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Preface

Research and Resources in Support of This We Believe was developed as a companion volume to *This We Believe: Successful Schools for Young Adolescents* (Hawker Brownlow Education 2005). As such it is not meant to be read from cover to cover, but instead is to be used as a tool in creating successful middle schools. It is our hope that the research summarised and documented in this book will assist middle years practitioners and policymakers in adopting and implementing sound educational practices for young adolescents.

Research and Resources is divided into five major parts. Part One, Introduction, provides the reader with the rationale for this book and an overview of middle years research that has occurred since 1991. Part Two reviews the major studies that have grounded and helped to conceptualise *This We Believe* (National Middle School Association, 1995) and *Turning Points* (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1989) as integrated reform initiatives. In this part we focus on research that specifically links the middle school concept to improved student academic performance and social-emotional development. Part Three reviews the research that has been conducted on each of the six programmatic components of *This We Believe: Successful Schools for Young Adolescents*. Part Four addresses the need for teachers and administrators who are specifically prepared to work in the middle years. In Parts Three and Four we provide readers not only with research summaries but with annotated references and recommended resources. The annotated references include important research that has been conducted and is worthy of further investigation and in-depth reading. The recommended resources, while based somewhat on research, are more practical in nature and provide examples of the *This We Believe* programmatic components in action. Finally, Part Five, Directions for Future Research, presents a preview of the next steps that are necessary to build a solid foundation for the middle school concept.

Part One

Introduction

This We Believe: Successful Schools for Young Adolescents (Hawker Brownlow Education 2005) presents a philosophical or conceptual framework to guide the development of school programs that effectively serve the needs of young adolescents. The primary question that educators, parents and policymakers have about the middle school is ‘Does it work?’ or ‘Will this model result in higher achievement while meeting other developmental needs of young adolescents as well?’ The myth that middle schools are ‘too soft’ and lack academic rigor persists, and many in the general public so believe, in spite of evidence to the contrary. We need to debunk this myth about middle schools. This is possible with the results of research studies combined with cumulative experience. What, then, do we really know about the effectiveness of middle years education? What kinds of schools are best for young adolescents? Is there research to support the type of school proposed in the position paper?

This companion volume, *Research and Resources in Support of This We Believe*, addresses these questions and presents summaries of research on the programmatic components described in *This We Believe: Successful Schools for Young Adolescents* (HBE, 2005). It provides educators and policymakers with a considerable understanding of what is currently known about middle years practice. To facilitate ongoing discussions, planning and policy development at the local level, annotated references and recommended resources are also included.

Developing an operational definition of ‘research’

Much has been published on middle years. For every serious research study a number of opinion pieces exist on a wide variety of middle years topics. In response, we modified Hough’s (2003) definition to guide the selection of sources to be included in *Research and Resources in Support of This We Believe*.

Research is an original work that reports the methods and findings from the systematic collection and analysis of empirical data.

Using this operational definition, we were able to include reviews of literature or conceptual pieces that utilised others’ works, provided these stand-alone documents did, in fact, use systematic approaches and follow standard scientific steps for data collection and analysis. Applying this definition, we included some ‘research’ that would not have been labeled as such by those engaged in experimental research.

An overview of middle years education research, 1991-2002

Between 1991 and 2002, 3,717 studies related to middle schools were published. That is an average of 309 per year over a 12-year period of time, almost one published study per day. This accounts only for the research that Hough and his research team (2003) identified.

While dissertations account for a large portion of this research (just under one-half), documents and journal articles indexed in ERIC (Educational Resources Information Center) account for two-thirds of all the studies disseminated. The American Educational Research Association (AERA) is the leading organisation disseminating middle years education research, followed by National Middle School Association. Research on middle years topics peaked in 1998 when almost 12 per cent of the total number of studies were disseminated, and by 2002 the volume of research had receded to roughly six per cent or half that of 1998 (Hough, 2003).

Surprisingly, many topics identified in *The 21st Century Research Agenda: Issues, Topics & Questions Guiding Inquiry into Middle Level*

Theory & Practice (NMSA, 1997) and the corresponding programmatic characteristics and structures found in *This We Believe* (NMSA, 1995) have not been adequately addressed in the research, including flexible timetabling, adult advocates for students, school climate and health and wellbeing issues (Hough, 2003).

About two-thirds of all studies on middle years education are qualitative in nature and have become increasingly so over the past 12 years, while quantitative studies that once represented almost 30 per cent of the total now represent about 15 per cent. The data collection techniques of choice among researchers conducting middle years education research include unobtrusive methods, case studies and mixed approaches. Less common are observation, surveys and interviews. Meta-analyses and focus groups are few and far between. Few experimental designs have been conducted, under four per cent of the total of 3,717 studies. Action research accounts for approximately 20 per cent of the studies and has grown exponentially as a method of choice (Hough, 2003).

Universities support almost 90 per cent of all middle years research conducted. The leading institutions providing this support are, in order: The University of Georgia, Columbia University's Teachers College, University of South Carolina, University of Nebraska-Lincoln and (tied for fifth) Ohio State University, Temple University and the University of Alabama (Hough, 2003).

Hough (2003) found that over 90 per cent of the research has been conducted by individuals not identified as prominent middle school advocates. One finding we stumbled upon serendipitously was that virtually no middle years education studies were replications of prior efforts. That is, no one has used the same research design and methods to collect, analyze and report findings that another researcher had employed. Replicating studies is a must if the research base is to be validated. Medical research, for example, is filled with replications to validate previous findings.