



N.Z. AIMS

NEW ZEALAND ASSOCIATION FOR
INTERMEDIATE & MIDDLE SCHOOLING

“PROMOTER OF MIDDLE YEARS LEARNING”



MIDDLE SCHOOLING IN NEW ZEALAND

‘A Learning Pathway’

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Learning in years 7–10

During these years, students have opportunities to achieve to the best of their abilities across the breadth and depth of the New Zealand Curriculum – values, key competencies, and learning areas – laying a foundation for living and for further learning.

A responsive curriculum will recognise that students in these years are undergoing rapid physical development, becoming increasingly socially aware, and encountering increasingly complex curriculum contexts. Particularly important are positive relationships with adults, opportunities for students to be involved in the community, and authentic learning experiences.

Students' learning progress is closely linked to their ongoing development of literacy and numeracy skills. These continue to require focused teaching.

(The New Zealand Curriculum p. 41)

MIDDLE SCHOOLING IN NEW ZEALAND

'A Learning Pathway'

PREAMBLE

The development of a middle schooling pathway is an intentional approach to teaching and learning. It is one that is responsive and appropriate to the full range of needs, interests, and achievements of students between the ages of ten and fourteen years of age (in the middle years of their schooling experience). The New Zealand Curriculum (2007) recognises the middle schooling pathway as a distinctly different learning experience to traditional primary and secondary schooling pathways.

The need for a clearly different teaching and learning pedagogy for students in their middle years of schooling (frequently termed “emerging adolescents”) is well supported by recent New Zealand research (Stewart and Nolan, 1992; Nolan et.al. 2000; Hinchco, 2003; Schollum, 2007; Gibbs and Poskitt, 2010; Gluckman, 2011). The recent report from the Prime Minister's Chief Science Advisor (2011)¹ addresses New Zealand's high adolescent mortality and morbidity, reflected in our elevated rates of teenage depression, suicide, pregnancy, and binge drinking. The report highlights the contextual changes that create both challenges and opportunities for today's young people. For example, while social media and new technology can enhance well-being, they also promote the risk-taking behaviour associated with adolescence. The report recommends a “whole-of-life” approach to providing young people with the skills to transition smoothly from childhood to adulthood.

This extensive cadre of New Zealand research suggests that a “whole-of-life” approach is best provided for by developing a middle schooling pathway as outlined in the New Zealand Curriculum (NZC, p.41).

1. Gluckman, P. (June, 2011). Report on improving the transition: reducing social and psychological morbidity during adolescence. Recovered from www.pmcsa.org.nz. Oct. 2013.



MATURATIONAL STAGE

The period of emerging adolescence (10-14 years of age) is marked as a period of developmental change second only in importance and intensity to the first two years of life (Stewart and Nolan, 1992; Carr Grieg, 2002; Nagel, 2007). The inter-related developmental changes, (physical, psycho-emotional, cognitive and social), have lasting effects on the development of self-concept, academic and social adjustment to social norms. This stage determines the kind of person the emerging adolescent will finally become (Erickson, 1968, Hargreaves, 1986, Nagel, 2007). Psycho-emotional development is characterised by the search for personal identity, transition from industry to inferiority (Erickson, 1968) and from identity to role confusion. While intensely preoccupied with self this is contradicted by a fluctuating sense of self-worth, and the desire to impact on major societal issues. Social development is characterised by decreasing parental affiliation and increasing peer influence. The development of strong peer group conformity is coupled with a growing acceptance of and interest in members of the opposite sex (Stevenson, 1998).

PHASES OF SCHOOLING

Physical development is characterised by accelerated growth, variable growth rates, variable degrees of co-ordination, and the development of primary and secondary sex characteristics. The sequence of physical change is generally similar from one person to another, although the onset, rate, intensity, and timing of these changes are highly individualistic. There is considerable diversity in how and when students move through this stage, and what impact this developmental stage has on each individual's attitude and success with learning (Carr-Grieg, 2002). These differences therefore create stress and feelings of insecurity in emerging adolescents. It becomes essential that teachers maintain their

students' interest in learning and provide relevant, appropriate experiences so that they are readied for the senior phase of their schooling.

