
Editorial

Machinations in the Middle

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Guest Editor – Special Edition

Middle Years of Schooling

The middle years of schooling (mys), including the middle phase of schooling (mps), middle level schooling (mls), and middle schooling (ms)¹, has become an important educational focus in Australia over the last 15 years. The relatively young research field, however, is somewhat fragmented and limited in quantity, scope, and theorisation. This edition presents some of the research operating within the field of mys in Australia. While the intention was to represent contemporary research that targeted conceptualisations, policy, school-based practice and teacher education, in reality the process of constructing the special issue exposed the dearth of quantity, quality, breadth and depth of research within the field of the middle years of schooling and reported earlier in Luke et al (2002). While it is the case that the focus on the middle years has improved substantially over the last 15 years, attention to mys in both research and practice risks being increasingly rhetorical, and the focus being dissipated or shifted to the more dominant ‘ends’ of schooling and the ‘good ideas’ section on bookshelves. This counterforce to the development of middle years education and research is achieved through some of the same mechanisms that earlier led to concerns over the lack of attention to the middle years and that fuelled the current wave of attention on the middle years.

Using Bourdieuan (Bourdieu, 1998) tools we can conceptualise the dynamic and dialogic relationships between the field of mys and the dispositions of those participating in the middle years of schooling. We can recognise there are particular practices, structures, players and positions taken up or made available. In turn what/who becomes legitimate, legitimating and legitimated, through the ‘game’ of education generally, and mys specifically, determines the range of possibilities for what might be. Bourdieu suggests that the school, through the mechanism of legitimising ability and awarding certification for particular ways of knowing and being, is a significant institution by which the established social order is maintained.

What counts as success and failure, valued practices, expected values, assumptions, and legitimate language adopted in schooling are argued to be those of the dominant groups, and for the purposes of this issue, the dominant forms of education. Being able to enact the dominant culture and share in the dominant groups' social capital is framed as success and ideologically legitimates the existing social order within education and schooling. Attempts, both philosophical and practical, by players with non-dominant educational positions, such as those potentially involved in the *mys*, to challenge, subvert, or provide alternatives to the dominant game/s of education are difficult as the players are not positioned strongly within the field. Many of the pedagogically sound practices promoted through middle schooling, such as democratic classrooms and integrative curriculum, are still positioned as 'alternative' practices. There are calls to 'prove' these practices against more dominant teacher-centred classroom and subject driven curriculum that not only glorify particular domains of knowledge, for example maths and English, but fail to provide substantial evidence as to their effectiveness.

As well, the rules of the game work against any play that challenges or subverts the game. Attempts to change the game, the field, the rules, or the players meets the inertia of change as those who are invested in the game (for example adults/teachers and particular knowledge bases) legitimate the knowledges and practices that keep them effectively and powerfully within the game. Note for example, the current popular and academic support for national testing of skills and content located within maths and English but not those skills and knowledges found in the Arts or Health and Physical Education key learning areas. This also can be seen in many other practices exposed by the increased focus on *mys*. Established orders of subject-based curriculum, lock-step age-based groupings, mythologies of what constitutes primary and secondary schooling, legitimate pedagogy, curriculum and assessment practices, teacher-student relationships, timetabling, classspaces², and conceptualisations of the young people in their *mys*, work to reproduce much of the game of dominant primary/secondary education or teacher/student relationships for example. As such, mechanisms of dominant education call into question those that challenge it. *Ms*, *mys* and *mpl* are examples where calls to account for such practices/philosophies are made by dominant education. Dominant education calls *ms*, *mys* and *mpl* to account for their practices and philosophies in the terms set by dominant education.

Research, in particular evidence-based research, has been called upon to 'prove' and 'disprove' alternatives promoted under the banner of *ms*. But some of this research is problematic, just as some versions of the practices promoted as *ms* are problematic. Some research, as part of the *mys* field, reconstitutes and relegitimizes popular notions of limiting terminology such as adolescents/adolescences (see Point and Counterpoint papers in *Curriculum Perspectives*, 2006 for further discussion) while

other research becomes invested in simplistic and totalising debates of ‘either/or’ with respect to topics such as streaming/mixed ability grouping, single-sex/coeducational classes, subject-based/integrative curriculum, student-centred/teacher-centred pedagogies, individual/group learning, high stakes testing/portfolios. While such foci might add to what we know about fragments of education it is important to keep remembering that the complexity, fluidity and multiperspectivity must be acknowledged and are possibly not able to be captured within many of the research processes available to us. Any claims must be tempered with recognising limitations and critiquing what counts as research as particular politics are played out within and upon the field. At the same time it is important to question assumptions within and about education, regardless of whether it is a dominant or less dominant form such as middle schooling, and continue to seek theoretical and methodological understandings that encourage an education of inquiry and curiosity beyond just reproduction of the status quo.

