



# Policy and Practice Recommendations: Supporting Play at School in Early Adolescence<sup>1</sup>

## INTRODUCTION

This Key Issues paper presents policy and practice recommendations from the initial findings of quantitative and qualitative data collected in the Play in Early Adolescence Project.

Early adolescents experience significant developmental, physical, cognitive, emotional and social changes. It is a time during which children experience growth of independence, peer identification, and experimental and exploratory behaviour (Christie & Viner, 2005). It is also a time of great transition for children.

In many countries, early adolescents move from being the oldest group in primary schools to being the youngest group in secondary schools; they navigate new environments of learning and have greater expectations placed upon them. Such changes can be disruptive and unsettling. More importantly, they experience all of this while navigating the onset of puberty (Blakemore, 2019). Unfortunately, this also means that early adolescence could be a time at which mental health conditions emerge (Mundy

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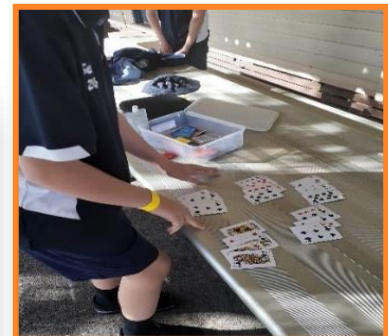
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et al., 2015). These transformations can also influence how children play and use their leisure time (Blackmore, 2019).

Given the distinctiveness of the early adolescence years and the significance of the transition from primary to secondary years, the Play in Early Adolescence project focused on children in Year 7 and Year 8 in Australia (age range 11- 13-year-olds). This effort aimed to provide a research base that can inform educators, parents and researchers, as well as policymakers.

The value of this timely key issue paper is three-fold:

- First, it provides several evidence-based recommendations connected with the research work undertaken in the project (see Key Issue Papers 1 -4).
- Secondly, the recommendations include actions for a wide range of stakeholders (government, policymakers, schools, teachers, students, parents and researchers).
- Thirdly, the paper starts a conversation around the importance of researching the middle school concept and its associated structures as they could potentially serve the needs of learners in the ‘middle years’.



## BACKGROUND AND POLICY CONTEXT

Australia's educational system uses a two-tier structure of primary and secondary schooling (Ellerbrock et al., 2018). Internationally, advocates of a three-tiered system of education acknowledge the uniqueness of the adolescent years, placing great emphasis on overall student wellbeing over academic performance (Lapon, 2020). Three-tier education refers to structures of schooling where pupils are taught in three distinct school types as they progress through the education system.

Whilst Australia does not use a three-tier separate middle school structure, the middle years are recognised within the Melbourne Declaration, and Australian states and territories are committed to 'middle years' responsiveness. The Melbourne Declaration states that:

*Australian governments commit to working with all school sectors to ensure that schools provide programs that are responsive to students' developmental and learning needs in the middle years, and which are challenging, engaging and rewarding. (Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs 2008, p. 12-13)*

## MIDDLE YEARS/ MIDDLE SCHOOL POLICY

The middle years concept gained some traction in Australia in the late 1990s and early 2000s following the publication of some reports that emphasised young adolescent learners' needs, student wellbeing and outcomes (Ellerbrock et al. 2018, p. 2).

Internationally, junior high schools had been part of the American educational landscape since the 1900s (Weilbacher, 2019, Alverson et al., 2019) because advocates believed young adolescents required an educational space dedicated to their developmental needs (Ellerbrock et al., 2018, Alverson et al., 2019). In the 1940s it was emphasised that the social, psychological and academic needs of younger adolescents were different to those of children and older adolescents (Bedard and Do, 2005). Advocates called for the use of different instructional methods, curriculum differentiation, and the creation of advisory teams to help students acquire life skills and stressed the importance of specially trained teachers (Alverson et al. 2019, p. 1-2).

The emphasis on the middle years was revitalized in the 1960s with the emergence of middle schools (Olofson and Knight, 2018, Weilbacher, 2019, Alverson et al., 2019, Ellerbrock et al., 2018). The middle school model emphasized curriculum exploration, interdisciplinary organisation for instruction, block scheduling, individualized instruction and teacher guidance plans; and middle-level teacher training (Weilbacher 2019, p.36).

Proponents of the middle school concept advocate for structures and approaches that are responsive to young adolescents' needs (Olofson and Knight, 2018) however, the concept was criticised for universalizing early adolescence, especially when much of the supportive research about early adolescence characteristics was conducted with upper-middle-class white males (Beane, 1999).

