Investigating the provision of professional learning and development for middle level teachers in New Zealand

Abstract

The current emphasis on quality teaching focuses on the correlation between professional learning and development (PLD), teacher efficacy and enhanced student learning outcomes. Abundant research evidence demonstrates that young adolescents (10-15 years old) have specific educational needs that are best catered for via developmentally responsive classroom practice, hence the rationale for scrutinising the nature and quality of middle level PLD. In this study, a sample of Years 7-8 teachers in New Zealand (NZ) schools were interviewed to determine the quality of their PLD experiences. Interviews with three key informants, who are international experts on the middle years of schooling, provided additional perspectives. The study concludes that if student learning outcomes and adolescent wellbeing are to be improved, middle level PLD should focus on enhancing teacher efficacy via both whole school and individualised initiatives.

Introduction

While the process of schooling is complex and involves multiple variables, the contemporary research base unequivocally identifies teachers as the most important influence on student learning (Dinham & Rowe, 2007; Hattie, 2009, 2012). In particular, Hattie's synthesis of over 800 meta-analyses of student achievement showed that "the biggest effects on student learning occur when teachers become learners of their own teaching" (2009, p. 22). Research on professional learning and development (PLD) highlights the centrality of effective PLD for enhancing the quality of teaching (Kennedy, 2016; Wiliam, 2016). Enhancing the quality of teaching, especially improving student-centred approaches which involve knowing and understanding students, is just as crucial to the success of student learning outcomes in the middle years, as it is in other years of schooling. The 2015 Position Paper of the Association of Middle Level Education (AMLE) in the USA emphasised this point by linking teachers' knowledge of developmental needs of young adolescents (10-15 years old) with their ability to implement effective curriculum and pedagogy:

> Successful middle level teachers, at their most fundamental level, must be *experts* in the development[al] needs of young adolescents … comprehensive understanding of the developmental stage of early adolescence provides a substantial basis on which middle level teachers can create curriculum, utilise effective teaching strategies, and use assessment wisely and effectively. (p. 1, emphasis added)

Implicit within AMLE's statement is the necessity to provide high quality PLD for middle level teachers. Indeed, targeted PLD for middle level teachers that results in improved teacher effectiveness is increasingly viewed as the key to enhancing student learning outcomes in the middle years (Flowers, Mertens, & Mulhall, 2002; Main & Pendergast, 2015; National Middle School Association [NMSA], 2010). This position is supported by abundant evidence showing that young adolescents have specific educational needs that are best catered for by pedagogies and practices that are developmentally responsive; that is, an integrated approach to all aspects of schooling that is specifically tailored to respond to the developmental needs of young adolescents (NMSA, 2010; Pendergast, Main, & Bahr, 2017). Reform of the middle

years of schooling has led to the establishment of specialised middle level Initial Teacher Education (ITE) programs as well as enhanced PLD for middle level teachers, particularly in Australia and USA.

The New Zealand context
Past recommendations for specialised middle level ITE in New Zealand (NZ) (e.g., Dowden, Bishop, & Nolan, 2009) have not been implemented. Instead, middle level teachers in NZ straddle a bipartite system of primary and secondary schooling that does not adequately acknowledge early adolescence as a distinct stage of human development and fails to recognise that specific pedagogies and practices are needed in the middle years. Indeed, the notion that 'effective teaching' in the middle years simply involves implementing prescribed pedagogical strategies without reference to students' age or developmental level is a widespread belief held by NZ educators (Shanks, 2010).

At the heart of the NZ Curriculum is the vision to develop "confident, connected, actively-involved and life-long learners" (Ministry of Education [MoE], 2007, p. 8). The Curriculum mandates high quality schooling by devolving responsibility to schools to design, implement and review local on-site curricula that respond to the particular needs, interests and circumstances of each school's students and community. It defines the concept of effective pedagogy as "teacher actions promoting student learning" (p. 34). One key teacher action is 'Teaching as Inquiry' which is predicated on Schön's (1991) generic reflection in/on action model. This two-stage model differentiates between thinking on one's feet during an event and in-depth analysis of an event after it has occurred to identify what could be done more effectively. 'Teaching as inquiry' is promoted by the Curriculum as an ongoing process that is integral to identifying PLD needs.