The middle phase of learning

is distinctly different from the senior phase of schooling which is generally characterised as a stage when individuals can make decisions independent from their families. The senior phase is concerned more with examinations and preparation for specific vocational callings or the requirements of tertiary education.

However, during the middle phase young people are going through the rapid growth and extensive maturation that occurs in early adolescence. They require a learning environment that is uniquely geared to meeting the needs of this middle phase. A transition occurs from the early years of schooling which is characterised by the need for students to be schooled close to home. This earlier phase is a time of developing key basic learning skills, both academic (to read and to count) and social (to work as an individual and as part of a group). The middle schooling phase, by contrast, is characterised as schooling at a physical distance from home, the development of greater independence and developing reliance on their peer group. These changes lead to the development of self as a learner and as a citizen. Middle schooling offers the opportunity to experience diverse new and challenging learning opportunities in the three spheres of academic, social and vocational contexts.

THE MIDDLE
PHASE OF
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FROM THE
SENIOR
PHASE OF
SCHOOLING



CORE DEVELOPMENTAL NEEDS

New Zealand researchers have identified a taxonomy of seven core developmental needs for emerging adolescents, each of which is further divided into an academic and a social aspect. The academic aspect refers to the knowledge and skills the emerging adolescent are expected to acquire. The social aspect refers to the beliefs and values that govern the way in which individuals develop as social beings. These seven needs distinguish emerging adolescence from other developmental stages and include:

- a sense of competency as a developing adult
- self-exploration and definition
- supportive social interaction with peers and adults
- challenging and rewarding physical activity
- meaningful participation in school and community
- routine, limits and structure and
- diversity of experience.

Furthermore, an important factor in meeting the needs of emerging adolescents is the requirement to develop relational learning experiences. What is important to young people during early adolescence is providing them with guided opportunities for learning about relationships in the context of their peer group. Gibbs and Poskitt (2010) describe four interrelated pedagogical approaches that promote learning and achievement in the middle school years which include:

- nurturing trusting relationships
- engaging students in fun activities
- making learning meaningful
- enabling students to learn better and helping them take responsibility for their learning.

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2. Nolan, C.J.P., Brown, M.A., Stewart, D.J., & Beane, J. (2000, September). *Middle schools for New Zealand: a direction for the future. Paper presented to TEFANZ Conference: Christchurch.*

At this stage in their lives emerging adolescents are also often a mystery to their parents. The latter are often bewildered by the changes

taking place in their child's natural development. Parents are generally receptive to advice about appropriate parental practices for this age-group. Middle schooling has much to offer by way of partnership in supporting the development of emerging adolescents. Effective middle schools are proactive in involving parents with their child's teachers in developing a better understanding of these young people at a critically formative time in their lives.

**EFFECTIVE
MIDDLE
SCHOOLS
ARE
PROACTIVE
IN INVOLVING
PARENTS**

A MIDDLE SCHOOLING PATHWAY

A Middle schooling pathway potentially optimises the learning opportunities of young people in the middle years of schooling. Such a pathway enhances their potential to live and work successfully in contemporary society, today and in the future. Middle schooling features the adoption of independent and aligned practices across the domains of pedagogy, pastoral care, assessment and curriculum; and through significant organisational changes in their learning places.

Generally New Zealand 10-year-olds tend to be in their final year of primary school; year six. Fourteen year-olds tend to be in year 10, the secondary school year preceding national examinations. The use of this middle schooling age-range (10-14 years of age) therefore implies the schooling years 7 to 10 in the New Zealand



context, and crosses the exiting divide between primary and secondary schooling pedagogies.

