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Hesterman, S. (2011) Extending Reggio Emilia principles in the middle school context: A Western Australian case study. *Educational Practice and Theory*, 33 (1). pp. 73-91.

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Title: *Extending Reggio Emilia Principles in the Middle School Context:
A Western Australian Case Study*

Abstract

In partnership with a small Western Australian independent community school, this research investigated how the *Reggio Emilia* philosophy was extended into the Middle School context. The *Reggio* approach, recognised as a model of excellence for early childhood education, has remained largely unexplored in secondary education. This research, is therefore, highly significant to the educational community as it presents an alternative model with fresh insight for delivering mainstream Middle Schooling consistent with post-modern sensibilities. The case study, conducted over a six-month period and employing ethnographic inquiry methodology documented the experiences of those involved in this innovative programme during a time of ongoing tension between the school's promotion of a curriculum responsive to the 'complex ecology' of young adolescents' lives and fulfilling government registration requirements. Implications for educational practice and theory are that extending *Reggio Emilia* educational principles in the Middle School context promotes students' learning, well-being and happiness.

Keywords:

Reggio Emilia, Middle Schooling, Adolescence, Efficacy, Well-being, Happiness.

1. Introduction

Research informs with alarming frequency youth disengagement with mainstream societal expectations, one of these being personal endeavour to maximise secondary education opportunities. Middle Schooling initiatives aim to arrest youth disenchantment by extending the early years' philosophy of nurturing the 'whole child' in a safe, supportive and intrinsically motivating learning environment. In Western Australia (WA), there is growing support for the establishment of 'discrete schools or campuses that cater specifically for young adolescents' (WA Department of Education and Training, 2008: 2). Main and Bryer (2005: 89) advise, however, that with 'respect to research on Middle Schooling, there is a wide gap between theory and practice: the everyday reality of Middle Schooling teaching and learning experiences have rarely met the ideals and ideologies behind the Middle Schooling vision'. A report on WA public schools describes Middle Schooling as, 'a nebulous and poorly defined term' that can 'refer to a suite of educational principles and practices' (WA Department of Education, 2008: 2). Increasingly, reform initiatives have centred on the professional needs, and well-being of the teachers to avoid 'burn out' as they strive to deliver improvements in student pastoral care, behavior management, and learning engagement while also satisfying government's stipulated education outcomes and standards.

Apparent in the literature is a gap of how young adolescents' interest in 'place-based' and 'nature-based' experiences can be integrated in a multidisciplinary-oriented Middle School curriculum. The *Experiential* teaching approach, advocated by Dewey

(1899) over a century ago, aims to make meaningful connections between students' place and nature experiences, and school activities. These 'lived' experiences are also recognised as powerful mediums that bond 'place with self and community' (Van de Geer, 2004: 1). How educational practice and theory can be intrinsically entwined to immerse young adolescents in a unique Middle School programme that integrates contemporary research on place-based and nature-based experiences with social constructivist practices inspired by the *Reggio Emilia* philosophy will be examined in this paper.

This case study is unique to Western Australia. The research project employed ethnographic inquiry methods over a six-month period to document the 'lived' experiences of those participating in this innovative programme; fourteen students aged between 12 and 16 years, three teachers who pushed the boundaries to enrich student learning, and ten parents who wanted to support their child become happy, healthy and active contributors to society. The school, hereafter referred to as Bridgewater Community School (pseudonym) (BCS), was at the crossroad of Middle Schooling sustainability (Years 6-10). In mid-2009, the school applied for extended school registration to include Years 11 and 12 in its secondary school provision. Many school community members were committed to extending the *Reggio Emilia* inspired Middle Schooling to include a 'senior college'. Others, however, were concerned with the low number of adolescent enrolments, the school's limited resources, and Middle School students' largely unquantifiable 'academic' achievement. Before proceeding to the BCS

case study, a review of the literature pertaining to the Middle School movement and the *Reggio* approach is necessary.

