

The Winston Churchill Memorial Trust of Australia



Engagement in the middle years: a path for successful lifetime learning

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2012 Churchill Fellow

The Northern Districts Education Centre (Sydney) Churchill Fellowship to assess environments which successfully re-engage and re-ignite learning in middle years (10-15 years) students - Finland, UK, USA

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Signed

Dated

Margaret Mulcahy

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INTRODUCTION

My interest in young adolescent development has spanned my entire teaching career. As a secondary teacher I have always been inspired by their enthusiasm for life and that look of expectation as they entered the secondary school context and continued their journey not just with learning but also with life in general. They are desperate to connect and belong and to be part of the “grown up” world and while many appear to sail through this ocean with just a few bumps and scrapes, for others the journey is not quite the same. The challenges each young person faces are somewhat similar and yet vastly different. Equally their range of responses to everyday highs and lows would probably fill an ocean.

Having worked extensively, particularly in the past 12 years, with these young people, their teachers and their parents I have observed the significance of these years on the rest of their school life and beyond and the critical importance of focusing on the particular needs of students between 10-15 years. They are transitioning: through our school system from primary to secondary phases of learning; physically, emotionally and socially as a young person; through a unique time of great change globally in areas such as expanding communication options, economic instability and security concerns.

Young people deserve to be supported through this time so that each one can be the best they can be as individual, to go on to participate successfully as global citizens and to have equal access to resources and opportunities. They are like kites and we want them to fly. They often need support to fly successfully. We can guide them, let them go, crash and make mistakes, as part of their learning experiences, and then get them started again, all within a caring environment. The key is education, yet the type and focus has also changed and we need to engage these young people if they are to experience success in school and beyond.

Data is telling us that many students at this time disengage from learning and from school and often experience a dip in their academic achievement. They have lost the love of learning in the school context. Often I have heard the comment that these students do not want to learn. This is a very narrow view as clearly, today’s students are constantly learning about the world and about life, as they live in a digital age that allows various learning to occur both in detail and volume like no other age. Reality is that they are fully immersed in a huge number of learning opportunities in daily life. Our challenge is to enable them to re-engage with the learning community that school provides and re-ignite a love of learning in this setting linked strongly to the real world and to break open and explore learning opportunities that are relevant, rigorous, authentic and in which students have a voice. This will then provide a solid foundation for students to achieve their life goals, be successful citizens and contribute equally to the society.

I would like to acknowledge and thank the Churchill Trust and the Northern Districts Education Centre (Sydney) for providing me with the opportunity and support to visit and experience education in Finland, UK and USA and to view, explore and discuss environments that have successfully re-engaged students and re-ignited learning in middle years. The opportunities to have professional discussions and forge links

within each of the countries has been instrumental in my considerations and ideas for exploring best practice in middle years education.

I would like to acknowledge and thank the following educational leaders and their schools for their very warm welcome and generosity both of their own time and that of their staff and students. Their willingness to share their classrooms and their stories and practice was outstanding. The professional conversations and genuine interest in my project were inspiring. The connections I have made will continue into the future and will allow the exchange of ideas and professional dialogue to continue. This unique opportunity is greatly valued and appreciated and will inform practice here in Australia in the years ahead.

Finland

- Esa Pasma, Principal, Rantavitikka Comprehensive School, Rovaniemi, Finland http://www.peda.net/veraja/rovaniemi/rantsu/ala/5b/upsidedown/rantavitikka_comprehensive_school
- Hannu Virkkunen, Principal, Arctic Circle Secondary School, Rovaniemi, Finland <http://peda.net/veraja/rovaniemi/napapiirinya>
- Outi Kyrö-Ämmälä PhD, Vice- Dean, Lecturer in Teacher Education, University of Lapland Rovaniemi, Finland www.ulapland.fi/InEnglish.iw3
- Janette Tolppi-Raittimo, Head of Continuing Education, Unit for Further Education, Faculty of Education. University of Lapland, Rovaniemi, Finland www.ulapland.fi/InEnglish.iw3
- Anne Markkanen Kindergarden Väinämöinen, Rovaniemi, Finland
- Jorma Turunen, Viirinkangas School, Rovaniemi, Finland

United Kingdom

- David Doubtfire, Principal, Walkwood Middle School, Redditch, UK www.school-portal.co.uk/Grouphomepage.asp?GroupID=945770
- Stephen Phillips, Principal, Holmemead School/ Biggleswade Academy, Bedfordshire, UK www.holmemeadschool.co.uk
- Rachel de Souza, Principal, Ormiston Victory Academy Norwich, UK www.ormistonvictoryacademy.co.uk
- Jonathan Culpin, Principal, Sawston Village College, UK www.sawstonvc.org

United States of America

Denver

- John Kuntz, Principal Middle School, The Kent Denver School, www.kentdenver.org
- Laura Tomlinson, Middle School Dean, The Kent Denver School
- Josh Cobb, Principal, Graland Country Day School www.graland.org
- Brian Hay, Principal, Hertzl /RMHA Jewish Day School www.denverjds.org
- Martha Ashley, Principal, St. Mary's Academy www.smanet.org
- Annette Fante, Former Assistant Superintendent Learning Services Douglas County School District. Education consultant at Transforming Thinking, Transforming Schools

New York

- Peter L McFarlane, Principal, Hugo Newman College Preparatory School, Harlem
www.hugonewmanprep.org

Portland, Oregon

- Chris Boyd, Principal, Happy Valley Middle School, Portland
<http://www.nclack.k12.or.us/cms/lib6/OR01000992/Centricity/Shared/MiddleSchool/HVMS.pdf>

In addition, I would also like to thank and acknowledge the following people who worked so hard in planning and enabling me to organise visits to various educational institutions. Without their assistance, friendship, generous hospitality and guidance, not only would I have not had access to the learning environments, but I also would not have been able to experience the culture of each country. Their generosity in planning the visits, as well as ensuring I was looked after and saw what life was like in the various places, is greatly valued and appreciated.

- Dr Tuija and Jorma Turunen (Finland) Jorma is a teacher at Viirinkangas School and Tuija a lecturer in education at the University of Lapland. They have been on exchange at Charles Sturt University, Albury.
- Dr Liisa Uusimaki, Lecturer in Education Charles Sturt University, Albury.
- Judith Baenon (Retired Principal and highly acclaimed, internationally acknowledged middle schooling educator, Denver, USA)
- Susan Hearfield (immediate past Executive Officer MYSA Australia)
- Nigel Wyatt (National Middle Schools Forum, UK)
- David Payton (Middle School Association, New York, USA)

In addition I would like to acknowledge and thank the following people for their support and encouragement in applying for and undertaking this Churchill Fellowship. Without these people, often operating behind the scenes, none of this would have gone so smoothly or happened at all.

- The Churchill Memorial Trust staff and all those wonderful people who volunteer to be part of this process
- The NSW Churchill Fellows Association and all of the fantastic people associated in various ways with this organisation
- The members of Student Engagement Team, NSW Department of Education and Communities: Dianne Hennessy and Melissa Nyholm
- Professor Susan Groundwater-Smith
- Dr Nicole Mockler
- Andy Best
- Middle Years of Schooling Association (MYSA) Management Team
- My son Andrew, family and friends, who have been most excited and supportive of me taking up this opportunity.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Margaret Mulcahy, 3/42 Grove St, Lilyfield, 2040. Executive Principal, Coonamble HS, Coonamble, 2829
The Northern Districts Education Centre (Sydney) Churchill Fellowship to assess environments which successfully re-engage and re-ignite learning in middle years (10-15 years) students - Finland, UK, USA

Highlights

1. Engaging daily in life and education in Finland through schools and a university in a regional setting. A truly special opportunity.
2. Being able to see at first hand the exemplary middle years practices in village schools in the UK and the ongoing review process undertaken to continually improve.
3. Visiting a school in the UK that has, within less than three years, under outstanding leadership, turned around and experienced significant improvement across teaching and learning, student wellbeing and professional development.
4. Speaking with leading middle years educators in Denver, USA, and visiting leading middle schools in Colorado showcasing outstanding practices.
5. The opportunity to share the amazing journey of improvement and increased expectations in a school in Harlem (New York City, NY) with a passionate and inspiring educator.
6. Attending the American Middle Level Education conference in Portland, Oregon.

Conclusions

The following is a summary of more detailed conclusions outlined later in this report.

1. Strong courageous leadership that builds relationships, empowers all members of the community and envisions with the community engendering a culture of high expectation is evident in each context where success and ongoing improvement is evident.
2. The most successful education systems are those in which middle schooling signature practices are evident and where these practices and initiatives are continually evaluated and reviewed to build on successful achievements and strengthen and expand their support for students and teachers.
3. Schools that focus on building and developing an environment to support all middle years students, their families and teachers are highly effective. The success of this priority to improve outcomes for these students and to maintain levels of achievements across this developmental stage occurs within an environment that encourages, trusts and empowers teachers in using their knowledge and skills with innovation and creativity to respond to students in the 21st century. A culture of mutual trust is imperative for success.
4. That where a strong teacher professional learning program on middle years pedagogy, curriculum and wellbeing has been developed and implemented, and closely linked with communities of schools and/or universities, there has been significant school improvement.
5. Those systems supported by tertiary institutions, which have dedicated and/or expanded opportunities for focus on training in middle years education, have confident and highly regarded teachers the to meet the particular needs.
6. That the period of implementation of the Australian Curriculum implementation is a unique opportunity to reflect on the middle years of schooling and to embed the signature practices of high performing middle schools in future planning, curriculum design and pedagogy.
7. All successful middle schools have developed responsive wellbeing programs for students, which have been embedded into a holistic curriculum, providing an environment that enables best middle years practices to be fostered and developed.
8. Those schools and their communities, which pay close attention to student nutritional needs and habits, and have implemented strategies for sustainable improvement, have seen significant change in student wellbeing, behaviour, focus and achievement.
9. Those schools exhibiting improved outcomes have also strongly reinforced to their communities the importance of successful student achievement in middle years on future outcomes.

Dissemination

A copy will be sent to:

- the Prime Minister, Federal Education Minister and all State Education Ministers
- the Director –General of NSW Department of Education and Communities
- the NSW Commissioner for Children and Young People
- the Australian Middle Years of Schooling Association (MYSA)
- Institutions/individuals visited overseas and educational institutions/ individuals upon request.

Presentations about the project:

- have been already undertaken with some communities of schools in NSW
- will continue to occur as requested in school, community and wider educational contexts
- will be prepared for conferences and professional associations upon request or acceptance of submitted expressions of interest. Contacts with overseas individuals and institutions are currently ongoing and this will be maintained to share new developments and examples of best practice.