New Zealand currently has some twenty-three different schooling structures catering for students in these middle years of schooling. Whether originally generated by definite choice, by evolution or by chance, the value of what has been provided through intermediate school education, needs to be carefully considered before eliminating what it now offers or making changes to it based upon a re-look at middle schooling pathways. Hewitt (1995) suggested that, “the best type of school to meet the needs of emerging adolescents is one which responds to identified needs. The alarming suggestion is that there are some schools which seem to fail in this regard, especially in relation to school culture.”³ That speaks of the individuality of school difference and school type. Clearly there are some that are more successful than others and the name and label given to a school type does not guarantee its efficacy. However, the effectiveness embedded within the school type can be “jewels” that should not easily be lost.

Every student during these middle years of schooling therefore, should have the opportunity to experience an age appropriate pedagogy which consists of:

- authentic, life based experiences which are integrative and purposefully leads them to become active citizens of our democracy (Beeby 1938, Beane, 1990)
- intellectually challenging learning, of a consistency and academic rigour that ensures that what is taught and how it is assessed informs future learning pathways (Watson, 1964).
- personalised learning appropriate to the learner at their own individual level of

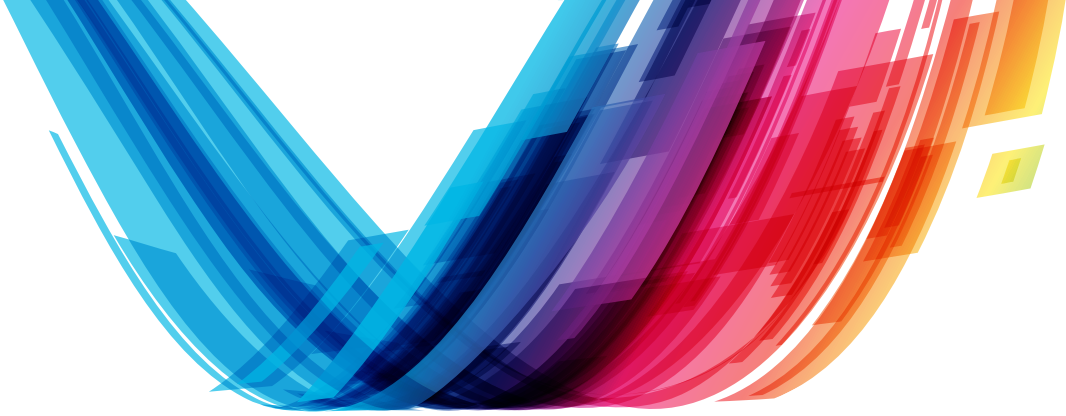
readiness, specifically accounting for the diversity of previous achievement which is characteristic of this age-group.

- opportunities that lead all students to experience success in all four aspects of middle years schooling; academic, cultural, sporting and social, while recognising and being responsive to their cultural heritage
- collaboration across all year levels and schooling structures that enable the learning and specific developmental characteristics and needs of emerging adolescents to be effectively met.

A middle schooling pathway offers the opportunity to provide a purpose built integrative curriculum that meets the specific developmental needs of emerging adolescents. An integrative curriculum cuts across subject-matter lines. It brings together various aspects of the curriculum into meaningful association through a focus on broad student selected themes of study. It reflects the interdependent nature of the real world and engages the learner in real life experiences, in a more holistic manner. Integrative learning experiences provide the learner with the opportunity to study in greater depth and to develop greater understandings than that which could be obtained through the study of the separate subject parts.

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3. Hewitt, R. (1995). *Young Adolescents Perceptions of and Attitudes Towards the Middle Years of Schooling*, Australian Curriculum Studies Association Conference Paper. No 24. University of Melbourne, 11-14 July.



This approach encourages greater student involvement, and therefore engagement, in the learning process. Rather than artificially dividing knowledge into separate subject areas, and using pedagogies such as textbooks and “seat” learning, this approach immerses students in the richness and complexity of life. Inviting students to help in this process, to bring their prior experiences to the situation, and be actively involved in problem solving activities gives them opportunities to develop critical thinking skills. It demonstrates to them that their ideas are valued, and to see that education is a serious concern of our society.

