

BOTO4815

Opening the Door to Greatness: public conversations in middle years pedagogy

Kim Keamy and Christine Bottrell

Abstract

There exist different, and sometimes conflicting, understandings of what good teaching and learning may be. Just who this may be 'good' for is also contentious. Yet in this example of a funded education program there is an expectation that the different voices involved not only collaborate but, also work to bring about change. Our contribution as to how this reconciliation is to be achieved is to provide research and a workable framework in which systematic inquiry can interact with the lived experiences of the multiple publics in the Beechworth Cluster of Schools. Through programs such as Schools for Innovations and Excellence, the competing publics Fraser (2003) refers to are meant to make decisions reflecting 'good', but for too long these decisions have been informed by uncontested opinion and stereotypical misunderstandings that surround school communities.

This paper describes the collaborative methodology and mutual respect that underpin research undertaken into the middle years of school as part of the Schools for Innovations and Excellence initiative in the Beechworth Cluster of Schools in North East Victoria. The research records the voices that have informed and continue to contribute to the public good within the Cluster.

Specific insights into teaching and learning within the Cluster have been gained as a consequence of this research, which has been positively embraced and regularly consulted for future decision-making. Innovations within the Beechworth Cluster recognise the uniqueness of particular settings within a context of collective action.

Introduction

Naming and defining the middle years as a distinctive and essential area for specific educational focus and intervention activities (Commonwealth Department of Education Science and Training & The University of Queensland 2003), including research, is not to isolate students in their middle years of schooling from the rest of the school community, but to recognise the unique qualities and attributes of this period of social and academic development.

The Victorian Government launched *Schools for Innovation and Excellence*, with one of the areas for innovation being The Middle Years – taken to mean Years 5 to 9. Schools that participated in the first phase of this initiative were consequently able to reflect on their experiences and were able to provide guidance for other schools wishing to proceed down the same path (Department of Education and Training 2003). Central to the advice given was that schools would form into clusters that reflected (supposedly) logical geographical alliances and which included as many schools as possible as feeder schools to a secondary college. In North East Victoria, The Beechworth Cluster was duly formed and includes the primary schools in the towns and centres of Beechworth, Osbornes Flat, Stanley, Wooragee and Yackandandah, as well as Beechworth Secondary College.

Each of the schools involved in the Beechworth Cluster has a unique culture, and it is important when we talk about the Beechworth Cluster that we recognise the distinctiveness that arises from this clustering, namely, that it incorporates both small, rural and larger, urban schools. The town or community in which each school exists are different, and each has historical relationships with the others, traceable back to the goldrush era in Victoria. In a sense, each of the communities has the potential to be in competition with each other. Fraser (1993) refers to this plurality of competing publics that ...[acknowledge] the diversity and inequality that characterises the contemporary world...functioning within and across a range of scales (local community, regional, national, global etc)... (p. 155).

Given the messy connotations of the term 'community' (Friedland 2001, p. 377), the multitude of voices that are present in the Beechworth Cluster provide a rich source of inspiration but also contribute to a greater possibility of disconnection.

Reid and Thomson (2003, p. xvi) identify one of the challenges in situations such as that which exist in the Beechworth Cluster, is to '...create the conditions whereby these multiple public spheres create networks of connection in order to influence various levels of decision-making.' An implicit objective of the *Schools for Innovations and Excellence* project is for systems/processes to be

established, which encourage higher quality communication across the Cluster and provide much of the impetus for subsequent innovation.

The whole-school approach to school improvement advocated in past research and literature, such as that by Hill and Crevola (1997), considers various partnerships that exist between home, school and community. These partnerships embrace a movement beyond current approaches to student care and behaviour towards directly addressing how

New economic conditions, social contexts and diverse patterns of youth identities, cultures and learning styles are intersecting with issues of growing cultural and linguistic diversity in communities (CDEST & UQ 2003, p. 7).

Universities have, since the development of the *Schools for Innovation and Excellence*, had a clear part to play in the directions taken by school clusters. As the Victorian Department of Education and Training acknowledges (2003), the most important outcome of schools participating in the *Schools for Innovation and Excellence* is that '... innovation is beneficial to every student, that it is sustainable and that any proposed change or reform is based on sound evidence' (p. 4). Personnel from the Beechworth Cluster approached the Institute for Education at La Trobe University Albury-Wodonga to conduct research that would inform the particular innovations of the Cluster. The aim of this research, which was undertaken in the second half of 2003 and which is referred to in this paper, was:

To investigate how to enhance student engagement by discovering the appropriateness and feasibility of improving community links, both locally and across the cluster (Beechworth Cluster 2003, p. 3).