2. Middle School Movement

During the 1990s, the *Australian Curriculum Studies Association* published 24 case studies presenting diverse educational perspectives on Middle Schooling ‘curriculum in action’ and ‘pastoral care orientation’ (Education Department of Western Australia, 1999: 3). National interest in Middle Schooling first emerged after the British Plowden Report (Central Advisory Council for Education, 1967) identified students aged 10-15 years as constituting a distinct group with ‘young adolescent’ emotional, physical, social and intellectual needs. The report strongly recommended the establishment of Middle Schools to better support students’ developmental needs and build their resiliency to face future change. Significant to this research, is that despite its strong grounding in developmental education theory and the belief by some that Middle Schooling is ‘the most remarkable event in recent [educational] history’, reform efforts in Australia have never been ‘officially accepted, nor rejected’ and as a consequence its educational advantage has remained a ‘somewhat neglected’ area of research (Education Department of Western Australia, 1999: 5; Hargreaves & Tickle, 1980: 1 & 2).

A review of the literature confirms philosophical differences pertaining to Middle School provision. Advocates recommend a ‘seamless transition’ bridging ‘the generalist environment of the primary school to the subject specialist curriculum of the secondary

school' as students approach the teenage years (Hargreaves, 1986: 5). Critics argue Middle Schooling denies children one of the few remaining 'rites of passage' to adulthood and can lead to a 'dumbing down' of the curriculum. As one teacher expressed, 'Middle School years ... are ... seen as a learning slump and not much is expected or achieved' (WA Department of Education and Training, 2008: 58). Pragmatists support Middle Schooling in principle, where and when feasible to do so. The need to have 'a clear focus on pedagogy' and maintain 'a culture of teamwork' is clearly established in the research literature (Middle Schooling Association of Western Australia, 2001: 23).

In recent years, the United States report *Turning Points: Preparing American Youth for the 21st Century* (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1989) has re-energised the Australian Middle Schooling movement and government interest in ensuring a 'good fit' between a school's organisational structure, the curriculum and student needs. The *Turning Points* reform model relies heavily on the teacher to deliver 'a curriculum grounded in rigorous, public academic standards of what students should know and be able to do' (sic) while also accommodating individual learning styles and ensuring well-being (WA Department of Education and Training, 2008: 6). As evidenced in this research paper, however, the 'turning point' for some students occurs much earlier than the 'middle years'.

Increasingly, young adolescents in Western society are portrayed as 'at risk' of harm and corruption, 'disengagement and underachievement', and requiring 'early intervention' measures to steer them through times of 'storm and stress' (Carrington,

2002: 12). On the other hand, Dinham and Rowe (2007: 77) contend that ‘one of the major dysfunctional consequences of prevailing Middle School reform initiatives is the tendency of school leaders and teachers to focus unduly on the developmental needs and problems of adolescent students’. In contrast, teachers adopting the *Reggio* approach view students as ‘unique individuals with rights’, who are ‘rich in resources, strong and competent’ (Rinaldi, 1998: 114). A unique philosophy inspiring ‘new ways of doing’ and reconceptualising the image of the young adolescent is now required (Pendergast, 2005: 4).

Timely for this research study, the WA Department of Education (2008) has completed a comprehensive review of its Middle Schooling provision evaluating ‘*What’s Working, What’s Not and Why?*’ Findings indicate that across the 33 schools involved in the research study there were ‘no apparent differences’ in the quality of educational provision, and ‘negligible difference...in terms of their underlying philosophy or the educational principles they espoused’ (WA Department of Education, 2008: 37). The review claims that school members viewed education as a ‘competitive market’ where issues related to ‘efficiency’ and ‘effectiveness’ guide Middle Schooling. In contrast, BCS members deem education as ‘a collaborative process opposed to competition’, where members’ energies focus on the ‘efficacy’ of *Reggio Emilia*-inspired educational experiences. The following writing provides insight to a Middle School programme inspired by social constructivist educational principles of *Reggio Emilia*, Northern Italy, that utilises ‘original founding aims’ as ‘a reference point’ (Payne, 2005: 16).