PRINCIPLES OF MIDDLE SCHOOLING

Just as the characteristics and needs of students in the middle years are inter related, so are the learning and teaching requirements for this age-group. A specific set of middle schooling principles underpin the relationship that should exist when working with emerging adolescents. These principles include a schooling:

- **philosophy** (beliefs and understandings) that put the emerging adolescent learner at the centre
- **culture** that creates a caring environment of trust and belonging, active engagement where authentic learning is valued, and healthy peer relationships are nurtured
- **pedagogy** that is responsive to the needs and characteristics of emerging adolescents, that is challenging and demanding, and provides effective differentiation of learning opportunities
- **curriculum** that is created from, responsive to, and frequently reviewed through the use of student voice
- **structure and organisation** that is responsive to the needs of emerging adolescents.

These five principles of effective middle schooling sit comfortably with the intentions of the New Zealand Curriculum

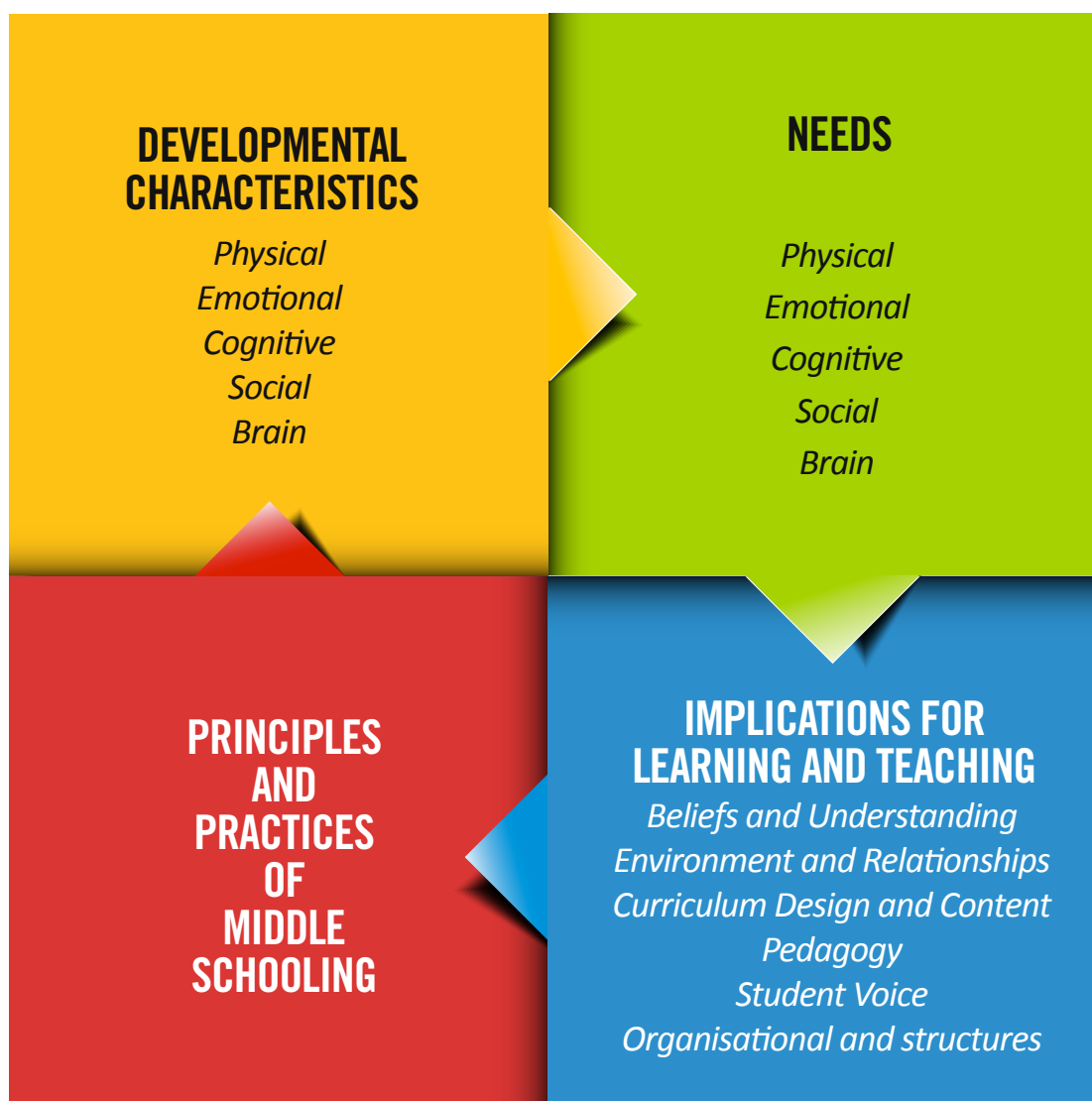
PHILOSOPHY CULTURE PEDAGOGY CURRICULUM STRUCTURE

(NZC) where students in the middle years will continue to develop the specific NZC goals of being:

- confident- positive in their own identity, motivated and reliable, and resilient
- connected- with themselves, with their peer group and community and with the wider global community