Recent initiatives such as the Queensland *New Basics* trials (Education Queensland 2001, p. 82) and the Victorian current reform initiatives, for example the *Schools for Innovation and Excellence* and *Middle Years Research and Development* (MYPRAD), are working towards reform from a strong research base. There is a symbiotic relationship between effective teaching and learning, and successful planning and the implementation of change, which affects the overall educational environment. Longitudinal research and school-based development are both necessary to acknowledge, and work with, the new and more difficult economic and social conditions in Australia (CDEST & UQ 2003), and to inform Australian education systems engaged in middle years reform. The importance of having sound educational research inform subsequent practice, had already been established in previous studies. Our role, then, was to analyse the situation at the local level.

Considering the Literature

The middle years of schooling have been the focus of a great deal of recent research into effective educational practice. In Australia, much of our initial understanding of 'middle schooling' came from research undertaken in the U.S.A. and the U.K. during the last thirty years, culminating in the publication of *Turning Points: Preparing American Youth for the 21st Century* (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development 1989). This turned the spotlight on the middle level of schooling and became influential in informing Australian research. Broadly, the 'middle years' are now taken to begin at Year 3 and end at Year 9, spanning the chronological ages of 9 to 15, although the focus for the Beechworth Cluster are the years of schooling from Year 5 through to Year 9. It has been widely recognised in the research that this is a period of intellectual, personal and social development that had not previously been sufficiently differentiated as possessing unique qualities and attributes. There have been some broad recommendations and foci within the literature, such as the development of restructured, discrete establishments called 'middle schools', a new focus on the structural aspects of primary and secondary sectors (Eyers, Cormack & Barratt 1992) and the development of more effective learning and teaching programs (Cumming 1998).

From an historical perspective, the early 20th century work of American psychologist G. Stanley Hall identified adolescents as a group with distinctive issues of identity, sexuality, intellectual and moral development (cited in Commonwealth Department of Education Science and Training & The University of Queensland 2003), but the focus of research into this heterogeneous group had been mostly from the academic discipline of child psychology, without a strong educational perspective, until the last thirty years. From the late 70s, however, educational researchers and practitioners have recognised the need to consider the ineffectiveness and inappropriateness of traditional schooling for adolescents and some have questioned the nomenclature used, preferring the descriptor 'young people in their middle years' (Hunter 2003). The *Report of the Junior Secondary Review* (Eyres, Cormack & Barrette, 1992) was significant in stimulating Australia's focus on middle schooling during the nineties.

When studying the learning styles of young adolescents, and expectations and outcomes of middle schooling, the project *In the Middle: Schooling for Young Adolescents* (Schools Council 1993) reported that there was 'a perceived need for fundamental reform within secondary schooling generally' (p. 13) addressing both the ongoing needs of the students and the flexibility of school organization. The report concentrated on youth 'problems', such as suicide, alcoholism and drug use, rather than on its recognition that even though the environment and lifestyles of adolescents had changed, their schools had changed only marginally. Within the narrow and selective focus of the report, it

did, however, emphasize the issue of the changing nature of the *context* in which adolescents are placed: when 'a physical, emotional and cognitive reality, its form and effects, [are] shaped by the society in which the person lives' (Schools Council 1993, p. 7).

The physical, social, emotional and intellectual changes during adolescence present a particular challenge in schools, especially with the extensive and sophisticated information sources available through both formal and informal means. Adolescents in the Western world are the targets of sophisticated advertising and mass media, and much of this targeted information is beyond adult control. Even young adolescents have an ability to 'construct themselves in relation to a growing twenty-first century consumer culture, outside the parameters of direct adult control' (CDEST & UQ 2003, p. 11). It is acknowledged that young people today have a different context for their 'world views' because of the acceleration of change in many socio-economic and technological areas (Harkin, Turner & Dawn 2001). Previously stable social structures have become destabilised, and new vocabularies are being invented through information and communications technologies that inform the new contexts embraced by adolescents, and educational responses need to account for these new situations.

