Re-Examining School Structures of People, Place, and Time to Promote Equity at the Middle Level

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Abstract

In 2018 we published a chapter entitled "Middle Grades Schools and Structures" (Ellerbrock et al., 2018a) in *Literature Reviews in Support of the Middle Level Education Research Agenda* (Mertens et al., 2013). Building on the earlier work of Ellerbrock et al. (2018a), this chapter reviewed literature between 2000 and 2018 that reported on the organizational structures of middle level education settings in the United States of America and Australia. Though the findings highlighted the dearth of research specifically examining the organizational structures of middle level education, the literature examined supported the original three key interconnected themes of **people**, **place**, and **time** (Ellerbrock et al., 2018b) as being key features necessary for the implementation of effective middle schooling practices. In our conclusion, we called for more robust research in this area to guide policy and enact practices across different jurisdictions. At the same time, Bishop and Nagle (2018) noted the many increasing disparities in access to quality education and invited readers to consider how schools can serve all students both equitably and well. Equitable access is first and foremost, but equitable outcomes for all students is paramount. At the time of publication of all of these works, no one could have predicted the significant negative impact of COVID-19 and the resultant exacerbation of the already challenging inequities in education across the globe. However, research over the last five years, and particularly since 2020, has placed a greater focus on policy, system, and grassroots pedagogical changes to bridge this widening gap. In light of this heightened focus, this essay aims to reexamine the three key themes of **people**, **place**, and **time** and, when implemented with integrity, the ways middle grades schools and structures can contribute to creating both developmentally responsive and equitable educational experiences for young adolescent learners.

People

As a philosophical approach to teaching and learning, a critical feature of middle grades schooling is the provision of socially just learning opportunities and environments that transcend the systemic barriers of socioeconomic status, race, or gender. Teachers play a pivotal role in shaping the learning experiences for young adolescent learners and also contribute to the overall culture of the school environment. However, globally, the teaching profession is under pressure. World-wide teacher shortages (c.f., Virtue et al., 2023) together with the pressures of the COVID-19 pandemic, have put unprecedented pressure on teachers' workloads and wellbeing. The challenge and pressure to 'flip' to online teaching and learning during the COVID-19 pandemic further eroded teachers' confidence and sense of efficacy. However, such pressures and disruptions have encouraged teachers to critically reflect on what really matters in education and to explore innovative practices that can meet the needs of all students.

Teaching teams continue to be at the heart of middle schooling practices. Teaching teams come in many forms including grade-level teams, co-teaching (pairs), and interdisciplinary teams (a team of two to six teachers from different disciplines that teach the same cohort of students). The reasons for using teaching teams are diverse but tend to align with the social or political climate of the time. However, what is consistent are the benefits for both students and teachers when teachers work collaboratively. Despite the changing landscape of education, those benefits continue to hold true. Teachers working together share the responsibility for their students and collectively are more creative, use more innovative practices, have stronger professional relationships (which is also a key contributor to staff wellbeing), capitalize on their individual and collective strengths, and can experience a reduced

workload (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership [AITSL], 2023; Main, 2017). What strategies can schools use to ensure their middle school teaching teams realize their potential? In places where teaching teams do not exist, what structures are being implemented that may help to achieve positive outcomes that support developmentally responsive and equitable educational experiences for young adolescent learners?

Importantly, teachers (people), in middle schools are responsible for implementing a curriculum that is "challenging, exploratory, integrative, and diverse" (Bishop & Harrison, 2021, p. 9). They are also responsible for promoting the health and wellbeing of students and supporting the development of their social and emotional skills through their day-to-day planning and practices. With teachers being critical players in fostering equitable outcomes for students, the importance of investing in teachers' professional development to build teachers' sense of efficacy and increase quality teaching is a must. There are clear links between effective professional development, teachers' increased sense of efficacy, and improved student outcomes (Main & Pendergast, 2015).

Continuing professional development is an integral part of the professional lives of all teachers. Just as teachers at any stage in their career have variations in their depth of knowledge and ability to integrate knowledge into practice, teachers working with different age-groups also need focused training. Newly qualified teachers typically commence teaching with a strong theoretical understanding of curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment; however, teaching is an experiential profession and individuals require time in the field to develop and further hone their skills. With many teachers working in the middle grades not having explicit training in adolescent development or best practices when working with this age-group, continuing professional development (CPD) is important for them to best support and teach these students. What resources can newly graduated teachers and teachers new to teaching in the middle grades access to ensure they have the knowledge and skills to teach middle years learners?