PROGRAM

Date	From	To	Itinerary
Saturday October 6	Sydney	Helsinki	Helsinki
Tuesday October 9	Helsinki Rovaniemi	Rovaniemi Helsinki	School and university visits: 1) Rantavitikan peruskoulu 2) Napapiirin Ylaaste (Arctic Circle Secondary School) 3) Kindergarden Väinämöinen 4) Viirinkangas School 5) University of Lapland
Saturday October 13	Helsinki	London	School visits: 1) Walkwood Middle School Redditch 2) Holmemead School/Biggleswade Academy Bedfordshire 3) Ormiston Victory Academy Norwich 4) Sawston Village College
Friday October 19	London	Denver	School visits: 1) The Kent Denver School, 2) Graland Country Day School 3) Hertzl Jewish Day School 4) St. Mary's Academy
Sunday October 28	Denver	New York	School visits: 1) Harlem Village Academies-both middle schools. This was cancelled due to Hurricane Sandy. 2) Hugo Newman College Preparatory School
Wednesday November 7	New York	Portland	AMLE CONFERENCE 1) Happy Valley Middle School visit selected as part of conference
November 11	Portland	Sydney	

WHY MIDDLE YEARS?

The Melbourne Declaration (2008) has two goals:

Goal 1: Australian schooling promotes equity and excellence

Goal 2: All young Australians become: – successful learners – confident and creative individuals – active and informed citizens.

It sets out the traits of successful learners as those young people who:

- develop their capacity to learn and play an active role in their own learning
- have the essential skills in literacy and numeracy and are creative and productive users of technology, especially ICT, as a foundation for success in all learning areas
- are able to think deeply and logically, and obtain and evaluate evidence in a disciplined way as the result of studying fundamental disciplines
- are creative, innovative and resourceful, and are able to solve problems in ways that draw upon a range of learning areas and disciplines
- are able to plan activities independently, collaborate, work in teams and communicate ideas
- are able to make sense of their world and think about how things have become the way they are
- are on a pathway towards continued success in further education, training or employment, and acquire the skills to make informed learning and employment decisions throughout their lives
- are motivated to reach their full potential.

Importantly, it also has a commitment to action in enhancing middle years development as the following extract from the Melbourne Declaration indicates.

Enhancing middle years development

The middle years are an important period of learning, in which knowledge of fundamental disciplines is developed, yet this is also a time when students are at the greatest risk of disengagement from learning. Student motivation and engagement in these years is critical, and can be influenced by tailoring approaches to teaching, with learning activities and learning environments that specifically consider the needs of middle years students. Focusing on student engagement and converting this into learning can have a significant impact on student outcomes. Effective transitions between primary and secondary schools are an important aspect of ensuring student engagement.

Australian governments commit to working with all school sectors to ensure that schools provide programs that are responsive to students' developmental and learning needs in the middle years, and which are challenging, engaging and rewarding.

It is the relationship between middle years development and becoming a successful learner that is the focus of this report.

The UK and the USA have for some decades had middle school movements and in many cases a three tier system that identified the middle years as a discrete group. Often, but not always, they have accommodated middle years students physically as a separate group. Finland accommodates these students in either Grade 1-9 settings or Grade 1-6 and then Grade 7-9 settings.

Since the early 1990's there has been growing interest in middle years education within the Australian context. Comparatively however, focus on middle years education in NSW is still in its infancy. Cormack (1991), Evers (1992) and Cormack and Cumming (1995) all highlighted the particular characteristics and needs of this group and opened the discussion about how best to cater successfully for these students. The Australian Curriculum Studies Association (ACSA) supported middle years projects including investigating what was termed "alienation" in middle years. Today we would use the term "disengagement", but at that time it provided the catalyst for discussion and further research around reform in middle years. Barratt (1998), in conjunction with ACSA, considered the needs of middle years students in the Australian context and highlighted integrated curriculum and authentic assessment as key features of best practice. Progress has continued particularly since the early 2000's and has gathered some speed in recent years in NSW.

In NSW, education is delivered in a primary then secondary setting with a transition between Year 6 and Year 7. Since the late 1990's many independent schools have sought to focus on this transition via a middle school structure, although these vary in composition across contexts. The NSW Department of Education and Communities has also focussed on middle years education through its Middle Years Strategy (originally 2007-09 and more recently 2010-2012). All government schools in NSW received a "Middle Years package" in 2008¹ and a recently developed resource, Transition in Middle Years matrix (2012), developed to assist schools in embedding transition within exemplary middle years practices across the domains of parent /carer partnerships, curriculum, pedagogy, student wellbeing and administration. The matrix provides a vehicle for discussion and a tool for planning and development of best practice in middle years education. Many schools are actively moving forward in focussing the lens on the middle years of schooling.

The ages from 10-15 years have been recognised as a significant developmental stage of physical, social and emotional development in young people. The following research-based generalisations from the work of John Lounsbury (2000) relating to middle years learners can serve as guideposts for deciding on ways young people might be better served by school, community and home:

- early adolescence is a distinctive developmental stage of life
- the general public has limited understanding of 10-15 year olds
- the accelerated physical and personal development that occurs during this period is the greatest in the human life cycle and is marked by great variance in both the timing and rate of growth
- these are the years when each individual forms an adult personality, basic values and attitudes
- they reach physical maturity earlier than previous generations
- they seek autonomy and independence
- they are explorers - curious and adventuresome
- they have intellectual capacities not often tapped by traditional schooling
- they learn best through interaction and activity rather than listening

¹ The package contained the following middle years of schooling documents: education strategy, discussion paper (prepared by Dr David Smith), bibliography, professional learning, school assessment tool and assessment poster.

- they seek interaction with adults and opportunities to engage in activities that have inherent value
- their physical and social development become priorities
- they are sensitive, vulnerable and emotional
- they are open to influence by the significant others in their lives
- a significant proportion of these young people is alienated from society.

The middle school reform agenda is again enjoying the spotlight as dialogue around literacy and numeracy achievements (through media commentary relating to national performance in NAPLAN, PISA and TIMSS results), student attendance and student engagement, focus attention on the critical need to respond to the specific needs of middle years students now in the 21st century.

More recent work by the Middle Years of Schooling Association (MYSA) in Australia in developing a position paper (2008) has provided a framework for significant professional discussion and a tool for reviewing middle years practices. It sets out a range of signature practices evident in a successful middle schooling approach:

- higher order thinking strategies
- integrated and disciplinary curricula that are negotiated, relevant and challenging
- heterogeneous and flexible student grouping
- co-operative learning and collaborative teaching
- small learning communities that provide students with sustained individual attention in a safe and healthy school environment
- emphasis on strong teacher-student relationships through extended contact with a small number of teachers and a consistent student cohort
- authentic and reflective assessment with high expectations
- democratic governance and shared leadership
- parents and community involvement in student learning.

Chadbourne and Pendergast (2010) and Pendergast and Hearfield (2010) highlight and apply a core model, across 3 phases, as a vehicle for middle school reform. Included in this model are practices of teaming, innovative leadership, connectedness, the importance of enhanced pedagogy and alignment of this with curriculum and assessment, student engagement and meeting the great diversity of student needs. This model is a way of **enabling** the signature practices.

Young adolescent learners benefit from environments that offer:

- support for their learning to which they are strongly connected,
- student centred learning that excites and challenges them and offers independence and collaboration,
- strong connection to peers, teachers, school community, wider community and family,
- challenging activities and situations that encourage resilience, tenacity and intellectual growth,
- reflective processes that engage them and empower students in their own decision making and which encourage positive risk taking with their learning,

- motivation, purpose and authenticity for them as learners, community members and as young adolescents and leaders,
- inclusion of technologies which are relevant and motivating,
- inclusivity and the celebration of difference. Opportunities for students to let their own light shine and to see respect for all and to gain experience that will support them to be a great citizen in whatever community structure they are.

Education contexts that achieve successful engagement of students in middle years are many and varied. The features listed above contribute to such environments, but just which structures and strategies best promote these features so as to be embedded in practice? How does this look in different contexts particularly where student achievement had previously been less than ideal? Finland, a country enjoying such high status in terms of educational achievement, is a context to investigate what in particular is evident for student engagement at this developmental stage. Both the UK and USA have a long history of middle schooling. They are also countries where a great deal of education reform is being undertaken with many successful stories of re-engaging students and achieving improved outcomes. These countries provide a wealth of examples, in a wide variety of contexts, of environments displaying particular features that have successfully increased student and, in some cases, parent/community, positivity towards school and learning, resulting in improved outcomes for students in middle years and beyond. Research by Balfanz (2009) shows clearly that a student's middle years experience is critical to their life chances particularly in high poverty contexts.

My observations will be presented in country contexts and then commonalities will be drawn together for consideration of informing practice in Australia.

Finland

Rovaniemi

Rovaniemi is on the Arctic Circle and is a small town that is the home of the University of Lapland. It was destroyed in WW2 and rebuilt after the war. It is the meeting place of two rivers and as such has been historically a meeting place for Sami people. The temperature is commonly -20 degrees in winter and can get to -45! Long summer days with 24-hour sunlight and long winter days with no light at all are features of this remarkable area.

School 1 Finland

The first school visited, a Year 1-9 school, is a combined primary and middle school that also has integrated special needs students in mainstream classes. Not all schools cover Years 1-9 and the benefits here of having good knowledge of students as they progress through the years is very important. The fairly new integration of special needs into schools in Finland is high on the agenda and a great success. The amount of flexibility principals have in responding to the needs of the community is enormous. They are able, and encouraged, to use this ability in a number of creative ways. Sharing staff across the schools in the area, as well as making shared town decisions about education, are just some examples. The emphasis on the importance of trust in the Finnish system is strong and clearly evident, even in a short visit. Great trust is placed in teachers and their skill and ability. This is linked very much to the trust in the teacher training system. There is also great belief and emphasis on the importance of teams and the way in which the teams support the day-to-day life in school. People step up to sort out challenges themselves, from covering duties when a teacher needs to attend to another issue to sharing ideas about classroom activities. It is a very collegial way of doing things.

School 2 Finland

A visit to a secondary school Years 10-12 showed just how smooth the transition is to this school. The knowledge about each student - academically, socially and emotionally in both schools was impressive and not just about their current year. Teachers had deep understanding of the continuum of learning and so were very familiar with what students had experienced before they entered their class and were also familiar with the stages, which would come in their learning journey.