According to *Beyond the Middle* (CDEST & UQ 2003) teaching, organisational arrangements and participation levels have shown improvement and schools' recognition of difference contributes preliminary evidence of 'better connectedness to the world' (p. 5). There is also improved commitment and a higher level of awareness of literacy issues and, to a lesser extent, numeracy. However, the report found that there is still little consistency and coherence in approaches to literacy and numeracy on a national level. Levels of intellectual engagement have only marginally improved, compared to benchmark data, which suggests that there needs to be a stronger and more sustained focus on the intellectual engagement and intellectual demands placed on students. This finding was emphasised by the observation that assessment procedures used in middle years education varied greatly and were not of a consistently high standard.

The effectiveness of teachers has been a prime focus of the last decade, for example: the 'key to improved educational outcomes is teacher effectiveness' (Hill, Holmes-Smith & Rowe 1993, p. 30). In recognition of the expanding information sources available to adolescents today, Donovan, Bransford and Pellegrino (1999) take the view that, as students come to classrooms with a wide range of prior understandings, teachers must engage these before new learning can be successful. Students must have a deep understanding of the factual and conceptual elements in an area of learning, and their inter-relationships. Harslett, Harrison, Godfrey, Partington and Richer (2000), also reflecting on the teaching of Indigenous students, came to the same conclusions: the teacher should understand the importance of culture; understand and appreciate the

skills of their students; have high expectations of students, and use pedagogies that are flexible and work with students.

Beyond the Middle (CDEST & UQ 2003) advocates professional development in strategies for the renewal of teacher skills and understandings in priority learning areas such as national numeracy and literacy programmes. It also recommends that teachers become more skilled in enhancing the learning of students with disabilities and learning difficulties. One of the most common reasons for students' alienation from schooling and the development of negative learning identities, says Wyn (2003), is relationships. For some students, she says, "anything is better than school" and the two most frequently mentioned reasons for leaving school were that students either did not like the teachers or they found the work boring (Dwyer & Win cited in Wyn 2003).

Effective teachers, however, are more likely to blossom in effective schools, where this is usually taken to mean that the interactions of leadership, school administration, the school environment and the teaching-learning interaction is in balance. Up until recently, there has been less focus on looking at the whole-school environment, apart from references to the national emphasis on literacy and numeracy for all students, and yet schools, teachers and the broader community are inextricably entwined. This involves recognising that schools are composed of individuals whose practices and actions impact on one another, and that are embedded within a wider community. Change, therefore, needs to be on a whole-school basis (MYPRAD 2003). Even those strategies that focus directly on the middle years have an important contribution to make within the whole school environment. Effective practice in teaching must, after all, play an important role in effective whole-school policies and practices (Hill & Crevola 1997).

Researching the Cluster

In the research conducted in the Beechworth Cluster, information was gathered through a variety of data gathering techniques, namely:

- Focus group interviews, graffiti sheets, questionnaires and a telephone interview. Seven focus group interviews took place with students from Years 5 to 9, selected randomly from across the Cluster;
- One focus group interview with staff from across all of the schools via the Cluster's Reference Group (which was made up of principals and classroom teachers);
- One focus group interview from staff at Beechworth Secondary College;
- Comments gained via graffiti sheets posted in the two largest schools in the Cluster, and
- Written questionnaires to school council members of each school.

The initial focus group interviews were conducted with a sample of randomly selected students from each of the participating schools, and although it was intended to extend this approach to discussions with school council members, timing practicalities along with a desire for all participants to speak openly and without fear or favour, led to the use of questionnaires. Focus group interviews were also conducted with all the teaching staff from Beechworth Secondary College, and this followed a period of four weeks during which time they were invited to make comments on graffiti sheets left in their staff common rooms and which asked three questions:

1. What assists your teaching?
2. What doesn't assist your teaching?, and
3. What would you change?

Focus group interviews as a form of data gathering were decided to be the most appropriate method for seeking the opinions and perceptions of students in the middle years because they were more likely to feel at ease if they are in a situation with their peers. Focus group interviews also allowed for diverse opinions and perspectives to be expressed (Vaughn, Shay Schumm & Sinagub 1996). While the focus group interviews were planned and structured – the questions having been arrived at in consultation with the members of the Cluster Reference Group – the sessions provided the opportunity for flexibility and discussion between the researcher and the students. The research evolved through democratic negotiation between members of the school communities in the Cluster, and the researchers from the University.