- actively involved- in their own learning as active participants in a range of life experiences
- critical and creative thinkers- problem creators and solvers, engaged in inquiry and real life scenarios and
- informed decision makers- able to actively participate in the wider society.

The principles and practices of middle schooling also provide a pedagogical balance between the cognitive and affective domains of learning providing an effective context in which to develop the key competencies of the NZC. These are in turn supported by purpose built schooling structures that support the inherently different learning requirements of emerging adolescents. Whether these specific middle schooling pathways are created within other schooling structures, or as stand alone structures tend to be driven more by financial imperatives. The reality however must be that with either alternative the specific organisational structures must meet the identified needs of this age-group.

EFFECTIVE MIDDLE SCHOOLING



RESPONSIVE TO THE DEVELOPMENTAL CHARACTERISTICS AND NEEDS OF EMERGING ADOLESCENTS⁴

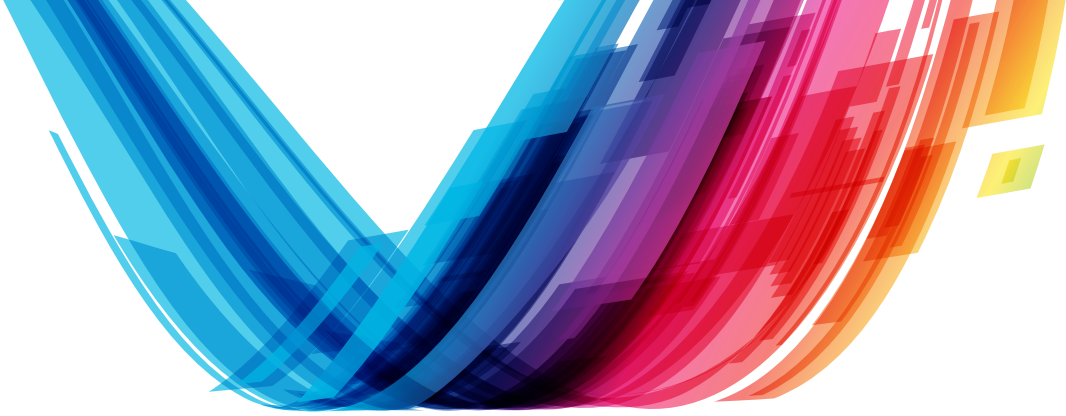
SCHOOLING PATTERNS

Since emerging adolescents differ in important ways from younger children and older adolescents, both primary and secondary patterns of school organisation unlikely to effectively meet their specific needs. When the middle levels are not separated, experience has shown that not only is the middle schooling philosophy diluted, but so is the delivery of an age-appropriate education. (Stewart and Nolan, 1992).

