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Terry de Jong  
*Edith Cowan University*

Rod Chadbourne  
*Edith Cowan University*

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## ARE MIDDLE YEARS TEACHER EDUCATION COURSES JUSTIFIABLE?

Terry de Jong and Rod Chadbourne  
Edith Cowan University

### Abstract

The recent growth of separate middle schools for young adolescents raises the question – do we now need separate teacher education programs in middle schooling? Or, can the staffing requirements of middle schools be met adequately by existing primary and secondary teacher education programs? This paper provides a contribution to answering these questions by discussing the rationale underlying a new graduate diploma in the middle years of schooling offered at Edith Cowan University. In doing so, the paper draws attention to the contested nature of innovations in teacher education and some uncertainty about what the future holds for them.

### Introduction

In 2002 Edith Cowan University (ECU) introduced a one year Graduate Diploma of Education in middle schooling. It was the first, and remains possibly the only, university in Australia to do so. Other universities interested in middle schooling have tended to include a unit or two on middle years education within their existing teacher education courses, rather than go down the same track as ECU. So how does ECU justify its one year, end-on course? What makes it distinctive? In this paper we attempt to answer these questions, having served as program directors for the new course for the past

four years. Table 1 provides a thumbnail sketch of the course and a backdrop for our discussion. As further background, for the purposes of this paper, it is worth defining and clarifying the difference between the following three terms.

- ∞ *Middle years* refers to the years of schooling that cover a particular phase of human development, namely early adolescence (commonly regarded as applying to students aged somewhere between 10-15)
- ∞ *Middle school* refers to an organisational unit for the schooling of young adolescents that is separate from the traditional primary and secondary arrangements. Middle schools may be completely separate schools or sub-schools within existing schools. Middle schools may practice traditional schooling or middle schooling.
- ∞ *Middle schooling* refers to a particular philosophy about the form that education for young adolescents should take, regardless of whether this education occurs in a middle school, an upper primary school or lower secondary school setting. Middle schooling can be practised in traditional schools and middle schools.

### Contextual Considerations

Historically, and in company with many other Australian universities, ECU compartmentalised its teacher education graduate diplomas into early childhood, primary and secondary courses, to cater for similar categories in the school education sector. A number of developments over the past twenty years, however, have brought the adequacy of those divisions into question.

Firstly, since the early 1990s Australia has seen the growth of separate middle schools for lower secondary school students and, in some cases, upper primary school students (Barratt, 1998; Luke, 2003). For instance, every new government ‘high’ school built in Western Australia (WA) since 1995 has taken the form of a middle school for young adolescents (eg. Year 8-10 students) and a separate senior campus for young adults (eg. Year 11-12 students). At the same time, an increasing number of traditional Year 8-12 senior high schools have been and continue to be restructured along separate middle school/senior campus lines. Likewise, an increasing number of K-10 district high schools are replacing their high school section (Years 8-10) with a middle school. Similar innovations are being implemented within the non government sector, particularly low fee paying schools. As a result, over 50 schools in WA now identify and name themselves, or a sub-school within their structure, as ‘middle schools’ and many others have made the transition to middle schooling without publicly re-naming themselves. This trend shows no sign of slowing down in WA and, arguably, the growth of middle schooling has gone beyond the possibility of it being merely a passing fad. Across Australia, the growth of middle schools has been supported by a wide range of initiatives (Chadbourne, 2001; Cuttance, 2001). In WA, these include:

**Table 1: Structure of the Graduate Diploma of Education (Middle Years)**

<p><b>Semester One</b></p> <p>Three days a week at university, four units:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>∞ MYS 4001: Adolescent Development</li> <li>∞ MYS 4002: Context and Philosophy</li> <li>∞ MYS 4005: Teaching Middle Years English</li> <li>∞ MYS 4006: Teaching Middle Years Maths</li> </ul> <p>Integrated studies take place across these four units, within MYS 4002 and by connecting theory with the practicum.</p>	<p>PPA 4180</p> <p>One day a week in a primary school</p>
<p>PPA 4180</p> <p>Four week block practice in a Year 6 or 7 setting</p>	
<p><b>Semester Two</b></p> <p>Three days a week at university, four units:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>∞ MYS 4003: From Alienation to Engagement</li> <li>∞ MYS 4004: Middle Years Curriculum and Pedagogy</li> <li>∞ MYS 4007: Teaching Middle Years Science</li> <li>∞ MYS 4008: Teaching Middle Years Society &amp; Environment</li> </ul> <p>Integrated studies take place across these four units, within MYS 4004, and by connecting theory with the practicum.</p>	<p>PPA 4280</p> <p>One day a week in a middle school</p>
<p>PPA 4280</p> <p>Eight week block practice in a ‘middle school’.</p> <p>Most of this practice will be in Year 8-10 settings.</p>	

∞ a report produced by the Ministerial Committee on Middle Schooling (Jackson, 1999).