Evident in both schools is the amount of time given to co-teaching with either a teaching assistant or a resource teacher in a classroom alongside the class (primary) or subject (secondary) teacher. Co-teaching is very common; students receive individual attention either within the class or in a smaller group in another room. These groups change very regularly and as needs arise. Students see this as very positive and in fact are known to complain if they feel they are not getting enough individual attention. Class sizes are around 20 and broadly have two adults in the class for about 2/3 of the time. This was common in both schools. Students with

special needs would attract further assistance in the class. Schools have 45 minute learning slots and then a 15-minute break. This means lots of changes to outdoor clothing in winter when they still go outside at minus 20 or even lower! One school had moved to 60-minute teaching and learning blocks as a trial.

Interestingly, at School 2 (Finland) a class has been set up for students who at the end of Year 9 did not get a place in a secondary school. The only whole cohort testing in Finland occurs at the end of Year 9, before entering secondary school. It forms part only of assessment as to readiness for secondary school. Schooling in Finland is compulsory until 15, the end of Year 9 (middle school) and then students apply for a secondary placement. This specific class is a response to a local need to try to stop students dropping out of education. These students had to apply for a placement in this class and have agreed parent support. The class offers a “hands on” curriculum with some work placement with a view to improving their grades and so applying again for secondary school placement the following year. In reality, what the students experience is the normal curriculum, delivered differently, and showcases the legendary support for students to succeed. In 2012 this class was in its first year, but the results in terms of attendance and student engagement in learning, is very positive. They have a dynamic young teacher who is passionate about what she does and is highly respected by colleagues for this. The level of engagement with parents is also very high in this group, as well as across the school. It is an example of the flexibility the principal has to respond to needs. Education funding comes from the local government and there are additional funds for such a project.

School 3A Finland

A visit to a kindergarten school (3 months to 6 years) again highlighted the great understanding of the continuum of learning. Significantly, it was built on to the primary school and purposely designed in a horseshoe to represent students entering at 3 months old and then continuing their journey through to Year 6. There was also a conscious plan to link both early childhood and primary stages of schooling. This is evident on a physical level, where some resources are shared, such as the kindergarten gym used by the primary school while the kindergarten students use the primary school woodwork room. I found it to be both fascinating and a fantastic opportunity for students to be further engaged in hands on activities that support creativity. Students and staff also share a dining room for the hot lunch. On a professional level, there is great collegiality between the two schools with a team that meets weekly across both schools to plan curriculum. Themes for each week are common across both schools and are on a 3-year cycle so students don't feel they are repetitive. The knowledge that teachers have of students is deep and responsibility is shared for students across both schools. For example, if a child in the primary school needs attention in the playground and the kindergarten staff are on duty then they deal with it.

Students in the kindergarten are grouped into the nursery (up to about 2 years of age) and then in multiage groups after that. Students progress from nursery to the

preschool groupings according to their readiness. The knowledge about each individual student and the response to each individual across the education system in Finland is one of its pivotal strengths. Every child is known, respected and assisted to achieve his/her best at every step of the way. It is entirely student focused with teachers constantly observing to see if a student has understood what is being taught. There is also an ongoing reflection on everything they do and if a child is having difficulty then a new approach is tried. The craft of teaching is well honed and visited each moment of the day.

In the kindergarten there is a ratio of approximately 3/4 adults per class of about 12 students. Some are teaching assistants and there is one early childhood teacher. The team approach is very strong. Reading to students is something that strikes you on arrival. There were adults in every room reading stories almost constantly during the day. Students had the choice to either have play-based activities or listen to the stories. Groups were monitored to ensure social skills were being taught and practiced and mixing of small groups within the larger group was closely observed. Students were encouraged to stay at an activity for at least 20 minutes and were also encouraged to participate in a variety of activities. There was also a rest time during the day.

It was observable that students are taught to be very independent from a young age with kindergarten students helping to clear tables after meals. Riding bikes to school is very common and students just ride home and cross roads from when they start school as a matter of everyday practice. Schools start and finish at staggered times over the week and so many students go home and are alone until parents arrive from work. It is very normal practice.

School 3B Finland

The primary classroom again is an environment that supports children and respects them. There is a curriculum that includes Finnish, Maths, Science, Craft (woodwork and textiles) English, PE, Music, History, Art and Geography. Approximately 3 hours per week is devoted to lessons on Finnish and Maths and about 2 hours is allocated for each of the other subject areas. This may vary locally and across the school years, as there is much flexibility given to both the principal and the classroom teacher to respond to student needs.

Trust is extremely high that the broad curriculum framework, in response to student need, is being implemented by a local area and then by each school and each teacher. Integration of learning is taken at every opportunity. Every primary school has a fully equipped woodwork and textiles room. I observed a kindergarten (preschool) class making a key hanger, including sawing wood and also older students making bags. It was about the level of a Year 7 class in NSW and is undertaken for 2 hours a week. This was in line with the student teachers I observed at the university who were engaged in learning how to teach in this area.

All primary school teachers are trained and in addition some have subject training that allows them to teach in middle school as a specialist. In School 3B, the Year 5 teacher did have a qualification to teach woodwork as well and so this enabled him to move between schools and teach in schools close by. The local principals work very closely together to share resources where possible. All subjects are treated equally with the importance of creative subjects being highlighted as a critical part of a holistic education.

IT is used but does not drive the curriculum. Most classes had one or two desktops set up for use and students accessed them as needed, but mobile devices and personal computers did not feature. There were digital portfolios for students and access for parents to school intranets. The use of video and filming by students was strong both in school and university. It is common to use the outdoors for classroom learning as well as physical activities. Textbooks are also still in use as one of a range of resources.

The students in the Year 5 class I visited were fully engaged with a Japanese teacher doing origami and learning about culture. There was great rapport between the students and each of the teachers. The collegiality of staff was clearly evident with high level sharing of ideas as well as sharing responsibilities. The school was a very happy place that showed great community spirit.

Finland does have new families from overseas that do not speak English. It was explained that the school worked with each individual child and family to ensure that the transition to Finland was made as smooth as possible. Daily reports were given to parents and the preschool encouraged the family to continue to speak the first language at home so that the child had a good language base. The school then worked on Finnish during the day. The school also took great care to ensure that the family was supported in understanding life in Finland. One example was the clothing needs for children at Finnish schools: the wearing of "inside shoes" as everyone takes off their "outside" shoes and also the use of rubber overalls for the small children when outside to keep them dry. A social worker was then allocated to each family to help them outside the school. The system seems to be extremely supportive.

Schools in Finland supply a hot lunch for students. These are wholesome meals with plenty of salad, bread, meat, vegetables and milk. Special diets are also catered for. The focus on nutrition and tying it closely to a child's ability to make the most of the learning time available each day was a significant feature of schools not just in Finland but across the UK and USA as well. It is a feature that was highlighted in every school I visited.

University

The local university provided an opportunity to discuss and observe teacher training in Finland. The number of applications from students to enter teaching is about 800 each year of which about 60 are successful. Teaching is the most sought after course in Finland and potential students must show not just ability but also a commitment

and passion to be part of this profession. Training is very thorough and requires students to be highly reflective of their role. The term "teacherhood " is used and much time is spent on thinking about their role, their impact and how they are developing as a teacher and what they are presenting as their particular strength. Teachers train as class (primary) teachers or subject (Year 7-9) teachers. It is becoming common to train as both and move between primary and middle school classes. The teachers in the secondary school, Years 9-12, have further training. I sat in two classes where class teachers were doing their craft course. In addition to this, two 3rd year students were teaching the 2nd year class and were being filmed for feedback later. At every opportunity students practice their craft.

There is great commitment to ongoing professional learning and all of it occurs outside school time e.g. nights (including Friday) or weekends. Summer school is also very popular. Teachers are very keen to participate in what is on offer and have great input as to what their needs are.

Teachers have three compulsory professional learning days each year organised with the school and local community. There is very little disruption to student learning as a result of professional learning as it does not occur as part of a school day. Long service leave does not exist. Teachers see that the time they have for school holidays presents opportunities for ongoing learning and also perceive that these holidays make up for average wages.

The university is also reflective of these practices and responds to needs. Currently teachers are asking for training in behaviour management and also dealing with parents. There is discussion now that these areas need to be more part of initial teacher training courses. The model developed for this university, while reflecting the general Finnish model, has its own flavour. There is also a teacher training school in town, closely linked to the university, where teacher practicum takes place. There are additional responsibilities for teachers in this school to liaise closely with the university about student teacher progress and needs for each cohort as well as providing advice for future teacher training. The link between universities and schools is very strong and effective in providing both initial training and ongoing professional learning.

Education is talked about in Finland as continuing from preschool to university and beyond. University is not an add-on but a real expectation for all and the Finns do everything they can to support students to be able to get to this point. Education is always talked about in its entirety.

Summary of features observed in Finnish environments that engage students in positive attitudes to learning and successful achievements.

- importance of leadership
- flexibility
- goal is for students/teachers to succeed
- high expectations for all
- trust for teachers is high
- extensive and deep knowledge of students
- strong student teacher relationships
- focus on balanced holistic curriculum
- deep knowledge of learning continuum
- teaching in teams
- integrated learning
- special needs students integrated
- co-teaching strongly featured
- frequent checking for understanding is very evident
- continuity and consistency of student achievement across middle years
- no high stakes testing
- IT present but not driving learning
- specialist rooms available to students from primary school through to secondary school
- education and teaching is held in high regard
- teacher training is thorough/responsive/practical
- teacher professional learning linked to University
- strong focus on good nutrition
- independence of students
- frequent short breaks during the day
- parent support for learning is very high but direct engagement with the school is not common

United Kingdom

Background

The UK schools receiving government funding are all under the jurisdiction of the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted). This body regulates and inspects schools to achieve excellence in the care of children and young people, and in education and skills for learners of all ages. It regulates and inspects childcare and children's social care, and inspects the Children and Family Court Advisory Support Service (Cafcass), schools, colleges, initial teacher training, work-based learning and skills training, adult and community learning, education and training in prisons and other secure establishments. This includes all maintained schools and state-funded independent schools, and certain non-maintained independent schools. Independent schools in the UK, which do not receive government funding, are not part of this school inspection system.

The Ofsted framework for school inspection (2012) states that the inspection of a school provides an independent external evaluation of its effectiveness and a diagnosis of what it should do to improve. It is based on a range of evidence available to inspectors that is evaluated against a national framework. Inspections can be, and are, carried out within short timeframes, often two days notice. Lessons are observed and a number of shorter visits are also made to classrooms to gather further evidence on specific aspects. Meetings are held with staff, representatives of the governing body, an officer from the local authority and groups of pupils. Inspectors look at a variety of documentation, particularly that related to pupils progress and behaviour. Samples of student work are looked at and commonly a number of students are heard reading. Inspectors analyse questionnaires completed by parents and carers, as well as questionnaires from pupils and staff. Schools are then given a rating of:

- grade 1: outstanding
- grade 2: good
- grade 3: requires improvement
- grade 4: inadequate.

