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## **Middle schooling in Tasmania: Teachers' beliefs about classroom pedagogy**

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### **Abstract**

Middle schooling has attracted growing interest and attention in Australia but this has been slow to spread to the island state of Tasmania. The exception is provided by independent schools in Tasmania; some of which have created dedicated middle schools within their larger organisation. This article discusses the findings of a study on middle school teachers' beliefs about classroom pedagogy in Tasmanian independent schools. Although the participant teachers were highly dedicated and reflective with sophisticated understandings about their specialist subject areas, they lacked the specific knowledge base about young adolescence generally considered to be an essential precursor to the design and implementation of developmentally responsive pedagogies.

### **Introduction**

The notion that an authentic approach to middle schooling is necessary — where the developmental and educational needs of young adolescents (10–15 years old) are prioritised ahead of other interests — has attracted increasing attention in Australia (e.g. Barratt, 1998; Luke et al., 2003; Middle Years of Schooling Association [MYSA], 2008). As evidenced by several recent books, Australian educators broadly agree that new and improved classroom pedagogies need to be developed to ameliorate the marked levels of disengagement exhibited by many young people in the middle grades (Carrington, 2006; Groundwater-Smith, Mitchell, & Mockler, 2007; Knipe, 2007; Pendergast & Bahr, 2005). The 2008 Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians reinforced this standpoint by making a commitment to approaches that are specifically designed to meet the needs of young adolescents:

Australian governments commit to working with all school sectors to ensure that schools provide programs that are responsive to students' developmental and learning needs in the middle years, and which are challenging, engaging and rewarding. (Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs, 2008, p. 12)

This statement by the combined governments has added impetus to the discourse on middle schooling but progress on educational reform in the states and territories remains patchy and is mainly associated with initiatives in the independent school sector, reforms of state education, and large-scale research projects. In Queensland, for instance, the state government launched an 'action plan' in 2003 that provided direction, clarified expectations, and committed systemic support to the reform of middle level education (Queensland Government, 2003). Consequently, the most visible 'hot spots' for middle schooling research and practice in Australia have centred on metropolitan districts in Queensland, Western Australia and South Australia.

In the state of Tasmania, middle schooling is in the nascent stage. Every Australian state and territory except Tasmania has developed middle schooling policies (Knipe,

2007). As a result, there is little tangible recognition at the systemic level that young adolescents have specific educational needs. For instance, an analysis of the extant Tasmanian Curriculum reveals that the young adolescent is invisible within the documents — to the extent that learners at every level are nearly always referred to as ‘students’ and, other than an incidental reference to the literary genre of ‘young adolescent fiction’, the documents do not mention young adolescents or their needs (Department of Education, Tasmania, 2011). In addition, the views of officialdom are sometimes ambivalent about the educational needs of young Tasmanians. Whereas the issue of student retention in Grades 10–12 within the state system ranked as the government’s greatest area of ‘concern’ in the 2010 Tasmanian Education Performance Summaries, a Grades 10–12 retention rate of only 50% in state schools in the combined Tasmanian regions was deemed to be ‘acceptable’ (Department of Education, Tasmania, 2010). In contrast, former Tasmanian Premier David Bartlett perceived poor retention rates as problematic:

We have ... 9,500 ... 18–20 year olds [in Tasmania] ... who are [underemployed and] not participating in any form of training or education ... [At the same time] we’ve got, not only a skill shortage, we’ve got a labour shortage as well, and we have the most significant participation problems in the labour force of any state in Australia. (Mulford & Edmunds, 2010, p. 35)

The failure to generate educational outcomes leading to worthwhile employment is not a new phenomenon. Tasmanian state schooling has had comparatively low Grades 10–12 retention rates for more than three decades (Reynolds, 2012). Indeed, in 2010 only 64% of young adults (20–24 years old) in Tasmania had completed Grade 12, whereas the comparable national figure was 78% (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2011). This suggests that renewed attention to the nature and purpose of schooling for young Tasmanians in the middle years could produce a social dividend. As Mulford and Edmunds concluded, “there is now, more than ever, a need ... [to] broaden what counts as good schooling [in Tasmania]” (p. 139).

A number of independent schools in Tasmania have recently reconsidered how to best meet the educational needs of young adolescents. These schools have followed the lead of several independent schools in other Australian states and reconfigured their school organisations. This process has involved a departure from the traditional two-tiered primary and secondary school to the formation of dedicated junior, middle and senior schools within the framework of the larger school. This innovation provides a logical starting point for research on middle schooling in Tasmania and, in particular, what teachers within these new middle school organisations believe about teaching in the middle years.

