

The middle school dilemma: Issues about curriculum delivery for Years 7-10

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The school curriculum will link all learning experiences within the total school programme in a balanced way.

(The New Zealand Curriculum Framework, 1993, p.7).

Introduction

Explaining the New Zealand school system to an overseas visitor is something of a challenge. We have primary schools that go to year 6 (contributing schools) and some that go to year Year 8 (contributing schools). Some include secondary schooling (area schools) and a significant number cater for the transition years between primary and secondary schooling, Years 7 and 8 (intermediate schools). Most secondary schools begin at Year 9, but a number begin at Year 5 (Form 1 to 7 schools).

A new type of school that has emerged in New Zealand in the last two or three years caters for Years 5 to 8 pupils (middle schools). Strictly speaking, middle schools are not a new phenomena in New Zealand. The first middle schools (called junior high schools) were established in 1922. They catered for three years of school and offered both a finishing education based on the core subjects for those leaving school and also courses which were designed to prepare those who were continuing on to secondary school. However, because of factors such as competition for resources, professional rivalry between primary and secondary teachers and the shortage of funds, middle schools were slow to become established. The term "intermediate" was introduced as a result of regulations issued in 1932, which reduced the time of schooling to two years and established less generous staffing and salary rates.

At the time of writing, three middle schools have become established; St Andrews in Hamilton, Clover Park in Auckland and Rakaumanga in Whangarei. They are about to send their first intakes on to secondary school. A further middle school has been approved in Ellesmere, Invercargill. Currently the Ministry of Education is reviewing five applications for other middle schools.

Middle schools, of course, are common in countries such as the United States (where they are sometimes known as junior high schools), Japan, United Kingdom and to some extent, Australia. Curriculum delivery in these schools is along specialist lines, as in our secondary schools. Whether this is the best mode for pupil learning, however, is an open question. The emerging middle schools in New Zealand are in a unique position to experiment with alternative forms of curriculum delivery. The

purpose of this paper is to critically examine traditional and alternative modes, and thus help to inform debate on this important issue.

Transition school or independent unit?

While some form of independently organised schooling is seen as being necessary for providing a transition between primary and secondary schooling, its method of curriculum delivery is usually influenced by its transition role. Intermediate schools provide an excellent example of this; core subject delivery by home-room teachers with specialist teachers for subjects that are likely to be available for selection on the grounds of interest or ability at secondary school. The recent introduction of the technology strand into the curriculum is one indication of the flexibility of this core and specialist mixture. Its integration into the existing intermediate systems has been relatively easy because integration is a feature of most home-room teachers. A more specialist subject approach, such as that typical of most secondary systems, increases the difficulty in integrating a new subject (in this case, technology) across the span of subjects.

But the emergence of the middle school has allowed the reappraisal of different forms of curriculum delivery. It offers more than transition because it is a four-year school, catering for the particular needs of emerging adolescents and able to offer a flexibility to timetabling and curriculum options hitherto not attainable. Curriculum planners, therefore are able to choose from a variety of approaches. The dilemma for the planners is whether to emulate the secondary school model and offer a subject-driven, more specialist approach and be seen to be focussed on preparation for exams or whether to examine the ability of the integrated, home-room approach to deliver specialist subjects.

Those who support a more subject-driven approach allude to the economic, organisational and transitional advantages of that model. Economically, secondary schools are able to offer specialist rooms, particularly science and language labs and the corollary of this is that the subjects are more effectively presented because of these resources. By comparison the multipurpose, semi specialist rooms associated with middle schools imply a less disciplined approach. From an organisational perspective the proponents of a secondary model illustrate the advantages of continuity in having the same specialist subject teacher for Forms 3 to 7 (Years 7 to 11) and the possibility of a greater range of subjects. Some argue the advantages of having the transition in to secondary at Form 3 without the attendant concerns of preparation for the School Certificate exam.

Such a scenario is well entrenched in the New Zealand education scene. It is strongly promoted in the media by those allied to the secondary perspective and those fearful of being able to accommodate the expected 33 per cent increase in secondary

student rolls in the next 20 years (NZ Herald, 15-11-96, p.A13). Many view the establishment of the middle school as little more than an extended intermediate.

An alternative perspective

An alternative view is one where the approach of pupils meeting curriculum organisation needs is replaced with meeting pupil needs with a flexible curriculum organisation. The New Zealand Curriculum Framework signalled this possibility. It provides a guide for teachers to plan and implement programmes that are appropriate for the pupils and which reflect the unique needs and the nature of the school community. This option is not denied the supporters of a subject approach philosophy, but it does offer real opportunity for planners of programmes where the ingredients include a four-year programme, the flexible use of large blocks of time with one teacher, the possibility of integration of subjects within themes and being able to focus on individual learners. In this way curriculum delivery at middle school is more than a rearrangement of subject categories or even a blurring of the categories, it is the change to combine those successful learner-centred strategies that are well proven in junior school classrooms with the interest needs of emergent adolescents.

In precise terms, one model might include the flexible use of whole morning blocks of time with the class teacher in largely thematic pursuits, extension times in the afternoon, including technicraft, horticulture and physical education, and late afternoon option classes which make use of specialist teachers to take classes according to the selected interests of the pupils. Examples of the last category could include topics such as pottery and ceramics, languages, and electronics.

Such an approach assumes that middle school teachers value being able to relate to pupils of this age group rather than to the sequencing of a subject presentation. It assumes that, given the excellent teacher resources available, most experienced primary teachers are able to deliver the curriculum needs of for Forms 3 and 4 (years 9 and 10) and in an integrated manner, within the flexible use of large blocks of time that they have been familiar with for years.

From this perspective, middle schools could be in the advantageous position for curriculum delivery because they have generalist teachers who are able to offer some specialisation and specialist teachers capable of a generalist approach. They do not need to develop new practices but merely extend what has proved to operate so well at primary level; pupil centred teaching that focusses on taking the individual from where they are at, with a high frequency of pupil interaction and using time flexibly in an integrated manner.

Planners of curriculum delivery for middle schools are in a position to take advantage of the unique possibilities that are available at this level and do not have to be committed to offering a junior high school diet for their learners.

References

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