

Senate Inquiry into the Academic Standards of School Education

Submission from the Middle Years of Schooling Association (MYSA) Inc.



Introduction

MYSA is a national association dedicated to the education, development and growth of young adolescents.

Membership consists of educators in schools and universities from every Australian state and territory, as well as parent groups. Although these people belong to a middle years association, they have experience in early years or senior secondary classrooms or teaching at a tertiary level.

Questions were framed around the Terms of Reference for the Inquiry and distributed to all members. This submission represents responses from five states and across the government, catholic and independent education systems, being a collation of their responses. There was consistency of opinion across the states with regards to middle schooling principles and practices, especially in regard to Term of Reference 1.

Members stated that the reforms in teaching and learning offered to students in the middle years of schooling in Australia over the last 15 years or so, have led to the development of a responsive curriculum and pedagogy implemented for improved learning outcomes for these young people.

The MYSA Management Committee authorised the collection of data from members of the Association for the submission, and appointed the MYSA Executive Officer, in consultation with nominated members of the Committee, as writer.

Susan Hearfield
Executive Officer

Phone: 07 3720 8711
Fax: 07 3720 8744
Email: office@mysa.org.au
Post: PO Box 2175
Toowong Q 4066

www.mysa.org.au

Overview:

There is little doubt that, in schools where middle schooling practices are undertaken, MYSA members have experienced 'success' with their students in terms of academic standards achieved. Students are prepared adequately for senior schooling, the immediate workforce, for higher education and for life experiences beyond further education and training. By its very nature, middle schooling philosophy and best teaching practice demand that students experience learning that is rigorous, responsive to their academic, social, emotional and physical needs (determined by research and the nature and needs of the young adolescent learner).

While the Senate Committee cautiously approaches educational evaluation, we would like to point out that this is intrinsically difficult as many positive (and negative) outcomes are not able to be empirically measured and are, instead, based on observations of teachers and researchers. In particular, the observations and opinions of experienced middle schooling practitioners are very powerful tools for evaluation of educational outcomes. This should be seen as valid research data, along with empirical data collected from testing, surveys and other more traditional data collection methods. A balanced approach is encouraged.

Response to the Terms of Reference

The following responses are directed to the Terms of Reference.

Term of Reference 1:

Whether school education prepares students adequately for further education, training and employment, including, but not limited to:

a) The extent to which the middle years of schooling equips students with the required knowledge and skills to progress successfully through to senior secondary.

Members of MYSA have a wealth of experience that shows that school education delivered within a middle schooling philosophy more than adequately prepares students for further education, whether that be senior secondary education or educational opportunities offered by other providers. However, there was considerable discussion about the meaning of 'successful progress' – what is the Senate Committee's definition of success and how can it be measured? If it is measured by an academic standard, caution is advised as there is bias and tradition with such a measure. Often it is difficult for educational evaluation undertaken to identify whether students are successful in significant ways beyond achieving particular academic standards or passing summative tests delivered at the completion of a particular year or phase of schooling.

Members identified the following core knowledge and skills that are needed for students to be successful, particularly if students have had opportunities to learn these while they are still in the middle years, or before. Members state that teachers operating within a middle

schooling philosophy have had success in teaching students these core skills and knowledge, while teachers practicing more traditional classroom teaching methods that are only content and discipline focused find the teaching of these skills more difficult. The knowledge and skills are generic, rather than being specifically linked to a particular learning area or discipline of study.

Required knowledge and skills are learnt so that students are able to:

- access, analyse and apply information appropriate to purpose and audience
- value-add to acquired knowledge and skills, create new knowledge and then critique outcomes and results gained from applying this knowledge and skills
- research, plan, note take, draft, edit, analyse using various forms of technology
- be proficient literate and numerate learners
- memorise, e.g. spelling, number facts, procedures etc. so, if appropriate, some tasks, procedures and skills become automated
- be critical thinkers and use higher order thinking skills
- transfer and integrate knowledge and understanding across contexts, situations, learning areas and disciplines
- understand the role of assessment in their learning (assessment being *for* learning as well as *of* learning)
- develop dispositions for lifelong learning, as knowledge is not fixed or finite
- be pro-active and autonomous learners and also be able to work in a team – be independent and inter-dependent learners
- have a deep sense of self as a learner, time manage and be resilient in learning and in life

MYSA members indicated that they were able to identify what are the necessary knowledge and skills, and then whether students had gained the above knowledge and skills, by using a range of processes and strategies, including:

- tracking the progress of student performance and achievements
- student reflection and feedback as they journeyed through their education
- responses and comments from teachers in senior secondary
- responses and comments from parents of students who had moved beyond middle schooling
- identifying and tracking students' selection of career paths – those that inspire them
- observing an obvious 'buzz' of learning among middle schooling students that extends into further schooling, education and training

Having identified these, it is essential to keep in mind that, although each state and territory's curriculum documents identify outcomes and essential learnings, the above capacities are examples of the learning that is essential for students in the middle years to enable them to successfully access appropriate academic, social and personal pathways in life. Teachers in this phase of schooling play an important role in fostering and developing these skills. These teachers rely heavily on their teaching experiences within and across year levels, personal reflection and professional discourse in identifying what will support successful progression through to, and in, the next stages of learning.

b) The extent to which the middle years of schooling provide students with the core knowledge and skills they need to participate in further education and training, and as members of the community.