This article discusses a study that investigated middle grades teachers’ beliefs about classroom pedagogy in dedicated middle school programs in two independent schools in Tasmania. It reviews the literature pertaining to engaging young adolescents in the classroom and middle schooling discourses in the USA and Australia. Utilising two extant models of the middle school teacher, it discusses study findings pertaining to teachers’ beliefs about the developmental needs of young adolescents and middle grades classroom pedagogy.

### **Literature review**

This review briefly summarises the literature that informs the practice of Australian middle school teachers. This includes the developmental stage of early adolescence and

the concept of middle schooling. It also outlines two models of the middle school teacher developed within the US American and Australian educational contexts.

### ***Young adolescents in formal learning contexts***

The problem of engaging young adolescents in classroom learning often arises in education systems that have compulsory schooling. This multifaceted challenge has been considered from a number of perspectives (e.g. Lipsitz, 1984; Stoll & Fink, 1996; Tharp & Gallimore, 1988). Research shows that recognising and attending to the developmental needs of young adolescents is a crucial component of enhancing student engagement in the middle years, but one that is often over-looked (Lipsitz, Jackson, & Austin, 1997; National Middle School Association [NMSA], 2003).

Early adolescence is a discrete developmental stage characterised by rapid change in every domain of development; be it physical, social, emotional, cognitive or moral (Brighton, 2007; Eccles et al., 1993). In the world of the young adolescent, issues such as social competence, making friendships and developing secure relationships with significant adults are especially important (Stevenson, 2002; NMSA, 2010). At the very time when young people most need support and understanding from trusted adults (Stevenson, 2002), they undergo a sometimes alienating transition from primary to secondary schooling. In particular, young people often struggle when there are ‘mismatches’ between the school context and their developmental needs (Eccles et al.). Just when they are ready to assume greater responsibility for their learning, school transition frequently results in greater emphases on discipline and teacher control with limited opportunities for creativity, decision-making or self-management (Eccles et al.). Young adolescents’ desire to achieve a greater degree of autonomy from parental and teacher control can lead to conflict (Brighton, 2007). In the middle level classroom, such power struggles are not only unseemly but also harm teacher-student relationships and impact negatively on the quality of learning experiences. Further complicating the picture, pronounced differences among young adolescents related to maturational variation and gender — let alone other variables affecting identity formation, such as socio-economic status (SES), ethnicity, sub-culture and emerging sexuality — mean the notion of an early adolescent archetype is likely to be flawed, thus any attempt to generalise research findings to particular contexts should be done with caution.

### ***Middle schooling in the USA — Schools for young adolescents***

The middle school (Grades 6–8), first implemented at the systemic level in the USA in the 1960s, offers a solution to the problem of engaging young adolescents in the classroom by providing them with specialised ‘middle schooling’ (Vars, 1998). Developed over several decades from the grassroots up, middle schooling is an educational approach concerned with providing stage-appropriate schooling for young adolescents by aligning developmentally responsive pedagogy, curriculum and assessment and then linking this to a particular organisation of the middle grades (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1989; Jackson & Davis, 2000; Lounsbury, 1982; NMSA, 1995, 2003, 2010). Although middle schooling is innovative in the broad sense, its theoretical underpinnings have a long pedigree. In particular, Dewey (1916) developed a strong case for student-centred or ‘progressive’ education where subject matter matches students’ experiences, and pedagogies are aligned with the cognitive and socio-emotional development of learners.

Education in the middle years has attracted recent attention because research shows that the quality of young people's learning experiences in the middle grades is strongly correlated to rates of successful completion of secondary schooling (Balfanz, 2009). A range of evidence, including meta-analyses of data from hundreds of middle schools in several states in the USA, shows that young adolescents achieve better in schools that adhere closely to middle schooling principles (Anfara & Lipka, 2003; Felner et al., 1997; Flowers, Mertens, & Mulhall, 2007). In particular, middle schooling principles are especially effective when applied in low SES communities (Balfanz, 2009; Mertens & Flowers, 2003). In keeping with the literature showing that teachers have a significant influence on classroom achievement (Hattie, 2002), teachers who are well-versed in the principles of middle schooling have the greatest influence on whether young people close achievement gaps in the middle years (Balfanz, 2009; Beane & Brodhagen, 2001).