The NZ Curriculum describes three pathways for learning during the years of schooling that seamlessly connect with early childhood education and tertiary education. It identifies a specific 'Learning Pathway' for Years 7-10, which highlights the need for developmentally responsive approaches to meet the learning needs of young adolescents (p. 41). Regrettably, there is a disconnection between policy and practice, thus the transition from primary and secondary schooling is a struggle for many students. NZ's Education Review Office (ERO) concluded that in order for Years 9-10 students to be actively engaged and successful learners, "improvements are needed in most [secondary] schools" (2012, n.p.). During the middle years in NZ, student engagement deteriorates (Gibbs & Poskitt, 2010). While students in NZ stay in high school for longer, secondary schooling has been characterised by rising levels of underachievement because academic progress slows in Years 9 and 10 (Durling, 2007). In summary, the research evidence indicates a mismatch between the learning needs of young adolescents and contemporary approaches to schooling in the middle years in NZ.

The MoE has responded to underperformance in the middle years by commissioning reports which duly highlighted the need to improve educational outcomes for young adolescents (Dinham & Rowe, 2007; Durling, Ng, & Bishop, 2010; Gibbs & Poskitt, 2010). To date however, reform of ITE in NZ has not focused on preparing teachers for the middle years. Initiatives have focused on limited structural changes rather than adopting the principles of middle level education as a basis for reform. As a result, the NZ schooling system does not adequately cater to the unique needs of students in Years 7-10. Students in Years 1-8 are taught by primary teachers and students in Years 9-13 are taught by secondary teachers; and teaching and learning is typically viewed through the generic lens of 'one-size-fits-all'.

Given the multi-faceted concerns regarding the quality of education in the middle years, it is pertinent to question whether NZ teachers are adequately equipped to meet young adolescents' learning needs. In the absence of specialised studies in NZ universities that focus on the middle years of schooling (Shanks & Dowden, 2013), this article discusses: (1) the experiences of six Year 7-8 teachers' with respect to middle level PLD, and (2) the opinions of three international experts concerning the provision of PLD for middle level teachers.

Literature review

Developmentally responsive practice in middle-level classrooms

Adolescents undergo major physical, socio-emotional and cognitive changes as they progress from childhood to adulthood (Caskey & Anfara, 2014). While early adolescence is characterised by considerable diversity in terms of growth and development, young adolescents exhibit a unique set of developmental characteristics that set them apart as a distinct group requiring specific pedagogies and practices that respond to their learning needs. In addition, young adolescents in the current generation – 'millennials' – are subject to rapidly changing political, socio-cultural, technological and generational influences in the 21st century (Bahr & Pendergast, 2007; MoE, 2009). It is during this developmental stage of early adolescence and the transition between types of schooling that students are at the greatest risk of disengaging from learning (Durling, 2007; Gibbs & Poskitt, 2010).

A plethora of research has identified the quality of teacher-student relationships as being pivotal to student engagement in their learning during the middle years (Gibbs & Poskitt, 2010; NMSA, 2010; Rumble & Aspland, 2010). Bishop, Berryman, Powell, and Teddy (2007) found that strong teacher-student relationships were a prerequisite for Māori student achievement in the middle years. Similarly, Buckskin (2015) emphasised that good teacher-student relationships are a prerequisite to positive academic progress by Indigenous Australian students in the middle years. Mutually respectful relationships, underpinned by the principles of social constructivism, value the unique perspectives of young adolescents and respond to their quest for identity (Pendergast et al., 2017). When young adolescents are able to make connections to past learning experiences and are provided with opportunities to reflect on their learning, they develop a range of self-regulatory skills essential to becoming confident, connected and actively engaged learners (MoE, 2007).

Research in the middle years of schooling emphasises the need for relevant, challenging, integrated and exploratory curriculum designs, including multidisciplinary curricula such as STEM and other variants, which are relevant and respond to the learning needs of young adolescents (Beane, 2005; Dowden, 2014; NMSA, 2010; Weilbacher, 2019). Such curricula utilise themes drawn from the authentic concerns of students, rather than prescriptive subject content knowledge. Socially significant issues, where students actively engage in real-life contexts, allow students to develop increasing levels of responsibility and autonomy. The utilisation of a student-centred curriculum design, focused around 'big ideas' as a basis for inquiry, enhances students' sense of agency and develops their capacity for problem-solving and abstract thinking. While student-centred integrated curriculum approaches have recent currency in NZ (e.g. Brough, 2012; Dowden, 2012; Fraser, Aitkin, & Whyte, 2013; Fogarty-Perry, 2017), they are a clear departure from traditional approaches to curriculum design, thus the provision of high quality PLD is essential (Bickmore, 2014; Pendergast et al., 2017).