Schools strive to improve and reach Grade 1. The schools I visited were well on their way to achieving this goal, were all actively analysing school data and had, in many cases, achieved outstanding improvements for the students in their school. One factor that contributed to this was the school-based decision to become an academy. This allowed the freedom to move away from the local education body and operate more independently. This meant that the school had control of its finances and could be more flexible in responding to specific community needs. The schools were part of the government sector, but with more autonomy. Principals who had led this decision saw it as crucial to their success.

School 1 England

The first school I visited has experienced an enormous turnaround in less than three years, led by a most inspiring principal. The school was previously performing very poorly and the measures in place have resulted in improved outcomes and achievements for students. Students openly said that the school had changed significantly since the arrival of the new principal and said they now liked coming to school, loved the learning and that there were now few interruptions or distractions to learning. Behavioural issues had previously been extremely problematic and had impacted very negatively on learning. Staff also articulated this and I observed highly skilled and engaged, happy staff teaching classes that were exemplars of excellent teaching and learning practice. Class sizes were around 30 students.

The elements that were evident and are at the core of the change are the leadership of the principal and high expectations for all students and staff. This expectation is articulated, discussed and is very visible across the school. The community is one where further education and the vision of university have not been evident and now students who I spoke to talked positively about their learning journeys, the achievements they had made and their aspirations for the future, many of which included tertiary education. There is very much a “can do” attitude present across the school that, together with a very collegial and transparent approach, has been the backbone for change.

Once initial major issues were addressed, particularly around behaviour expectations and a clear framework for this developed, the teaching and learning became the critical focus. The learning environment is a core focus where a respectful relationship with students and good understanding of each student is central. Literacy has a strong focus with feedback to students happening very frequently in every lesson. There is a clear framework for every lesson so that students are aware of the purpose of each lesson, the outcomes to be achieved and strategies to get there. These are displayed in *every* classroom, in *every* lesson, so students have consistency throughout the day. There are also tips for classroom activities, such as writing or vocabulary, provided on laminated sheets on every workspace in the room. There are pathways for students to move towards achieving a General Certificate of Secondary Education - GCSE (and beyond) that are personalized and, since becoming an academy just 3 years ago, there has been a 98% improvement in achievement.

The improvements have been the result of many factors, all grounded in a change in ethos that has at its core high expectations for all. There is no magic wand, but there is positive belief in self and others. This focus on student care and wellbeing is embedded firmly in the holistic curriculum² on offer. Students meet with staff about

² The term “holistic curriculum” has been used where there is an integration of academic and social learning. The words “student wellbeing, pastoral care, social learning, student care and advisory” all refer to such practices in this report.

their aspirations and how they might achieve them and what help they need. Support and advice for possible careers is freely available.

Now students aspire to pursue apprenticeships and university courses. They have destinations and their eyes are on that goal. Achievements along the way are celebrated and some staff take particular responsibility to mentor students who are underachieving. There is extra support available on weekends and in the holidays and teachers often collect students who need to be there.

Parents are really on board with the change, after previously experiencing a loss of faith in the school. To engage parents, the school runs focus groups to discuss and gather their views, as well as social events e.g. bonfire night. Parent workgroups are active and, via the website, the results of their engagement can be seen. There is an annual celebration day that has become a focal point for the school. It was due to take place later in the week I visited.

While there have been few staff changes since Ofsted indicated it was a very low performing school, professional learning for staff has been a critical factor for change. Firstly behaviour structures were developed that were predictable for students and had clear consequence. There was much consultation with parents. Previously behaviour structures were ill defined and lacked consistency resulting in a chaotic environment. One result was that lessons were stymied. The change allowed staff to deliver lessons that engaged students. Many students commented on how different the school is now and that behaviour improvement had meant they were able to learn in a very positive environment. The principal clearly articulated that the students have allowed the teaching to change with the support of the new behavioural structures.

Professional learning now is built on lesson observations and collaboration. Teachers want to move to being rated as outstanding in the next Ofsted inspection. There is a clear move to in-house professional learning, which is sustainable, and a better use of funds. There is time given for weekly meetings for the range of teams and leaders. Much focus is given to both students' support and also curriculum.

The outcome of an external audit and responsive action plans has been learning that stretches and challenges teachers and has converted new success and achievement into a very successful school with hugely improved student outcomes.

School 2 England

Again this is a school that has taken the academy option and is reaping the benefits of funding flexibility that brings. This is a middle school of Years 5-8 with a lower school sharing the same land. The dream is to merge the two with Years 0-19 on one site. The principal has been at the school for five years, has made significant improvements and continues to do so. There is a real vision for the school that serves a mixed community of both middle class families and those receiving support. The strong focus on good nutrition is also evident with the eating of not only a

healthy lunch, but sitting down at tables to eat, even if lunch is brought from home. A hot lunch is available, but requires payment. About 1/3 of students avail themselves of this option. Families receiving welfare benefits receive free lunch.

Student welfare is based on respect with a “3 strikes” policy and significant support intervention by senior staff. This has almost eradicated inappropriate behaviour across the school. Absenteeism has also been a focus and the school has produced an excellent brochure that explains to parents the importance of good attendance.

Staff are really encouraged to think outside the square and teach using innovation. The environment is such that teachers feel very confident and supported to do this. Good questioning and higher order thinking skills were very prevalent in all classes I observed. The next focus will be to expand IT use in the curriculum. At present, two computer labs have been set up and can be booked by teachers for classes.

An outstanding program of professional learning exists that aligns school goals with personal goals and up-skilling. A move to in-house professional learning, with much sharing, has been undertaken and, while being cost efficient, the outcomes have been both significant and sustainable. In addition there is training undertaken by leaders who, once accredited, can deliver ‘a middle management leadership’ course across the local community that can be counted towards a masters degree. This is highly economical as it costs a significant less cost than other ‘masters’ subjects, which have just recently become fee paying in the UK. Working with other schools in the area is a way of sharing cost, skills and opportunity. The school leadership team embraces these opportunities to build individual capacity as well as the whole human capacity of the school.

Ofsted is always near and the school has been working towards being classified as a “good” school. The classification is critical and highly sought after. The principal at this school is training to be an Ofsted inspector, so as to build his own capacity and then influence further school improvement. Some local schools have banded together in an Ofsted-style feedback and reflection, visiting each other’s schools. This is seen as very beneficial and a great support to school improvement and to each other.

Transition is another area of school focus as students comes from the local school just across the field, as well as from other schools in the village or just outside the village. The school was very interested in the NSW DEC Middle Years Transition Matrix developed by the Student Engagement Team. In fact each school visited, in Finland, UK and the USA, expressed great interest in it with many are keen to adapt it for their own purposes.

Class sizes are about 30, which seem to be typical in the schools I saw in the UK. The school has an autism class and another special needs class both serving the wider local area. Students integrate with mainstream when they can. Specialist classes for student with autism have been introduced in England and are very successful in achieving very positive outcomes for students. Science labs, woodwork and textile facilities are available to students in Years 5-8, which is not the case in the 2-tier

system³ so this is seen as extremely beneficial. In some areas there has been a movement against middle schools, as people thought this would create two transitions, but others have fought hard to keep them or move to Years R-13 as the benefits of knowing the children and maintaining their continuum in learning are so strong.

Learning is integrated here as much as possible with a teacher accompanying a class from Years 5-8, together with the progress leader (year adviser), taking the cohort through each year. This is very strongly supported in the school and so knowledge about each student is outstanding. The embedding of student wellbeing and care within the curriculum is evident and strong throughout the school.

Student voice is strong with a representative group that have made suggestions, asked for changes, been listened to and suggestions acted upon. Dinner menus and playground-sharing arrangements are just two examples. There are also lots of opportunities for parents to interact with school.

While national testing results are determinants of many things in the UK, this school has worked really hard to move away from teaching to the test and to create an environment to maintain a holistic education model, with significant innovation and creativity evident. Student engagement and improved learning have followed in an outstandingly.

School 3 England

This is a school catering for students between the ages of 9-13 (Years 5-8) from a mix of families as part of its community. It is an area of England where people have fought hard to retain the 3-tier⁴ middle school model and the benefits for students are highly valued and the data supports this. The school is renowned for its caring and inclusive nature, placing people first. The opportunities it affords its pupils are second to none. Its focus on the middle years allows pupils to receive specialist education at an early age, as well as outstanding preparation for the high school years.

Here again, the need for good nutrition for students is recognised, with a hot lunch option available or students can bring lunch from home. Both options provide an area for students to sit at tables and eat. Teachers join students for lunch and this also has the bonus of strengthening relationships. There is no eating on the run, or playing while eating. There is no junk food evident. This is another example of the impact of chef Jamie Oliver's push for good quality, tasty and nutritious school meals in the UK.

The importance of nutrition and lunches in schools was never part of the thinking in this project, but it has stood out as an important feature in schools and clearly linked

³ 2-tier system is lower school and upper school.

⁴ 3-tier system is lower school, middle school and upper school.

to students being able to participate in learning all day; and the days are very long. Further consideration of this issue is recommended. No junk food was seen in schools in Finland, UK or USA either in the lunch program or in the food students brought to school. Some communities, in partnership with local businesses and schools, agreed not to sell snack type food to students, either before or during school hours. This too is having a positive impact.

I was privileged at this school to join a meeting of the leadership team where it was clear the enthusiasm of staff, the professional learning of staff and the needs of the children were central to all decisions. The school is working towards improvements, highlighted in the last Ofsted inspection, and has a clear agreed plan that is tied closely with teacher development. Strong leadership by the principal is again the critical factor in visioning future direction for this school.

Once again, the recurrent theme of success related to integrating academic and wellbeing aspects, was evident. There are pastoral managers employed to work with the learning adviser, to support students and who are not teachers, but who may have a background in psychology, or perhaps social work. There was also a teacher who had responsibility for each pastoral group and all worked together as a team. There was also often a school counsellor or access to one at a local level. This system was evident in a number of schools. Whether there was a pastoral manager for each year group, or for a number of year groups, depended on finances and school decisions. It is common in the UK to have parent teacher interviews with the pastoral/student wellbeing teacher, who has a handle on student learning across all subjects. The statement below from this school demonstrates the integration of both aspects for students. Students are known very well known to each of their teachers.