2.1. A *Reggio Emilia*-Inspired Teaching Approach

In the years that followed World War II citizens of Emilia Romagna in northern Italy sought to establish an alternative early childhood education (ECE) teaching approach. This approach recognises the ‘complex ecology’ of children’s lives and is responsive to post-modern sensibilities (Jones, Evans & Stritzel, 2001: 5). Edwards, Gandini and Forman (1998: 7) describe how, under the guidance of its founder, Loris Malaguzzi, the municipal early childhood system creates its ‘own distinctive and innovative set of philosophical and pedagogical assumptions, methods of organisation and principles of environment design’ to meet students’ individual learning aspirations. In what is described as ‘a new paradigm for the sociology of childhood’, students are perceived as ‘authors and inventors’ ‘who know how to walk along the path of understanding’, and who are ‘protagonists of their own growth’ (Malaguzzi, 1998: 67 & 180; Nimmo, 1998: 306).

The *Reggio Emilia* philosophy, shaped by the writings of Dewey, Montessori, Piaget, Vygotsky, Bruner, Gardner and Malaguzzi, promotes social constructivist learning principles, ‘the idea that knowledge is socially constructed in a cultural setting’, and considers that ‘there is no knowledge independent of the meaning attributed to experience (constructed) by the learner, or community of learners’ (Hein, 1991: 1; Hill, Stremmel & Fu, 2005: 7).

These principles are integrated in curriculum design, thus, rather than teacher pre-planned, it is ‘negotiated’ through ‘emergent processes between adults and children’ (Pope Edwards, 2002: 4). Peer interactions during small group project work, where *Pedagogy of Listening*, interdependence, partisanship and relationships are explored, are also embedded in its teaching approach. Students are encouraged to ‘take leadership in planning’, assume ‘responsibilities’ for their own learning, and using a ‘multi-symbolic approach’, access a wide range of mediums to express meaning (Edwards et al., 1998: 359; Katz, 1998: 33). *The Hundred Languages of Children* (Malaguzzi, 1986) is a metaphor synonymous with the *Reggio* approach, and denotes how children learn and communicate in a myriad of ‘multileveled and multimodal ways’ (Spaggiari & Rinaldi, 1996: 13). In the case study of BCS, *The Hundred Languages of Children* was relevant to students across the education spectrum including those in the Middle School.

2.2. BCS Philosophy

BCS was established in 1998 when the school’s principal, and a small group of parents sought to establish a model of education excellence for the 21st century. Since 1998, student numbers have grown from 23 to 214 students (aged 3-16 years). BCS believes it can provide Middle School students with quality education by implementing ten philosophical principles. For the purposes of this study, the principles have been modified to emphasise the Middle School student/s (MSS) and Middle Schooling provision:

1. Education is founded on values: BCS aims to create a community where MSS will respect and value their families and the society in which they live; where MSS respect, know and value themselves and are comfortable with the challenges that lie ahead. There is an emphasis on the development of interpersonal skills and self-regulation, understanding and valuing social justice and mutual respect in everything that is undertaken;
2. MSS are strong, capable, and unique individuals who are powerful contributors to their own learning, not empty vessels ready to be filled with knowledge: For this reason purposeful learning experiences that touch the MSS interest, curiosity or motivation to learn are pursued with the curriculum outcomes weaved into these. The concept of ‘100 languages of learning’ is promoted. These ‘languages’ may include words, movement, drawing, painting, building, sculpture, dramatic play and music;
3. MMS need to feel valuable, capable, unique and therefore safe and, supported by their environments in order to learn: The Middle School provides an inclusive environment for students to learn and allows for a flexible approach to address individual needs within the group. This is based on the knowledge that MSS are not all the same. For this reason, at any one time, different MSS may be working on different tasks. Learning is rarely whole-class and static but rather small group, dynamic and often noisy. MSS will have varied experiences within the same classroom;
4. There is power in collaborative and peer-based learning: As such the Middle School has a multi-aged class that allows the MSS to experience being both the