Pedagogies that respond to the developmental needs of young adolescents are crucial to enhancing learning outcomes (NMSA, 2010). Designing responsive pedagogies requires teachers to cater for diversity and to focus on students' intellectual development (NMSA, 2010). Inherent within this is the need for middle level teachers to focus on developing students' thinking skills via opportunities for analytic thinking, critical literacy and higher-order thinking (MoE, 2007; Pendergast et al., 2017). Implementing responsive pedagogies requires teachers to maintain high expectations of learners and offer learning experiences that integrate multiple learning approaches such as inquiry, self-directed learning and peer interaction (Landroth, 2013). The notion of developmental responsiveness also requires teachers to provide learning environments that adhere to democratic principles that value student voice in processes such as decision-making, negotiation and co-construction of classroom curricula (Beane, 2005).

Assessment should be aligned with pedagogy and cater for the diverse needs of young adolescents (Shanks & Dowden, 2013). Responsive assessment in the middle years should not only accommodate the characteristics of learners but also recognise local contexts (Wyatt-Smith, Adie, van der Kleij, & Cumming, 2017). Assessment also recognises the developing autonomy of middle level learners by: providing opportunities for self and peer assessment (Davies & Hill, 2009); fostering teacher and peer collaboration in the co-construction of criteria; negotiating how learning will be demonstrated; and utilising a range of technologies (Pendergast, 2017).

Targeted PLD for middle level teachers
The case for specialised PLD for middle level teachers is strongly supported by the literature (AMLE, 2015; Bickmore, 2014; Bishop, 2008; Dinham & Rowe, 2007; Flowers, Mertens, & Mulhall, 2002; Main & Pendergast, 2015; Shanks & Dowden, 2015). The common thread is that the systemic provision of PLD is essential if middle level teachers are to develop a full understanding of the principles of middle schooling and the implications for classroom practice.

Middle level reform, and by extension PLD, has been traditionally associated with technical changes such as establishing separate middle schools, block timetabling and teaching teams. This was certainly the case in NZ during the 1990s when middle level advocates were preoccupied with establishing middle schools (Dowden et al., 2009). While the delivery of PLD via workshops or similar is common, this is known to be of limited value (Desimone, 2009). A more effective approach to middle level PLD is aligned with the themes of collaboration, relevance, shared decision-making and healthy school cultures (Bickmore, 2014; Main & Pendergast, 2015). In Queensland, for example, a massive state-wide PLD program, designed to meet the needs of junior secondary (Years 7-9) teachers at the systemic level, resulted in the implementation of a set of quality teaching principles for junior secondary schooling that are responsive to students' developmental needs (Pendergast, Main, Barton, Kanasa, Geelan, & Dowden, 2015).

Collaborative reform activities involve teachers working in teams with the support of facilitators (Ruebel, 2012). The theme of relevance is enacted through the implementation of job-embedded professional development (JEPD) involving teacher learning grounded in authentic teaching practice to improve student learning (Croft, Coggshall, Dolan, & Powers, 2010). As part of a cycle of continuous improvement, JEPD is primarily classroom-based and focused on connecting learning, and is implemented daily via an inquiry-based approach. Rather than implementing a 'top-down' approach, contemporary PLD models emphasise the

importance of shared decision-making by senior managers and teachers. The duration of reform activities is also salient, with longer term initiatives having a greater impact on enhancing teacher capacity and improving student learning outcomes (Mourshed, Chijioke, & Barber, 2010).

In NZ high schools, school leaders generally provide subject-based PLD but, as ERO (2012) noted, this kind of PLD often fails to enhance the pedagogical practice of Years 9-10 teachers. ERO commented that "it would be wise for secondary leaders to evaluate the extent to which the focus of PLD should also be on building pedagogical practices that can be applied across a range of learning areas, subjects, and disciplines" (p. 33).

