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A CASE STUDY OF THE IMPLEMENTATION OF MIDDLE SCHOOLING IN NEW ZEALAND

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Education at Massey University, Palmerston North, New Zealand

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February 2007
ABSTRACT

This thesis considers the introduction of middle schooling to the New Zealand education system. It is a case study of a school going through the process of introducing the middle schooling concept. It seeks to identify and explain the considerable challenges that this school faced as it sought to implement this change.

This research project began as a study of the factors which hinder and support the implementation of middle schooling structures and practices. It became an analysis of the features of middle schooling that make it such a challenging and problematic innovation.

Middle schooling is a set of philosophical concepts, educational practices and structural arrangements for the education of students between the ages of approximately ten and fourteen years. These concepts and practices are based on the premise that students of this age have academic, social, emotional and physical needs which differ from students on either side of this age group. Middle schooling is generally understood to involve integrated curriculum which is delivered through team teaching. This approach to teaching and learning requires high levels of teacher collaboration, flexible workspaces and timetables and high levels of parental support and involvement.

Ideally, middle schooling provides a separate school environment for children of this age. A number of school communities in New Zealand have gained government approval to restructure as middle schools and are at various stages in implementing this new form of schooling.

The researcher began the study with the intention of developing guidelines to assist school communities to make this transition from the structures and processes of conventional schooling arrangements to those of middle schooling. To this end she initiated a programme of action research in a school that was about to introduce middle schooling arrangements for its middle years students. The innovation began to run into difficulties from an early stage and it became clear that an action research methodology
was unsustainable. Instead, the researcher chose to refocus the research problem to a more analytic study of the factors that were impeding the implementation process.

The research methodology evolved to that of case study. Observational data were collected in the school over two years. From these data, three factors seemed to be affecting the implementation of the middle schooling changes. These were the way in which leadership was being executed, the attitudes and responses of the teachers and the particularly complex and demanding nature of the middle schooling innovation itself. The data were then re-analysed with respect to these three factors. From this analysis, the researcher came to a number of conclusions about the relative importance and impact of these three factors.

In an effort to ascertain whether the experiences of the case school were typical of the difficulties and challenges schools face when implementing middle schooling change, the case findings were cross checked against the experiences of two other schools that were five years or more into the change process. The cross checking found that the experiences of these other schools were very similar to those of the case school. All three found that implementing middle schooling change had been more difficult and demanding than any other innovation they had implemented.

This study identified some aspects of leadership and teacher behaviour that may have slowed the implementation process, but these seem to have been secondary to the sheer complexity and challenges involved with this particular form of innovation. An innovation that requires such a shift in values, behaviour, structures and systems from a school community, and one that requires the sustained commitment of the entire staff over an extended period of time, will always prove to be exceptionally challenging.

The case study identified five requirements that middle school implementers need to consider in order to implement the concept successfully. Failure to consider any of these requirements is likely to threaten the success of the innovation. The five requirements are:

- The need to develop a shared understanding of the concept rationale and principles and how these will be operationalised within the school;
• The need to develop a shared understanding of the complex, multi-faceted and integrated nature of the innovation and how this will impact on and influence the implementation process;

• The need for strong, visionary, shared leadership;

• The need to gain the interest and operational commitment of the entire staff and a high level of interest and commitment from the parent community and to sustain this for the life of the innovation; and

• The need to develop supportive and appropriate infrastructure within the school to support the innovation.
I wish to thank all the people who helped to make this thesis possible. Firstly, my sincere thanks are extended to the community of Matai School. I am very grateful to the school staff, students and parents for allowing me into their school and their lives for two years. In particular, I would like to say a very special thanks to the key staff members who let me question their thinking and actions during the middle schooling change process. To the other middle schools who gave their time to tell me about their middle schooling experiences, I also extend my thanks.

This thesis would not have been possible without the enduring support, assistance and encouragement of my PhD supervisors, Tom Prebble, David Stewart and Wayne Edwards. I sincerely thank these men for sharing this process with me. Their knowledge, wisdom and patience sustained and supported me through this long and at times, difficult journey.

I am also indebted to the many friends and colleagues who also encouraged and supported me through the past four years. I very much appreciated your personal support and input. I would like to say a very special thanks to my brother Professor David Thomson who has mentored me through this project. His interest, guidance and wealth of knowledge greatly helped me through the highs and lows of doctoral study.

And finally, I am indebted to my family who have supported me through eighteen years of continuous study. My children know of nothing else but a mother who is always studying. I would like to assure them that the study is finally finished, but learning is a now a way of life. It is difficult to imagine life without study so I give no guarantees. Goodness knows what field of learning might tempt me next.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

**ABSTRACT** ................................................................................................................... i

**ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS** ............................................................................................... iv

**TABLE OF CONTENTS** .................................................................................................. v

**LIST OF FIGURES AND TABLES** ................................................................................ x

**CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION** .......................................................................................... 1

1. Clarification of Terms ........................................................................................................ 1

2. Background to the Study ................................................................................................ 2

3. Nature of the Study .......................................................................................................... 3
   3.1. The Research Problem .............................................................................................. 3
   3.2. The Research Questions ........................................................................................... 3
   3.3. Justification for the Study ......................................................................................... 3