- eldest and the youngest of a group. There is plenty of opportunity for MSS to work together; planning, sharing ideas, reflecting; helping their peers and in turn being helped by peers. MSS are encouraged to work in collaboration as opposed to competition;
5. Reflection and metacognition are required in the pursuit of understanding and an ethic of excellence: MSS are encouraged to reflect and discuss the process of their learning. They are encouraged to ask questions, relate experiences and to express feelings and opinions. The MSS are supported in identifying strategies and skills that will assist them to reach deeper levels of understanding and communication as they strive to do the best they can;
 6. The best learning occurs in authentic and integrated experiences: The school uses the eight learning areas outlined in the Curriculum Framework ‘...as guides to the construction of a comprehensive, broad and balanced curriculum rather than using them to divide up the curriculum and create narrow and artificial boundaries across learning areas. Emphases on particular learning outcomes may vary according to phases of development.’ (WA Curriculum Council, 1998: 28);
 7. Sustainable healthy lifestyle participation provides the foundation for life-long practices, as exemplified through the Bluearth and REmida initiative: The school does not have an emphasis on competitive team sports but rather equips MSS with positive attitudes to physical activity through enjoyable and personally satisfying physical activity experiences. REmida is a creative re-use centre that sources clean waste from local manufacturers for the use in creative and educational programmes;

8. Place-based and nature-based education plays a critical role in Middle School Students' learning: It is increasingly recognised that providing MSS with positive experiences within their local community and natural surroundings (place-based and nature-based) can serve to promote the health and well-being not only of MSS but communities both locally and globally. As much as possible, students interact with the local community and are encouraged to investigate and research their immediate natural world;
9. Teachers are researchers: Teachers work together to provide a social constructivist environment. In support of this, the school provides weekly professional development meetings together with workshops and conferences hosted by BCS. This allows teachers to access excellent professional development opportunities and also share their teaching and research experience with the wider community; and
10. Establishing a genuine partnership with parents, characterised by mutual respect and confidence, provides a collaborative learning process: Families, teaching staff and MSS are considered equal partners in the learning process. BCS attempts to forge close links with parents in a partnership of mutual respect for each other's unique role in the education of the MSS.

In June 2009, BCS Middle School membership consisted of sixteen students aged between 12 and 16 years, and three classroom teachers. Specialist teachers also supported the Middle School programme attending to subjects that included English support, Music and Japanese. The case study, *Extending Reggio Emilia Principles in the Middle School*

Context, provides insight to the integral relationship between the school's philosophical principles and the lived experiences of those participating in this case study.

3. Methodology

As previously stated, this research study focused on a single-case examination of the *Reggio* approach in a Middle School context. The terms of reference guiding the study included examining the efficacy of educational experiences offered in the Middle School, and ascertaining students', teachers' and parents' satisfaction towards the quality of the learning programme. Pertinent to this research was the need to provide rich descriptive data about the Middle School's organisational structure, curriculum, and environment. As previously stated, ethnographic inquiry methodology was employed over a six-month period. Methods used to gather data included semi-structured interviews, participant observation and documentation analysis.

In the post-modern tradition, I acknowledged 'there is no blue print for qualitative analysis' but that it 'should be in keeping with the researcher's 'epistemological and ontological assumptions underpinning his/her research' (Hall, 1999: 20). For pragmatic reasons, I selected single case study format. Final data selection was based on my judgment of what I deemed critical findings in this study. My aim was that the case study would 'take the reader into the case situation and experience...to understand the case as a unique holistic entity' (Patton, 2002: 450). The epistemological question driving analysis was, 'What can be learned from the single case?' (Stake, 2005: 443).

3.1 Ethical Considerations

One research aim was to review students' perception of their Middle Schooling. Consistent with *Reggio Emilia* educational principles there were multiple opportunities for student-initiated learning experiences. Students' participation, in terms of reflecting on these experiences, was indispensable to the conduct of this research. Students' participation was voluntary and dependent on parental permission being obtained. Two of the 16 students did not participate in the research project. The final number of 14 student participants consisted of seven males (aged 14 – 16 years) and seven females (aged 12-15 years).

Student semi-structured interviews were conducted in a multipurpose room connected to their classroom with clear visibility to others by way of a large window. Parents and teachers were interviewed in a school administration interview room at a time convenient to them. Permission to audio record conversations prior to interview commencement was requested and duly obtained. Pseudonyms were assigned to participants to ensure anonymity. The interview sessions, averaging one hour in duration, were akin to informal discussions. Later the interview transcripts were reviewed with key themes identified. A process of 'triangulation', involving cross referencing different data sources, was used to confirm the 'validity' of the researcher's 'making of meaning', construction and interpretation.