In summary, the literature shows that the key factor influencing student motivation, engagement and academic achievement is the *quality of teaching* (Dinham & Rowe, 2007; Hattie, 2012). Enhancing teacher capital by increasing teachers' understanding of middle schooling principles, and thus their self-efficacy, directly influences their responsiveness to students' needs and, ultimately, leads to enhanced learning outcomes (Pendergast & Main, 2017). Accordingly, the literature implies that investment in targeted PLD for the middle level focused on enhancing teacher efficacy is the key to effective middle level reform.

Method

This study utilised a phenomenological design for research inquiry (Creswell, 2014) to capture the lived experiences of six Years 7-8 teachers regarding middle level PLD. The teacher participants represented a diverse range of experience with respect to the middle years and all had completed a primary program of ITE. In addition, the perspectives of three international experts, recognised as leaders in middle years' research and the provision of middle level PLD, were obtained. The principles of qualitative research inquiry guided the recruitment of participants, the collection and analysis of data, and the formulation and reporting of findings. Ethics approval was obtained from the University of Otago and the study was classified as minimal risk.

The three experts were Professor Donna Pendergast, Dean of Education at Griffith University, who is a leading researcher in the middle years of schooling; Dr Katherine Main, a Senior Lecturer of Education at Griffith University, who specialises in the middle years of schooling; and, Professor Penny Bishop, who is Professor of Middle Level Education at the University of Vermont, USA. The expert participants each gave permission to be identified.

In-depth and semi-structured interviews were used to collect data (Creswell, 2014). Interview schedules were used to guide individual interviews. The interviews with the teacher participants focused on: (1) their motivation for teaching young adolescent students; (2) their philosophy of teaching; (3) the middle level PLD they had engaged in; (4) the level of input they had in relation to decision-making about their PLD; and (5) their suggestions for future PLD. The interviews with the three key informants focused on: (1) their roles as leaders in middle level education; (2) their rationales for middle level PLD; (3) their opinions concerning enabling policy and initiatives; (4) their beliefs about the core components of effective PLD; and (5) their opinions on future directions for middle level reform. The interviews were approximately 90 minutes long. They were conducted either face-to-face or via audio-visual technology and recorded before being transcribed.

Interpretative analysis was used to create meaning from the data. To enhance validity, the two investigators engaged in independent data analysis (Bouma, 2000). Coding was used to identify patterns of meaning, which were then refined and represented in discrete categories and emergent themes (Creswell, 2014). Relevant data were selected to illustrate each theme and to ensure that the participants' voices were prominent in the reporting process.

Results

Five themes emerged from the interviews. These were: (1) The principles of middle schooling provide a framework for responsive practice; (2) Inadequate initial teacher education preparation; (3) Strategic influence at the policy level; (4) Decision-making about PLD should be collaborative and related to teachers' work; and (5) Teacher preferences for future PLD. The perspectives of the teachers and the experts have been presented together, within each theme where relevant, to facilitate comparison of the teacher and expert data sets.

(1) The principles of middle schooling provide a framework for responsive practice

All three experts emphasised the need for the principles of middle schooling to form the overarching framework for the philosophy, pedagogy and practice in middle level classrooms In effect, this requires school communities to envisage the principles of middle schooling as being positioned above curriculum, pedagogy, assessment and other facets that contribute to schooling. Penny explained:

> Rather than [middle level PLD] becoming … a literacy initiative or a special education initiative' [it becomes] an umbrella [that helps teachers to] see how to fit other initiatives within it.

Penny elaborated that middle level PLD provided in Vermont was needs-based, thus the central focus of middle level PLD in her context was to help schools to identify their goals and then align them with the core principles and practices of middle level education.

This informed approach to guiding and improving practice, which is grounded in a coherent philosophical foundation, was absent from the perspectives of the teacher participants who lacked knowledge of the principles of middle level education. Importantly, the teachers did not recognise that young adolescence is a distinct stage of human development that requires a specialised approach to classroom teaching. Rather than describing a sound philosophical framework for their practice, the teachers identified a grab-bag of generic touchstones that they believed would promote effective practice in Years 7-8. While most of the teachers articulated the importance of knowing the learner, understanding the developmental needs of young adolescents was not identified as a basis for their practice. Rather, the dimensions of effective teaching were utilised as a generic approach for all learners. The teacher participants' responses revealed a lack of identity as teachers of young adolescents and this extended to their inability to provide a rationale for middle level education other than preparing students for senior schooling. Essentially, the teachers saw their role as preparing students for future studies, as opposed to facilitating authentic learning within students' lived contexts. One teacher commented:

> It's all about relationships … teachers need to have that personal one-on-one connection with kids … my philosophy is that they need to have very clear expectations … [and] preparing them as much as possible for the transition into the senior years of schooling.