It is worth noting at this point that in the comprehensive report of the research project and findings there were remarkable consistencies between the comments made by the students, their teachers and school councillors. But rather than reducing these comments to a series of themes, in the report submitted to the Cluster at the end of the investigation, we considered it important for the different groups of respondents to be able to hear their own "voices". Some of the students, for instance, were concerned that they be able to have access to the final report – to not only know that a report was written, but to also be able to read and understand parts of it. They were also concerned that frequently they felt as though they are being listened to by adults but that nothing ever comes of it.

Major Findings

Teachers (Can) Make a Difference

An overwhelming and consistent message that has been conveyed in this research is the acknowledgment of the role and influence that passionate and knowledgeable teachers have in the learning process. Students, teachers and school councillors all made reference to the fact that teachers with passion about their subject and in its delivery, were the key to students' learning. This isn't new information, though its significance to any changes that might take place in the Cluster is substantial.

The quality of teachers, as Federal Education Minister Nelson (2003) repeated several times during an address, is the most important determinant of successful outcomes for students. Nelson's claim is supported by recent research, such as that by Hattie (2002), who represents the six major variables¹ upon student achievement in the following pie chart:

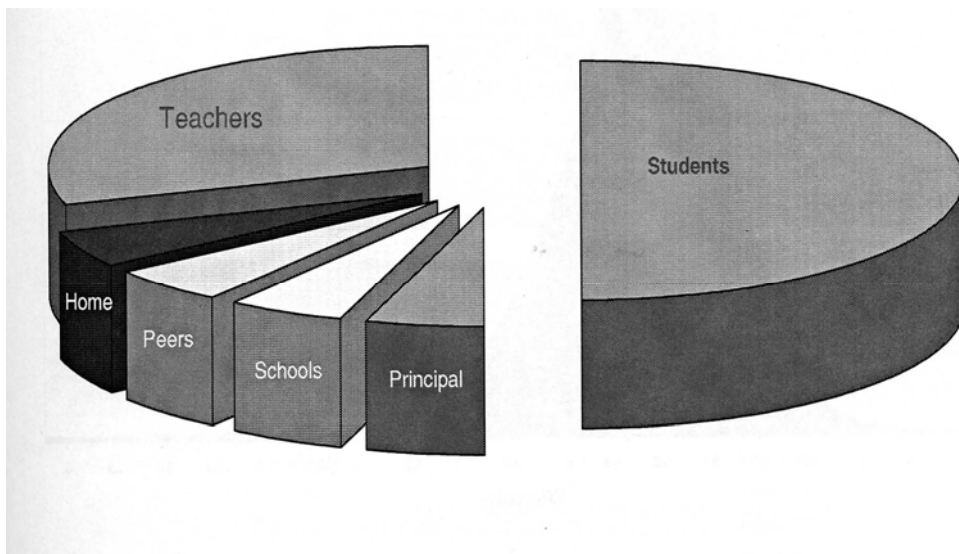


Figure 1: Proportions of achievement variance (Hattie 2002, p. 7).

Hattie's analysis is helpful, for it provides a means of prioritising options for subsequent action. Whereas the Middle Years Pedagogy Research and Development Project (2003) identified many of the same variables upon achievement (such as teachers, students, leadership and school factors), Hattie's

¹ Hattie (2002) makes the observation that although there are interaction effects between these variables, too often they are minor.

contribution extends this by utilising meta-analyses of research to apportion relative values of these variables. In Hattie's view,

Intervention at the structural, home, policy or school level is like searching under the lamppost for your wallet which you lost in the bushes, because that is where there is light. The answer lies elsewhere – it lies in the person who gently closes the classroom door and performs the teaching act – the person who puts into place the end effects of so many policies, who interprets these policies, and who is alone with students during their 15,000 hours of schooling (Hattie 2002, pp. 6-7).

According to Nelson's (2003) view of the literature, the characteristics that make up a 'good quality teacher' include the following: teachers who know their subject area; are passionate and excited about teaching it, and who are also capable of helping students realise the connections between what they are learning and how this can be translated into real-life situations. Therefore, this is in the public good.