Schooling in New Zealand has traditionally focussed on the early years as the ground work for learning success, and then more recently on the “high stakes” senior years of schooling. By contrast a focus on middle schooling provides

an opportunity to provide resourcing at a time when adolescents are most sensitive about themselves and their development. A relevant age-appropriate curriculum provides the very best opportunity to contribute to positive life outcomes for these students as they establish a sense of self and a place in the world.

New Zealand has a long tradition of developing schooling structures to meet the specific needs of students in the middle years. In 1893 the first New Zealand middle school was opened in Nelson (Nelson School for Boys). This schooling model was followed by Junior High schools in the 1920s, Intermediate schools from the 1940s, and more



latterly Middle schools from the 1990s⁵. However, New Zealand research, since the beginning of this century (Nolan et.al. 2000; Hinchco, 2003; Schollum, 2007; Gibbs and Poskitt, 2010), suggests that the discussion should be less about schooling structures, and rather more concerned with the most effective pedagogies and schooling culture that engage and motivate students during their middle years of schooling.

Currently the schooling debate has been limited to what is, rather than what could be. Intermediate and Middle schools are only 'primary' schools because they are defined as such in legislation. Equally the recent revival of the 1920s Junior High Schools model has been an expediency resulting from the perceived financial advantages of placing these schools within the Secondary model of schooling structures.

Middle schooling is not, and neither should it be, a reflection of primary or secondary models of schooling. Middle schooling focuses on academic excellence, the arts, the sciences, maths, technology, and health and well-being. However, the way they achieve that excellence is directly related to understandings about the developmental stage and imperatives that phase places on all students achieving positive growth during their middle years.

In particular adolescent behaviour has been profoundly shaped by the way we have organised adolescents' educational and social experiences. The manner in which we organise school structures for our emerging adolescents in significant ways influences their development and behaviour. American researcher Robert Crosnoe (2011), who explores the social turbulence of

adolescence, says that educators need to pay greater attention to the informal part of adolescents' education, which takes place within their school peer culture (and subcultures) and helps them develop the resilience to cope with social pressures.

We owe it to emerging adolescents to ensure that we provide the best educational experiences research can provide us with. Structures of schooling that may have served the country well in previous decades need to be overhauled and updated to cater for the needs of adolescents entering a technological society significantly different from one that existed even ten years ago.

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THE POTENTIAL IMPACT OF MAINTAINING THE CURRENT SCHOOLING STRUCTURES

Learners' progress through the middle years of schooling is currently marked by transitions between different school settings. The transition from primary to secondary school can be especially challenging. The New Zealand Ministry of Education's research (2010) showed that most students cope with the immediate transition from intermediate to secondary school, but become more negative in the second half of year 9. For a

4. Schollum, J. (2007). *Using the Schooling Strategy as a framework for significantly improving opportunities and outcomes for students across the middle years of schooling (years 7-10) regardless of school structure. Sabbatical report, p. 38.*
5. Hinchco, B. (2003). *Politics or pedagogy: The development of middle schools in New Zealand. Unpublished doctoral thesis: Waikato University.*



significant minority, this is a time of considerable stress. Consequently, it is important to think of the year 8–9 transition as a process rather than an event. Supporting students through this process requires schools to know each learner well and to build positive relationships among students, teachers, families and whānau, and “feeder” and “receiving” schools.

The current New Zealand process of transitioning students between schooling structures in the middle of their emerging adolescent phase needs to be questioned. At an individual’s second most crucial development phase our schooling system moves them at least once, and often twice, between schooling structures. This is at a developmental stage when students should experience the greatest stability and a specific age-appropriate learning experience. While middle schooling is not specifically a schooling structure debate, the intentional alignment of specific schooling structures and pathways would serve our emerging adolescent much better than what is occurring presently.

The Ministry’s research shows widening gaps in achievement at secondary school, with some students falling behind as the literacy and numeracy demands of the curriculum increase. Teachers need support in understanding these demands and how they can help students meet them (Dinham and Rowe, 2007). Transitions can be especially difficult for specific groups, such as Māori and Pasifika learners and learners with special needs. Students with sensory disorders such as those on the autistic spectrum, for example, need extra support to cope with changing classrooms and teachers.