This comment reveals a modicum of wisdom of practice, in that teacher-student relationships are important and that expectations need to be clear in the middle level classroom, but it falls short of genuinely knowing the young adolescent learner. In addition, this approach does not adequately prepare students for senior schooling because it fails to recognise that teaching in the middle years should empower young adolescent students to become life-long learners, thereby implying a gradual release of responsibility from teacher to student (Pendergast et al., 2017).

(2) Inadequate initial teacher education preparation
The experts emphasised that the main aim of middle level PLD should be to enhance teacher efficacy, that is, a teacher's belief in his/her ability to have a positive impact on student learning (Tschannen-Moran & Woolfolk-Hoy, 2001). When middle level teachers have not completed an initial teacher program specifically tailored to teaching young adolescents, they lack efficacy with respect to meeting students' learning needs.

Five of the six teacher participants believed that their experience as an ITE student had failed to adequately prepare them for teaching Years 7-8 students. One explained:

> I had really good [subject area] knowledge, I knew how to assess students. I knew how to build relationships with younger primary learners but I didn't know how to develop relationships with older students in Years 7-8.

The teachers had learned via a process of trial-and-error to develop relationships with young adolescents and cater for their diverse learning needs. One elaborated that she had on-going difficulties with managing student behaviour and sustaining student engagement.

Katherine believed that enhancing teacher efficacy should be central to middle level PLD initiatives because, when teachers believe in their ability to teach young adolescents, they are more likely to be motivated to implement and sustain developmentally responsive practices. She added that ongoing middle level PLD empowers teachers by helping them develop enough knowledge and understanding to be confident in their ability to teach young adolescents:

> Effective PLD ... change[s] teacher practice and build[s] their sense of efficacy. There's a strong correlational and causal link between teacher efficacy and [better learning] outcomes. So, if you improve [teachers'] sense of efficacy in their ability to teach ... [they become] resilient ... [and] put more effort in. There is strong research evidence that this will actually improve student outcomes.

(3) Strategically influencing at the policy level
The teachers participants believed that the Ministry of Education (MoE), which mandates government policy and is the main provider of PLD in NZ, had priorities that did not include middle level PLD. They identified the MoE's emphasis on improving student achievement in numeracy and literacy as the main driver of whole-school PLD in their schools. Moreover, the MoE's focus in recent years on targeting 'priority learners' – defined as Māori or Pacific Islander students, students with special needs, or students from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds – left little room for other PLD. Although teachers across the sector were meant to be able to choose PLD relevant to their professional growth, the reality was

that the nature of their PLD was driven by baseline data and thus decided on by senior managers. As a result, none of the teacher participants had experienced PLD that specifically targeted the middle years.

One of the experts, Donna, highlighted the importance of adopting a strategic approach when lobbying politicians or other stakeholders at the policy level in order to enact change initiatives. With regard to some successes in influencing policy in her state, she commented:

> *I think the politics has a lot to do with it because unless there is a commitment at a systems level then schools can do all sorts of amazing things but it's only going to change that school ... I'm chair of [a state committee], so I work with the Minister, I work with the Director-General and I influence. And that's how I think that you actually have an impact ... Unless it gets to policy it's not going to happen. So being highly influential at that level is very important.*

Donna also explained that she has been involved in research that has provided evidential data on the impact of a range of middle level initiatives. This informed politicians and other stakeholders and led to legislation that has provided the infrastructure for reform.