Although the primary intention of middle schooling in the USA is to promote the intellectual development of young adolescents (Jackson & Davis, 2000; NMSA, 2003), the movement has encountered persistent resistance (Apple, 2001; Baker, 2011; Beane, 1999). Historically, this undue attention has probably arisen because middle schooling recapitulates aspects of the student-centred agenda of the century-old progressive education movement which has been interpreted by some latter-day conservatives in the USA as having a socialist agenda (Apple, 2001). In many states and districts, school communities have bowed to political pressure and diluted middle schooling principles to that extent that some middle schools more closely resemble miniature high schools (Vars, 1998). In schools such as these, case studies have shown that, although a variety of teaching and learning strategies are usually implemented, too much time is 'devoted to passive, teacher-dominated and intellectually non-stimulating activity' (Beane & Brodhagen, 2001, p. 1164). Thus, although the argument in favour of middle schooling is compelling, the political climate has been such that only a minority of middle schools in the USA have implemented middle schooling principles with fidelity (Anfara, 2009).

Nonetheless, US American middle schooling advocates continue to maintain that middle schooling principles are vital to the education of young adolescents. As the NMSA (2010) stated in its most recent position paper, 'in the middle grades, the stage will be set for success in high school [Years 9–12] and beyond, or for disengagement and the likelihood of becoming a high school dropout' (p. 1). According to Beane and Brodhagen's model (2001), middle level teachers who adhere to the principles of middle schooling:

- Have a thorough understanding of the young adolescents they teach;
- Work collegially in teacher teams;
- Mentor young adolescents;
- Utilise a variety of learning and teaching approaches; and
- Use curriculum designs beyond that of traditional separate subject approaches. (p. 1159)

### ***Middle schooling in Australia — Searching for powerful pedagogies***

In the last two decades, middle schooling in Australia has emerged as a grassroots movement and progressed to become a significant force for the reform of middle level education (Pendergast, 2005). The need for improved learning outcomes in the middle grades for numeracy and literacy has been well signposted (Carrington, 2006; Luke et al., 2003). This has been also apparent in other subject areas, such as science, where

Tytler (2007) called for a fresh approach with ‘open pedagogies’ that engage young adolescents (p. 67). While Australian educators generally accept the US American concept of middle schooling, despite some reservations relating to recognising student diversity and responding to the digital revolution; the Australian version of middle schooling probably has stronger commitments to constructivist understandings of learning and teaching, and student-centred pedagogies that emphasise intellectual rigour and critical thinking (Carrington, 2006; MYSA, 2008). The notion of student-centred pedagogy has stayed at the forefront thanks to the outcome of an influential study in Queensland state schools which found the higher the level of intellectual demand teachers placed on students, the greater their improvement in ‘productive’ performance and, thus, the greater the improvement in student achievement (Lingard et al., 2001). The term ‘productive pedagogies’ has since become familiar in the Australian teaching lexicon and its principles, which focus on developing effective student-centred learning and teaching strategies, have been incorporated into several state curricula. Moreover, pre-service teachers in Queensland have generally demonstrated a sound grasp of productive pedagogies by accurately situating it within their middle schooling praxis (Pendergast, Keogh, Garrick, & Reynolds 2009). However, as Zyngier (2005) implies, it should not be assumed that other Australian teachers and teacher educators will have similar understandings. Rumble and Aspland (2010) developed a model of the middle school teacher based on analysis of middle grades data from Queensland schools. They described the ‘key attributes’ of the middle school teacher as a professional who has:

- A capacity to forge a middle school identity;
- A designer of a wholesome curriculum;
- A specialist in (young) adolescence ... ; and
- A capacity to sustain middle school reform (p. 8).

## **Method**

The participants in this study were middle grades teachers in dedicated middle school organisations housed within two independent schools in Tasmania. Teachers’ beliefs have been long regarded as fundamental to the efficacy of classroom practice (Kagan, 1992), thus qualitative methodology was used to investigate the participants’ beliefs about pedagogy in the middle years. Data was gathered via a preliminary on-line questionnaire, followed by in-depth interviews. This twin pronged approach is recommended for the qualitative investigation of beliefs and understandings (Cresswell, 2009). In the preliminary phase of the study, an online questionnaire with open-ended questions was utilised to survey the teachers in the participating middle schools to gauge their attitudes, identify general trends, and determine the parameters for the in-depth interviews. The questionnaire was completed by 30 self-selecting participants (16 in one school and 14 in the other). The results were analysed and used to inform the interview schedule.