3.2 Research Background

The BCS principal requested that this research be conducted on behalf of the BCS *Parents Advisory Council*. Within the MSS cohort were five students, with strong parent support, who wanted to complete their senior school education at BCS in 2011 trialing a ‘blended’ senior school programme that integrated ICT and community resources.

During the course of the study, the school was appealing against the Minister of Education’s decision that denied establishment of a senior college (Years 11 and 12). The Minister’s concern was that neither the number of students proposed for the senior school met the required registration ‘standards’ and nor could the school guarantee provision of qualified teaching staff and facilities for some specialist courses. To be registered as a non-government school in WA, BCS must satisfy the requirements of the *School Education Act* (1999), and *School Education Regulations* (2000). In June 2010, the Minister appointed a *Non-Government School Registration Advisory Panel* to conduct an independent school review.

While the school’s appeal was not the focus of this study, considerations of the pending panel review were evident during the interviews and day-to-day conversations. The continuance at BCS by five MSS was in jeopardy, and in all likelihood, their relocation to another school at the end of the year was imminent. As stated previously, research data was collected during the appeal process. This may have attributed to the high percentage of Middle School research participation.

4. Efficacy of Middle School Educational Experiences

The 'efficacy' of an educational experience is determined by its capacity or ability to produce a desired or intended result. What is deemed 'desired' and 'intended', however, may differ depending on particular parties and their vested interests.

Fieldwork confirmed Middle School students were involved in many educational experiences that integrated the core values and learning areas of the *Curriculum Framework*. Other sources verifying satisfactory curriculum and outcome standards included the *National Assessment Program - Literacy and Numeracy* (NAPLAN) results, and Curriculum Council *Progress Maps*. To date, the efficacy of BCS *Reggio Emilia* inspired educational experiences has produced a desired or intended result to the Minister of Education's satisfaction. At the school level, the efficacy of educational experiences is held in high priority since dissatisfaction could impact on school enrolments and revenue.

The BCS Middle School programme was developed in consultation with a community of learners that included Curriculum Council advisers, the Middle School teachers, BCS colleagues, the students, and their families. Two teachers were in the Middle School classroom at any given time, maintaining a teacher-student ratio of 1:8. Individual attention was provided to students on a needs 'on the spot' basis. Middle School teachers demonstrated 'effective teaching' traits identified by the WA Director General of Education, as acknowledging individual differences, encouraging student responsibility, having mastery of their teaching content, providing a safe environment,

monitoring progress and providing feedback, and building positive relationships (O'Neill, 2008: 1).

The Middle School teachers, aged in their thirties, were qualified secondary teachers. One teacher had completed a Bachelor of Arts and Graduate Diploma in Secondary Education with a major in Art and a minor in English as a Second Language. A second teacher had a Bachelor of Arts with a major in Industrial Design and a Postgraduate Diploma of Education. The third teacher's qualifications included a Bachelor of Science with Honours in Biochemistry and Toxicology, and also a Graduate Diploma in Secondary Education. The teachers had traveled widely, and have worked in a range of occupations. Collectively, they had depth of knowledge and breadth of skills that could be integrated readily into the Middle School programme if the need was perceived.

A review on the efficacy of educational experiences by the wider school community, as evidenced in parent letters, signed petitions and video recordings submitted to the *Non-Government School Registration Advisory Panel*, confirmed that many school members endorsed the continuance and expansion of its Middle School programme into the senior years. The Middle School programme was perceived as providing students with a quality education guided by *Reggio Emilia* principles adapted to the local community and culture. The efficacy of Middle School educational experiences was further explored during the semi-structured interviews. Case study findings are now presented.

4.1 Middle School Perceptions

Within the limitations of the study, I aimed to achieve an interpretative consensus from participants on the phenomenon under study and describe the cultural life surrounding it. The semi-structured interviews enabled ‘a straightforward route to interviewees’ thoughts and feelings about the world’ that involved ‘both the interviewee and interviewer...actively creating and constructing meaning within the local context of the interview’ (Peel, Parry, Douglas & Lawton, 2006: 1338). Each interview began with me asking participants how they came to be a member of BCS. Each participant had a personal story to tell, and in the telling, a Middle School narrative was told. Dominant themes included pedagogical considerations, happiness in education, educational values and priorities.

