My Middle Schooling Classroom
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Rationale for Teaching

Middle schooling (grades 6-9) is a crucial time in the lives of the young people that I teach (Main & Pendergast 2017, p. 47-48), there is a lot going on at the same time as their education. Students go through a wealth of physical, psychosocial, emotional and cognitive changes (puberty), that is only matched by the development that occurs in the first two years of life (Pendergast 2017, p. 4). During this period, my students will form values and dispositions that will direct their attitudes and behaviours through to adulthood and into the future (Main & Pendergast 2017, p. 47-48).

The students that I encounter within a middle school context are complex, unique and diverse individuals, each having learning and personal needs that needs meeting. They are adolescents and are going through the journey of adolescence (Main 2017), Meaning they are still developing. Diversity in gender, culture and ability are seen and I acknowledge that this is where the one size fits all approach, does not work. I feel that using this type of approach in the classroom only leads to student disengagement. Pendergast (2017), notes that disengagement in many cases is a product of not meeting these desired learning needs. Learning needs are to be met for the students to be successful and include how they learn and learning difficulties they possess. All students have the right to success through both a meaningful and differentiated curriculum and it is my role as teacher to facilitate this to provide equity in opportunity for student success. I need to differentiate student needs to cater for all in my class (Main 2017, p.97).

When my students enter the middle school years of their education journey, there is an apparent focus on subject matter, rather than the student-learner as seen in primary school (Pendergast 2017, p. 7). The way that we expect students to learn changes and at this time there are increased expectations, new relationships and academic diversity are experienced (students at different levels of knowledge and ability in all subjects).

Middle school reform is a response to claims that the middle years of young people's learning either slows down, stops or even seems to go backwards (termed disengagement), at a time when learning should be progressing (Stringer 1998, p. 6 as cited in Chadbourne & Pendergast 2005). The middle school reform is the transition period for young people moving from primary school to high school (Chadbourne & Pendergast 2005). This reform is necessary due to unfamiliar structure, forming new relationships, different focus of learning and unique learning needs (Chadbourne & Pendergast 2005. It seeks to address students' learning in a way that meets their complex, unique and diverse learning and personal needs in a meaningful, relevant way. Thus, enabling students to feel safe, wanted and included in their learning environments. Motivation and engagement are important, this is why a specific meaningful curriculum presented using a middle school approach is needed to build students in preparation for success for themselves and the world.

Essential Features of Middle Schooling

Essential features of middle schooling and strategies for action will be outlined in a clear philosophy and supported by my rationale. Throughout teaching training and career, I will develop my own teaching philosophy and style, however, when working in schools I need adapt and incorporate to their philosophy, vision and values with my own. Looking at essential features, it can be seen they stem from the basics of a fully functioning middle school classroom and allow for each student to find success on their learning journey. Middle School learners all have needs that include identity, relationships, purpose, empowerment, success, rigour, safety (Pendergast, D 2005, Table 1.1), This is what my managed learning environment is built around and meeting these needs will result in engagement and success for my students

A middle school environment should start with highly effective, motivated and specialised teachers (AITSL 2011). AITSL Standard 2, demonstrates this 'as knowing the content and how to teach it '. Teachers, who provide students with all they need to know to be successful, will share their discipline and passion and allow for practical transference of skills into everyday life, including other subjects. I believe, middle school teachers need a balance of the traditional middle school which is subject disciplines and the student-centred approach seen in primary school, this is learning through harnessing enthusiasm, energy, relevance and connection (Dowden 2017, pp.187). Personal learning methodologies are assisting with the change from the focus of the child learner in primary school and the secondary school focus of subject matter (Main 2017, pp.94, 97).

Then middle schools should create a managed learning environment being focused around relationship and rapport building. I feel that once; relationships are formed and rapport is built with my students, the sky is the limit. This is supported by Main & Whattman, who states 'a safe and supportive environment that empowers my

students and meets all students personal and learning needs must be built on the quality of relationship' (2016, as cited in Dowden 2017, p. 175). I will know my students and how they learn (AITSL Standard 1).

My students will be given ownership of their learning and the environment they learn in (Hunter & Park 2005, p.164), through the creation of a collaborative class identity, expectations and values; through letting students arrange the learning environment; and through icebreakers and team building activities (e.g. two truths and a lie and human knots). Additionally, I will negotiate learning. This could be in the form of assignment content, due dates, the type of final product assessment criteria or the order it is taught in. These strategies allow a managed learning environment and for students to thrive.

A classroom needs to be a safe, open and inclusive learning environment and creating this (AITSL, Standard 4) will ensure student needs are met and they have the opportunity for discovering their identity and learning about/through the world/community around them. To continue this sort of environment I must enforce positive behaviour management (O'Brien 2017, p. 253), prioritising student wellbeing and the approach of prosocial skills, positive values and harmonious learning environments. I will model correct behaviour and boundaries and students will have a sense of right and wrong.

At any stage of the journey undertaken as learners in the education system, students are entitled to a meaningful curriculum that allows students to grow and develop as learners in a relevant context. (Dowden 2017, p.171). Meaning, I am obligated to this as a teacher and it should be high on my list of priorities. I will employ connective teaching, lively teaching and academic rigour as ways to engage my students in their learning to develop a meaningful depth of understanding. Connective teaching is

connecting students socially and emotional to their learning. Lively teaching is learning that is perceived as fun. Whereas, academic rigour is the promotion of the academic dimensions of a classroom through passion and high expectations (Main 2017, pp.63,64). I feel all three all work collectively as part of my teacher arsenal, but with particular classes and students, some techniques may take priority according to context.