Developing Wellbeing	Developing Achievement
<p>We want our pupils to become happy, self-motivated, socially aware individuals who support each other; whose values are underpinned by respect and tolerance and who strive for positive interactions with all those they encounter.</p> <p>Key Words: Respect Tolerance Support</p>	<p>We want our pupils to become independent thinkers, who enjoy learning and take every opportunity to broaden their understanding of the world they live in; achieve the best they can for themselves and the good of all those they encounter.</p> <p>Key Words: Enquire Achieve Enjoy</p>

I joined a tutor group (pastoral group) for the 40 minute morning session, which occurs three mornings with two assembly mornings making up the week. It was a vibrant, happy and engaged group. They watched and discussed the news of the day, had a debate on the news, and did a quiz that demonstrated great use of the interactive board. It was most impressive! The relationship with the teacher was very strong.

Each day, an hour is dedicated for students in each of literacy and numeracy, as well as meeting again with the tutor group in the afternoon for reading time. Students also undertake lessons in Science, Woodwork, Cooking and Textiles in specialist rooms for all year groups. Language, Art, History and Geography, PE and Maths, Drama, Music, ICT, English, Religious Education and Citizenship were also part of the curriculum.

Lessons were engaging and a focus on skills and thinking in particular was evident. Students are adept at reflecting on their learning. Each lesson students are able to articulate responses to these questions.

1. What are you learning today?
2. How do you know?
3. How is the activity helping you?

Again, special needs students are integrated into mainstream classes and the amount of support provided to them through a teaching assistant is to a high level. This is determined by external assessment and the local authority *must* supply the recommended support. Once there is a diagnosis, the school action plan is developed with support from external agencies forming a specialist support team. There is a co-ordinator for special needs at the school. One example was a Downs Syndrome student who received 25 hours support in the classroom and five hours support in the playground each week. There was an autism class based at the school, again serving the local area. There was evidence of many outstanding achievements with the students and many were integrating for part of their day into mainstream classes.

School 4 England

An historian at Cambridge University commended this school as “doing interesting things”. In fact, a student-produced video from this school, available on their website, was used as a resource at the school development day in Western Sydney in Term 3, 2012. When I told them this they were very excited!

The school has a very interesting history. Sadly, a few weeks before my arrival a fire broke out during the school day and an historic building was burned, including many of their archives. Thankfully, everyone was evacuated and no one harmed, but of course there has been ongoing disruption, which has been handled in an exemplary manner. To hear the story of a real evacuation is sobering.

At this school students are the owners of their learning and are really engaged in every aspect of curriculum and learning on offer. Again I observed really engaging lessons that were innovative and relevant to students. The lessons were clearly outlined with purpose and expectations visible to students. Differentiation was evident in each lesson and students had a clear understanding of their learning. Students in UK schools are very aware of their individual learning goals and the levels that they are aiming to achieve and what achievement at each level looks like.

This is closely linked to test scores.

Transition is an area of focus for the school and knowledge of students and building of relationships is very strong. Again, as seen in many schools, deep understanding and knowledge of each student is a key aspect of the success. Strong care and wellbeing is central to the school and firmly embedded in the curriculum, with time dedicated to this each day. The ASPIRE⁵ program is central to the school and provides a framework for the school community. Pupil voice here is strong and is encouraged.

The links to community are strong, seen clearly in the integration as part of the ASPIRE program. A local filmmaker has been working with the school in a program for students who wish to participate in a project based on video making. This year, the students are making a video to assist with transition and I sat in on a session where they were planning the storyline. This was not only very innovative, but certainly engaging, for the students who had chosen to participate. The news that a previous project had been used in Australia was a real buzz for this group. They have also revived an old theatre next to the school, which now provides strong links with the community and an opportunity for students to be part of the community in the running of such an enterprise. There is a community adult learning centre that is part of the school, which further links the school to the community. Given that historically this was the first *community* school in the UK this has remained a strong and sustained aspect.

In terms of assessment, remembering that this school is also part of a national testing regimen, there is an ongoing process that is driven and owned by students and links through the years clearly showing the learning journey of each student. During the course of the year, each pupil will complete three milestone pieces. The nature of citizenship is such that they do not simply assess a pupil's ability to memorise (e.g. what happened and when - factual recall) but they ask pupils to demonstrate the processes that help them become more informed citizens and become active members of the college as well as active citizens in local, national and international current affairs. The milestone pieces are completed in a variety of formats (e.g. written, diagrammatic, class presentations). Time for planning and research is scheduled into the program of study, and when preparing and presenting written work, pupils are encouraged to make use of the college ICT facilities. Assessment data and evidence is used to inform report writing and are passed on to their new teachers at the beginning of the following year to provide background into each each student's progress.

There was also a centre for students needing extra support to engage in learning. Whether it was a wellbeing, pastoral or behavioural issue, a great deal of support was given to students to maintain their learning, away from mainstream, with support to return to mainstream in a caring family type environment.

⁵ The ASPIRE program encapsulates the values, ethos and attitudes encouraged at the school. The aim is for students to be confident and aspirational about who they can be, what they can achieve and what they can contribute.

Summary of features observed in English environments that engage students in positive attitudes to learning and successful achievements.

- importance of leadership
- flexibility with academy structure an option
- goal is for students/teachers to succeed
- high expectations for all
- trust for teachers is high
- extensive and deep knowledge of students
- strong student teacher relationships
- focus on balanced holistic curriculum with embedded student wellbeing programs
- deep knowledge of learning continuum
- teaching in teams
- integrated learning
- special needs students integrated with high levels of in class support
- specialist classes for students with autism
- co-teaching strongly featured
- frequent checking for understanding is very evident
- outline of lesson /purpose and goal for each lesson on board.
- support for learning afterschool/within timetable
- continuity and consistency of student achievement across middle years
- Ofsted high stakes testing
- IT present but not driving learning
- specialist rooms available to students from primary school through to secondary school
- teacher professional learning moving to in-house model
- strong focus on good nutrition
- parent engagement varies across contexts

USA

Denver

School 1 Denver

The day starts at this religious school in suburban Denver at 7:55am and there are 9 periods with a 45 min break for lunch. School finishes around 3:30pm, often with sport to follow. I discovered that this day's schedule is usual for schools in Denver.

Students spoke most endearingly about the school and were really engaged in learning, as evidenced by their work in classes. The focus for this school, as with others, was in the integration of the pastoral/advisory with the academic aspects of the curriculum, resulting in a holistic curriculum. Grade 7 and Grade 8 students meet in groups of 10-12 every day for 25 minutes for this advisory session. Grade 6 students meet with their class teacher weekly for a community circle, a similar advisory opportunity. When students are in Grade 9, they have 40 minutes each week. It dissipates as they move towards Grade 12. The emphasis is definitely on middle years. According to the principal it was a battle to get this time but the benefits have been outstanding. Teachers know every one of the students both academically and socially and it is a two way street, as students also know the teachers very well. The school has a counsellor and access to student counsellors in training from the University of Denver.

The goal of the advisory program is to build trust and for the teacher to be both an advocate and coach for the student. Students are encouraged to be independent and to move towards speaking up for themselves. There are general guidelines for the advisory sessions and teachers are encouraged to customize for their particular group. The group is kept constant through middle school and the teacher does not generally teach any of the students in the advisory group. In addition, students have a 1 on 1 time each week with this teacher for an academic/social catch up and to monitor that things are going well.

There is a lot of parent communication. Advisors call home to check how students and parents are progressing and any parent conferences always include advisers. Students are just beginning to be part of the conferences at this school. The inclusion of students in parent conferences varied from school to school but there was an observable move to having student led conferences.

This school also had "Tiger Time" (supervised study time/study hall twice a week) for students to work with an individual teacher, supervising and advising. This time was structured in middle school so as to model good use of the time and maximise the opportunities it could provide. The school had a broad range of learners and so this time allowed for student access to teachers to support or extend their learning. Again, it was difficult to get this time, but well worth it, as the outcomes for students have been very positive.

There is a service learning program in operation at the school and students from Grades 6-12 go on a weekend retreat that is both school centred and beyond. The aim is to build identity and provide good role models for younger students and for community building.

The school delivers an academically demanding, college preparatory education, rooted in Jewish history, ethics and principles. The challenging dual curriculum instills the work ethic, organizational skills and stamina to sustain students' performance beyond high school. The school provides an individualized supportive environment for all students. The Judaic program is thoroughly interwoven into the secular curriculum and leverages Jewish learning skills, values, wisdom and tradition to enhance academic achievement. The educational philosophy is shaped by the reality that the students and their families come with diverse Jewish beliefs, attitudes and practices. This diversity is viewed as an asset and an educational resource.

In middle school (Grades 6 through 8) the curriculum is designed to provide the students with experiences of belonging to the Jewish people: initiation into traditional Jewish text study, tikkun olam (service learning) and Sabbath retreats. This creates an environment where students can safely question and express their personal Jewish identity.

Students were observed in classrooms to be engaged in learning that was differentiated, with extensive checking for understanding and innovation. One group was preparing for a Science fair and their level of investigation skills was impressive. They were inquisitive and inquiry based learning was a strong feature. In the USA there is a national focus on Science, Technology, Engineering and Math (STEM) as an area for improvement and many schools I visited were preparing students for Science fairs and promoting engagement in robotics and encouraging participation in the NASA educational program.

School 2 Denver

This school was founded by the Loreto Sisters of America who have a very long and interesting history here. Judith Baenon, also an ex-principal of the school, maintains very close ties both with the school and the sisters. When the school was initially set up, it was in farmland, but is now part of suburbia.

Under the leadership of Judith Baenon a purpose built middle school was constructed. Judith's passion for middle schooling is evident in every aspect of the building design, which provided the physical structure for the middle schooling practices throughout the school. Each year group is located in specific class areas with a breakout area common to all of the rooms. At the centre of the building is a large open common area that is the meeting point for gatherings. There is also an industrial kitchen as well as Science labs.

This school starts around 8am and finishes around 3:15pm, with sport often for another hour after school. In some schools, this is compulsory. The lunch break is about 40 minutes and there is no other recess break. It is a full day for students and teachers.

My observations of a Grade 7 group where students were gathered for a “point to counterpoint” activity confirmed the impact of structure on practice. The activity was a bit like a debate where students are paired, choose a topic and each research a point of view and then come together to debate/discuss it. It resembled the presidential debates, which were happening at the time in the USA. The really interesting part is that there were two classes here who were integrating their learning across Social Studies and Language Arts. The teachers have worked together for some time and they often open the wall between their rooms to co-teach and then close when they are teaching more specific areas. They were highly enthusiastic and supportive of the students who were speaking to an audience for the first time. Student peers were also encouraging and the speakers were really excellent.