The main phase of the study involved conducting interviews with four participants from each school. The participants were selected from on the basis of availability, their leadership role and being representative in terms of their professional experience and gender. The eight interviews were conducted by the researcher using open-ended questions and in-depth interviewing techniques (Cresswell, 2009; Rubin & Rubin, 2005). The interviews explored participants’ beliefs about: (a) their strategies for catering for early adolescent developmental and educational needs, (b) their classroom pedagogies, and (c) their general beliefs pertaining to middle grades education (see Appendix 1). The researcher checked interview transcripts by listening to audio files of

the interviews. The interview data were analysed using a 'hybrid' process of inductive and deductive thematic analysis (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006) and then sorted by the researcher according to emergent themes. Representative interview data were selected to illustrate the themes so that participants' beliefs could be directly represented (Rubin & Rubin, 2005).

The study had human ethics approval and was classified as minimal risk. Participation was voluntary and identities were kept anonymous. In addition, the identities of the two schools were not disclosed. The community of professional educators in Tasmanian independent schools is small, thus particular care is taken to avoid inadvertently identifying participants via descriptors within the results section below.

## **Results**

The strongest teachers' beliefs to emerge from the research centred on students' needs and classroom pedagogy. In addition, the participants demonstrated strong commitment to on-going professional learning. Although professional learning was encouraged via personal tertiary study, access to professional development on middle schooling was viewed as problematic. The participants explained that digital technology was assumed to be part of the environment for young people of today. It was taken for granted that the latest technologies would be available, partly reflecting the degree of wealth within the school communities, but also reflecting the expectations of their students.

### ***Young adolescents' developmental needs***

The participants had definite views about the needs of students in the middle grades but most displayed no more than a rudimentary level of knowledge about young adolescents' developmental needs. For instance, one stated, "[developmental] needs are social and emotional connections with their peers, with the teachers and the environment." One of the senior participants had completed post-graduate education study that was relevant to middle schooling. He questioned how well middle grades teachers generally understand young adolescents' developmental needs:

[Teachers] need to understand the kids and their development ...there's so much change in the way kids think which is connected with developmental changes ... They begin to learn in a very, very different way ... They're much more prepared to question ... 'Why am I doing this?' 'What's the purpose?' 'How does this connect?' ... 'Why are you making me do this?'

He pinpointed the underlying problem:

There's [plenty] of professional development about how to teach your subject better, but ... [it is assumed] you've learnt about how [young adolescents] develop when you've gone to university ... and that you understand it ... Very few people really have a good understanding, in my mind, of this developmental process.

Nonetheless, the participants seemed to recognise intuitively that young adolescents do indeed have developmental needs, even though they were unable to describe them. One stated, "teaching the middle grades is different to teaching lower primary or senior secondary ... this cohort comes with their own particular needs." Several participants side-stepped queries about developmental characteristics and needs by emphasising the need to 'know' students. One explained that the ideal middle school teacher has:

Passion for education, passion for the subject ... also passion for young people ... I think that's really important. I don't think you can just come into the middle school and teach ... you've really got to know the kids.

Similarly, the participants believed that establishing good relationships with young adolescents is essential in the middle years. One stated, “students at this age are making their own stamp on the world and they want genuine relationships.” Most participants said that they knew the names of all the students in their middle school. One stated, “here everyone knows everyone very, very well ... I think that’s very important.” Both school organisations had a strong commitment to pastoral care and a concomitant focus on teachers working collaboratively.

### ***Classroom pedagogies***

The participants’ beliefs about pedagogy were loosely underpinned by a commitment to constructivist understandings of learning and teaching. One explained, “we’ve been quite successful at moving away from a structured, prescriptive syllabus ... [to] engaging learning experiences for students.” All the participants implemented various versions of collaborative learning in their classrooms. Small group and whole class discussions were commonly mentioned. One believed that young adolescent girls are, “more engaged in group activities ... [they] develop understanding through dialogue ... [and] love to be with others.” The participants generally believed that pedagogy and assessment should be aligned. One stated, “we do peer and self assessment ... [and promote] student-directed learning.”