There has been very little Australian research focused on middle years education since the 2000s (Ellerbrock et al., 2018). Over the years middle school researchers have proposed various 'best practice' frameworks, but that these were not uniformly implemented (Olofson and Knight, 2018). Ultimately, there appear to be gaps between vision and implementation (Alverson et al., 2019). Weilbacher (2019) explained that reclaiming the middle school vision requires a dissociation from high schools and an overcoming of the existing barriers to success (e.g. trained teachers and leaders).

Recently, there has been a growing interest in middle school education, but implementation is seen to be ad hoc and piecemeal (Ellerbrock et al. 2018, p. 2).

## **POLICY CONTEXT IN SOUTH AUSTRALIA**

Up until recently South Australia had configured year levels within this two-tier system slightly differently to other states and territories in Australia, as its primary schooling system encompassed Year 7 (Ellerbrock et al., 2018).

As of 2022, however, Year 7 is taught in secondary to "bring" South Australia "in line with the rest of the country" (Department for Education South Australia, 2021). To prepare for this shift, the Department for Education conducted a pilot program in 2020 in three South Australian schools. The Department also funded secondary schools, area schools and R-12 schools through establishment grants to help these schools prepare learning areas for year 7 students. These grants were worth \$2.85 million and allocated on the basis of anticipated enrolments (Department for Education a, n.d.).

Some primary-trained teachers are also making the move to highschool to teach the incoming year 7 students, ensuring their pedagogical expertise with this unique age group of early adolescence. Professional learning for secondary teachers and principals is also being offered to support the move (Department for Education c, n.d.).

Another recent policy change affecting students of this age in South Australia is the mobile phone policy. Primary schools in South Australia banned the use of mobile phones while at school from 2021 (The Educator, 2020). In secondary schools, however, students are allowed to keep these devices with them including in break times.

Given what we know about the importance of the early adolescence years, and the significance of the transition from primary to secondary years, future policy development should focus on understanding more about this cohort and developing a research evidence base from which to work.

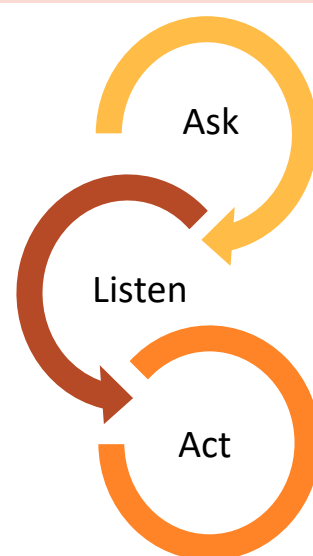
## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

The following recommendations are data driven culminating from the Play in Early Adolescence project findings and literature reviews (see Key Issues Paper 1 -4). The recommendations include actions for government, policy makers, schools, teachers, students, parents and researchers.

### RECOMMENDATION 1: INVOLVE CHILDREN IN DECISION MAKING

Our research provides ample evidence for the need to involve children in decisions that impact their lives. The process needs to be a lot more than it currently is in the schools.

Whilst some schools did asked children for their opinions, the process did not adequately involve children in the different aspects of consultation and collaboration. At worst decisions were made with no input from the children at all. All stakeholders should be involved in the process.



*We need to ask, listen and act.* Educators and policymakers need to reflect on whether they ask the right questions; ask them in the best ways; and whether they act on children’s advice.

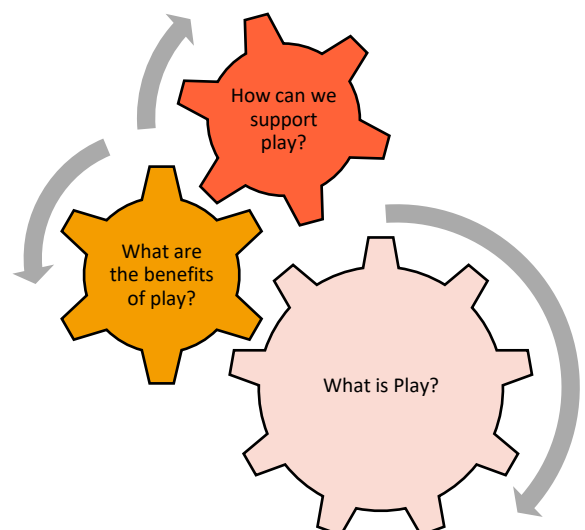
## RECOMMENDATION 2: **BUILD A PLAY CULTURE**

We must dispel the myth that adolescents are too old to play. We need to build a culture of play within schools. This is increasingly important given the evidence that pandemic lockdowns have had an impact on the mental health and wellbeing of children and adolescents. The call to action is for policy makers, teachers, parents and children as it is only through a united vision that we can enact far reaching change.

