

Let's Talk Middle School!

“Much has already happened in the middle years in Australia and internationally (especially USA, UK, Singapore and New Zealand). It has come about essentially where teachers saw a need to work differently with students in years 4 to 9 and to implement transition strategies to make the change from primary to middle/secondary schooling more seamless.” (Lesley Englert, *Middle Phase of Learning: From Research to Action*)

In order to better understand learning in the Middle School we need to understand the Adolescent Learner. Andrew Fuller’s research shares that the frontal lobe of the brain is the last to mature in adolescents. This is the area which helps us to *plan, consider, control impulses, make wise decisions, to be kind, caring, considerate people – this somehow goes missing during adolescence during restructuring – which is why students often need help with further planning.*

Barratt (1998a, 1998b) has been influential in developing the table below to show adolescent learning needs. These factors influence how we develop our learning experiences and our approaches to teaching and learning in the Middle School.

Table 1

Identity	Exploring how individual and group identities are shaped by social and cultural groups
Relationships	Developing productive and affirming relationships with adults and peers in an environment that respects difference and diversity
Purpose	Having opportunities to negotiate learning that is useful now, as well as in the future
Empowerment	Viewing the world critically and acting independently, cooperatively and responsibly
Success	Having multiple opportunities to learn valued knowledge and skills as well as the opportunity to use talents and expertise that students bring to the learning environment
Rigour	Taking on realistic challenges in an environment characterised by high expectations and constructive and honest feedback
Safety	Learning in a safe, caring and stimulating environment that addresses issues of discrimination and harassment

The *New Basics Project Technical Paper* (Education Queensland 2000, p.15) notes that students moving from primary to secondary schooling face:

- Curriculum transition from often integrated primary school curricula to a secondary school system that, in most cases, still consists of a disintegrated ‘collection code’ (Bernstein 1990) of subject ‘boxes’ with highly variable levels of integration
- Pedagogical shifts from student-centred teaching in primary schools to subject-centred teaching in junior secondary years
- Discontinuities in personal support, as a result of highly variable emphases on self-development, life-planning, physical and psychological health



As a result we have witnessed that many students struggle with the shift. Hill and Russell (1999), for example, claim no student growth in reading, writing, speaking and listening in the middle years. This has been variously termed the 'middle year's slump' and Year 8 slump in student outcomes and engagement.

This is when we as a staff stepped back and asked ourselves“Hang on, Hill and Russell published this observation way back in 1999 and it still seems to be the trend in Middle Schools around the world today. So what do we need to do differently at ISS?”

We needed to reflect on our core business which is clearly stated in our Mission Statement, "**ISS is committed to rigorous and high academic standards and instillation of ideals of life-long learning and responsible global citizens. We strive to ensure that every student leaves ISS with an international understanding, an ability to think critically, act with compassion, care about themselves and others and display the attributes of the School Learner Outcomes.**"

As a staff we aspire to reflect our Mission Statement through our curriculum and approaches to teaching and learning in order to help all students achieve success and remain engaged in their learning.

Hence, with the introduction of a separate Middle school we are in a position to develop and strengthen:

- A shared ethos
- Interdisciplinary teacher teams
- Integrated curriculum
- Seamless transition
- Constructivist approaches to learning
- Larger classes of students sharing a small group of teachers
- A focus on pastoral care
- Flexible use of time and space

Finally, in their book 'What Every Middle School Teacher Should Know' by Trudy Knowles and Dave F. Browne, they share interesting insights from Middle School students who provide snapshots to help adults understand the Middle Schooler. Below is a poem and some of the questions that these authors have posed which have now become our questions. I quote,

"Think about these possibilities:

- *What if we truly supported and encouraged young adolescents in their quest to develop a self?*
- *What if we based schooling on the knowledge of early adolescent development?*
- *What if we designed a school that acknowledges the physical changes that these students are going through?*
- *What if we developed a curriculum that responded to their changing intellectual and social worlds?*
- *What if we provided an environment that supported their need for social interactions and emotional stability?*
- *What if we listened to what they said?*
- *What if their questions became our questions?*
- *What if . . . ?"*

Here is how Lindsay, an eighth grade student, describes herself in both poetry and art.

What's on the Inside?

I am an artist,
who draws what she feels, sees, and encounters,
I need love from my friends and family,
I need affection to help me be successful in life,
I want to be all I can be,
To do this I will work hard to achieve,
I am human,
I make mistakes and learn from them,
I will not give up and therefore,
I will be the best by being me.

LINDSAY HAMILTON



Lindsay's self-description

Further information on the Middle School Learner can be found on the links below.

<http://andrewfuller.com.au/talks-by-andrew/#professionals>

<http://www.michaelcarr-gregg.com.au/links.shtml>

<http://educationnext.org/stuck-in-the-middle/>

<http://www.bushcenter.org/education-reform/middle-school-matters>

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