As part of this field, researchers, educators, teacher educators, education policymakers involved with middle years must position themselves to work alongside the strong players in the popular media and those with much more conservative or reproductive education agendas. Players such as the researchers working in this field might argue that they are left on the bench with issues such as: being early career middle years researchers struggling for research funding; their short term employment or funding disabling longitudinal research in ms; unestablished research programs in Research Higher Degrees for those interested in middle years; loose or undeveloped networks of researchers within Australia and with other systems such as North America; and marginalised teacher education courses, programs, and associated research that seek to investigate and enact less dominant educational practices such as those often associated with mys. While some of these issues become apparent in this edition these papers also highlight possible shifts that researchers and others within the field of mys might work towards. These shifts should aim to strengthen the research base that informs the field, uphold a spirit of debate with expanding possibilities in conceptualisations and practices, and establish the middle years as important and engaging spaces for young peoples’ learning. A continuing focus on ‘the middle’ seeks to value the contribution and participation that young people, alongside others such as researchers and teachers in the field, can make to society.

The papers that follow illustrate current research targeting middle years’ practices in Australian schools and schooling systems as well as initiatives in middle years teacher education. The issue is well overdue as there was a lengthy delay as one set of authors waited for government permission to publish their findings. Ultimately the permission was not granted within twelve months, yet another frustrating mechanism that interferes with dissemination of valuable research in the middle years. The first

two papers capture practice in schools. On the topic of literacy the first paper focuses on literacy pedagogy - Sarah Jane Culican analyses transcripts from teachers attempting to adopt new patterns of classroom talk. Furthering the curriculum/knowledges debate John Wallace et al pick up on one of the practices promoted in middle schooling – integrated curriculum. Whilst there are many versions of what a non subject-based curriculum can be, this paper focuses upon one notion of integration, recognising that there is no panacea but there are more fruitful ways to work with curriculum beyond a ‘one size fits all’ approach or a taken-for-granted historically constructed content/subject-based approach so common to many of our schools today. Tony Dowden furthers the debate of integrated curriculum to support implementation of integrative curriculum in middle schools.

Donna Pendergast et al explores early attempts by several teacher education institutions to prepare teachers to work specifically in the middle. While new university courses have been created in the name of middle years since this paper was written there is evidence that other courses have suffered under the knife of economic rationalism, educational conservatism or appropriation by dominant ideologies and practices. So too is the related mys research in an early stage and while much of the data gathered has yet to be processed or more time needs to pass before ample data can be collected, this paper provides the reader with an indication of what research we can expect to see in the near future.

Katherine Main and Fiona Bryers capture the state-of-play in Australian research about mys in the penultimate paper. Much can still be learned from related research in places such as North America but as the authors and others before them have noted, the Australian context is particular, so there needs to be caution in the transferability between contexts.

In the final paper for this special edition, Lisa Patel Stevens et al endeavour to offer a way to conceptualise the symbolic and material learning space of the ‘middle’; the work of schools as an institutional site working with young people who are also conceptualised as ‘middle’.

I suspect that we are in a bit of a lull between the first wave of conceptualisations, practices and positionings constructing and constructed by the growing middle years field in Australia and the next wave. At a time when I would argue mys (as a legitimated educational, academic and research field) is again in danger of losing its distinctiveness and particularity within the broader field of education, I acknowledge the important ‘first wave’ work by those such as Lesley Newhouse-Maiden and Rod Chadbourne as they leave the field in which they worked so hard to help legitimate.

It will be interesting to see whether the next wave brings strength to the appropriation of middle years by conservative dominant forces or resists these forces. Will we witness some of the epistemological shifts playing out in North America's wave of reinvention, such as those encouraged by early proponents of middle schooling (e.g. James Beane) and those suggested by contributing authors such as Stevens et al? And how might the shifts play out in the practices of the middle years of schooling in Australia, practices that actively reconstitute what continues to be possible (Butler, 2003). As indicated by some of the cross-referencing critique between authors and the continuing unproblematic use of conceptualisations such as 'adolescents' our field is in need of, and open for, much more debate, and an engagement with complexity. My hope is that this issue promotes ongoing debate around mys and mys research; that such practices fuel the legitimation of a more dynamic and responsive schooling that extends what middle years of schooling possibilities might be for young people, their teachers, their administrators, policy makers, community and researchers in ten years time.

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Notes

- ¹ As these terms are sometimes used interchangeably while at other times they are seen to be different, for the purpose of this paper the middle years of schooling (mys) refers to those schooling years of grades 4/5 through to 8/9 and would include middle schooling models as well as primary and secondary schooling models; the middle phase of schooling (mps) refers to particular systemic organisational approaches to the middle years such as currently in Education Queensland; and middle schooling (ms) refers to the approach to schooling that tends to adopt signifying practices such as teacher teaming, block timetabling, integrative curriculum, democratic classrooms, and authentic assessment.
- ² I use the term classspace to go beyond the classroom and recognise the other formal learning spaces used, for example the library, the drama theatre, the school hall, the gym, oval or pool.

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