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**Jumping the Fence to See What's on the Other Side: A Report on a  
Middle Phase of Learning Teacher Exchange Project in Central  
Queensland**

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**Abstract**

A primary to secondary school transition still exists for students in Queensland schools, despite a policy focus on the middle phase of learning since 2002. The Queensland State School Action Plan (2003) focuses on the unique characteristics of new millennial adolescent learners and the effects of (potentially) negative schooling experiences during years 4 to 9, and challenges teachers to plan for a greater degree of alignment between curriculum, pedagogy and assessment practices, particularly during the transition from year 7 to 8.

This paper reports on case study data from a teacher exchange project designed to help primary and secondary teachers better understand issues in the opposite schooling sector. The teachers reflected on what they had *expected* to see in the other sector's learning site and what they *actually* saw when they observed teaching on 'the other side of the fence'. Their observations focused on teacher planning, curriculum, pedagogy, teacher/student relationships and student behaviour. The study reveals that teachers from each sector understood little about the 'other' educational sector, and in most instances, the realities did not match the expectations. The study confirms the value of teacher exchange and work-shadow approaches to cross-sectoral understandings of middle schooling issues.

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## Introduction

Throughout many parts of the Western world since the 1990s, concerns about adolescent disengagement and alienation from formal schooling have focused systemic reform efforts on the Middle Phase of Learning. This phase is notionally understood to encompass young people from ten to fifteen years of age, although in some school systems it includes those as young as nine years old. Research from around the world has shown that decreasing levels of participation in school puts communities, individuals and economies at risk (Batten & Russell, 1995; Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1989). In Australia, by the turn of this new century, questions about the continuing relevance of formal schooling to new millennial adolescents have been raised, thus ensuring on-going interest in middle phase issues in all school systems (Jackson & Davis, 2002).

Despite more than a decade of research around middle phase learning and issues related to the 'transition years', in Queensland, a primary to secondary school transition remains the dominant model. The fence to be jumped from Year 7 in primary school, to Year 8 at the beginning of high school divides one set of schooling practices from the other. Students experience discontinuity between curriculum, pedagogy and assessment practices, as well as pastoral care arrangements and timetabling. These different operational aspects of primary and secondary schools have been identified as negative factors in adolescents' engagement in learning. As Braggett (1997) points out, teachers, parents and other professionals have been aware for quite some time that schooling is failing to engage some adolescents. Structures in secondary schools prevent the kinds of close personal associations that are vital to middle phase learners' continuing engagement with learning. At a time when young people are undergoing major social, cognitive, emotional and physical changes of adolescence, many of them have difficulty assimilating entirely new routines, relationships and responsibilities into their lives as they proceed from primary to secondary schooling.

In 2002, Queensland's 'Education and Training Reforms for the Future: A White Paper' initiated a renewed focus on the middle phase of learning. School systems were exhorted to respond to issues around low engagement and participation for adolescent learners. Queensland's Middle Phase of Learning State School Action Plan (Education Queensland, 2003) has subsequently emerged as a blue-print for change and improvement by focusing on strategies to keep students engaged in learning during the school Years 4 to 9. It recommends strengthening links between primary and secondary schools to achieve a smoother transition for students, lessening the dislocation and upheaval that some experience during this time. It also recommends initiatives at a school and cluster level aimed at providing opportunities for teachers to share pedagogical practices across sectors to ensure that meaningful, embedded change occurs.

This paper reports on one such initiative in a cluster of five primary and two secondary state schools in Central Queensland. Cluster principals conducted a teacher exchange project around the middle phase of learning in response to the Queensland State School Action Plan and the recently introduced Professional Standards for Teachers (Queensland Government, Education Queensland, 2005). The eight month project provided an opportunity for teachers to observe the operations of teaching and learning in the opposite

sector and to engage in professional discourse and reflection about their experiences. The project was designed as an initial stage in an on-going professional development project to assist teachers to appreciate middle phase issues and to develop new ideas and practices to 'bring down the fence' between primary and secondary schools in the cluster. The teachers engaged in work shadowing over a number of days, focusing on aspects of schooling such as planning, assessment, student behaviour, pedagogy and student/teacher relationships. At the conclusion of the work shadowing experiences, teachers reflected on what they *expected to see* in the learning sites and what they *actually saw* and experienced.