- ∞ reports on middle schooling commissioned by the Education Department of Western Australia (EDWA); eg. Belt (1998), Hunter & Loudon (1999), Chadbourne & Harslett (1999).
- ∞ a Middle Schooling Forum, organised in 1999 by EDWA and the Centre for Excellence in Teaching, with input from national and international middle years educationists.
- ∞ the formation, within EDWA, of the Middle Years of Schooling Management Committee and Middle Schooling Reference Group in the late 1990s.
- ∞ the establishment the Middle Schooling Association of Western Australia in 2000.
- ∞ a report on middle schooling published by the Catholic Education Office of Western Australia in 1997.
- ∞ a State School Teachers Union sponsored report (Chadbourne, 1999) and a series of union-run professional development programs on middle schooling.
- ∞ an evaluation of middle schooling in WA government schools to be conducted by the Department of Education and Training (DET, previously EDWA) over 2005 and 2006.

Secondly, over the past decade, most Australian education systems have introduced new state-wide curriculum frameworks. These frameworks identify early adolescence as a distinct phase of student development and they set learning area outcomes specifically for students at this stage. For example, the WA Curriculum Framework, launched in 1998, did not advocate a perpetuation of the traditional primary/secondary curriculum structure. Instead, it recommended that the K-12 curriculum be reformed and made developmentally responsive to four overlapping phases of student growth, namely, early childhood (Years K-3), middle childhood (Years 3-7), early adolescence (Years 7-10), and late adolescence/young adulthood (Years 10-12). The WA Curriculum Framework is mandatory for all schools, public and private, in the state. As a policy document, it implicitly supports the rationale for separate middle schools for young adolescents. Put differently, the expansion of middle schools is more in alignment with the WA Curriculum Framework than is the long-standing compartmentalisation of schooling into primary and secondary divisions.

Thirdly, influential studies in Australia and the United States of America (USA) support separate middle years teacher education programs. For instance, nearly ten ago the Queensland Board of Teacher Registration recommended that, “preservice teacher education programs should be developed which enable prospective teachers to prepare specifically for the teacher’s role in young adolescent education” (1996, p.30). In 1989, a major American report titled *Turning Points* (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1989), claimed that middle grades teachers should be specifically trained to teach young adolescents. Eleven years later, *Turning Points 2000* recommended “specialised preparation for middle grades educators” and urged middle grades schools to “hire staff specifically trained for the middle grades” (Jackson & Davis, 2000, pp.96 and 23). Moreover, with respect to the need for a specific middle years teaching credential, in the USA (FERENCE & McDowell, 2005, p.4):

*The number of states that offer middle grades certificates or endorsements has increased dramatically since the 1980s when only about 25 states offered middle grades licensure. Gaskill (2002) reported that 44 states now have some type of middle level certification, 18 offer endorsements, 11 offer both endorsements and certificates, and 15 offer certificates. Additionally, 21 states now require the credential for teaching in a middle school.*

### **Course Distinctiveness Considerations**

Part of the justification for ECU's Middle Years Graduate Diploma, then, is that it represents a response to contextual developments in the outside community; it represents an attempt to support these developments and keep up with them rather than lag behind. However, traditionalists could argue that teacher educators can meet the challenge of these developments by making adjustments within existing courses rather than by setting up new courses. They could point out that between them, current primary and secondary teacher education programs already cover the middle years of schooling; that is, they are structurally placed, perhaps with a few internal reforms, to adequately prepare teachers to work with young adolescents in Year 6-10 classrooms. One approach to countering this traditional perspective involves showing that ECU's Middle Years Graduate Diploma contains important features the primary and secondary graduate diplomas might find difficult or less necessary to offer. Three such features are outlined below.