All teachers gain the most benefit from an integrated professional development strategy that focuses on support and mentoring including professional dialogue between teachers,

observation of others, and practicing new approaches with feedback—that is, working in teams. However, time has become politicized and teachers carry an additional time burden of accountability through reporting and other administrative tasks that take them away from their core business—teaching students. Moving forward, it is important for those working in middle schools to think about where and how evidence-based middle level practices are being enacted. That is, ensuring teachers working with middle years learners not only are provided the opportunity to work in teams but are provided the common planning time to work together to plan and support the diverse students in their classes (Mertens et al., 2013). When working collaboratively, teachers are able to best meet the diverse needs of their students and help each child reach their potential. Linking into the importance of time, how can schools prioritize time for teams to plan and work together?

Place

As middle level scholars and advocates, we recognize there is no one right approach to middle level schooling. When defining structures of place we align our definition with Bishop and Harrison's (2021) understanding that middle schools are ***any*** spaces where young adolescents are being schooled. When thinking about issues of equity, decisions made around "place" are crucial. For example, grade configuration and school choice both have the potential to be inclusive or exclusive depending on the way in which these structures are implemented.

Across the world young adolescents are educated in a variety of places including K-8, 6-8, K-12, public schools, private schools, magnet schools, charter schools, homeschools (different types of school structures), and a number of other configurations and modes. As explored in Ellerbrock et al. (2018a), there is no grade configuration or school type that is needed in order to enact the middle school concept. In fact, Lounsbury (2009) says "the middle school concept is applicable wherever any 10-15 year olds are enrolled" (p. 2).

Bishop and Harrison (2021) explain that no matter the structure, "Middle schoolers benefit from an increasing focus on autonomy, belonging, competence, and identity" (p. 14). In the US the fight against "wokeism" is bringing scrutiny on critical components of the middle level designed to bring such focus. Legislative

measures or executive orders in a total of 18 U.S. states have been implemented, aiming to regulate the teaching of critical race theory and impose constraints on discussions regarding racism and sexism in classrooms.

Parent advocates, legislators, political pundits, and other advocates have argued against key middle level components like social emotional learning, often rooted in autonomy, belonging, and identity (Bishop & Harrison, 2021), claiming it is harming students or tricking them into learning critical race theory. At the same time we are seeing attacks on books and curriculum with inclusive and historically accurate representations pulled from shelves or challenged. In one case in the Midwest US, a 20+year veteran teacher chose to leave her job after community members tried to have her arrested for having a book available in her classroom with no requirement for any student to read it (Keane, 2023). Looking at these actions through the lens of "place" suggests that many middle schools are no longer safe places for young adolescents to learn or their teachers to teach.

With these fights against social emotional learning, accurate historical teaching/ representation, and fights about books happening in the background, advocacy groups are leveraging these things to lean into political structures that further push an agenda for school choice. In Ellerbrock et al. (2018a) we explored magnet schools, charter schools, and private schools as types of alternative schooling being fought about in the school choice movement. These continue to be the alternative approaches, but with the rhetoric becoming increasingly politicized, the calls for school choice are getting louder.

Homeschooling has continued to be an alternative option for families. According to the Census Bureau's Household Pulse Survey (Eggleston & Fields, 2021), homeschooling is on the rise in the US with a large, nationally representative sample of households reporting that homeschooling had more than doubled from 5.4% in 2019-2020 to 11.1% in 2020-2021. Australia reported similar results with currently 0.05% of the total school population being homeschooled and growing at the rate of 9.4% per year with numbers more than doubling in some states during the 2020-2021 reporting period (Riches, 2023). The speculation around this growth has to do with the push to

emergency remote options during the pandemic and the ways families discovered it worked well with their lifestyle, or for some students. This would be a good time for middle level advocates to look at homeschool curriculum and think about where and how middle level practices are enacted. How do the curricula marketed for young adolescent learners (10-14) "focus on autonomy, belonging, competence, and identity" (Bishop & Harrison, 2021)? What is being marketed for homeschooled young adolescents to reach the social emotional components?

In our increasingly polarized environment it can be tricky to argue completely against alternative schools or increased choice. It is true that there are some alternative placements that work for kids. After the global pandemic left students to rely on alternative modes of education, it was documented that some students thrived in these environments. Not only was there an increased attention to access and accessibility, but students were no longer being forced into school buildings that were perpetuating harm day by day in the form of microaggressions, and outright racism and discrimination. You will not learn if you are not safe, and in some communities, it might only be safe in spaces that you seek out and choose.

Traditional schooling is not always meeting the needs of young adolescents. If we want equity in schools, we must have places that are inclusive, have diverse representations, and help all young adolescents to discover who they are. While school choice and alternative placements give us some options, we also have to be mindful that when you start to corrode the makeup of public schools, we begin to lose the diversity that is housed within those schools. In the US, calls for school choice also go hand in hand with school funding. How do we avoid echo chambers if we rely on school choice?