4.1.1 Pedagogical Considerations

The Middle School programme provided an integrated approach to learning that focused on students’ place-based and nature-based interests. These interests were used by teachers to build on students’ learning strengths, and support their developmental needs. The three teachers, working as a team and in consultation with a community of learners, delivered a *Reggio Emilia* inspired Middle School programme that integrated the Curriculum Framework learning areas through emergent curriculum. As one teacher described, ‘In a nutshell, we plan experiences and around those experiences we leave plenty of space to go in different directions...we have discussions about options...we

have some ideas where that might go...it involves constant feedback'. Often this necessitated several discussions before a consensus was finalised, however, during the process class ownership of programme direction was ensured.

While each teacher identified learning areas they coordinated, monitored and assessed, the holistic teaching approach necessitated fluid lesson structures, blended teaching roles and interchange of programme responsibilities. Teachers, individually and collectively, contributed subject expertise to facilitate student-initiated interest-driven class projects, which in some cases extended over the course of a school year and integrated several learning areas. Two such projects involved students designing their own *RIOT Radio* station broadcasting a weekly programme to the school audience, and a *Gifts from Nature's Garden* project, providing opportunities for growing and cooking



'good food' for sharing and conversation. Processes that enabled the intrinsically motivating, and diverse programme were teachers' shared understanding of the 'whole' curriculum and their mutual determination to nurture the 'whole' child.

Figure 1: Middle School Class Meeting

Respecting students' individuality is fundamental to *The Rights of the Child* (United Nations, 1989), and embedded in *Reggio Emilia* educational principles. Pedagogical considerations included how to ensure the MSS felt connected and able to

contribute to 'their' world. In the classroom, this was achieved by 'less teacher talk' and 'more asking of specific questions' so that teachers learned more about the students' knowledge and understandings to further scaffold learning. One teacher described that as 'progressive planning...where the ideas came from the students...but coupled with your own ideas about the curriculum and what's expected'. The teachers ensured learning activities were 'very hands-on', visual stimulating, engaged students' curiosity, and 'found a point' to make a meaningful connection to scaffold learning.

It was clearly apparent during fieldwork that teachers had a positive attachment to students. Teachers sought actively to provide a safe and supportive Middle School environment where students felt 'happy' and 'comfortable' with their individuality. The programme promoted student self-expression in their school-work through *The Hundred Languages of Children* wherein 'students can choose what they want to do, and they can choose how they want to present it.' While teachers have learning outcomes in mind, students are given flexibility and choice to go about their learning in ways that interest them.

4.1.2 Happiness in Education

As one might expect, a wide range of issues pertaining to the Middle School programme was discussed during student interviews. Most issues, however, converged on students' well-being. Integral to their sense of well-being was 'happiness' and quality of life. Students were 'happy' to go to school, 'happy' to be a class member, and 'happy' to

participate in learning activities. They were generally unhappy about completing homework. While the definition of ‘happiness’ its measurement and significance to educational practice and theory are subject to considerable debate, narratives relayed in this study, confirmed that “education has enormous influence on [student] happiness” (Michalos, 2007: 2). Noddings (2003: 121 & 243) also observes that, ‘love of place often marks a happy childhood’, and that synonymous with the condition of happiness is a feeling of ‘pleasure’.

In all interviews students displayed positive attachment to their teachers. Teachers were described as ‘friendly’, and ‘their friends’. Students were permitted to address teachers by their first name. This small provision was perceived by students as an act of ‘openness’ that gestured friendship and distanced perceptions of authority. Students considered their teachers as ‘nice’ and ‘helpful’. Being ‘nice’ was associated with showing respect for individual difference, and ‘helpfulness’ was demonstrated when teachers took time to listen and assist them with learning. When qualifying teacher descriptors, students reflected on particular events or scenarios that provided further detail on the Middle School culture:

The teachers here don’t feel like teachers. They feel sort of like part of the class. They don’t stand up in front of all of you. They will sit down with us. It doesn’t feel like they are superior to us. The difference here is that I’m not embarrassed to ask for help. At my old school I was too embarrassed to ask for help and I think that’s why I was falling behind. I remember one time I asked for help, and I still didn’t get it no matter how many times the teacher told me. I could tell that she was getting impatient, so I just said, ‘Oh, I get it now’, just to make her go away, but I still didn’t get it.