#### **Adolescent-specific teacher education**

As intimated earlier, middle schooling covers only one of the four phases of students' development (early adolescence) whereas traditional primary schooling covers three phases and traditional secondary schooling covers two. By definition, the middle years of schooling refer to early adolescence. Thus, middle schooling is adolescent-specific and, in turn, ECU's Middle Years Graduate Diploma is adolescent-specific. This helps distinguish it from the primary and secondary graduate diplomas.

Being adolescent-specific provides a unifying theme for the eight units and two practicums that comprise the Middle Years Graduate Diploma (see Table 1). This facilitates course coherence. It also frees up time for two of the eight units to focus on adolescent development (MYS 4001) and youth studies (MYS 4003) and one unit to focus on the context and philosophy of middle schooling (MYS 4002). *Turning Points 2000* (Jackson & Davis, 2000, p.100) underscores the need for these foci by stating that:

Middle grades teachers must be well grounded in the development and needs of young adolescents if they are to be successful.

A thorough study of middle grades philosophy and organization, not merely a superficial exploration, should be a main element of middle grades teacher preparation programs.

The philosophy of middle schooling supports particular principles and practices such as cooperative learning, collaborative teaching, authentic assessment, mixed ability student grouping, using ICT as a learning tool, the integration of theory and practice, higher order thinking, success for all students, participative decision making and shared leadership (Anfara & Stacki, 2002; Doda & Thompson, 2002; Manning, 2002). These principles and practices are not distinctive to the schooling of young adolescents. They apply equally to the schooling of students of all ages and stages. Within a Middle Years Graduate Diploma, however, we argue that these generic principles and practices need to be explained, illustrated and applied in adolescent-specific educational contexts – if they are to have meaning, authenticity, relevance and power. Doing so makes middle schooling not only student-centred in general, but adolescent-centred in particular. This forms part of the rationale for a separate Middle Years Graduate Diploma at ECU.

### **A seamless transition from primary to secondary school**

Middle schooling arose partly in response to concerns that the transition from primary to secondary schooling is ‘nasty, brutish and short’ (Braggett, 1997; Braggett, Morris & Day, 1999). Students in primary schools have one teacher in one classroom for a whole year. Students in traditional high schools tend to have a different teacher in a different room, teaching a different subject, 5-8 times every day. This abrupt transition from primary to secondary school occurs at the stage of puberty when young adolescents “undergo more and profound personal changes than at any other period in their lives” (National Middle School Association, 1995, p.6). Middle schooling reduces the gap between primary and secondary schooling by grouping students into small learning communities, or sub-schools, of about 80-120 students and 4-6 teachers. This enables students to feel they are cared for as individuals, without restricting them to one teacher or forcing them to cope with up to 10-12 teachers in any one week. It provides a structure within which students can make a seamless transition from the ‘mother hen’ model of primary school to the subject specialist model of upper secondary schools.

In various ways ECU’s Middle Years Graduate Diploma goes beyond what the primary and secondary graduate diplomas do to equip graduates with the understandings and skills needed by teachers to help middle schools act as agents of ‘seamless transition’. Firstly, it requires graduates to complete two practicums: one in an upper primary (Years 6-7) setting and the other in a middle school or lower secondary setting (Years 8-10). Secondly, it requires graduates to complete curriculum units that qualify them to teach across four areas (Maths, English, Science and Society & Environment). This makes the Middle Years Graduate Diploma a more subject specialist and less curriculum generalist course than the primary graduate diploma and a less subject specific and more curriculum generalist course than the secondary graduate diploma. Thirdly, as outlined in the next section, ECU’s Middle Years Graduate Diploma is structured in various ways to model a small middle school community.

### **Small middle school communities**

A prominent feature of middle schools is the building of ‘community’ to meet the distinctive developmental and educational needs of young adolescents (Anfara, 2001; Daniels, Bizaz & Zemelman, 2001). As indicated above, small middle school communities are defined partly in terms of size. They consist of about 4-6 teachers and 80-120 students. As such, they are bigger than primary classes and smaller than large secondary age-grade cohorts. In effect, they operate as sub schools, or schools-within-schools, generally with their own identity, name, students, staff, rooms, facilities and budget. According to some middle schoolers (Chadbourne & Pendergast, 2005, in press) they should also be characterised by:

- ∞ A climate of trust, openness, care, friendliness, high morale, and ‘can do’ optimism – rather than a climate of suspicion, secrecy, indifference, cynicism, hostility and defeatism.
- ∞ A culture that values diversity, inclusion, sharing, equity, support, cooperation, shared power and facilitative leadership - rather than a culture of intolerance, segregation, hoarding, elitism, put downs, rivalry, neglect, domination and power-based leadership.
- ∞ A membership of young adolescents who are able to say, “Within this community I feel that my needs, interests, values and experiences are known, understood, accepted and valued. I identify myself, and others accept me, as a respected member of this community. I feel I belong to it. I’m pleased and proud to belong to it. It’s part of who I am.”