Some of the comments made in the research reflected the attributes of new and of experienced teachers in the Beechworth Cluster. Within the next few years, an obvious area for public concern is the prediction that there will be high numbers of teachers leaving the workforce. Although it is beyond the scope of this paper to consider these impacts in any detail, we feel it is important to raise the issue of having high numbers of new teachers and gradually declining numbers of experienced and expert teachers. In their research on Productive Pedagogies – a component of the *New Basics Project* – Gore, Griffiths and Ladwig (2002) made interesting observations about the approaches to teaching adopted by pre-service and in-service teachers. Whereas they concluded that their belief in teachers' capabilities to teach well (provided they had the support of the systems in which they worked and were clear about what it means to teach well) was reaffirmed, they were able to make some observations about the different strengths that groups of pre and in-service teachers brought to their teaching.

Whatever organisational arrangements might occur in the middle years in the future in the Cluster, the key to any success, as some have argued (see, for instance, Hattie 2002; Hill *et al.* 1993), is most likely to come down to the quality of the teaching that takes place. The manner in which the Beechworth Cluster is able to develop ways in which new, experienced and expert teachers can learn from and support each other will enhance the achievements of students, whilst managing to avoid the hole left by expert teachers leaving the profession.

Much faith is placed by the *Schools for Innovation and Excellence Project* in school principals steering the reform process (Department of Education and Training 2003), and although teachers will be the ones who will make the most difference to students' achievement, the role of school principals in creating environments that enable mutually beneficial teaching and learning, will be fundamental. In

our view, it would be preferable for the Cluster to direct its energies at the needs of particular groups of teachers in particular schools, rather than limiting professional development activities to generic topics.

Teachers should be able to feel that it is not only alright to name good practices, but there are sound pedagogical reasons for doing so. To the rich array of successful teaching practices can be added a range of alternative, yet pedagogically sound, approaches to teaching, such as consideration of the directions taken by projects such as Queensland's *New Basics Project* or the mooted "Essential Learning" curriculum reforms in Victoria (Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority 2004). The Cluster will be in a position to develop consistent approaches to pedagogy – an approach that will do three things: first, build on good existing practices; second, consider a range of additional teaching principles and practices (that are informed by research), and third, ensure that the space still exists for teachers to teach passionately, and to not feel that they must conform to a particular paradigm to do so.

Different Views of Young People and Adults

One area in which there were striking differences in perspectives was that of older students' interactions with younger students, particularly in the smaller rural schools. According to the students in the smaller rural schools, what typically happens in composite classrooms is that older students (in Years 5 and 6) are encouraged, or directed, by the teacher to assist the younger students. Sometimes, the students said, the younger students are told to actively seek the assistance of the older students. This support also extends into the playground, say the students, when they are expected to "keep an eye out" for the younger students and to occasionally play with them. This is certainly not a new phenomenon, and might even be considered something of a tradition in some schools. For teachers, it provided a means of being able to address the vast range of abilities in a rural classroom and a means of coping with teacher overload, and for most members of rural school communities, it made the school into something of an extended family and provided opportunities for students to learn to work and socialise together.

In this research, however, students in rural schools overwhelmingly indicated that they didn't like it when they were expected to act as teachers, older playmates or guardians for the younger children – whether in the classroom or out in the playground. (This wasn't the case in the larger, urban primary schools, where there was a sense of pride expressed by the older primary students when they acted as a 'buddy' for younger children.) Particular comments made by the students focussed on having their concentration interrupted; of being required to provide this support even if it wasn't what

they wanted to do, and of sometimes having to endure other children's company.

School councillors, on the other hand, have expressed a different point of view². Several school councillors saw these interactions as representing opportunities for students to interact with each other, which was something that held rural schools apart from other schools.

For teachers, perhaps the phenomena of requiring older students to help younger students is symptomatic of the demands being placed on teachers in small rural schools, and teachers in the focus group discussions clearly pointed to these demands, such as needing additional and specific skills to deal with difficult students, the many administrative requirements, the physical limitations of their settings, teaching a crowded curriculum, and dealing with an expectation that "[we] have got to fix it all", to use the words of one teacher. Utilising children in this way – and we should stress, we are referring to situations in which the older students feel imposed upon, not those situations in which it is the student's clear choice to act as a peer-support person – may be one way of dealing with the many demands, but it does raise concerns in relation to the appropriateness of doing so. At the least, requiring students to 'teach' other students may lead to a frustrated sense of justice; at the worst, it could even be seen as a form of exploitation.