Students commented on programme flexibility to pursue learning interests: ‘you still go down a certain path, but you have more options’. Integral to their understanding of diversity was an appreciation that ‘different students liked different things’ and sometimes they needed to ‘taught differently’. Several students commented on the effectiveness of ‘hands-on’ learning experiences, the non-competitive environment, and the low teacher-student ratio. Students also provided positive feedback on peer tutoring young students in this multi-aged context and freedom to move about the room to observe and interact with others. Paramount to favourable learning conditions was students’ ability to make personal connections with curriculum content. Content needed to ‘make sense’, be ‘pleasurable’ to learn, and be relevant to their place-based and nature-based world. Classroom activities were described as, ‘doing lots of different things’, ‘interesting’, and ‘fun’, where students ‘can learn something the way they want to learn it’.

All students recognised the uniqueness of the *Reggio*-inspired Middle School. Students were mindful that schools with larger student enrolments offered potentially more friendships, but this had not been the experience for some students. Feeling alone and isolated in mainstream settings, they had become extremely unhappy. BCS Middle School offered a ‘small multi-aged circle’ of class peers who had a wide range of interests, aspirations and developmental needs. It also offered a ‘happy’ environment where members’ recognised that, ‘everyone is similar and different in the same ways’.

4.1.3 Educational Values and Priorities

Through word of mouth and surfing the internet, parents learned about BCS. They sought an alternative model of education, ‘a different philosophy’, which would enrich their child’s life. All parents recognised that the Middle School values, programme and relationships accommodated student diversity. Parents’ first priority, however, was their child’s happiness. During the interviews, some parents shared heart-rending stories of how another school had failed to nurture their child’s well-being. A ‘one size fits all’ teaching approach, demands for high academic performance, and lack of consideration of ‘the whole child’ had resulted in pressure, stress and anxiety too heavy for the child to bear. These experiences occurred across the school spectrum, from the early years to early secondary school. The following narratives provided insight to this unhappiness:

They said that she was a little bit talkative in the class, very popular, very sporty, very social, a lovely girl...then I noticed the change in her...She became a lot quieter and it was just Year 8 and it was so serious...She didn’t settle in. She’d done very well in primary school but when she got to high school she just wasn’t coping. She was very tired. It was the work-load. Very, very structured and she just got to a point where she felt overwhelmed... she didn’t want to go to school.

It probably started in Year 2-3 when he started really bucking the system. Eventually it got that bad that we just had to do something... he was very depressed, he didn’t want to learn, he didn’t want to be at school. He used to be very isolated. He would go in and switch off, and he wasn’t being interactive. He didn’t want to learn. They [the school] didn’t know what to do either. He just had needs and they couldn’t meet those needs because he didn’t fit the box.

When specifying Middle Schooling qualities that ‘suited’ their child, it was apparent that parents shared similar perceptions of the classroom culture. They

appreciated the ‘transparency’ of the learning process and the implementation of social constructivist educational principles. Highly valued was the frequent availability and flexible provision of time to converse with teachers. Respect for the parent’s voice, valuing their contribution and inviting their involvement in class activities are values underpinning the *Reggio* approach.

Parents were informed to varying degrees of the *Reggio Emilia* philosophy. For their child, on a practical, day-to-day basis, it meant, ‘children not pitted against each other’, ‘working with each other’, ‘learning from other kids’, ‘developing a real passion for learning’, ‘becoming self-determined individuals’, ‘involved in their own learning goals’, ‘making connections’, ‘working at their own level’, ‘having choice’, ‘not being passive’, ‘receiving constructive feedback’, ‘getting one-on-one attention’, and ‘being looked after’. Critical to implementing these processes was small class-size, and teachers’ understanding of students’ individual interests, aspirations and needs. The Middle School teachers were held in very high regard and ‘trusted’ by all parents.

The efficacy of Middle School educational experiences was consistent with parent expectations, their educational values and priorities. Many parents viewed mainstream schooling as ‘de-contextualised, and segmented’ with monitoring and reporting mechanisms that, ‘measure the kids against an arbitrary line...instigated by the bureaucrats of public schools’. While parents readily acknowledged that the Middle School at BCS may not suit all people, it appealed to their way of thinking, and provided the ‘best fit’ for their young adolescent.