The ECU Middle Years Graduate Diploma attempts to model principles and practices that reflect the nature of small middle school communities. The intake for the course is limited to 90 graduates. Four core staff teach the foundation units and assist curriculum experts teach the

curriculum units. Each unit is taught by a team led by a specialist in the area, an approach that models shared leadership and interactive professionalism (Fullan & Hargreaves, 1998). Among the purpose-built facilities designed for the course is a large flat floor room with a flexible divider that can accommodate whole cohort activities, and a kitchen with tea/coffee making facilities for the staff and students. The program includes a weekly one hour forum for ‘town meetings’, guest speakers and students presentations. It also includes practices frequently recommended for the development of small middle school communities such as advisories, inclusive student grouping, exhibitions of students’ work, group building activities, social events, and a proactive approach to preventing the development of harmful cliques, negative interpersonal relations and a culture of individualism and indifference. A well patronised electronic discussion board offers a further vehicle for developing a sense and the substance of community.

In addition to showing the graduates what a small middle school community looks like, we include discussion of the theoretical base and operational processes of a small middle school ‘community’ as a formal component within our units. Primary and secondary graduate diplomas have less need to prepare their graduates to work in small middle school communities because primary and secondary schools are generally not structured along these lines.

In short, ECU’s Middle Years Graduate Diplomas differs from its other graduate diplomas by placing more focus on:

- ∞ understanding and working with young adolescents.
- ∞ ensuring that the general principles of teaching and learning are made specific to middle years classrooms and contexts in particular.
- ∞ crossing the traditional primary/secondary divide.
- ∞ teaching within the structure, climate and culture of a small middle school community.

In distinguishing ECU’s Middle Years Graduate Diploma from the other graduate diplomas, these features form part of the justification for it.

### **Political And Ideological Considerations**

Further justification for ECU’s Middle Years Graduate Diploma is embodied in a set of considerations of a more political and ideological nature. These considerations can be illuminated by a brief comparison of the situation faced by middle schooling and early childhood education (ECE) and a brief reference to the historical battle for ascendancy between traditional and progressive schooling.

Until the 1990s, the preparation of graduates for early childhood teaching at ECU took place within the primary graduate diploma. Some members of the early childhood education (ECE) community became dissatisfied with that arrangement and pushed for a separate early childhood graduate diploma. They felt that pre-primary children had distinctive needs that require a school learning environment based on an early childhood-specific form of developmentally appropriate education that, in turn, requires teachers with specialised preparation in ECE. They had a clearly developed philosophy of ECE, they belonged to ECE professional associations and they campaigned effectively to win support for a separate early childhood graduate diploma.

Middle schooling shares some conceptual and circumstantial elements in common with ECE. Both forms of schooling apply to only one phase of student development (early adolescence in the case of middle schooling and early childhood in the case of ECE). Both have an explicit

philosophy that can be described as progressive, developmentally appropriate, constructivist, and student-centred. Both have professional associations that play a support and advocacy role. Both have successfully argued, at ECU, for setting up their own graduate diplomas, separate from the primary and secondary graduate diplomas. And as relatively 'new kids on the block' at ECU, both have had to combat opposition from sceptics and critics with ideological and self interest axes to grind.

For over a century, traditional forms of primary and secondary schooling have been dominant in Australia. Throughout that time, progressive educators have periodically launched initiatives to break the traditional mould; eg. in Western Australia, these initiatives include the Open Education and School Innovation programs in the 1970s, the Managing Change in Schools Project in the late 1980s, and the Flexibility in Schooling Project during the 1990s. However, these initiatives did not take root or bring about lasting wide scale reform. Put differently, when challenged by these reform initiatives, traditional schooling displayed resilience and maintained its ascendancy.