To ensure my curriculum content is challenging and students develop a depth of understanding, I will encourage Higher Order Thinking in my classroom to enable the student to think critically and creatively in a variety of way and for the process of life-long learning (Hilton & Hilton 2017, p. 242). This will also be a way of engaging and differentiating student learning. Using Bloom's Taxonomy (1956) as model recognising difference in students and that they think differently, some will understand while others will synthesise, apply, analyse, evaluate or create.

There should be connections made in the curriculum to student's use of Information Communications Technologies (ICTs) for a range of purposes in their personal life and for learning purposes (Prestridge & Finger 2017). This means where they can make connections through what is used in class to their everyday life, in the middle school context this is a powerful tool for engagement, especially for the generation that grew up with technology in their hands. Teachers who are digitally literate, as defined by (ACARA 2015c, as cited in Prestridge & Finger 2017) are using ICTs to leverage relevant meaningful learning for middle years students, learning that links to the real world and their own life. Doing this can help combat the disengagement issues that are seen in the middle school transition phase of an adolescent's life. A number of students are supplementing their learning through the use of YouTube clips to aid their understanding Prestridge & Finger 2017). I should embed this into my practice.

Differentiation is a pedagogical approach to meet the diverse needs of all students (Tomlinson, 2005 as cited in Main 2017, pp.81) and enables all students' success through a meaningful curriculum that meets their needs. To differentiate is to know the students (AITSL Standard 1). Differentiation starts with the planning process and considers the student's readiness for content, interest in content, as well as the student learning profiles (Main 2017, p. 97). I could assess and measure the readiness of content through diagnostic assessment tools. This informs my planning. I differentiate my students in the attempt to include them and cater for all their learning needs and whole unique persons. This is an application that I have seen effectively implemented at my placement schools each year.

Current Practice / What is Happening?

Middle schools of today have seen a shift in focus to Student Wellbeing (Socially, Emotionally and Physically) and it is widely accepted that learning outcomes and student wellbeing and engagement go hand in hand.

Implementation of self-regulation in students is important, so they can take initiative without having to be told and later down the track be able to be directors of their own life, making decisions and choices for themselves. In Home Economics, through a meaningful curriculum with clear curriculum links, they are able to use personal learning methodology to direct students towards becoming those self-thinking, self-directed learners society needs, whilst learning how to work collaboratively and cooperatively with others toward a common goal.

High schools today see subject integration as a way of providing a meaningful curriculum. Through practising integration in our subjects, linking content and drawing connections to the real world, I am able to utilise the cross curricular links in the Australia Curriculum Documents and build the general capability strands, to create well-rounded and informed students. A meaningful curriculum that engages students should also integrate some aspects of physicality (movement) into it, rather than just have students being sedentary. On placement, the difference without physicality and with physicality was noticed. Students learn more when there is some sort of movement involved, like introduction games, think-pair-share and partner interviews this also promotes learning as fun (Cooper 2014, as cited in Main 2017, pp.63,64)

A meaningful curriculum will allow students to engage with the content and create success and I have seen this in the classroom. Connective teaching, academic rigour and lively teaching were identified in a study by Cooper, who found Connective

Teaching to be the most effective if engagement strategies (2014, as cited in Main 2017, pp.63,64) and I will be employing these strategies as ways of engagement in middle school environments.

Meaningful connection of ICT to the real world has been seen on placement when my mentor teacher used YouTube clips to demonstrate practical skills in Home Economics, specifically textiles, for students who were more visual learners and to meet various speeds/abilities. The teacher was able to demonstrate as needed to the class but have student's self-directing their learning during and outside of class hours.

Social/Political Dimension for Equity (A Fair Go)

The Australian Curriculum states that all students are entitled to a rigorous, relevant and engaging learning program drawn from a challenging curriculum that addresses the individual learning needs of students and allows for individual success to be achieved by all students (Dowden,2017, pp.171). I see this as my goal when I step into the role of a teacher. I need to ensure that my classroom provides equity in opportunity for all student to be successful and that they get a fair go, as they are entitled.

A middle school environment acknowledges differences and allows success through differentiation, and this can be used for equity in opportunity for success. Through reflection on my teaching practice and strategies, I have come to realise that large part of my middle schooling classroom revolves around the key factor of difference, the acknowledgement of the uniqueness and individuality of each and every student. In turn, I learn about students, how they learn and will interact with them to provide the best outcomes for all in my care.

Differentiation is a pedagogical approach to meet the diverse needs of all students (Tomlinson, 2005 as cited in Main 2017, pp.81) and enables all students' success through a meaningful curriculum that meets their needs. Differentiation is dually beneficial: students' wellbeing is impacted as they meet success, and academic rigour is practised relative to their own individual ability. Teachers need to know outcomes are already set within ACARA but the mode of satisfying these is negotiable and this is where differentiation between students allows for success.

Through the need to provide a differentiated, meaningful curriculum comes the need for personal learning methodology to assist with the recognition that each student is unique and has unique attributes that contribute to who they are and how they learn

– allowing for success and a fair go. In this approach, students are at the centre of their learning and can connect and transfer learnings into other aspects of life and school subjects. Students in this approach work as self-directed learners (Main, K 2017, pp.94, 97).

Conclusion

The vision that I currently see in middle school is one of success for all through equitable opportunities and outcomes; and one that looks to provide students with a meaningful curriculum through effective teachers and relationship; and assists in the transition that our young people go through from childhood to adulthood. As a teacher, I will acknowledge and embrace all students' unique needs and personalities. I do not marginalise those in my care because of race, religion, sexuality, gender, values or minority. I will know them in order to engage them to the best of their ability.

Through reflection on my practice, I am able to look at what I am doing and why I am doing it with the middle schooling philosophy and vision in mind. Being equitable and providing success for all, supporting student well-being and differentiating the students' needs to provide them success.

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