The first section of the paper briefly outlines the history of government and school policy dedicated to the production of a middle phase agenda and professional standards for teachers in Queensland state schools. The second section of the paper describes the research around the project, which was undertaken as a case study. The third and final section of the paper sets out the findings from the research according to the categories for analysis. The findings confirm the value of teacher exchange and work-shadow approaches to cross-sectoral understandings of these complex issues in contemporary schooling.

## **Education and Training Reform: a Smart State agenda**

School reform and renewal has been ubiquitous and fast-paced since Dawkins' (1988) reform efforts focused attention on the relationship between Australia's national economic interests in the emerging global economy and the effectiveness and efficiency of Australia's educational sector. Since this time, schools have been charged with the production of hi-tech, creative and skilled workers for the emerging knowledge economy in recognition that Australia's 'human capital' is vital to its future survival in the global marketplace. By the 1990s, policy began to show a concern for the 'quality' of schooling. With its ageing workforce and traditional structures designed for the former Industrial Era, it was becoming evident that, without radical reform and continuing up-skilling of the teaching workforce, schools could become irrelevant to new millennial generations of learners. Indeed, by the early 1990s, a number of Australian States had sponsored research out of a growing concern that students in the middle years, in particular, were 'switching off' from school or dropping out of schools altogether (Braggett, 1997).

In this context, schools have been positioned as being responsible for reform efforts directed at: recognising the needs of adolescent learners in the 21 century; up-skilling and re-skilling the professional workforce; and instituting new policies around systemic priorities that seek to modernise schooling for the new century. In Queensland, the government's Education and Training Reform for the Future (ETRF) Agenda (2002) outlined a 'Smart State' agenda. Significant among the reforms are:

- the introduction of a non-compulsory full-time preparatory year of schooling (in 2007) and the compulsory school-starting age will increase by six months (in 2008);

- substantial curriculum, information communication technologies (ICTs), literacy and numeracy middle schooling initiatives focusing on students from 10-15years, and targets for reaching Year 5 and Year 7 national reading, literacy and numeracy benchmarks; and
- the requirement that by 2006 all Year 10 students be registered with the Queensland Studies Authority (QSA) and commence ‘banking’ learning credits towards a Senior Certificate (in 2008).

The ETRF recommended that throughout the transition period between primary and secondary, students should be provided with continuous support and innovative curriculum delivered through improved teaching methods. Following recommendations in the ETRF, the Ministerial Advisory Committee for Educational Renewal (MACER) (2003) in Queensland produced a list of recommendations to drive policy on the middle phase of learning in Queensland education. Included in the MACER recommendations are calls for:

- implementation of a renewed vision of the middle phase of learning;
- a greater degree of alignment between upper primary and lower secondary schooling; and
- a high priority on the immediate and systematic professional learning and development of teachers and principals that recognises and supports their strategic role in delivering the desired outcomes from the middle phase of learning.

The development of Education Queensland’s *See the Future: The Middle Phase of Learning State School Action Plan* in 2004 provides specific detail on how Queensland State schools are to achieve the recommendations set out in the ETRF and MACER documents. At issue in all of the reports, is the requirement for schools to recognise the ‘middle years’ as a unique period of human development with distinct social, emotional and cognitive traits that require particular kinds of attentions from teachers and schools. Without this recognition, students are considered especially at risk of losing interest in learning. The recent emphasis on preparatory and senior years exacerbates the problems of middle phase learners, whose invisibility places them further at risk of ‘falling through the cracks’ and becoming disengaged from formal learning.

