



# EFFECTIVE MIDDLE SCHOOLING

A MANUAL FOR  
MIDDLE SCHOOL LEADERS

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A Resource Book for Middle School Leaders

A GLOBAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES MANUAL

By Julie Boyd

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## INTRODUCTION

Middle Schooling is a phrase which has waxed and waned in both popularity and meaning for many years. While intending to refer to the group of young people who are in the middle of their schooling years, depending on the geographic location and context in which it is being discussed it can refer to groups ranging from year 5 level to year 10 level. This has created some confusion in the translation of teaching and management strategies and requires some clarification as to our intent in providing ‘middle schooling’. It also requires that we, as educators, think ‘care-fully’ about the implications for schooling and learning experiences are for young people of this age.

While the terminology is not important, addressing the issues of students in this age group is crucial. As a pre/young adolescent group their needs are somewhat different to others. Their developmental stages will be variable across physical, emotional, intellectual, social, cognitive and moral platforms. Each young person will be a matrix within themselves, and our programs must be sufficiently flexible to enable individuals room to move and grow within them.

Physically we are dealing with the challenges of increasingly earlier onset of puberty, particularly in girls, with studies in England indicating an average onset age of 11 with rapidly increasing numbers experiencing onset as 7/8 year olds. The activity levels and needs of young men and women continue to differ. Coordination capabilities are often at their optimum challenge levels at the same time that kinesthetic modes of learning and physical sensory learning are optimally heightened. So, while we are beginning to look at the needs of the 'middle years' group and the effective articulation of young people through the schooling process we must bear in mind this developmental migration.

Cognitively young people of this age are reaching a stage where their capacity to learn is influenced by the focus of their brain development. Depending on the emotional environment they have experienced in their previous years, their brain and moral development takes significant strides at this point. Assisting them to grapple with moral and value based issues in a productive way will lay the foundation for their continuing affective development as young adults.

Young people at this stage in their lives also have different vulnerabilities to those of different ages. Socially they are in a period of transition. The question of social initiation and development is one with which many educators and some parents are currently grappling. What does this mean for different genders? Should we be separating girls and boys? All the time or just some of the time?

Do they learn more effectively in gender heterogeneous or homogeneous groups? Is gender a matter of polarities or a continuum? While research is currently being conducted around these questions, anecdotal evidence seems increasingly to indicate that there is considerable merit in the separation of boys and girls for some periods of time for the purpose of developing male and female 'secret business'. Also the movements which are occurring in indigenous cultures across the world where young men and women are either

engaging in traditional rituals or creating new ones to celebrate transitions at this crucial time in their lives is gaining increasing popularity in western cultures.

Social boundaries are also a source of conversation for many educators and parents. Many of our young people seem to be growing into a world where the word responsibility is being increasingly used, and misused, and the word boundaries is being forgotten. Responsibility is the synthesis of two words, response- and ability-, ie. it means 'the ability to respond'. Providing boundaries for young people gives them the capacity to develop response-ability, as well as providing them with something tangible, but relatively safe to challenge, and thus assists in building resiliency.

Emotional vulnerability also needs to be recognised and addressed. Self esteem and self worth which manifest in self confidence at either high, low, or, most usually, fluctuating levels is also an area of considerable challenge at this age. Research into creating resilient young people indicates that if certain protective factors are implemented in the life of each young person, the opportunity for them to develop resiliency is heightened, and they are likely to achieve certain outcomes.

Protective factors include

1. High expectations (of self and others)
2. Bonding (with healthy adults)
3. Lifeskills (willingness and ability to learn throughout life)
4. Boundaries (social, moral, and ethical)

5. Participation (in opportunities to learn beyond normal experience and to assist others)

If these protective factors are combined with the creation of a psychological learning environment in which a young person experiences

1. AUTONOMY while surrounded by a supportive yet challenging group
2. The ability to manages CHOICE effectively
3. ENJOYMENT OF LEARNING
4. Strong sense of BELONGING

Then a young person is likely to attain the following outcomes:

Steven and Sybil Wolin define the 'Seven Resiliencies' as:

1. Insight
2. Independence
3. Relationships
4. Initiative
5. Creativity
6. Humour
7. Morality

Bonnie Benard defines the following as providing a profile of a resilient child

1. Social competence
2. Problem solving skills
3. Autonomy
4. Sense of meaning and purpose

So what does this mean in terms of schooling? Schools are increasingly experimenting with the most effective learning environments, learning strategies and curriculum for 'middle schooling'. Increasing experimentation in these areas is creating masterpieces of success in some areas and abysmal failures in others. Success is being achieved mostly by young people are an integral part.

