

Early Adolescents in UK Middle Schools: Research and Contextual Evidence

November, 2008

Jenny E. Symonds

Faculty of Education, University of Cambridge

jes81@cam.ac.uk

In 1963, the Central Advisory Council for England (CACE), chaired by Lady Plowden, was commissioned by the then Conservative Minister of Education to write a review of UK primary education (Gillard 1987). The report, drawing on empirical data (including surveys of teachers, parents, children and the National Child Development Study 1958 cohort) and theory from developmental psychology, recommended that primary education be restructured into first (age 5.5 to 8) and middle schools (age 8.5 to 12.5) before transfer to secondary school at age 12.5. The four year middle school was to allow 11 and 12 year olds the benefits of specialist subject teaching without exposing them to the larger, adult-oriented environment of the secondary school (paragraphs 373 to 376). Having a later transfer at age 12.5 also avoided the coincidence of pubertal onset and school transition. This justified and extended the movement of many local educational authorities to reorganise to a three tier system, after permission for this was granted by circular 10/65 in the wake of the 1964 Education Act. This resulted in a rise in middle schools from 140 in 1970 to 1690 in 1978 (Hargreaves and Tickle 1980).

Despite Plowden calling for a national policy to protect the advised later age of transfer, one was never made. This undoubtedly contributed to the slow decline in middle schools that occurred over the next forty years as LEAs reorganised back into the mainstream two-tier system. The pressure to fit with majority national structures increased in 1988 with the National Curriculum and its key stages of education. These are designed around a two tier system and schedule the benchmark KS2 SATs exam at the end of primary school - half way through middle schooling. Recently, several local authorities have commissioned independent reviews that have sought to identify differences between the two and three tier systems, with a view to supporting reorganisation to a solely two-tier system. Unfortunately these reviews are limited by the absence of any representative empirical studies that compare middle and secondary schools. Suffolk LA is now considering the closure of over 40 middle schools (as of 2008). Their preliminary decision rests on a marginal difference between the two and three tier systems' KS2 and KS3 SATs results, with no investigation into the wellbeing of children in these schools. Incidentally, any gaps in achievement disappear for GCSE when considering value added data (Symonds 2007). Suffolk's plans to reorganise have been strongly opposed by parents in the local authority. Recent movement by the Isle of Wight to reorganise into 14-19 schooling has seen the demise of all middle schools on the island. Currently there are 328 middle schools existing in the UK, most of which are in Bedfordshire. This is now the only county in the UK that is solely three-tier.

The existing middle schools serve around 130,000 early adolescents¹. Here, their status passage from childhood is marked by the change from a single classroom teacher in Year 5 and 6 to specialist teaching in Years 7 and 8. They are educated in an environment away from the influence of older children, with provision of secondary school level curriculum resources and sports facilities and a later age of transfer. The OFSTED inspections of middle schools between 2005 and 2008 (Wyatt 2008) revealed that on average, middle schools are more likely to be judged as 'good' overall than primary or secondary schools. Middle schools are less likely to be judged as 'outstanding' perhaps in relation to their slightly lower scores for leadership and management. However, early adolescents in middle schools are more likely than those in secondary schools to achieve well, to have good standards of learning, and to have good and outstanding overall personal development and wellbeing (OFSTED inspections 2005-2008). Recently, the Primary Review found that teachers, parents and children with experience of middle schools were overwhelmingly positive about them, and that parents in other systems were in support of returning to a three tier system. They concluded that the matter is one of is one of "much more than local interest" (Primary Review 2007 p.39).

In summation, early adolescents of age 10 to 12 in middle schools obtain higher levels of support for their personal wellbeing and are removed from the stress surrounding school transfer at age 11.5. Their experiences of taking the KS2 SATs exam at age 11 are likely to be similar to most children's in that they experience anxiety in relation to this, however their fears might be offset somewhat by the placement of the exam half way in the four years of middle schooling. Verbal reports from headteachers at the UK National Middle Schools' conference at the National College of School Leadership in Nottingham (October 2008) are in support of making a later transfer, as here their pupils are observed to be ready for change whilst having overcome many of the initial challenges of puberty. However, to date there is no study that compares a later transfer from UK middle to high schools, to transfer from primary to secondary schools. Considering the ambiguities of data on pupils' achievement, and until research on three versus two tier transfer and on the prospective benefits of middle schools on pupils' wellbeing is performed, there is no method of confirming whether the closure of middle schools is justified.

References

Central Advisory Council for England (CACE) (1967) *Children and Their Primary Schools (The Plowden Report)*

Hargreaves, A. & Tickle, L. (Eds.), (1980), *Middle Schools: origins, ideology and practice*, London: Harper & Row

¹ Barker in TES, 2007

Primary Review (2007a). *Community Soundings*

Symonds, Jenny E. (2007) *The Ambiguities of Comparing Transfer 'Effects' Between Two and Three Tier Systems: A Literature Review*, National Middle Schools' Forum, <http://www.middleschools.org.uk/research>

Wyatt, Nigel (2008). *Middle School Inspection Outcomes: A report on the three year cycle of middle school inspections*, <http://www.middleschools.org.uk/research.php>