(4) Decision-making about PLD should be collaborative and related to teachers' work
The teacher participants unanimously identified time constraints as a key barrier to their participation in middle level PLD, however, the experts believed that this could be addressed through providing PLD as a result of shared decision-making where teacher voice is valued, and where PLD is relevant within the daily work of teachers. When PLD is embedded in teachers' work it has greater impact and is more likely to be sustained. Katherine commented:

> *There are several features around PLD that make it effective. It has to be connected to teachers' work and it has to be done [collaboratively] ... [Teachers must be] agents of the change. ... How that works is critical because if ... [PLD is] mandated ... [it becomes] a political issue ... in terms of time ... [Teachers] prioritise their time and say 'well I haven't got time to do that' but if the leaders approach [PLD] in a way that the teachers feel invested in ... [they] make the time to actually make it happen.*

The teacher participants frequently mentioned time constraints. One commented:

> *We are so busy! Teachers never have enough time – it's always time – there's never enough time to do anything.*

Although these comments reflect that work intensity was a problem, it also revealed that middle years PLD was a low priority in their schools because there was no time allocated to it. The comments may also reflect limited opportunity for teachers to participate in decision-making with respect to whole-school PD. Nonetheless, when teachers understand they have serious gaps in their professional knowledge, they are more likely to invest time and effort into lobbying for high quality PLD.

Penny identified action research as a key feature of PLD she led in the USA. Action research engages teachers in a cyclical process of posing authentic questions, problem-solving to identify and apply interventions, gathering evidence and engaging in reflection. Accordingly, contextualised middle level PLD enables teachers to solve local problems and precisely respond to students' learning needs with reference to their lived experiences and thus help students to develop skill sets for engaging in contemporary contexts.

Donna described a particular case of middle level PLD in detail. This was a large-scale PLD project in Queensland, involving junior secondary (Years 7-9) schooling in 259 state high schools that implemented contextualised reform in each school (Queensland Government, 2015; Pendergast et al., 2015). A key component in the project was the use of the Education Change Model (ECM) (Desimone, 2009), which encompasses the stages of initiation, development and consolidation, and is underpinned by core features for effective PLD.

Accordingly, PLD must be content focused with explicit links to the knowledge and skills teachers require in daily classroom work; it must involve participants in active learning where they are engaged in meaningful discussion, planning and practice, both during the PLD and in everyday work; it must ensure coherence by reflecting the connection between the PLD activity and the classroom; it must be of sufficient duration to enable participant engagement and implementation; and it must involve the collective participation of teachers undertaking PLD, so that it generates opportunities for relevant interaction and discourse. Donna further explained that in the Queensland project PLD was needs-based and resourced to provide a knowledge framework so that each school could identify where they were positioned on an 'initiation-development-consolidation' continuum. Individual schools developed an action plan and were provided with online coaching (see Pendergast et al., 2015). In the ECM, the initiation phase of PLD is crucial because it engages teachers in the philosophical underpinnings of middle schooling, especially the notion of developmentally responsive pedagogy and practice. In the process, teachers' beliefs are likely to be examined, confronted and re-shaped. Donna elaborated:

> The [school-based] PLD that I have done for 15 years has really explained why it is that we need to do this kind of work, what's different about young adolescents and their learning, what it is that we need to understand as educators. What did we miss in our preservice teacher education that was specialised information around young adolescents? ... It's not until the development phase where fine-tuning the pedagogies and assessment practices and all of that really takes place. What tends to happen with [other] models ... is that they start at the development phase and they try to focus on changing day-to-day practices, but they miss the philosophy component. So one of the common reform glitches, is starting at the wrong place because then you've got to go back there anyway, because it's the important 'why' stuff.

(5) Teacher preferences for future PLD

When asked about their ideas for future PLD, the teacher participants expressed a desire to take part in a range of PLD opportunities that would enable them to know and understand young adolescents so that they could design learning experiences that were developmentally responsive. One of the teachers commented on the possible focus for such PLD:

> I'd love to see something around the psychology of [Year 7-8 students]... how their brain is developing, what we can do to help them in their life at the moment ... to help us teach them better [and] connect more effectively to them as learner[s].

The teacher participants seemed to intuitively recognise that the needs of Years 7-8 students are distinct and cannot be met by generic dimensions such as 'knowing the learner', as espoused by extant ITE programs in NZ. Genuinely knowing young adolescent learners entails the need for middle level PLD that is focused on developmental needs so that teachers are able to effectively respond to these.