4. Overview of Methodology Used ...................................................................................... 4

5. The Context for the Study ................................................................................................ 5
   5.1. Selection of the Case Study School ........................................................................ 5
   5.2. The Case Study School ............................................................................................ 6

6. Research Conditions and Responsibilities ..................................................................... 7

7. Thesis Structure .............................................................................................................. 8

**CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW – PHASE I** .............................................................. 11

1. Introduction .................................................................................................................... 11

2. Phase I: Review of the Middle Schooling and Middle Years Literature ......................... 12
   2.1. The Middle Schooling Movement ........................................................................... 12
   2.2. The US Middle Schooling Movement ..................................................................... 14
   2.3. The Intermediate Schooling Movement in New Zealand ....................................... 17
   2.4. Middle Schooling in New Zealand ......................................................................... 20
       2.4.1. The Education Reforms of 1988 and 1989 ....................................................... 20
       2.4.2. The Years Following the Reforms ................................................................... 22
       2.4.3. The Current Situation ...................................................................................... 23
   2.5. Conclusion ................................................................................................................ 24
3. Phase I: Review of the Educational Change and Innovation Literature .................................. 24
   3.1. Theories of Change .................................................................................................................. 25
   3.2. Theories of Action/Implementation Theories ....................................................................... 29
   3.3. Cultural Change Theories: The Human Side of Educational Change ........................................ 37
       3.3.1. School Culture and Reculturing Theory ......................................................................... 37
       3.3.2. School Sub-Cultures ........................................................................................................ 41
           3.3.2.1. Teachers ................................................................................................................... 41
           3.3.2.2. Students .................................................................................................................. 43
           3.3.2.3. Parents and School Community ............................................................................... 44
   3.4. Conclusion ............................................................................................................................... 45

CHAPTER 3: LITERATURE REVIEW – PHASE II .............................................................................. 46

1. Introduction ................................................................................................................................. 46

2. Change Leadership ...................................................................................................................... 46
   2.1. Shared Leadership .................................................................................................................. 50

3. Teacher Subcultures and Teacher Resistance .............................................................................. 56

4. The Nature of Innovations and the Nature of the Middle Schooling Concept ......................... 70
   4.1. Re-examination of the Literature on Educational Change and Innovation ......................... 71
   4.2. Re-examination of the Literature on Middle Schooling ......................................................... 72
   4.3. Re-examination of the Literature on the Middle Schooling Concept ..................................... 74
       4.3.1. Articulation of the Concept ............................................................................................ 74
       4.3.2. Coherence and Completeness of the Concept ............................................................... 78

5. Conclusion .................................................................................................................................. 79

CHAPTER 4: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY ..................................................................................... 81

1. Introduction ................................................................................................................................. 81

2. Research Design ......................................................................................................................... 82

3. Perspective of the Researcher ...................................................................................................... 82

4. Choice of Research Design ......................................................................................................... 85
   4.1. Action Research ...................................................................................................................... 86
       4.1.1. Introduction ..................................................................................................................... 86
       4.1.2. Key Features of Action Research .................................................................................... 86
       4.1.3. The Action Research Process .......................................................................................... 87
       4.1.4. Criticism of Action Research Methodology .................................................................... 87
       4.1.5. Use of Action Research in the Study .............................................................................. 88
       4.1.6. Shift in Methodology to Grounded Theory ..................................................................... 88
   4.2. Grounded Theory .................................................................................................................... 90
       4.2.1. Introduction ..................................................................................................................... 90
       4.2.2. The History of Grounded Theory ................................................................................... 90
4. The Nature of the Middle Schooling Concept ........................................ 237
   4.1. Complexity of the Middle Schooling Concept ................................ 238
      4.1.1. Multiple Elements of the Concept ....................................... 238
      4.1.2. Conditions Required to Support the Concept ............................ 240

5. Conclusion ......................................................................................... 249

CHAPTER 8: CONCLUSIONS ..................................................................... 251

1. Introduction ....................................................................................... 251

2. The Research Questions ..................................................................... 251

3. Conclusions about the Middle Schooling Implementation Process .......... 252

4. Implications for Middle Schooling Implementers ................................ 255

5. The Contribution this Study makes to the Body of Knowledge on Middle Schooling................................................................. 259

6. Review of the Research Methodology ................................................. 259

7. Further Research ................................................................................ 261

REFERENCES .......................................................................................... 263

APPENDICES .......................................................................................... 273

Appendix 1: Memorandum of Understanding ......................................... 273

Appendix 2: Focused Interview .............................................................. 276

Appendix 3: Staff Meeting Observations ................................................. 279

Appendix 4: Year 10 Team Meeting ........................................................ 280

Appendix 5: Teacher Questionnaire ....................................................... 281

Appendix 6: Parent Questionnaire .......................................................... 282
LIST OF FIGURES AND TABLES

Figures

1.1: School Structure and Middle School Team Structure ........................................... 6

2.1: Fullan’s (2001) Typology of the Key Factors in the Implementation .................. 31

Tables

2.1: Literature Review Structure .................................................................................. 12

5.1: Phase I Data Sources ......................................................................................... 110

5.2: Summary of Emerging Issues and Research Method Issues ......................... 135

5.3: Phase II Data Sources ......................................................................................... 139