Extending the negotiation between students and their teachers to specifically address how students wish to be treated in terms of providing support for other students, rather than expecting that it should happen automatically – or worse, imposing this as a requirement – would be an obvious extension of this practice and would be consistent with a socially-just and thinking curriculum.

It is difficult to locate specific literature that assists here, and indeed, it may be that our research has named a phenomenon that is not new, but which provides a rural perspective on previous pedagogical discussions. The opportunity that exists for further research is apparent, and there would be benefit in seeing the interactions that occur in classrooms, rather than relying only on being told what they are. Stories, such as those that have been heard in this research, are representations of experience, for '...it is a mistake to treat the stories told as though they were the truth' (Kamler 1998, p. 13). This certainly should not be taken to mean that participants in this research were lying. Rather, it points to the existence of multiple truths being expressed by multiple publics; the well-recognised differences between what people say happens and what actually happens.

² Our researchers did not hear specific comments about this phenomenon from teachers.

Schools

Linked to this discussion on rural-specific issues, another strong point that has come through in the research is that of the positive features associated with being country schools. Urban and rurally-based schools came in for positive comment on the basis of having space and for being located in what many in the study have regarded as an ideal part of the North East of Victoria. The environmental settings in which schools are located within the Beechworth Cluster are viewed positively for the benefits they provide in terms of lifestyle and opportunities for learning outside of the traditional classroom. This commonality, we would suggest, provides a basis for the development of a shared vision – from the ground up. Literally! But from this common starting-point, it may provide opportunities for schools within the Cluster to consider ways in which they can aim to share things that work – things such as particular teaching strategies and curriculum initiatives that capitalise on the external environment, as well as ways of communicating with the broader community.

Hattie (2002) has argued that the physical aspects of schools play a relatively minor role in influencing student achievements, and that the major influence that affects student achievements – after the students themselves, that is – are the teachers. Even though Hattie has said that the size and layout of the school, and of class sizes themselves, contributes relatively little, he is not arguing that teachers should be expected to teach massive classes of students at the one time or that they – or their students – should be expected to endure less than adequate and safe physical conditions.

Consideration of large-scale and substantive changes to the way in which things are organised within the Cluster might still remain an option, but if Hattie's (2002) meta-analyses of related studies is to be relied upon, then trying to bring about large changes, unless absolutely essential, could cause massive upheaval for minimal gain. It would seem more appropriate, and ultimately more effective, to concentrate upon the teaching and learning interaction. It would be unfortunate – and probably undesirable – to have the focus of attention shifted to organisational arrangements when the energy and real potential for change is likely to come by concentrating on pedagogical concerns.

Cluster Culture

If the concept of culture is taken to mean '... a set of meanings, ideas and symbols that are shared by the members of a collective and that have evolved over time' (Alvesson & Billing 1997, p. 103), then this can mean that certain things become taken for granted, and therefore, legitimated. As the Beechworth Cluster is relatively young, the meanings and ideas by which it operates are likely to be in a formative stage. In fact, it may not even be possible for the

members of the Cluster to name their shared meanings and ideas at this point in time. Whereas some schools are able to make their beliefs and understandings explicit, this may take some time for the Cluster to achieve. Clearly, '... beliefs and understandings are often contested, and are not always shared' (Hill, Mackay, Russell & Zbar 2001). Realising this, it seems important for the Cluster not to rush headlong into developing an explicit statement of its culture, for this may have the effect of forcing compliance upon some members of the group in a process known as 'groupthink', which is the uncritical acceptance and/or suppression of dissent in going along with group decisions (Fullan 1993, p. 82). Rather, the Cluster's culture is something that will emerge, providing that opportunities exist for all parties in the Cluster to collaborate and contest understandings. This isn't to suggest that it is inappropriate for the Cluster to have a collective vision, but it is to caution against prematurely locking itself into one way of being and thereby advantaging certain publics, and more importantly, disadvantaging others.

Change is a process which takes place continuously and rather than being evolutionary and linear, occurs in episodes. It would appear that the challenge confronting the Beechworth Cluster if it is to move beyond an innovation and towards a sustainable change is manifold: the Cluster will need to harness the enthusiasm and commitment of the members of the Cluster. Not all Cluster members will see the need for change in the same way. Collaboration then, ...is not automatically a good thing; it does not mean consensus; it does not mean that major disagreements are verboten; it does not mean that the individual should go along with the crowd. (Fullan 1993, p. 82)

We therefore urged the members of the Cluster to consider the realities of collaboration; that it is a process of shared creation and a recognition that conflict is inevitable.