Research on the middle phase of learning has focused on the issues around the Year 7 to 8 transition. This is a time when students experience a number of significant curriculum discordances that are largely ignored when Year 8 planning occurs. Where there has previously been an emphasis on literacy and numeracy skills in primary schools, many secondary programs emphasise discipline content knowledge instead. In light of this trend, Hill and Russel’s (1999) claim that “there is almost no student growth in reading, writing, speaking and listening in the middle years” (p. 11) is not all that surprising. Carrington’s (2002) finding that many secondary teachers are ill-equipped to be able to manage students learning in literacy and numeracy in terms of diagnostic and remedial work is thus significant in this context. Subsequent school policy in Queensland has identified literacy and numeracy and authentic assessment practices as driving improvement in the middle phase of learning schooling. To produce meaningful and

permanent change, Carrington (2002) recommends strong advocacy from the school leaders and organisations whose recognition of the middle phase of learning must be the ‘first principle’.

At the heart of this middle phase agenda is the recognition that a change in teacher practices, and most likely teacher beliefs, as well as changes to existing notions of curriculum are required. Essentially though, teacher change remains the key focus, as it is the basis of any reform and improvement (Hackling, Goodrum & Rennie, 2001, p. 15). The middle phase agenda requires a significant shift in teacher beliefs about pedagogy, planning and assessment and calls for an alignment between these aspects of school curriculum. Changes of this nature require time and considerable effort and motivation on the part of the teachers. As Hackling *et al.* (2001) explain, pedagogies that emphasis an “inquiry-oriented, student-centred, outcomes-focused approach [require] more sophisticated teaching skills” (p. 15).

For classroom teachers to move beyond the status quo in middle phase teaching they require support in the form of leadership and professional learning that works for them. Teachers play a critical role in the ultimate implementation of middle phase learning experiences, and their beliefs and opinions are a key factor influencing middle phase reform agendas. However, as Lumpe, Haney and Czerniak (2000) found “the beliefs of teachers are not necessarily consistent with the literature about best practice in teaching” (p.276) and they are often entrenched and resistant to change. Therefore, teachers concerns for adolescents can be nurtured and channelled into professional learning communities around middle phase where recognition of the need to change existing practices is supported, and teachers can engage in the difficult business of developing new programs in tune with adolescent needs with leadership and collegial support.

The implications for middle phase in Queensland are clearly stated as thirteen actions listed in *See the Future: the Middle Phase of Learning State School Action Plan* (Queensland Government, Education Queensland, 2004). Actions ten to thirteen focus on strategies to assist teachers to become more effective pedagogues in the middle phase of learning through prioritising and promoting professional development, reviewing pre-service and post-graduate provision for teachers in the middle phase, and recognising and rewarding best practice for middle phase of learning teachers. Underpinning professional development for teachers in action ten of the report, is an undertaking to facilitate flexible staffing arrangements between primary and secondary schools, and to share information across clusters to facilitate closer alignment between curriculum and pedagogy from primary to secondary.

Coupled with this direction for middle phase learning, are the Queensland government’s *Professional Standards for Teachers: Guidelines for Professional Practice* (Queensland Government, Education Queensland, 2002). The twelve interrelated standards are designed to support teachers in “transforming their roles” to meet the needs of “new curriculum frameworks that coordinate curriculum, pedagogy and evaluation” and to renew their commitment to their own learning and professional development (Queensland Government, Education Queensland, 2005, p. 1). Designed to be generic in nature, the standards set out knowledge, skills and abilities applicable to all teaching situations in

Education Queensland schools. In the context of this project, they were used to frame one of the key data gathering activities of the research.

## Project Design

Qualitative case study method (Merriam, 1998; Patton, 1990; Stake, 2000) was chosen to investigate the teacher exchange program for its potential to yield insights into primary and secondary teachers' beliefs about the other sector, their practices, and the challenges they faced in working to gain a deeper understanding of the Year 7-8 transition and the middle phase agenda. Case study is embedded in literature on qualitative research (Merriam, 1998) and the central objective is 'understanding'. As Stake (2000) argues, "case study is not a methodological choice but a choice of what is to be studied ... but we concentrate, at least for the time being, on the case" (p. 435). Using case study, maximized opportunities for teachers' views and beliefs to be heard and legitimized their explanations of their preconceived views, actions and subsequent reflections. It provided a holistic perspective required to derive useful outcomes from the teacher exchange investigation.