Some of the teachers also identified a preference for enrolling in postgraduate study as a way to enhance their knowledge and understanding of the principles of middle level education. They saw this form of PLD as providing greater flexibility in their respective workloads and also a way to address time constraints within their day to day lives.

The experts explained that some universities in USA and Australia offer postgraduate programs tailored to the needs of middle level teachers. One example is the Graduate Certificate of Middle Education delivered online by Open Universities Australia. Katherine described the program:

> *[It consists] of four units ... it's basically to upskill teachers. I've had people ... all across the world doing it, because it's fully online ... The first unit is based on understanding the adolescent learner. The second one [situates] the adolescent learner in contemporary society ... The other two units ... [involve implementing] an action research project within [the] classroom.*

The teacher participants made it clear that they wanted to have a greater say in decision-making relating to PLD and, more particularly, they wanted PLD with a greater emphasis on the principles of middle level education and the nature of young adolescence.

Discussion

The perspectives of the teacher participants in this study reflected the low profile of middle level education in the NZ schooling system by revealing a lack of knowledge and understanding about young adolescent students' developmental needs or the principles of middle level education. The teachers gave higher priority to PLD focused on subject area content than to PLD focused on developing sound pedagogies for the middle level classroom. This puts the cart before the horse because effective PLD for middle level teachers needs to establish the principles of middle schooling before focusing on curriculum design.

The experts emphasised the existence of a causal relationship between middle level PLD, teacher efficacy and improved student learning outcomes (Tschannen-Moran & Woolfolk-Hoy, 2007). Moreover, within the experts' contexts, the political status of the middle years was comparable to other years of schooling, thus the experts were not distracted by a continual need to provide a justification for middle level PLD. Instead, they focused on designing PLD programs that were context-specific, data-driven and embedded in the daily work of middle level teachers. They used inclusive approaches to whole-school or year level PLD that engaged teachers in goalsetting, problem-solving, applying interventions, gathering evidence and practising ongoing reflection. Such approaches are consistent with both the NZ Curriculum's "Teaching as Inquiry" approach that promotes student learning (MoE, 2007, p. 35). While there were subtle differences in the approaches to middle level PLD advocated by the experts, their work with teachers was consistently underpinned by the core principles of effective PLD. To complement whole-school PLD, the experts highlighted the importance of universities providing postgraduate study opportunities for middle level teachers.

The results of this study reveal a pressing need for high quality middle level PLD in NZ. It should be unacceptable for teachers to have to resort to trial-and-error for behaviour management in classrooms and to be in a knowledge vacuum with respect to the

developmental stage of young adolescence. As a result of the MoE's recent restructure of PLD, schools now have the autonomy to identify their focus for whole-school PLD. School leaders may submit a proposal and apply for central funding for an identified whole-school focus. This provides an opening for all schools catering for young adolescents to identify PLD for the middle years that focuses on enhancing teacher efficacy as a key to improving student learning outcomes. Schools may engage in whole-school PLD or PLD within communities of learning to collaboratively examine the principles of middle level education. Specialised PLD within communities of learning, led by experienced facilitators and supported by experts in middle level education, could provide an avenue for high quality middle level PLD. ITE providers could also support middle level reform by providing opportunities for postgraduate study on the middle years of schooling. In order to make progress towards the provision of high quality middle level PLD in NZ, collaboration between policymakers, the MoE, universities and the school sector will be required.

Conclusion

Teachers and students in the middle years in NZ continue to be served by a bipartite primary/secondary system of schooling that does not respond to the developmental needs of young adolescents. Given ongoing concerns about the variable quality of schooling in Years 7-10, along with negative statistics on student disengagement in these years, it is time for stakeholders to take action and effect change. This study concludes that it is an imperative for middle level teachers in NZ to engage in high quality PLD that will catalyse developmentally responsive classroom practices. If the vision of the NZ Curriculum to develop "young people who will be confident, connected, actively-involved lifelong learners" (MoE, 2007, p. 8) is to be realised, it will require middle level teachers who are *experts* in facilitating the learning of young adolescents. School communities catering to young adolescents currently have the autonomy to identify an inquiry focus for high quality middle level PLD focused on enhancing teaching efficacy, pedagogy and classroom practice, however strategic and effective leadership will be needed in order to instigate change. Ultimately, middle level teachers in NZ need high quality PLD that will equip them to be effective in the classroom.

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