Middle Years Development Instrument (Australia)
NEWSLETTER 1

INTRODUCTION
Welcome to the first newsletter on the pilot of Middle Years Development Instrument (MDI) in Australia. The MDI is a self-report survey for children aged 9-14 which covers non-academic factors relevant to learning, participation and wellbeing. As a participating school, the newsletter provides an update on the MDI team’s activities concerning the MDI pilot in South Australia and Western Australia.

PROCESS PILOT OF THE MIDDLE YEARS DEVELOPMENT INSTRUMENT
In late July 2012, Year 6 classes from Allenby Gardens Primary School and Gilles Street Primary School in South Australia participated in a process pilot of the MDI survey. The process pilot enabled the MDI team to examine how well the MDI survey translated to the Australian context and to test survey materials with Australian students and teachers.

This was followed up with a test of the online version of the MDI survey at schools located in and around Mt Barker in South Australia. The online version of the MDI survey was built by Australian Survey Research on behalf of the Department for Education and Child Development. Teachers and students gave very useful feedback which included straightforward and comprehensive teacher instructions, suitability and relevance of the questions and ease of use of the online survey. The process pilot provided the opportunity to iron out any bugs with the system and the MDI team is confident that the MDI online survey is fully functional and ready to go in 2013.

MT BARKER RESULTS
Approximately 500 students from eight primary schools and one high school in the Mt Barker area participated in a process pilot of the online MDI survey. Mt Barker High School’s participation came about because of the school’s focus on well-being and its subsequent selection to participate in the Seligman Thinkers in Residence program. The MDI was considered complementary to the Seligman work taking place at the school. The preliminary data is currently being analysed and a regional report, as well as, individual school reports will be provided to participating schools in the new year. Community meetings will also be convened in 2013 to share the findings with the Mt Barker community.
PERSERVANCE QUESTIONS

Recent evidence on perseverance shows that children tend to stick to tasks, plan well, finish what they begin and as a result have better life outcomes. Five questions focusing on perseverance have been added to the MDI survey for the Australian pilot.

The Nobel Laureate Economist James Heckman’s\(^1\) work clearly shows that both the non-cognitive and cognitive attributes of children have long lasting effects into adulthood and that indeed the non-cognitive outcomes such as perseverance and social competencies are the strongest predictors of future human capital (Conti). Moffitt et al\(^2\) show that childhood self-control predicts physical health, substance dependence, personal finances, and criminal offending. Interventions addressing self-control may reduce societal costs, save taxpayers’ money, and promote prosperity.

The MDI data is a critical addition to the evidence base required to support the foundation for academic growth, and for creating a safe, caring and inclusive community of learners that fosters universal human qualities (compassion, fairness, respect) that underlie socially responsible citizenship. For further information, the two articles below can provide additional information.

DEVELOPMENT AND VALIDATION OF THE MDI

The Middle Years Development Instrument was developed by The Human Early Learning Partnership (HELP) at the University of British Columbia, Canada. The tool has undergone extensive validation by researchers at HELP. An article entitled Development and Validation of the Middle years Development Instrument (MDI): Assessing Children’s Well-being and Assets across Multiple Contexts was published in the October 2012 edition of the academic journal; Social Indicator Research. The paper ‘describes the theoretical framework, selection of items and scales for the survey, and four studies that were conducted to revise the MDI and examine its psychometric properties’. If you are interested in the science that sits behind the MDI, the article is available at www.mdi.sa.edu.au (see the ‘What is the MDI’ section)

WESTERN AUSTRALIAN PARTNERS

The Western Australian Department of Education is a project partner in the piloting of the MDI in Australia. It will be piloted in two metropolitan and two regional education regions in both states. Like South Australia, Western Australia has a commitment to children and students wellbeing. In 2011, the Western Australian Commissioner for Children and Young People wrote an issues paper on the middle years. The paper discussed that ‘relationships between adults and children are of central importance to developing resilience’ and ‘that ‘connectedness’ to family and to school is central to emotional wellbeing’.

The paper also highlighted that ‘challenges and issues facing children as they transition into adolescence make the middle years a period of heightened risk, particularly for disadvantaged children and young people and a key intervention point at which risks can be addressed. Identifying and responding to early warning signs will help prevent more serious social, emotional and behavioural problems later on’.

---

The five domains of the Middle Years Development Instrument are concerned with the themes raised in the Issues paper.

- Social and Emotional Development
- Connectedness
- School Experiences
- Physical health and Well-Being
- Constructive Use of After School Time

**MDI IN PERU**

Along with South Australia and Western Australia, the MDI is being piloted in Lima, the capital of Peru and Callao, the largest port in Peru. The pilot project is a partnership between the World Bank, the Peru Ministry of Education, and other researchers, including HELP. The MDI Peru pilot project is part of a program they are developing for urban public schools. About 15 schools are included in the pilot. They are testing the validity of the survey for use in the Peru context, with different grade levels, starting with Grade 4.

**DECD’S KNOWLEDGE TRANSLATION SEMINAR**

On 17 September, the South Australian Department for Education and Child Development hosted the *Found in Translation* online seminar with colleagues from British Columbia and Manitoba. The theme was translation of research and evidence into policy and practice. Dr Kimberly Schonert-Reichl, from Human Early Learning Partnership (HELP) and Lisa Pedrini from the Vancouver School Board gave a presentation on the development, implementation and outcomes of the MDI.

Dr Schonert-Reichl discussed the context and impetus for the development of the MDI. At the time, a lot was known about the critical early years of development, but little attention had been given to the middle years of childhood. HELP saw a research gap into this important life stage which is associated with significant cognitive changes in children’s lives. They conducted an initial study of children’s social and psychological lives with 1400 students recording their activities, thoughts and feelings in diary format. The research reports provided a wealth of information and from this it became evident that there was a need to develop an instrument that could measure children’s well-being in the middle years of childhood. It was considered that an instrument using student voice would provide a reliable measure of the emotional and social world of children.

In developing the MDI, researchers realised that the data and findings needed to be reported in a way that was interesting and useful to schools. HELP established a reporting methodology that gives each participating school their own report. A school report will be an integral part of the MDI pilot in South Australia and Western Australia. Kimberley and Lisa’s PowerPoint presentation on the MDI is available at [http://www.frasermustardcentre.sa.edu.au](http://www.frasermustardcentre.sa.edu.au)

Wishing you happy and safe holidays from the MDI team.