Disengagement, alienation and boredom in traditional secondary schools often peak in these middle years leads to a decline in academic achievement. It was for this reason that an Education Review Office report (ERO, 2006) suggested that students in years nine and ten are currently the “forgotten years” of schooling in New Zealand. Reports from

the Ministry of Education’s Middle Schooling Research Programme (2007–2010) reveal that New Zealand students are generally positive about schooling and achieve relatively well (Durling, Ng, and Bishop, 2010). However, in these years, many learners’ perceptions of school become increasingly negative and their overall engagement in learning declines. This “switching off” can be accompanied by behavioural problems that affect educational participation and achievement, as evidenced by increasing rates of truancy, expulsions, and stand-downs. Māori boys are the group most vulnerable to these experiences,

Absenteeism, truancy, stand-down, attitudinal and engagement data from [New Zealand] sources indicate that some students’ perceptions of school become increasingly negative over the middle years, suggesting that a portion of students make the choice to leave school early far sooner than the senior secondary years. [...] Therefore, schools must understand and respond to the needs of their young adolescents, keeping them involved, engaged and wanting to stay in school beyond Year 10. If educationalists wish to discourage students from leaving school early, these students must both achieve well and feel engaged in their work⁶

Hence the middle years, particularly with respect to the productive engagement of this age-group in schooling, must become a priority for policy makers, the Ministry of Education and educators.

6. Bishop, P. (2008). *Middle years teacher credentialing in Aotearoa/ New Zealand*. Ian Axford Fellowship. Comments from the executive summary.



PRINCIPALS

The role of the principal is crucial. Principals must know the personal and professional needs of their community of learners, as well as to be able to provide effective leadership of both students and staff. The principal must be capable of developing a collaborative school culture (and a positive school climate) appropriate for this age-group and of developing staff and parent commitment to, and active participation, in this emerging adolescent culture. Furthermore, the principal has an important role in acting as an advocate for this age-group. They need to be able to provide informed advice and promote the inherent strengths that this age-group bring to society at large.

Educators during these middle years of student development need to be multi-talented and multi-skilled. They have to be specialists in educating emerging adolescents. They have to like the age-group and be able to exploit the advantages which accrue from aggregating significant numbers of peer-driven learners together in a school context. They need to become skilled at balancing diverse and multi-faceted developmental needs of this dynamic age-group.

**EDUCATORS
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AND MULTI-SKILLED**

TEACHERS AND SUPPORT STAFF

As middle schooling is focussed on emerging adolescents, teachers should be responsive to the real concerns and feelings of these students. Teacher-student relationships are not pre-empted by academic demands divorced from the physical, social and emotional needs of students. All educators involved with the middle years of schooling therefore must be concerned with the issues of engagement, motivation, opportunities and achievement of this age-group rather than the more peripheral issues of specific school structures.

Teachers of students in the middle years need to be:

- committed to working with emerging adolescents
- empathetic with the physical, emotional, social and academic needs of this age-group
- skilled negotiators, responsive to student voice while setting firm, fair, clear boundaries
- in touch with youth culture, and able to connect with this age-group
- prepared to keep up to date with the current research on emerging adolescents, and effective pedagogies for engaging them in learning and
- appropriate, positive role models

The Ministry's middle schooling research programme (2007-2010) included a review of the literature on learners' engagement in the middle years of schooling (Gibbs and Poskitt, 2010). The reviewers identified three components of engagement: behavioural, emotional, and cognitive. The first two are preconditions of the third. That is, if students are to do the cognitive work of making meaning and building knowledge, they need to be present and participating in class and to feel comfortable and connected with their school, teacher, and peers.

Schools can improve middle school learners' engagement in schooling through providing



quality age appropriate teaching and learning opportunities, building educative partnerships with families and whanau and understanding the learners' specific developmental needs.