I visited a Grade 6 Social Studies class, where inquiry and project based learning was being introduced, and a Year 7 Spanish language class based on storytelling. The teacher was relating a legend to the students and had on the board some grammatical information and was constantly checking for understanding and correct use of the tense. There was a mix of language and culture as the meaning and history of the legend was discussed in English later in the lesson. The lesson was engaging and inspiring. The classroom environment was such, that students were encouraged to try things, to ask questions, to check their understanding and were affirmed for their efforts.

This environment was positive throughout the school and the relationships across the school were extremely strong. From the wonderful administration assistant who greeted and knew every student, to the principal, who I witnessed encouraging students to attend a sport game to support the school, and through to every teacher: the sense of community and support for each other, and the strength of team, was outstanding.

There was a strong focus on building community and the design of the building is also supports this endeavour. Advisory sessions (student wellbeing/pastoral care) are held twice per week and are called “community action teams” which form the group for students to engage in service learning. This is a big part of many schools in Denver. Again the advisory teacher sees the advisory group daily for 25 minutes after lunch. Sometimes it is a study hall (a time students can access teachers to check for understanding) or to follow up work that supports their achievement e.g. organisational skills for some. This is evident in many schools and is a time in the day where students can access staff for extra help, or continue to work on projects or schoolwork.

Again, care and knowledge of students strongly underpins the program and the outcomes for students are spectacular. Students were almost running to class so

eager were they to get there. They also had the opportunity to choose electives during the week that were really engaging for them. Robotics was just one example.

There were many examples of integration in the classrooms. I sat in a Year 8 Science class looking at metals. It was inspiring to see research skills, higher order thinking, Maths and environmental issues so linked in the Science learning. Students prepared their work for real audiences and received feedback from staff and local area people often linked to the topic in some way. The learning was relevant, with students interacting with the everyday world. This was evident in every lesson I saw. Feedback was personal and frequent.

The students are linked to the community by the strong service program and I worked with students preparing food for a soup kitchen that they would go to the following afternoon. Part of a day each week is programmed for community initiatives and so does not disrupt the flow of the day for student or teachers who attend. Timetabling is flexible enough so that schools can offer all of these options to students.

Another noteworthy feature is that, in most of the schools I visited, the teacher remained in a classroom and students moved to them. This allowed for the display of student work and consistent classroom setups as well as ensuring the rooms were maintained. Students found it easy to find teachers when they needed help. It is a strong feature of these high performing middle schools.

Curriculum and pedagogy had a very strong focus on capabilities and thinking and the content was linked to the real world. Creativity and innovation were evident in every lesson I saw with staff reflecting on practice and ensuring that every student was being supported and challenged. Independent schools in the USA are not subject to compulsory high stakes testing and staff articulated that they felt this freed them up to be more creative.

School 3 Denver

At this school the day starts at 8:10am and finishes at 4:30 pm with compulsory sport from 3:30pm providing another example that long days are common in Colorado and the wider USA. The school has 90-minute teaching/learning blocks.

Student advisory time is central to the school and occurs everyday at 8:10am for 20 minutes. The grouping is about 9 students with one teacher or 18 with two teachers. I observed the 2-teacher model, which saw a very strong partnership with the teachers and the students.

This school has a policy that every child is greeted individually in advisory time and often on arrival school by staff, who are at the door specifically with this in mind. Without this, it may be possible that a student may arrive at school and go through the day without being greeted as an individual. It is a very strong practice and a simple but very worthwhile one. It sets the tone and the feeling of connectedness

each and every day. There is a Dean of Advisory, who really looks at the wellbeing of every student. This person does not teach and so can work with both staff and parents ensuring that every child is achieving and being supported both academically and socially.

The curriculum has its origins in developmental design structure which features strongly embedded social and emotional aspects. It is balanced, research based and neither progressive nor traditional but exhibits best practice. Inquiry based learning was evident and textbooks were used as one of a number of resources in some subjects.

The Math, English, Science and Humanities (MESH) classes stay as a group and rotate among teachers. Again the teachers in this school stay in the classroom and the students move. This allows teachers to present in the room when the students arrive, to create a welcoming and focused environment for their learning area and to display work. The group remains the same for Art, Foreign Language and PE. The MASH teams are the advisers at each year level and are assisted by some of the specialist teachers. Teachers are all trained to support their advisory role e.g. Counselling for non-counselors courses. There has been much work to break down the silos between the various parts of the child's learning and now the continuum across Grades 5-8 is evident. The rest of the curriculum is called ICE - Innovative, Creative, Expression and this takes place one block each in a rotation. The timetable is a 6-day rotation to overcome loss of time on any one day.

I observed Math lessons. 'Math in Focus' from Singapore is used across the school Grades K-7 very successfully. It is differentiated and demands mastery before moving on and checking for understanding is frequent. I also observed a "flipped"⁶ classroom in Math. This is a trial for the school. The teacher was very positive about it, although preparation in recording all the videos had been a good deal of work. The plus is that homework for Math is to watch the video which takes about 15 -20 minutes each night, and the application and checking for understanding occurs during class the next day. Students are very engaged and parents are pleased, as the time spent on homework for Maths at home is less and they can also see the video so as to understand what is being done and may also be able to further assist students.

Much emphasis is placed on students being active, as brain research has indicated this is good for middle years students. Berckemeyer (2009), Nagel (2010) and Medina (2008) highlight the importance of current brain research particularly in relation to working with young adolescents. A strong focus on PE and sport is evident. Also the student artwork displayed so professionally around the school is just one indication of the value placed on student work and celebrates everything that a student contributes to the school community.

⁶ Flipped classroom is a reversed teaching model that delivers instruction at home through interactive, teacher-created videos and moves "homework" to the classroom.

The view of the school with regard to testing and combining the social, emotional and academic is summed up by the following question commonly asked as a focus for discussion within this learning community. Who are these students at 25? 35? The question is **not**; can they perform on a particular test in middle school? How can we measure core traits of trust or respect? The principal highlighted a movement in the USA towards such a test, but as it is reliant upon self-assessment it is not seen as reliable data.

Parent partnerships are strong. There is a parent education network and speakers such as those talking about adolescent brain development have been offered throughout each year. There exists a trend towards tutoring for students outside of school. The school sees middle school as a place to “have a go” and try things.

Support is given to students with special learning needs both within class and one to one depending on particular needs at any one time. The special needs co-ordinator co-teaches classes and up-skills teachers so that needs are met via differentiation in the classroom. Some students are exempted from foreign language studies and some small groups may also operate at that time. Once again there is a system of checking in with students throughout the cycle to ensure that they are on track and to assist if need be. Support often was focused in Math and English classes.

Service learning is a significant program in the school starting in Kindergarten, where it is in the form of a class project. There is a co-ordinator and a teacher in each grade who is responsible for the program. Grade 5 works with the zoo and learns about endangered animals. Students have a night at the zoo and they present information on endangered animals to the visitors at the zoo, an authentic audience. Grade 6 work with the homeless at a local soup kitchen and the issue of homelessness is built into the History/ English curriculum. The school has found that the most effective service learning is embedded into curriculum. Grade 7 works in a retirement community where they interview the people and collect and collate the stories and produces videos and podcasts for them. Grade 8 works in the local public school with Grade 5, supporting with Math.

This school has many innovative features and the Gates Invention and Innovation Program is a unique and outstanding example. Students work with the question “What’s your problem?” and over the years look at problems and solve them in an innovative way by inventing a solution. I saw many fantastic inventions. Some have patents and one student has launched his own successful business before leaving school! Amazing!

School 4 Denver

This school has a very large campus (more than 200 acres) in an area of Denver that has large acreage blocks so there is quite a country feel about it. There are five academic buildings, which house 50 classrooms, and labs, three theatres (as well as two outdoor amphitheatres), and seven studios for music, dance, and art. Two gymnasiums, a fitness and sports medicine centre, seven tennis courts, and 20 acres

of playing fields — including DeSo Field, an artificial turf facility — complement the athletic program. The dining hall is a model of sustainability and energy efficiency. Extensive technology and Wi-Fi access are available campus wide. There are 672 students at the school (222 in the middle school, and 450 in the high school). The school has 86 full- and part-time teachers.

There is a strong belief that the culture of the school is the key to success. The middle school program is designed to address the unique academic, artistic, physical, creative, and moral development of sixth, seventh, and eighth grade students. Among the major goals is the fostering of strong character and the building of the questioning minds, the use of critical thinking skills, fluency with mathematical concepts, and proficiency with oral and written expression. Through a carefully designed structure at each grade level, the school provides a natural and developmentally appropriate transition from elementary school to middle school, and then from middle school to upper school. The middle school advisor system is designed to support, encourage, and guide students through the middle school years.

One key element of the middle school program is the extended field trip, which offers students the chance to try new skills, take appropriate risks, and widen perspectives. These experiences encourage the formation of new friendships, the gaining of new knowledge, and the creation of a common experience to be used as a springboard for further work at school.

Through a broad and challenging curriculum, the middle school students are prepared for the wide range of courses with opportunities also available in the secondary school. The middle school creates experiences that encourage students to discover joy in learning and to make good decisions about their lives—decisions that are grounded in careful thought, individual responsibility, and the commitment to a value system that respects both self and others.

This is a huge campus with outstanding facilities that serve both the middle and high school. The middle school is housed in a set of buildings with classrooms and administration. Students access Science labs and other facilities nearby. The dining room and food were exemplary and there is a very strong recycling program for all food scraps as well as other waste. One particular thing I noticed in terms of student voice is that there is student representation on the board of trustees.

The timetable is a 7-day cycle with 1-hour teaching/learning blocks. The day starts at 8am and finishes at 2:30pm with sport and electives following this. There are 4 teams, each moving through these focus areas—Community, Human Development, Stewardship and Gratitude, and Survival Skills. There is a two-year cycle of these areas over Grades 7 and 8. Curriculum is devised around these teams and focus areas. These areas are also woven into Advisory, allowing for further integration. Student led conferences with parents are also run with the advisors and not subject teachers. The advisor has the knowledge of student achievement and progress

overall.

I was fortunate enough to visit a Grade 6 English class where excellent questioning and higher order thinking were very evident in the class discussion of a young adult novel. Students were highly engaged and participating enthusiastically. I visited a Grade 8 Science class planning a short skit in groups to explain some aspects of their topic, particularly in relation to understanding and explaining the meaning of scientific terminology. Students loved this type of activity and were accustomed to having a wide variety of teaching and learning in class. A visit to a Grade 7 History class saw an outstanding use of groups exploring aspects of a topic. Groups had specific roles for each member and were preparing for a class discussion on the topic the following day. Students were expected to be fully informed on their aspect and preparation was furious getting ready for a focused learning opportunity. Students were actively driving and owning the learning with the teacher very much a facilitator. Laptops were in use to assist in research and each room had a bank for student to use. IT was used and very much embedded into the teaching and learning, and available as needed.