Fullan (1993) goes on to argue the dilemmas associated with educational reform: on one hand, there is a bottom-up movement initiated by teachers and other educators; on the other, there is the natural inclination towards maintaining the *status quo*:

The way that teachers are trained, the way that schools are organized, the way that the educational hierarchy operates, and the way that education is treated by political decision-makers results in a system that is more likely to retain the *status quo* than to change. When change is attempted under such circumstances it results in defensiveness, superficiality or at best short-lived pockets of success ... You cannot have an educational environment in which change is continuously expected, alongside a conservative system and expect anything but constant aggravation (p. 3).

Concluding Thoughts

The research process has enabled the voices of many publics within the Cluster to be heard, but equally, the voices of many have not been heard, such as the administration staff in schools who are at the frontline of the interface between schools and the broader community and who know much about the needs and circumstances of young people in their middle years. Similarly, the voices of many in the broader community have not been heard.

Of the voices that have been heard, however, students have told of some of their experiences in schools and have spelt out many of the things that would enhance their learning, such as the nature of the teacher-student relationship and of how schools might be organised somewhat differently. Significantly, they have also revealed their preferences for how they would like to be treated during this period of their lives.

Teachers have also offered their voices to this research story, and they have expressed not only the frustrations associated with being expected to do increasingly more, but also the delights and rewards of working with young people when they come to school prepared to be active partners in the learning process.

School councillors, most of them parents of children in the schools in the Beechworth Cluster, have spoken with pride about the achievements of children in their schools as well as the positive and valuable contributions that teachers make to their children's learning. As participants who are positioned as being simultaneously inside and outside their children's learning contexts, they have expressed concerns about troubling aspects, such as the apparent increase in bullying and other atypical behaviours, and have told of concerns that reflect changes in Australian society.

Guiding the introduction of change via innovation into the middle years of schooling is the task that now falls to the leaders within the Beechworth Cluster, whether the leaders be principals or other members of the school communities. Elmore and Burney's comments provide wise counsel for the task that lies ahead:

Leadership must create conditions that value learning as both individual and collective good. Leaders must create environments in which individuals expect to have their personal ideas and practices subjected to the scrutiny of their colleagues, and in which groups expect to have their shared conceptions of practice subject to the scrutiny of individuals. Privacy of practice produces isolation; isolation is the enemy of improvement (Elmore & Burney 1999 cited in Fullan 2001, p. 20).

The leaders of this change process are no doubt aware of the tasks that lie ahead, but hopefully see it as an opportunity to make a positive difference to

the lives of many, and this therefore will be in the public good. Innovation, of course, does not need to be large or even spectacular, and as this research has helped to demonstrate, the real difference for young people in their middle years can be achieved by concentrating on the single most valuable resource in each of the schools that makes up the Cluster, which, of course, are the teachers. Teachers who step outside the established square of instruction to dream up content and teaching and learning strategies that will enable students to develop deeper understandings of core knowledge, and then practise the ability to transfer this knowledge, can be identified as educators who are innovating for engagement.