Middle schooling is a form of progressive education with the credentials to make a breakthrough and have an enduring impact. This won't occur, however, if opposition to it is stronger than the support it needs. In principle, some of that support could come from traditional primary and secondary graduate diploma courses. In practice, it is more likely to come from a middle years graduate diploma course where staff have a deep understanding of middle schooling, a strong commitment to it, and a willingness to perform an advocacy role for it.

The ideological and political considerations outlined above were not an explicit part of the justification for setting up the Middle Years Graduate Diploma at ECU. However, their relevance for the rationale underlying the course has become increasingly apparent over the past three years. Indeed, part of the case for retaining the course is that it serves as a change agent for the middle schooling movement, particularly in WA. The course is not value free and does not pretend to be. For staff delivering the course, this means being open with the graduates in the Middle Years Graduate Diploma course about its progressive philosophical position but not presenting this position as a party line that has to be toed. Within the course, our advocacy for middle schooling occurs in the form of intellectual argument and professional debate; we operate as teacher educators, not teacher indoctrinators; we value dissent and welcome critique of the course from our students.

### **Grounds For Closing Down The Middle Years Course**

It would be difficult to justify ECU's Middle Years Graduate Diploma course if strong grounds built up for closing it down. For example, before the course began, sceptics predicted that it would (a) fail to attract viable numbers, (b) produce unemployable graduates, and (c) lack professional rigour. These predictions are examined briefly below.

Ground 1: the Middle Years Graduate Diploma should be closed if the number of applicants dries up. For the past three years the number of applicants who have nominated our Middle Years course as their first preference has averaged over 55 and a similar number have nominated it as their second or third preference. During the three years that the course has run, the average intake per year has been over 75. This has occurred despite the Middle year Graduate Diploma being a new course in a new area on a new and outlying campus of ECU.

Ground 2: the Middle Years Graduate Diploma should be closed if very few graduates get jobs after successfully completing the course. So far this has not occurred. Virtually all graduates who have passed the course have got teaching jobs. The state Education Department tends to appoint them to lower secondary school positions. A high proportion of them are offered jobs in merit select middle schools. And a small number obtain upper primary jobs in non government schools and in schools overseas, particularly London.

Ground 3: the Middle Years Graduate Diploma should be closed down if it can not be delivered with integrity. Several indicators show that this possibility does not apply. Last year (2004), ECU's Middle Years Graduate Diploma won the Vice Chancellor's Award for Excellence in Teaching (in the category of team teaching). In making this judgement, the selection panel used the criteria set for the national tertiary teaching awards. Also, a book soon to be published (Beck & Kosnik, 2005) presents ECU's Middle Years Graduate Diploma as one of three exemplars of community-based programs selected from a range of preservice teacher education courses that the authors studied across the world.

### **Closing Comments**

This paper has outlined a variety of considerations used to construct the case for a separate middle years teacher education program at ECU. Whether or not this case is relevant to other universities depends partly on whether all the considerations apply to them. It also depends partly on whether the assumptions underlying these considerations are acceptable. Some of these assumptions can be listed as follows:

- ∞ Recent developments in the areas of middle schooling and outcomes-based curriculum frameworks are worthy of support and advocacy from teacher education programs.
- ∞ When traditional practices are challenged by progressive schooling, teacher education programs can not and should not be ideological neutral.
- ∞ The interests of young adolescents are better served by specialised middle years teacher preparation program, than by generic courses.
- ∞ Young adolescents have a need and the right to a seamless transition from primary to secondary schooling.
- ∞ While there is no 'one true' model of middle schooling, a non negotiable design element of middle schools is the building of 'community'.

The future of middle years teacher education courses depends largely on developments, local and global, outside of universities. At present, while middle schooling has become prominent in countries such as Australia and the United States of America, traditional schooling remains dominant. Given that situation, a range of different scenarios can be constructed. For example, middle schooling could 'run out of steam', leaving traditional schooling not only dominant but also unchallenged – in which case middle years teacher education programs could be dismantled. Or, middle schooling could continue to gain ground and share equal standing with traditional education, or even replace it – in which case middle years teacher education courses would expand. Or, middle schooling and traditional schooling could make concessions towards each other's philosophy to the point where the distinction between them disappears – in which case middle years and traditional teacher education programs would lose their claims to distinctiveness. In our view, the interests of young adolescents would be best served by the second, or possibly the third of these scenarios. Perhaps keeping the chances of both scenarios alive provides another justification for separate middle years teacher education programs.

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