The participants generally believed they had good subject area knowledge and associated pedagogical content knowledge but they did not seem to know much about ‘productive pedagogies’ or other analogous pedagogical approaches used in middle schools in some other Australian states. None of the participants specifically mentioned higher order thinking activities but two believed that pedagogies promoting exploratory activities should be implemented in the middle years. One also explained that in her class, “students are challenged with open-ended tasks, open-ended learning ... they take it on their own journey.” A senior participant stated that the ideal pedagogy in the middle school is “flexible and responsive ... [and] student-centred.” Despite their relatively vague beliefs about pedagogical approaches in the middle grades, the participants were confident that their middle schools provided quality learning environments. One stated, “[we have a] holistic education where we get to know the kids very, very well ... we do it fantastically well.”

### **Discussion**

The study found that the participant middle grades teachers reflected on their classroom practice and about the kind of schooling young adolescents need, but they were not well informed about the concept and attendant principles of middle schooling. In particular, the participants were not sufficiently knowledgeable about early adolescence which, in turn, affected their beliefs about appropriate pedagogies in the middle grades. The participants repeatedly stressed the need to ‘know’ young people but they neither knew about young adolescents nor how they best learn.

In spite of this state of affairs, the participants were deeply committed to the young people in their charge and placed a high premium on pastoral care. This was supported by the school cultures where teachers were expected to work collaboratively and mentor young people as a matter of course. Similar cultures are found in some other Australian middle schools (for example, Wilcox, 2005). In a similar vein, middle schools in the USA utilise what are called ‘advisory’ networks, which enhance the degree of social connectedness young people experience in school (Shulkind & Foote, 2009). On the

other hand, Prosser (2008) suggested that reliance on “popular” constructions of early adolescence could lead to schooling approaches in the middle grades with an overt “emphasis on counselling or pastoral care” (p. 155). Indeed, when the participants’ beliefs are compared to the Rumble and Aspland (2010) and Beane and Brodhagen (2001) models for the middle teacher, they are found wanting in terms of their general lack of knowledge about the specific developmental needs of young adolescents. It should be remembered, though, that both schools had configured their middle school arrangements relatively recently, thus the participants may not have had sufficient time to complete comprehensive programs of professional development.

In a nutshell, the participants believed that good teaching results in quality learning outcomes, that is, young adolescents somehow ‘automatically’ engage in learning when the classroom environment is warm and supportive. This belief is problematic for two reasons. Firstly, societal inequalities associated with class, ethnicity and culture are known to be powerful mediators of learning outcomes at every level (e.g. Willis, 1977) but, given that identity formation largely occurs during early adolescence, inequalities are especially likely to have a negative impact in the middle years. Secondly, the notion that good teaching is generic boils down to a default position based on insufficient knowledge and appreciation of young adolescents’ developmental needs (Rumble & Aspland, 2010; Shanks, 2010). Here the implication is that teachers will have little motivation or concern with regard to setting high expectations and stretching students by implementing productive pedagogies associated with higher order thinking (Lingard et al., 2001). For instance, a relatively common reality for middle level teachers is that some of their students have higher abilities in certain discrete aspects of cognition than they do. Thus, unless teachers are well versed in the developmental needs of young adolescents, they run the risk of underestimating their students’ cognitive abilities (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1989).

## **Conclusion**

This study provides a snapshot of middle level teachers’ beliefs about middle schooling in Tasmanian independent schools. Generalisation of the findings should be undertaken with caution due to the small scale of the project and the fact that both middle schools were relatively new entities. Nonetheless, the findings suggest that firstly, specific knowledge about the developmental needs of young adolescents, and secondly, productive pedagogies are likely to be worthy candidates for targeted professional development for middle grades teachers in Tasmania. Ultimately though, teachers’ understandings of early adolescence and their knowledge about productive pedagogies in the middle grades are linked to effective teacher education, and universities are better positioned to prepare teachers than are school communities. As such, the specific provision of teacher preparation for middle schooling in existing teacher education programs in Australia remains a pressing issue (Lingard, 2007; Shanks & Dowden, 2010).

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### **Appendix 1: Guiding questions for interview**

1. In your experience what are the particular needs of students in Grades 5-9?
2. What specialised knowledge do teachers need to effectively teach Grades 5-9? What professional learning have you done? Did it include the concept of early adolescence?
3. What specific teaching skills do teachers need to effectively teach Grades 5-9?
4. In your experience what teaching practices or learning activities do you find most effective for students in Grades 5-9?
5. In your view what are the main barriers to learning that occur in Grades 5-9?