## RECOMMENDATION 3: **INVEST IN TRAINING FOR EDUCATORS**

Research suggests that responsive school leaders who work in educational contexts focused on middle years respond to young adolescents’ needs and establish learning environments in which they can thrive (Rheume et al., 2021). Responsive leadership focused on middle years adolescents' needs cultivates shared vision and collaborative cultures focused on improvement (Rheume et al. 2021, p. 1). Researchers have also suggested that teachers who work with students in the middle years could benefit from specialised training and upskilling (Raphael and Burke, 2012, Byrnes and Ruby, 2007).

Our research suggests that these needs are pronounced in connection with the importance of play and the means of supporting and promoting play opportunities. Professional development is urgently required for educators so that they can gain a deeper understanding of what play is, what its benefits are, the different types of play, and how they can support it. Professional development sessions will help transform attitudes to, and perspectives on play in early adolescence; and build capacity for making knowledgeable recommendations around the implementation of play in schools.



#### **RECOMMENDATION 4: CREATE PLAY ENVIRONMENTS FOR ADOLESCENTS**

Research has suggested that the physical (e.g. access to suitable spaces and equipment) and natural environments (e.g. weather) within which adolescents are embedded can influence their play and leisure time activity opportunities and choices (see Key Issue paper 2).

Our research shows that schools need to create environments that encourage and facilitate play. Spaces need to be inviting, accessible, well-equipped and age-appropriate. If adolescents don't find the provided spaces to be fun, engaging and lacking in age-appropriate equipment or options, they won't use them. This means that adolescents will be less active, sedentary, and potentially bored, all of which have both behaviour and health implications.

Schools must provide dedicated spaces for different age groups. Our research suggests that while primary schools catered well for their students in terms of types of playgrounds and accessibility, high schools struggled. High schools did not have playgrounds or separate spaces. Some high school educators had tentative ideas about potential equipment that could be provided. However, their efforts are best described as experimental and not sufficiently guided by young people's perspectives.

Offering multipurpose equipment in high schools that can be easily accessed such as table tennis tables, pop up goal posts, jumping mats, and a range of soft and hard surfaces with comfortable seating, shelter, wifi access, charging stations, and areas for games such as hand-ball, chasey, hopscotch and basketball are just some of the practical suggestions that we heard in our interviews about how the open areas could be improved. Beyond these, ideas with more investment were posited from school leaders involving bike tracks, bmx, skate parks, mountain biking, trampolining and so on.

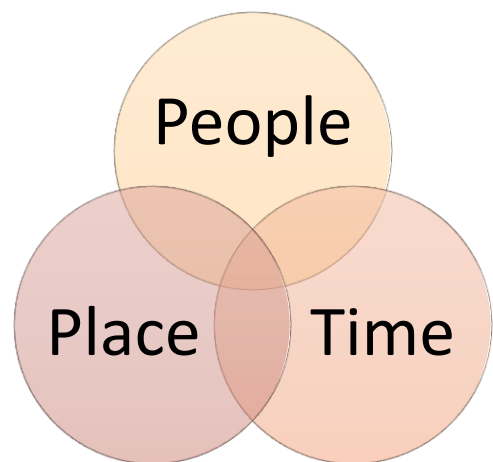
#### **RECOMMENDATION 5: PROVIDE SCHOOL SYSTEMS THAT FACILITATE PLAY**

A commitment to facilitating play in high schools requires a review of the systems, structures and rules that govern children and young people's play opportunities. Structural considerations such as; location of lockers and access to equipment needs unpacking as do the policies within schools. Having children as part of the review team, giving their perspectives, and having their view heard is vital for the process.

Moreover, it is recommended that supporting play and leisure time activities in schools involve the establishment of interdisciplinary teams comprised of Department for Education personnel, architects, playspace designers, local government officials, educators and researchers. These teams need to work together and consult children in order to create environments and educational structures that support children and adolescents' meaningful play opportunities.

#### RECOMMENDATION 6: INCREASE RESOURCES FOR HIGH SCHOOLS

Effective middle years education requires integration of people, place and time. This requires investment in people, infrastructure and systems. Staff are underresourced and needed to supervise break times at high school. The lack of supervision leads to a lack of play affordances at school given the risk adverse culture of schools. The evidence was clear, when a teacher or an adult championed a particular activity, was interested, committed and passionate about a topic, then play of the children in the school increased. To a lesser extent, the same can be said for play equipment. When investment was made into provision of materials and equipment, play increased.



