a shared purpose, greater diversity of ideas and stronger advocacy that positively benefits the programme. Specialised middle level teacher preparation is still breaking new ground in Australia. It involves teacher educators in generating new and innovative approaches to middle level education through research and involvement in state-wide initiatives to advance the reform agenda, as well as in the ongoing implementation and evaluation of the programmes. Where a whole team approach to implementation is adopted the negative effects of individuals leaving the institution are mitigated because there remains a critical mass of teacher educators with the specific knowledge and conceptual understanding to continue. The collegiality developed from a shared approach further acts as a buffer to less favourable attitudes that frequently exist in the wider institutional environment.

Teacher educators involved in the implementation of specialised programmes need to be committed to the principles of middle level education and to improving learning outcomes for young adolescents. The participants in this project all demonstrated a deep understanding of the philosophy of middle schooling. The programmes therefore have rigour because their conceptual foundations are firmly grounded in current research and progressive pedagogical approaches responsive to the diverse needs of young adolescents. When teams of teacher educators are knowledgeable and committed to the philosophy of middle level education, there is less likelihood that the integrity of the programmes will be compromised by competing institutional demands.

Conclusion

This paper has drawn from data in a recent doctoral study (Shanks, 2010) to identify a range of interrelated systemic, schooling and institutional influences that impact on the viability and sustainability of middle level teacher education programmes. We argue that

adopting specific approaches and processes, at both the conceptual and later stages of programme implementation, will serve to mitigate the dominance of the traditional two-tiered education system. In particular, middle level teacher education programmes need: a team commitment to the philosophy of middle schooling, the strategic recruitment of staff, rigorous programme design and planning, institutional support at the senior level, and collaborative relationships with the schooling sector. Dedicated middle level teacher education in Australian tertiary institutions is integral to advancing the middle schooling reform agenda and to improving educational outcomes for young adolescents. Reform of teacher education inclusive of the middle level has gained considerable momentum in recent years. Our paper argues that if the impetus of this reform is to be sustained, then recognition and resistance of the factors that continue to undermine the integrity of middle level teacher education in Australia is imperative.

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