In Grade 6, English is separated into writing and literature and in Grade 7 it is combined. Languages available are Spanish, French, Mandarin, English Mastery and Latin. Latin was evident in a number of schools. Spanish is in all schools in Denver as there are many native speakers in Colorado. In Grade 8 there is the opportunity for students to accelerate to the high school in Math and Mandarin. There is a very strong creative arts focus: Visual Arts, Theatre and Music are all included in a trimester, each year, in middle school. Sport is also very strong.

There is a strong transition program into the school as they draw from a large number and variety of schools. For students who need extra assistance, they can drop Foreign Language and pick it up again in high school, which then allows for time to look at skills to support transition into middle school.

There is a very strong electives program that can also build bridges from Grades 6-12 that happen five out of the 7-day cycle they operate. It is the school's signature program and involves mixed groups and staff from across the school in roles for which they volunteer. They are not clubs but are academically focused. Some examples are robotics, technical theatre, suburban ecology, writing and illustrating books, journalism. Some are one term and some are year-long. One program, Young Surgeons, includes dissecting activities and tapping into the community visiting a hand surgeon and also the local ER. Another group, Teams for Oceans, has been part of a program that set up cameras in the ocean collecting all types of information. Destination Imagination is another group, which participates in a National program www.destinationimagination.org. The "buy in" for the electives program for staff is voluntary and for the advisory program it is compulsory.

The advisory program is embedded firmly into the structure of the middle school and is viewed as essential to high performance. Strong relationships and sense of team is evident and essential for success. There are shared leadership opportunities.

Teachers are very committed to the school and clearly loved being part of the community. Advisory time is 1 hour per cycle and, in addition, there is time for class meetings by year group and study hall, which is a time for students to seek assistance and/or speak with teachers about any work related issues. The group also undertakes trips together and early in the year there is a camping trip to bond the groups and develop relationships. Much work has gone into developing the advisory program and it continues to build. The groups are a combination Grades 7/8. Grade 6 has its own group.

Once again, the strong service to the community programs I have seen in middle schools is evident here with service being undertaken through the advisory groups. This school believes that service to others is crucial and provides about 15,000 hours of service to the community each year. There are also immersion programs that reflect this philosophy and a group of middle school students will embark on such a trip to Mongolia early in 2013.

Professional learning here is extensive and staff highly value the outstanding opportunities presented to them. They also create opportunities to share their learning with other staff.

New York

Unfortunately my plans in New York were severely disrupted by Hurricane Sandy, which unleashed its devastation the day after I arrived. I did however manage to visit one school in my last days in New York. Given that this was the first day the school was open for staff after the hurricane, it was very generous of the principal to welcome me. Unfortunately, students had not yet returned to school due to power and transport difficulties. Most staff returned to this school although some were trapped in the worst effected parts of town.

This inspirational school, with both early years and middle years education, is located in Harlem and, according to the principal, was once one of the worst performing schools in New York. This has been turned around in every way and, as he says, they just “keep on striving to improve”. Leadership and very strong relationships with committed staff have obviously been a critical factor in this outstanding achievement. The school has won a number of awards, including the Schools to Watch Award, earning the Essential Elements: Schools-to-Watch designation having distinguished themselves in academic excellence, developmental responsiveness, social equity and organization and structure. There is a more detailed description of this program at www.nysmsa.org

The principal spoke extensively about leveraging support for the school in the local and wider community to gain the extra funding used to improve the physical facilities of the school and to provide services so that the school is indeed the hub of the community. Student attendance has risen to about 96% because the school is a pleasant physical place to come to and is an exciting place to be in terms of learning. Every corridor and classroom was alive with visual learning opportunities, from

displays of work, to inspirational quotes and visual signs, using their school icon of a jaguar, to indicate which way to go up and down the stairs. All of these things are in response to years of observation and problem solving. There is also very strong student voice and students have designed most things. Additionally, the school operates weekend activities for students and families to further engage them. There are also after school opportunities for supporting students with learning and, with external funding, teachers have the option of doing these and being paid for their time.

With extra funding gained, the school provides a full time doctor, dental service, eye testing and care, speech therapy as well as a play therapist. Students and their families are well cared for and there are high expectations for achievement. This wellbeing centre is an impressive area of the school. There is a very strong advisory program that supports learning in the school and is embedded in curriculum each day. In addition, this school again places great importance on nutrition and so students have breakfast each morning, now in the classrooms, so that it further builds community; and there is also lunch. Parents who opt to send lunch sign an agreement to say they will do so and that it will be nutritious. Students also access a kitchen to learn about cooking nutritious food.

Staff work in teams in each grade and integrated curriculum is the norm. My discussion about testing indicated that the principal wanted students to have all the opportunities of school and not to just focus on test scores. His belief is that these will improve with a strong holistic and broad curriculum. Student outcomes have improved without question and the staff strive to continue on this path. The total environment – physical, social and learning – underpinned by high expectations, has impacted extremely positively on students. Even the name of the school reflects that belief that all students are on the path to further education.

The professional learning for staff is a combination of sharing “in house” with an internal system that supports staff who wish to be promoted, to outside opportunities and also employing consultancy with the school. One example of this is in the case of grammar, in which the author of *Funner Grammar*, Sandy Wilde, works with the staff. There is an online program that also is used. Japanese Lesson Study has been used as a basis to start the professional sharing.

There is IT access in each room and two computer labs. Interactive boards enhance visual learning in some classrooms and the aim is to install more in the future. The shift in pedagogy has been significant in the classrooms.

This is a very inspirational school with an outstanding leader who has turned this school around. His estimate is that it took five years to implement the initial change and another five to really embed the change. It was emphasized that it is not a quick process.

Portland

This school visit was part of the American Middle Level of Education (AMLE) conference and is a school in an outer suburb that has student voice as a strong feature of its operation. The school is purpose built and reflects an environment that supports exemplary middle schooling practice. There are over 1000 students in this facility and so areas for each cohort and a central open space for gathering and connecting are vital components. The physicality is inviting and is conducive to learning with IT available and specialist facilities for Art, Science and Sport. Again nutrition is high on the agenda as is integrated and project based learning. This school has about 25% of students speaking English as a second language and has about 23% of its student population coming from very low SES homes.

As this is a fairly new school, opening in 2009, a great deal of focus has been on building identity through narrative. The school community fosters learning, risk taking, engagement and leadership. The values of the school are displayed very effectively on walls and two or three are chosen each year to inform the holistic curriculum. These core values have become a large part of the school wide recognition system that includes awards for students who exemplify these values as well as for academic achievement.

A major goal was to improve writing and so an annual school-wide Day of Writing was implemented in 2009 that links these values into powerful stories of hope and pride, courage and friendship, acceptance and laughter. As a result book containing these stories was published and this now underpins the annual program with each book becoming a mentor book for writing and community building.

Student voice is evident across the school with students driving much of the decision-making about the environment and in some classes about the learning. The evidence that students are clearly at the centre of this community is observed in relationships within the school and the confident way with which students approached teachers and asked questions within classes. Classes were very large, as teachers had decided to increase class sizes to free staff to support the various programs and initiatives in the school. This is one example of the flexibility available to meet the specific needs of this community.

Summary of features observed in USA environments that engage students in positive attitudes to learning and successful achievements.

- importance of leadership
- flexibility with structure –academy, independent, charter
- strong focus on middle years education
- goal is for students/teachers to succeed
- high expectations for all
- community valuing of education and teachers is high e.g. ads in USA for corporations supporting teachers /schools both financially and ethically
- extensive and deep knowledge of students
- strong student teacher relationships
- focus on balanced holistic curriculum with embedded student wellbeing programs
- wide choice of subjects and electives
- teaching in teams
- integrated learning
- special needs students integrated
- very long school days –few breaks
- co-teaching strongly featured
- frequent checking for understanding is evident
- outline of lesson /purpose and goal for each lesson on board.
- support for learning afterschool/within timetable
- continuity and consistency of student achievement across middle years
- high stakes testing in government schools
- IT present but not driving learning
- large class sizes
- specialist rooms available to students from primary school through to secondary school
- focus on physical environment of schools
- teacher professional learning moving to in-house model
- strong focus on good nutrition
- parent engagement is generally high

COMMON TRAITS

In each of the educational settings visited, the success in engaging students in the school, and in learning, had particular attributes that created an environment within their own unique context to enable this to happen. Responding to the expectations and needs of the **community** in a flexible manner, informed by research, was evident in every setting. Passion to **engage with young adolescents** in middle years was an essential element with a strong view that this developmental stage is unique, critical to future engagement in learning and thus for success. Educators working within this stage were held in high regard and were encouraged and supported to view this as a career focus. All stages of education and of teaching within those stages are equally valued in each country. An understanding of the continuum of learning is one element that assists in maintaining this equity.

The contexts I observed covered a broad range and included government funded schools, independent schools and religious schools. Some schools were of low socio-economic status, or had been low performing and had been turned around in spectacular fashion, or serving high multicultural groups and high African American populations. They were located in highly urbanised centres and also in regional areas. Across this range, in addition to their own particular elements, the following traits were common across all educational settings in achieving success in every context:

- strong, passionate and courageous leadership
- holding, articulating and modelling high expectations from every person within the school - of themselves, their students and community.
- embedding student pastoral care/ wellbeing /advisory into the curriculum. A holistic approach to curriculum is non-negotiable.
- integrated curriculum with project based learning that is relevant, authentic and student centred
- IT is present, to varying degrees, but not driving the curriculum
- continuity of achievement across middle years
- positive and respectful relationship between teachers, between teachers and students, between the school and community
- every teacher having deep knowledge about students—personally, as a learner, and where they are on the learning continuum
- ongoing effective, responsive and sustainable professional learning for teachers
- teachers working in teams
- strong focus on responding to young adolescent learners
- teachers of middle years students are highly valued
- effective models of co-teaching within classrooms
- good nutrition as a support to effective learning in middle years
- initiatives by schools to create environments to support creative and innovative teaching and learning. In those contexts with high stakes

testing, there was a conscious effort to move this from being the driver of the classroom environment, to being just one measure of achievement at a point in time. The following questions commonly asked at one school “Who are these students at 25? 35? and **not**; can they perform on a particular test in middle school? How can we measure core traits of trust or respect?” sums up many schools responses to across the board testing.