#### RECOMMENDATION 7: EXPLORE WAYS TO REDUCE THE EQUITY GAP

Whilst government schools appear bounded by primary and secondary two-tier systems, private schools appear to thrive on marketing middle school models. For example in South Australia a review of the top 10 most expensive private schools reveals that 9 out of 10 schools utilise some sort of middle school structure.

This suggests an inequitable offering of specialist middle school education in Australia. Why do children whose parents pay for their education get educated within a three-tier system? Are there benefits of a middle school system that funds can secure? These issues and more need exploration.



## RECOMMENDATION 8: CONDUCT FOCUSED RESEARCH

Research on the effectiveness of the middle schools/middle years schooling is very limited. What research is available seems to be mixed with results supporting “some elements of the middle school model while proving inconclusive for others” (Olofson and Knight (2018)p. 9). Researchers have suggested that a lack of large-scale quantitative research focused on the efficacy of middle school practices is to blame for this issue.

In their comparative research on Australia and the USA, Ellerbrock et al. (2018) aptly stated:

*There seems to have been little research on the efficacy of middle school organisational structures published since 2000. Yet decisions are being made on how to organise people, the school itself, and the school day. Who is making these decisions? How? Why? Using what data? Are these decisions being made with the developmental needs of young adolescents in mind or are other factors driving them? (p. 13)*

The major takeaway from our work and the literature is the vital need for research that investigates current middle years organisational structures. However, such work must include the voice of the students themselves. large scale research, including not just white middle-class students. The research focused on middle school structures and focused research on adolescent play



Can the middle school philosophy and its associated flexible structures be an appropriate alternative system?



Which organisational structures within High School best meet the needs of early adolescents?



Can a focus on separate middle years organisational structures within High School benefit the developmental needs of early adolescents transitioning to high school? Can separate middle years spaces remove barriers to play for children?



Can technology promote active play? Some evidence was found that phones could be a barrier but also an enabler of play. Given that students are motivated to use phones, research on effective ways to use phones to benefit play would be advantageous.



Can structured activities at break times promote more play and social connectedness in high school?

The data in our study showed that primary schools were catering for physical play for children in their break times through innovative programs and ideas such as dance programs and facilitated sports games being offered. In secondary schools, the facilitated activities were predominantly sedentary, such as coding clubs, spaces to use screens and STEM clubs. Could providing more active age-appropriate activities enable greater participation in play? For example, teachers could consider setting up sports tournaments, kite flying or rock climbing to encourage older students to get outside. School leaders mentioned investing in equipment such as pop-up goal posts, table tennis, skateboarding, mountain biking but were unsure if the investment in time and money would be worthwhile. Focused research on such changes would help to answer this and provides schools with the guidance they are desperately seeking.



Can altering school break times change play behaviours?

Break times in the schools we observed accounted for less than one hour total in the school day. Many children in our study mentioned they wanted and need longer breaks. As well as providing students with a break from formal learning, school break times provide opportunities for many children to compensate for the reduced physical activity they have in their increasingly sedentary lifestyles, both in the school day and after school. Increasing these opportunities could benefit students, however, schools and policymakers need evidence that this change is worthwhile given that this would shift timetables thereby potentially reducing the focus on the academic curriculum.



Can integration of play within the curriculum fit the play and academic agenda for middle years students?

## PLAY IN EARLY ADOLESCENCE PROJECT OVERVIEW

The Play in Early Adolescence Project investigates play at school for children aged 11 to 13 years. The rationale for this study was grounded in the well accepted view that play is important to children of all ages, but that it declines as children move through the years of schooling. A comparison of how children in their last year of primary school and in the first year of high school interact, socialise, and spend their break times enabled clearer understandings about what children need in this transitioning year, what they struggle with, and how schools can better meet their needs for play in the school day. The study aimed to investigate:

- How does the play of children in the last year of primary school compare with the first year of high school?
- What are the barriers and enablers to play for young adolescents at school?
- What is available in schools to support and facilitate opportunities for play?
- What are the implications for transition to high school?

This research is to generated new insights into play for the 11 to 13 age range, an age typically neglected by research. It provided evidence which demonstrates the contextual impact on play and how the environment limits, promotes or alters play opportunities.

For further information see: [playresearch.com.au](http://playresearch.com.au)

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