REFERENCES

- Alvesson, M. & Billing, Y. D. 1997, *Understanding Gender and Organizations*, Sage, London.
- Beechworth Cluster 2003, *Schools for Innovation and Excellence 2004: Expression of Interest for Phase 2 School Clusters*, up.
- Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development 1989, *Turning Points: Preparing American Youth for the 21st Century*, Carnegie Corporation of New York, New York.
- Commonwealth Department of Education Science and Training & The University of Queensland 2003, *Beyond the Middle. A Report about Literacy and Numeracy Development of a Target Group of Students in the Middle Years of Schooling*, www.dest.gov.au/schools/publications/2003/MiddleYears/index.htm, accessed November 28, 2003.
- Cumming, J. (ed.) 1998, *Extending Reform in the Middle Years of Schooling: Challenges and Responses*, Australian Curriculum Studies Association, Canberra.
- Department of Education and Training 2003, *Innovation in the Middle Years: a Discussion Paper to Assist School Clusters Develop an Expression of Interest for the Schools for Innovation and Excellence Initiative*, DE&T, Melbourne.
- Donovan, M. S., Bransford, J. & Pellegrino, J. 1999, *How People Learn: Bridging Research and Practice*, National Academy of Sciences, National Research Council, Washington DC.
- Education Queensland 2001, *The New Basics Project*, <http://education.qld.gov.au/corporate/newbasics>, accessed March 22, 2004.
- Eyers, V., Cormack, P. & Barratt, R. 1992, *The Report of the Junior Secondary Review: the Education of Young Adolescents*, Education Department of South Australia, Adelaide.
- Fraser, N. 1993, 'Re-thinking the public sphere: a contribution to the critique of actually existing democracy', in B. Robins (ed.), *The Phantom Public Sphere*, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis.
- Friedland, L. 2001, 'Communication, community and democracy: towards a theory of the communicatively integrated community.' *Communication Research*, vol. 28, no. 4, pp. 358-391.
- Fullan, M. 1993, *Change Forces: Probing the Depths of Educational Reform*, Falmer Press, London.
- Fullan, M. 2001, *The New Meaning of Educational Change*, Teachers College Press/Routledge, New York.
- Gore, J. M., Griffiths, T. & Ladwig, J. G. 2002, Exploring "productive pedagogy" as a framework for teacher learning, Paper presented at the Annual Conference of the Australian Association for Research in Education, Brisbane, December 2-5.
- Harkin, J., Turner, G. & Dawn, T. 2001, *Teaching Young Adults: A Handbook for Teachers in Post-compulsory Education*, Routledge Falmer, London.
- Harslett, M., Harrison, B., Godfrey, J., Partington, G. & Richer, K. 2000, 'Teacher perceptions of the characteristics of effective teachers of Aboriginal middle school students', *Australian Journal of Teacher Education*, vol. 25, no. 1, pp. 37-45.

- Hattie, J. 2002, 'What are the attributes of excellent teachers?' in B. Webber (ed.), *Teachers make a Difference: What is the Research Evidence? Conference Proceedings*, New Zealand Council for Educational Research, Wellington (New Zealand).
- Hill, P. W. & Crevola, C. A. 1997, *Redesigning Schools for Improved Learning*, Centre for Applied Educational Research, The University of Melbourne, Parkville (Vic).
- Hill, P. W., Holmes-Smith, P. & Rowe, K. J. 1993, *A Study of School and Teacher Effectiveness: Results from the First Phase of the Victorian Quality Schools Project*, IARTV Seminar Series Paper No. 21, September.
- Hill, P. W., Mackay, A. D., Russell, V. J. & Zbar, V. 2001, 'The middle-years', in P. Cuttance, M. Angus, F. Crowther & P. Hill (eds), *School Innovation: Pathway to the Knowledge Society*, <http://www.detya.gov.au/schools/publications/2001/innovation/chapter5.htm>, accessed November 20, 2003.
- Hunter, L. 2003, Young people in their middle years of schooling: have we missed the point again?, Paper presented at the Joint Conference of the New Zealand Association for Research in Education and the Australian Association for Research in Education, Auckland, November 29 - December 3.
- Kamler, B. 1998, 'Narrative research and the production of stories', *Changing Education*, vol. 4, no. 4, pp. 13-17.
- Nelson, B. 2003, Taking Schools to the Next Level, Paper presented at the Pursuing Opportunity and Prosperity Conference, University of Melbourne, November 13.
- Reid, A. & Thomson, P. L. 2003, 'What's public about curriculum?' in A. Reid & P. L. Thomson (eds), *Re-thinking public education: towards a public curriculum*, Post Pressed, Flaxton (Qld).
- Schools Council 1993, *In the Middle: Schooling for Young Adolescents*, Project Paper No. 7, Compulsory Years of Schooling Project, NBEET, AGPS, Canberra.
- Vaughn, S., Shay Schumm, J. & Sinagub, J. 1996, *Focus Group Interviews in Education and Psychology*, Sage.
- Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority 2004, *Victorian Curriculum Reform 2004 Consultation Paper: a Framework of "Essential Learning"*, VCAA, Melbourne, <<http://www.vcaa.vic.edu.au/prep10/crp/consultpaper.pdf>>.
- Wyn, J. 2003, Becoming Adult in the 2000s: New Life Patterns and New Challenges, Paper presented at the Community Lecture Series 2003, La Trobe University Albury-Wodonga Campus, November 27, 2003.