- community and school values were commonly the lens through which much learning occurred in many schools.

CONCLUSIONS

Australia is at present in a process of reflection upon education and how we can, as a nation, better ensure all students have access to education that is equitable, high quality and engages students in effective learning for success and continues throughout their lives.

Engaging students is a critical feature of this goal **for all students** and in many cases this means re-engaging students who are not attending, who are experiencing difficulties responding to the school setting, or those who do not view school as a major source of learning. The often-stated view that many students “don’t want to learn” and don’t value education loses traction when we see students learning in a large variety of highly engaging activities outside the school setting! In addition the National Survey of Young Australians 11-24 (2011) ranked school or study satisfaction overall in the top three items they valued (36.9%) behind family relationships and friendships. The group 15-19 years showed 36.4% and importantly the middle years group 11-14 years scored 38.9%. In some locations this may mean re-engaging the community and placing the importance of education, particularly the views of young people on this topic, at the forefront of local considerations. In the end, teachers, students, parents and community all want to achieve the same goal - **positive and successful young people**. It is how we *enable* this to be achieved that is the vital issue in succeeding in this endeavour. The environment must be conducive to achieving this goal.

It is true that we cannot, and should not, think that we can necessarily transplant success from one context to another. Sahlberg (2011) supports this view and indicates that success in Finland is due to having done things their own way in response to their own context. However, he goes on to say that encouragement should be given for consideration of successful practices and how the lessons learned and the policies, strategies and processes used to achieve great outcomes may benefit education in different settings. It is with this view in mind that I have considered my observations and how they may inform practice in Australia.

The major conclusions from my observations, conversations and evidence, presented in various contexts, is that while there is a comprehensive range of signature practices to engage middle years learners in relevant, meaningful and challenging learning, these must sit in an environment that facilitates their

implementation if they are to effect sustainable change and engage young adolescent students in successful learning and sets the ground for lifelong learning beyond school. In each of the high performing schools observed, there is strong evidence of an enabling culture that allows best practice to flourish. Campbell Wilcox and Angelis (2007) found that higher performing middle schools build and maintain a culture of success where there is strong evidence of trust, respect, teamwork, focus on student wellbeing, evidence based decision-making, a shared visioning and goal setting.

The creation of an enabling environment must have, at its centre, students who are well known to every person in their school and who enjoy respect and positive relationships with teachers. At its head there needs to be a passionate leader with structures supporting vision, innovation, flexibility and creativity. He or she must be surrounded by teachers who are well trained, enjoy ongoing professional learning and dialogue, have interest and passion for engaging this middle years age group and who are respected by peers and the community for their focus on this developmental age.

Once these elements are in place, the expectation of success for each student becomes the driver. This must be articulated at every opportunity and modeled in every situation by every member of the school and wider community.

The vehicle driving achievement and success within the model is pedagogy. Exploring curriculum, which is holistic in nature, integrating both academic and social/wellbeing aspects, would include project-based learning, integrating skills and knowledge across learning areas, and also student voice in negotiating and owning the learning. Both co-teaching situations and teams of teachers form the back bone of a well connected learning environment in which students feel confident to ask questions, make mistakes, extend and challenge their thinking, problem solving and creativity and in which they focus on achieving their goals.

Australia can achieve this for all our young adolescents and some opportunities currently exist across the various education systems that have proven that a focus on middle years can make a difference. The NSW Department of Education and Communities Middle Years Strategy has regained traction in the past two years particularly in the area of middle years transition, including pedagogy, wellbeing and curriculum and it is strongly recommended that this continue, as engaging students at this stage will improve attendance and learning outcomes at a time when students across Australia commonly experience a dip in achievement (as evident in NAPLAN results). This dip was not evident in contexts I visited and was attributed to the focus on responding to the particular needs of middle years learners. The students in the contexts observed achieved improved and sustained outcomes across middle years. The need to continue to strive for best practice in middle years in Australia is a key factor in addressing this trend. Most structures in NSW mean that this is a time of transition for students between primary and secondary schools. Importantly, this goes far beyond the physical movement of this change. The

engagement of parents, pedagogy, curriculum and student wellbeing all need focus under a middle year lens across Years 5-8 if we are to see sustained improvement.

There have been a number of projects in Australia focusing on middle years and raising the profile of this particular developmental age. The NSW Parliamentary Committee published its report (2009), based on its 2008 inquiry into the needs and issues facing 9-14 year olds, and the recommendations passed on to the Commission for Children and Young People for implementation. This has certainly reinvigorated discussion about middle years within the wider community and has brought together a wide range of government agencies to consider their response to this age group. It has also provided a very effective vehicle for professional learning across these government agencies and the wider community with regards to this group. This emphasis needs to continue and the focus remain firmly on raising both the profile of this developmental stage, particularly their needs as the 21st century unfolds, and to extend the awareness from recent research to the wider community - particularly to parents.

The Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth conducted interviews and an E-survey in 2010 and their report highlighted the importance of nutrition, relationships, social issues and wellbeing for students in the group. This reflects strongly the attributes and areas of focus in the successful schools I visited overseas. Australia certainly has gathered evidence about this group that is consistent with the overseas contexts. It would serve us well to consider the successful responses that have been put into place elsewhere including the elements of the environments that have been created as these have certainly seen students highly engaged in learning and achieving improved outcomes.

The critical role of leadership in achieving success has been evident in each country. While these were individually highly motivated, passionate and inspiring people, it is what they did in:

- building teams and capacity to support ongoing learning
- visioning with staff and community for setting goals
- empowering teachers to interrogate relevant data and to seek best pedagogical practice to ensure student improvement
- being motivated to respond creatively to the local context
- fostering relationships and building teams

that allowed a culture and environment to flourish that is supportive of learning for all.

Fullan (2011) talks of the “drivers for reform” and my observations are not dissimilar to his identified crucial elements for successful reform: intrinsic motivation, instructional improvement, teamwork and affect on all students and staff. Again, the need for the environment to be the enabler for these drivers to operate successfully, is highlighted by Hattie (2009) in his observation and data that one of the most powerful effects on learning is the climate of the classroom. For the classroom to be such an environment teachers need to be confident, empowered, well trained and a motivated part of a highly effective team.

Focus on teacher training, with a specific emphasis on middle years learners, that has a large proportion of practice teaching opportunities, aligned closely between school and universities, is clearly an important aid for success. Effective and ongoing feedback from peers, lecturers, host teachers and students provide teachers in training with a realistic view of classroom teaching and an environment that allows them to trial and test their skills in a supportive environment. Ongoing self-reflection on their role as a teacher and their progress towards acquiring and honing their skills is a critical element of the training that will stand by them as a practice for their future role in the classroom. Ongoing professional learning is highly valued. It is often linked back to universities and designed to share effective practice within the local context. Such a focus on the art of teaching and in reviewing the role of teachers is evident in Finland, particularly, and is certainly worth further close consideration. While it is already very competitive to be accepted into teaching in Finland, the holistic suitability of the candidate is a very important aspect. The training builds on this holistic view and engenders it as part of ongoing practice in Finnish classrooms.

Holistic curriculum with well-embedded wellbeing programs has proven to be a major factor in the success of each of the schools. Positive strong relationships resulting in teachers knowing their students both as individuals and as learners are supported by well designed programs that focus and devote significant amounts of time to do this. The environment of each classroom reflected the results of such a focus and is supported by challenging, authentic, integrated and relevant learning opportunities underpinned by high expectations and student voice.

RECOMMENDATIONS

These recommendations are based on my observations as part of this project together with my experience in middle years education since the mid 1990's.

1. to continue to endorse the focus of the Melbourne Declaration on middle years and strongly encourage education systems to prioritize and adequately resource to strengthen this focus and promote opportunities and support initiatives to further develop strategies to address the specific needs of this group with a goal to maintain learning achievement across this period of transition
2. education systems should evaluate and review their current initiatives in middle years with a view to building on the successful achievements evident in overseas contexts and strengthening and expanding their support for middle years students and teachers
3. focus in schools be on building and developing an environment to support all students in middle years, their families and their teachers. The success of this priority to improve outcomes for these students and to maintain their levels of achievement across this developmental stage needs to be within an environment that encourages and empowers teachers to be confident in using their knowledge and skills with innovation and creativity to respond to students in the 21st century. A culture of mutual trust is imperative for success.

4. a strong professional learning program focusing on middle years pedagogy, curriculum and wellbeing be developed and implemented across all education sectors and be closely linked between communities of schools and with universities.
5. the NSW Commission for Children and Young People continue to raise awareness in the wider community about the specific needs of these young people and support appropriate responses to this group through the implementation of the recommendations of the NSW Parliamentary Committee.
6. education systems undertake a planned awareness raising strategy with their school communities of the particular importance of this phase of schooling, within the learning continuum, and its potential impact on future success, and embark on a campaign of recognizing the particular teaching attributes, skills and knowledge that are necessary and valued in this context.
7. the Australian Curriculum implementation be considered as a unique opportunity to reflect on the middle years of schooling and to embed the signature practices of high performing middle schools in future planning, curriculum design and pedagogy.
8. for schools across all sectors to develop appropriate and responsive wellbeing programs for middle years students and to embed them in holistic curriculum so as to provide an environment which enables best middle years practices to be fostered and developed.
9. schools and their communities review current student nutrition needs and habits and consider strategies for sustainable improvement.
10. strongly encourage tertiary institutions to review teacher training options and to expand focus on more dedicated middle years education at both graduate and post graduate levels.
11. systems investigate career paths for teachers who wish to specialise in teaching middle years students.

The opportunity to visit, observe and speak with international educators, and then to critique my findings as afforded me by the Churchill Trust, has been outstanding. My data and ongoing conversations with many of the people I met have already allowed me to share best practice, innovative ideas and success stories with schools in NSW who are focusing on middle years education. The evidence indicates the importance of middle years in determining success later in life is strong and many countries have responded proactively and successfully to this need. This group of young adolescents is high on both education and social agendas in the countries visited. Even before young people reach the school gate, the conversation and focus is being built. It is at this early stage that the signature middle schooling practices around parent engagement, student wellbeing, pedagogy and curriculum should be introduced to support students and families and to achieve a best practice environment, based on respect and high expectations for all.

Australia has in the past decade increased discussion around middle years however the need to re-engage many students from this group, so as to achieve and sustain improved outcomes, remains a challenge in some contexts. Middle years must remain a key focus on the education agenda. This is not only an educational

imperative, but an economic and social one. The creation of environments to support middle years students must be evident in systems, schools and classrooms if we are to address the dip in achievement currently experienced by many in this group and set them on a path to success in school and a pattern of lifelong learning.

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