Gibbs and Poskitt (2010) explain eight interconnected factors that influence student engagement:

- relationships with teachers and other students
- relational learning
- dispositions to be a learner
- motivation and interest in learning
- personal agency/cognitive autonomy
- self-efficacy
- goal orientation and
- academic, self-regulated learning.

Unsurprisingly, positive relationships with teachers and other students are critical. These researchers (p. 15) cite evidence from Te Kotahitanga (Bishop et al., 2007) suggesting the importance to Māori learners of:

- manaakitanga (building and nurturing a supportive, loving environment),
- ngā whakapiringatanga (the creation of a secure and well-managed learning environment),
- wānanga (engaging in effective teaching interactions with Māori students as Māori), and
- ako (both teachers and students learning in an interactive, dialogic relationship).

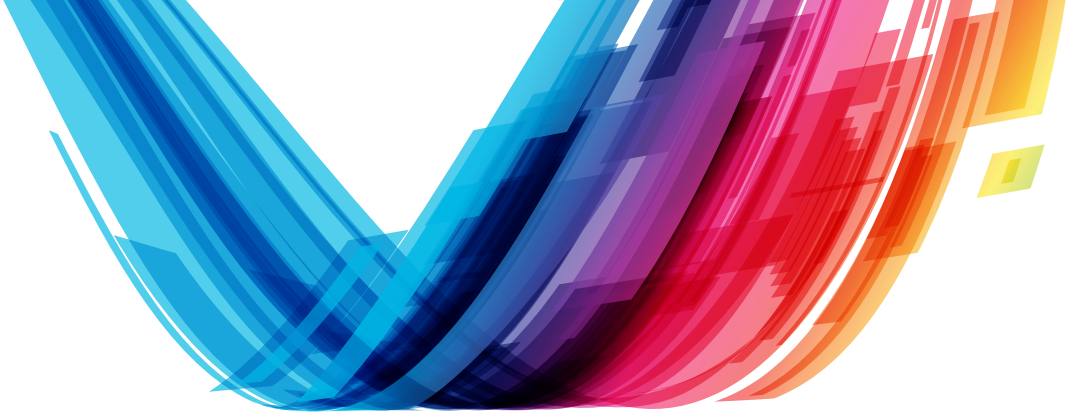
CONCLUSION

From the extensive New Zealand and international research material available the foundations for a uniquely New Zealand middle schooling approach has been laid. On purely pedagogical foundations the middle schooling pathway would encompass four years of schooling. A grade span of years 7-10 best suits the identified needs of emerging adolescents while fitting most effectively within the existing New Zealand structures of schooling.

The middle schooling pathway should be led by principals with strong academic understanding of the philosophy of middle schooling, and be staffed by teachers with a passion for this age-group. Teachers should come from pre-service teacher training programmes that had prepared them for working with this age-group. Effective in-service professional development programmes should support on-going development of teachers working with emerging adolescents.

The teachers should be supported by specialists trained in emerging adolescent counselling, social skills development and mental health issues. Together, in a homeroom and advisory programme, the specific needs of this age-group would be catered for. Teachers should work in teams, planning, teaching and assessing an integrated responsive curriculum reached democratically with significant input from the students. The learner as an individual should be supported by their homeroom teacher, by multi-level ability grouping, by authentic learning experiences, and the structures of the organisation as a whole.

Close links with parents and caregivers should be maintained with students encouraged to engage their whanau in their learning. Links with the community should be established and community service and adult mentoring programmes should be developed as would effective transitioning programmes with contributing primary and senior high schools.



The middle schooling pathway as expressed by the NZC should recognise the leadership opportunities and mentoring of year 7 and 8 students by those in years 9 and 10. Similarly effective recognition of and support for the cultural backgrounds of all students would be assured.

Policy makers, Ministry of education officials, and educators now have the opportunity to establish an age-appropriate schooling response by enacting the full extent of the NZC's commitment to a middle schooling pathway.

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