In creating effective learning environments we often need to look beyond the school walls. School is one option however many schools are now exploring further forays into the community, partnerships with other educational organisations, mentorships, business partnerships, part-time work/school placements and many other options. The most successful include the following ingredients:

- Structure and boundaries
- Student interest
- Willingness and commitment to learn
- Reciprocal benefits
- Qualification (not academic) recognition
- A focus on learning

Curriculum which is meaningful to students and which challenges them at higher cognitive levels through the development of their capacity to effectively negotiate their learning, and through providing learning challenges which are open-ended rather than constraining, will assist in their intellectual development. Many teachers are taking a more conceptual approach to curriculum as a means of broadening students' experience across multiple learning areas and disciplines.

If we think about curriculum as being on a continuum of teacher intervention, our challenge as educators is to determine where our students are on the continuum (and indeed where we are ourselves!) and to gradually and purposefully move the students toward the 'student determined' end of the spectrum using a broad variety of strategies.

*Teacher intervention*

Teacher controlled-----Teacher student negotiated-----Student determined

Maybe beginning to think in terms of structured learning and unstructured learning will assist those who still focus on specific disciplinary learning to move away from that to a more integral form of curriculum. Structured learning refers to the fact that there are sometimes skills, concepts and attitudes we want students to experience and learn, either within or across learning areas, ie. the teacher 'non-negotiables'. When teachers negotiate curriculum with students it does not mean the abdication of responsibility to the students. It, in fact means the assumption of more 'response-ability' with them with the teacher in a facilitator role as opposed to an 'information-transmission' role. However, in determining what these 'non-negotiables' are we need to become more sensitive to changing learning needs of young people.

The teaching and learning strategies used with this age group often create the most challenge for teachers. If we do not have an extremely broad range of teaching and learning strategies at our disposal it severely limits our flexibility in being able to effectively facilitate learning. It behoves each of us as teachers to constantly and consistently seek to extend our experience in this area. With the advent of increasing digitisation of education, teachers will not only need to be familiar with using the internet and other digital facilities, but also in facilitating learning through this new medium.

What all of this means, of course, is that we need to look carefully at the way in which we structure both learning opportunities and learning locations for young people. We need to encourage the increasing movement of our students from school into the community as they move progressively through their schooling. We need to provide opportunities for them to take increasingly guided control of their learning processes, and we need to provide them with opportunities for meaningful and relevant learning. This is being achieved through a range of structures being used in different schools ranging from:

- having teachers plan shared curriculum and/or planning time
- introducing 'negotiated curriculum' or 'conceptual curriculum' times each day.
- restructuring the timetable so that groups of 'home' teachers spend much larger periods of time with a group of students
- beginning and ending the day with 'structured' learning, with cross- and/or multi-disciplinary learning from morning recess through to afternoon recess
- using a unitised curriculum where students can choose their program within guided frameworks
- scheduling so that students spend time in individual learning, partnered learning (with peers, mentors, coaches, supervisors etc.), and team learning (with peers, cross age, like- ability, heterogeneous, etc),
- developing major, community based projects which form the basis of a totally integrated program (eg. students undertake to build a house and organise the entire project from

obtaining donated materials, to planning, construction and decoration to negotiating a community use or sale to fund future projects, etc)

The 'middle years' are a truly exciting and challenging time. Our students are trying to contend with raging hormones, growing awareness of self and others, developing cognition and other significant changes. We, as adults are trying to best assist these young people to channel their time and energy into the most productive pursuits which will ultimately benefit not only themselves at a personal level, but also contribute to a more positively resilient community and culture.

This manual is designed to provide ideas and strategies for Middle School leaders to assist teachers to move into this process. We wish you the best in your endeavours and encourage you to remember that although (good!) teaching is probably the most challenging job in existence- apart from parenting- the long term rewards, as with parenting- are priceless!

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