Members of MYSA identified that students are learning:

- a responsible sense of citizenship and the role of each individual in society
- to respond to local, national and global issues
- to develop self-direction and purpose, with awareness of a range of creative and alternative pathways
- cultural understandings and ethics
- financial intelligence
- environmental awareness and action

Examples of learning experiences that foster these understandings and attributes include:

- units of work that explicitly focus on the above
- pastoral care, civics and citizenship, values education programs
- exploring and developing and understanding of the role of education in building a healthy community
- careers education and counselling
- community links and involvement outside the classroom and school settings
- community service, service education
- developing organisational and leadership skills and having opportunities to practice them

It was noted by MYSA members that the extent to which the middle years of schooling provide students with the core knowledge and skills they need, while making community connections and taking learning to a wider context, can depend on the extent of various societal, financial and time constraints that face teachers.

Term of Reference 2:

The standards of academic achievement expected of students qualifying for senior secondary school certificates.

As our focus is the middle years of schooling, a limited response to this Term of Reference is submitted. However it needs to be noted that MYSA members, particularly those with experience in senior secondary, identified the type of learning experiences in middle years and the opportunity for students to become independent learners as being significant contributing factors to students being 'successful' in senior secondary and further education. Teachers noted that students were more likely to achieve higher standards of academic achievement, and to cope with the demands of senior schooling, if they had had experiences during their middle years that are consistent with middle schooling philosophy and practice.

Term of Reference 3:

How such academic standards compare between states and territories and with those of other countries.

MYSA members generally are not able to make international comparisons. As stated in the introduction, the responses received showed consistency in opinion about middle schooling practices across the states. We do not have data evidence that compares academic standards.

Other factors for consideration

This part of the submission does not explicitly refer to the Terms of Reference, but the points were amongst those provided by the Senate Committee as possible inclusions in the submission. MYSA members have identified these as being important to consider in any investigation of academic standards of school education. The following factors impinge on the level of academic standards and of 'success' experienced by middle years students:

- Many social change factors have a significant influence on curriculum, teaching and learning, including:
 - family breakdown and dysfunction
 - lack of personal resiliency
 - society becoming more insular
 - political agendas becoming a more important focus than student needs
 - parental perceptions, attitudes and experiences
 - socio-economic divisions
 - prevalence and influence of mass media
 - impact of globalisation
 - population mobility in some areas

- Technological change also has an effect on how students learn:
 - students are often more technological advanced than their teacher/s, both in application and in expectations of how to be engaged in learning
 - expectations of instant gratification are created
 - students need more visual stimulation as a result of high exposure to technology
 - decrease in concentration span
 - the effect on traditional reading and writing skills
 - the challenge of meeting school and outside school literacies which can impinge on curriculum, pedagogy and assessment practices
 - technology use in the construction of identity and interaction in relationships
 - the pressure and need for increasing technological use and access but schools often not able to financially provide the necessary hardware or expertise
 - differences in access for some rural and urban areas
 - the challenge for teachers to participate in our competitive ICT world
 - the opportunity teachers now have to communicate with students, parents, peers in new mediums and to make use of resources, production and contemporary texts

- The following points about cultural change were identified by MYSA members:
 - increasing student capacity to accept and lead change is crucial in a rapidly changing world so that students experience success
 - the diversity of cultures does challenge teachers in catering for students' needs
 - fostering inclusivity is also important so that students experience success
 - influence of the media in shaping opinions and perceptions, the need for students to be aware of such influence and to be critical readers and viewers

MYSA members also noted that the divide between life at school and life outside of school will continue to widen unless educational authorities, institutions and teachers are empowered to facilitate authentic and student-driven learning that is valuable for school and beyond school.

- Changes in the way teachers and/or students value knowledge were identified by MYSA members:
 - some teachers and students remain in the 'quantity realm' while others are moving to an 'access and application realm', which is preferred and which assists students to achieve higher standards
 - teachers face the challenge of identifying what knowledge and skills are central to our societal being and which should be incorporated in school curriculum and learning
 - what is valued is often defined by learning styles, family and social backgrounds, or how knowledge is defined and who it is defined by
 - the need to retain knowledge is now less valued due to accessibility through the internet which can lead to a perception that knowledge is disposable
 - process can be more valued than knowledge – there needs to be a balance between students learning knowledge and learning processes, so they are lifelong learners and not just reliant on being part of formal education to be engaged in learning

Conclusion

MYSA members believe that the opportunities given to students in the middle years of schooling have a significant impact on the standards these students will achieve in senior secondary and beyond.

While some core knowledge and skills may be assumed in any educational debate, MYSA members insist that the process of the '*how*' of gaining this knowledge and these skills and understandings is paramount. Considerable classroom-based and academic research, and the experience of numerous teachers over decades, shows clearly that facilitating student learning in the middle years via an integrated, student-motivated curriculum with an inquiry approach produces high levels of success for students. This success can be demonstrated by results in standardised testing and exams in the later years, success in chosen pathways beyond the middle years and anecdotal reports of satisfaction and a sense of achievement from students and their parents and teachers.

The members of MYSA submit to the Senate Inquiry into the Academic Standards of School Education these perceptions, practices and considerations for successful learning in the middle years of schooling.