5. Discussion

Key research findings detailed in discussion papers across the nation confirm that despite ‘active and ongoing reform in the middle years of schooling’ many initiatives have been stifled due to a wide range of prevailing conditions and this has resulted in *ad hoc* progress in both the public and independent school systems (Carrington, 2002: 4). Lack of progress compromises the quality of young adolescent schooling experiences confirming for some that school is a ‘waste of [their] time’. The cornerstone to BCS effective provision of Middle Schooling was reciprocal respectful relationships. Inspired by the school’s ten philosophical principles, members worked together to secure student ‘happiness’ and support their individual interests and learning styles. Participants involved in this study confirmed that these priorities had been achieved.

The provision of an integrated curriculum by experienced and highly motivated ‘classroom’ teachers who demonstrate to their students that they care for and listen to them at an individual level, affords multiple opportunities for these priorities to be achieved. A teacher-student ratio of 1:8 at BCS was highly significant to securing these achievements, as was strong school leadership and a shared school vision. Reform initiatives focused on delivering what is deemed ‘developmentally appropriate practice’ for young adolescents are forewarned of the controversies surrounding “monocultural orientation” and “developmental discourse... [excluding] all but those with the right signs: being white, middle class, and living in orderly conditions...” (Cross, 1995: 91; Hulqvist & Dahlberg, 2001: 6).

During fieldwork there was no evidence to suggest neither the ‘dumbing down’ of the curriculum nor ‘learning slump’ during programme activities, but rather, extended periods of time were provided for students to further deepen their understanding of knowledge without fear of reproach or embarrassment. Extending *Reggio Emilia* principles into Middle Schooling years presented as a logical and natural extension of the BCS early years and primary programme. Issues related to ‘rites of passage’ dissipated with observations of students’ multiple opportunities for leadership and responsibility within a programme that promoted teamwork, lateral and creative thinking. In this case study, the ‘robust’ professional learning community frequently identified in the literature as a requirement underpinning successful Middle Schooling, included BCS families who shared the school’s vision of education excellence for the 21st century.

6. Conclusion

We have to move with the next generation. We can't get stuck in our own time; we need to do this to honor our children and to meet their needs in a very fast paced world (Giacopini, 2010: 1).

If the ultimate aim of Middle Schooling is to ensure that students are happy, healthy and active contributors to society, then it is incumbent on schools to provide learning environments that respect students’ right to self-expression ‘in all matters affecting them’ utilising a ‘multiplicity of discourses,’ and are ‘fun’ places to be (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000: 9; United Nations, 1989). Illustrated in this research paper, the *Reggio Emilia* philosophy and its educational principles empowered pedagogy that supported these processes.

BCS is unique. Its teaching practice has moved with the next generation. There is no doubt that this school offers WA families an exciting alternative education model for their children, one that embraces cultural and linguistic diversity in ways that empower MSS to become successful learners, confident and creative individuals, and active and informed citizens. BCS has realised the vision so frequently articulated by the Australian government. BCS pedagogy and practice is consistent with the internationally acclaimed *Reggio Emilia* teaching approach. Its school philosophy is in step with contemporary research literature that advocates a holistic and integrated curriculum that extends beyond the primary school years. *Extending Reggio Emilia Principles in the Middle School Context* presents an exemplar of ‘best practice’ that provides fresh initiative and impetus to the Middle School reform movement.

Postscript

Enshrined in the Western Australian Education Act 1999, under section 157, the Minister must consider ‘diversity of choice in educational programmes’. In June 2010, the Minister referred BCS’s registration appeal to a *Non-Government School Registration Advisory Panel*. In September, the Advisory Panel visited BCS for the purpose of conducting an oral interview with school representatives. The panel recognised that ‘the passion and commitment of staff, students and parents would ensure the successful delivery of the senior secondary programme’ and concluded that ‘it [BCS] will be in a position to deliver a viable programme for students’. The Minister then signed consent for senior school registration. New enrolments of students wanting to trial the Middle

School have been processed and BCS now looks forward to its first graduating class of 2011.

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