Time

The construct of time is always complicated. In Ellerbrock et al. (2018a), various forms of scheduling from the traditional schedule to block scheduling were explored. Both types of scheduling models can promote equity in different ways. Traditional scheduling allows for frequent student-teacher interactions, providing more opportunities for individualized instruction and support. On the other hand, block scheduling allows for extended periods of time dedicated to in-depth learning and project-

based activities, fostering deeper understanding and engagement for students who benefit from more immersive experiences (Fitzpatrick & Burns, 2019). While the type of day still varies across middle schools, there has been a shift towards considering time as more than simply the structure of a typical school day. In the last few years, the school calendar has changed. Two of the most popular structures are the balanced calendar otherwise known as year-round school and the emergence of a four-day school week. The popularity of both models seems to at least in part be driven by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Proponents of the balanced calendar argue that the shorter breaks for students creates a better learning environment and combats the traditional summer learning loss (Fitzpatrick & Burns, 2019). While the year-round school is not a new idea, it has grown in implementation since the pandemic. A search for the effectiveness of the year-round school leads to many blogs and school groups that endorse the idea. Proponents note opportunities for enrichment during the breaks throughout the year as well as more continuity in learning. Yet, systematic research does not support the claim that students in a year-round school have significantly greater educational gains (e.g., Finnie et al., 2019; Fitzpatrick & Burns). Interestingly, the very calendar changes that are supposed to equalize learning often lead to scheduling that favors kids who are already progressing faster than their peers or kids who have families that can support vacations and out of school activities during the two week breaks scattered throughout the year. Poorly resourced enrichment activities during the breaks can lead to low-income students simply having to "hang out at school" during the breaks resulting in them being at school literally all year long. Two things are clear: 1) the year round or balanced calendar is growing in popularity, and 2) much more research needs to be completed to determine the actual benefits for students. In what ways can middle level advocates have a 'seat at the table' to ensure that decisions being made are going to enhance equitable outcomes for all middle years learners?

Another school time structure is the four-day school week. This structure lengthens the Monday through Thursday school day, but in most schools only modestly. A scan of school district reports suggests that there are modest financial savings for the school districts. Interestingly, in school districts offering this structure both parents and teachers report they favor it. However, initial research suggests students do progress at a slower rate than students at school for five days (Bauer et al., 2018). Thompson and Morton (2021) of the Brookings Institute further state that schools need to find ways to keep the learning times intact if this school time structure is going to be successful. Of note is that most districts employing this structure are classified as rural. While this is not a new structure, there is rapid growth in school districts employing a four-day week. Middle grades researchers need to investigate the implications of this structure, especially as it relates to rural students. Given the relatively recent growth of the four-day week, much attention needs to be given to how this structure enhances or challenges structures needed for middle grades. Given the research to date is showing that this approach may not provide equitable outcomes for all students, whose agenda would this change serve?

In the past few years, the debates over start times for middle school students has gained momentum. At the onset of the trends of later start times for adolescents, both elementary and middle school start times were moved earlier to accommodate the high school changes as well as parents' working schedules. However, in the past few years the American Academy of Sleep Medicine and American Association of Paediatrics have advocated that middle schools need to similarly consider start time (Bastian & Fuller, 2023). Middle school proponents argue that middle school students have similar sleep requirements to high school adolescents and must be part of the equation when arranging start time across a school district. North Carolina recently conducted a state-wide study that correlated later middle school start time with higher math and reading achievement scores (Bastian & Fuller). It is interesting that medical groups seem to be leading the charge to consider start times for middle schoolers. Given the complexity of school calendars, perhaps adjusting the start time for middle school students would be a relatively easy change to advocate for students. More research on the effects of school start times on student learning and wellbeing is needed. How can middle level advocates further support the research initiated by the medical community?

Conclusion

Fundamental to supporting the developmental and cultural needs of young adolescents is the way middle grades schools organize themselves into structures of people, place, and time. With a range of global, national, and local issues that are shifting the landscape of education today, these issues are producing tensions between key organizational features of middle grades schooling and the ways middle schools are actually organizing themselves. In light of this changing landscape, we call for middle grades researchers to empirically study the myriad of ways middle grades schools are currently being structured and the ways such structures may support developmentally responsive and equitable educational experiences for young adolescent learners. Further, it is imperative that middle grades schools and school policy be informed and guided by sound research and best practices. As a result, additional research on ways to support developmentally responsive and equitable educational experiences for young adolescent learners through middle grades school organizational structures is key. What new school structures exist to support equity and developmentalism at the middle level? What new organizational structures can be modified in some way to be more responsive to students' needs? What may be a new, unexplored way to organize middle grades schools into structures of people, place and time that may help to provide equitable access and equitable outcomes for all students? One thing is clear–school organizational structures have changed over the years and will continue to change as the schooling landscape evolves to adapt to our changing world. As middle grades scholars, we have an obligation to remain vigilant to these changes and lead the conversation on best practices as it relates to school organizational structures of people, place, and time to ensure developmentally responsive and equitable educational experiences for young adolescent learners is realized for all.

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