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The Background

Purpose of the Book

Australian interest in the middle school years has increased over the past decade, resulting in numerous attempts to reform schools and to make them more responsive to the needs of young adolescents. While some educators have set out to create a separate school, specifically designed for the age group 10 to 14+, the majority have maintained the traditional structure involving two sectors, the *primary* school and the *high* school, and have sought to improve the transition of students from one to the other.

As desirable as it is to have improved transition, there are inherent difficulties as it involves two or more schools on separate campuses, different executive staff, two different teaching teams catering for separate age groups of students, and – one has frequently to concede – two sets of assumptions about education. Two schools may even serve two different communities if the schools are separated by considerable distances as in country areas.

The case for cooperation between the sectors and, more importantly, for continuity of teaching and learning experiences is overwhelming if we are to provide high quality education and reduce the growing sense of alienation that many young people feel towards school life and school learning.

This book explores the issues relating to the middle years of schooling and reports a number of case studies where clusters of schools have concentrated their efforts on the age group 10 to 14+, seeking to improve the school organisation, the curriculum, and the welfare provisions (with an additional focus on gifted students) during the early years of adolescence.

Those involved

During the period 1996 to 1998 three related projects operated in different Australian states and territories, all similar in intent but differing in the ways they approached educational reform in the middle years of schooling.

The first was a joint venture between the Department of Education, Victoria (coordinated by Gay Morris of the Gifted Education Section) and Charles Sturt University, Wagga Wagga NSW (headed by Eddie Braggett). Termed *The Middle Years of Schooling Years 5 to 8+, Individual Learning Pathways Project*, it included the following seven clusters of schools.

Eureka Cluster, Ballarat	(3 schools)
Hampton Park Cluster, Melbourne	(6 schools)
Whitehorse Cluster, Melbourne	(4 schools)
Sebastapol Cluster, Ballarat South	(4 schools)
Tallangatta Cluster, northern Victoria	(4 schools)
Traralgon Cluster, eastern Victoria	(5 schools)
Yarrum Cluster, south-east Victoria	(4 schools)

The second was a similar joint venture between the Northern Territory Department of Education (coordinated by Alan Day of the Quality Outcomes Branch) and Charles Sturt University (headed by Eddie Braggett). Known as *The Middle Years of Schooling Project*, it included the following clusters of schools:

Darwin City Cluster	(4 schools)
Sanderson Local Schools Network (Darwin suburbs)	(6 schools)
Taminmin Cluster (rural)	(6 schools)

The third was a New South Wales country-based initiative in which two adjacent schools, West Wyalong High School and West Wyalong Primary School, developed and expanded their own ideas of a middle school, a model with some unique differences.

In the first two projects, those involving Victorian and Northern Territory Schools, the Department of Education advertised a *middle years of schooling project* and called for expressions of interest from clusters of schools which had already implemented some reforms in the area. A joint application was required from all schools in a cluster which was defined as 'a secondary school together with its main feeder primary schools'.

In return, the cluster was promised central support and funding as it explored its own needs, set out its objectives for a period of 2+ years, developed strategies, and implemented programs. As each cluster included both primary and secondary sectors, ways of enhancing the

transition of students between the two (ie. between Years 6 / 7 in Victoria and NSW and between Years 7 / 8 in Northern Territory) formed a crucial aspect.

Aims

No blueprint was provided and each cluster was free to develop a plan based on its own school community needs. The Department of Education in each case offered some consultancy services, the chance for clusters to meet and discuss issues and approaches and, in some instances, gave a grant to assist with travelling and release costs.

Clusters accepted seven broad aims requiring them to:

• further develop understandings about the content of the curriculum and the sequence of learning across the middle years of schooling so that a rational, coherent, seamless, consistent, and planned sequence of learning experiences are implemented through those years

• investigate the different classroom management and teaching strategies operating in primary and secondary schools and how they impact on student learning

• develop appropriate enrichment, extension and flexible progression programs to assist students with advanced skills

• allow highly able primary school students access to secondary school curriculum and, if appropriate, receive credit for advanced studies when they later transfer to secondary school

• investigate how school organisation and structure affect students' learning

• develop common understandings and language for assessing and reporting on students

• further develop structures / mechanisms for continuous communication and interaction between primary and secondary schools.

To their credit, the two NSW schools were self-funded and developed their own school-based reform agenda.

The Case Studies

When they agreed to participate, the schools were informed that their case studies might be published and that the reports would present both successes and difficulties experienced. There seems little point in relating the many positive gains without detailing the hindrances encountered, the difficulties of mind sets, the hard work required, the obstacles of time and distance, and the complications of changing staff.

All schools achieved some success and their stories indicate the positive gains experienced by the students and staff. Some of the schools were too optimistic in their objectives while others were restricted by traditionalism. Every school, however, provides a revealing glimpse of dedicated school communities which set out to make school life more relevant and appealing for the young students involved. The authors hope you are challenged by the reports of those who sought to analyse and improve current practice in the middle years of schooling.

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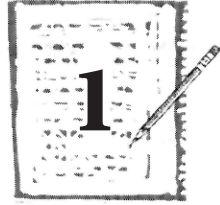
The Schools We Know

A Parent's Wish: Predictability

Schools are very predictable places. You can travel across Australia, visiting schools in each of the eight states and territories, and find similarities that make educational guests feel very much at home whatever schools they may visit. Of course they differ in size, in resources, in the type of students they enrol, and even in the philosophies they espouse but there is something distinctive about them all – their general purposes and the way they function.

Much of the similarity is quite deliberate because teachers set out to develop routines around which they operate. While it is true that schools may commence and end each day at slightly different times because of climatic differences, the needs of bus companies, and the requirements of local communities, the same general pattern tends to dominate. Students arrive about the same time each day, there are arrangements to care for younger children until teaching begins, wet weather rosters come into play when the clouds threaten, and there are sections of the school which are out-of-bounds for safety reasons.