This research aligns with Robson's (1993) definition of case study as "a strategy for doing research which involves an empirical investigation of a particular contemporary phenomenon within its real life context using multiple sources of evidence" (p. 5). Central to this definition is that "the case is studied in its own right, not as a sample from a population" (Robson, 1993, p. 5). It is not expected, therefore, that the findings from this particular case study would be applicable to all Queensland schools and clusters. Nevertheless, it would be reasonable to assume that other cluster groups may have similar issues with the transition years due to the resonances between adolescent learners, teachers' work and school operations in the context of formal schooling.

Three key questions guided the project:

- In what ways has this particular professional learning opportunity been important for the twenty-six participants from seven cluster schools?
- What pedagogical practices do these teachers identify as suited to teaching young adolescents?
- How has the teacher exchange opportunity contributed to teachers' professional learning about the middle phase and professional standards for teachers?

They were jointly negotiated with cluster principal representatives and as per their request, aligned with the *Middle Phase of Learning State School Action Plan* and the *Professional Standards for Teachers: Guidelines for Professional Practice* documents.

Given the logistics of organising work-shadowing opportunities for multiple teachers in multiple school sites across sectors, opportunities for gathering data were optimised by providing participants with prompt sheet pro-forma, and a diary dedicated to reflections and observations for the project. Data were gathered from: (i) the participants' responses to prompt questions for use with colleagues at the end of the work-shadowing sessions; (ii) their diary entries; and (iii) group discussions during a de-briefing day. The debriefing day at the conclusion of the teacher exchange work-shadowing sessions also provided an

opportunity to observe the participants and record their informal discussions about the experience.

Who went where? Twenty-six (26) teachers from five primary and two secondary schools (including one special education unit [SEU] attached to one of the secondary schools) volunteered to participate in the project. Thirteen (13) primary teachers work-shadowed in secondary schools and thirteen (13) secondary teachers went to primary schools (see *Table 1* below).

*Table 1: Participating schools and teachers*

School	Number of Participating Teachers
Primary State School A	3
Primary State School B	1
Primary State School C	2
Primary State School D	1
Primary State School E	6
Secondary School F	5
Secondary School G	8

Teachers' participation in the project involved: (i) attending meetings; (ii) maintaining observation notes of work-shadow experiences; and (iii) participating in debriefing and reflection sessions. The table below illustrates the specific activities teachers engage in as part of the project.

*Table 2: Teachers' activities*

Meetings	Two (2) prior to work-shadowing: first to elicit participation and second to address the Professional Standards underpinning the project.
Work-shadowing	Average work-shadowing period per participant was one-half (1/2) to a full (1) school day. In-class experiences depended on the timetable for that day of the teacher being work-shadowed. Peer debriefing occurred in non-contact times and during lunch breaks.
Project debriefing	Project de-briefing occurred over one half day (approximately 4 hours). All teachers met to compare and contrast the teaching and learning they observed in another schooling sector.

The project generated a range of qualitative data, including researchers' participant-observation notes from reference group feedback sessions, focussed analyses of transcripts from de-briefing day sessions, participants' prompt sheet responses and anecdotal notes from exchange teachers' diaries.

The following section describes the findings from the study, focusing on the 'expectations versus the realities' of teachers as they experienced teaching and learning in their exchange site. Key themes from the *Professional Standards for Teachers* were used to organise participants' responses and which provide an organising framework for the data in relation to the research questions

## **Expectations versus Realities**

For both the primary and the secondary teachers, their expectations of life on the other side of the fence were not always matched by the perceived realities. Many of their assumptions about teaching and learning in the opposite sector drew upon stereotypical notions of those sectors; notions which clearly became disrupted by their work shadowing experiences. With reference to the first research question, the important aspects of this particular professional learning opportunity are presented in terms of student engagement strategies embodied in student-teacher relationships and classroom learning environments. Pedagogical practices are the focus of the second research question and these were identified in relation to the use of information and communication technologies (ICTs), assessment practices, higher order thinking activities, literacy and numeracy activities. Findings relevant to the third research question conclude this section in a synthesis of the teachers' reflections on the project's entire professional learning process. In the text that follows, teachers' words are represented in italics.

### ***Teachers investigating student engagement strategies***

Teachers involved in this project recognised the importance of engaging their students in meaningful learning experiences and they identified positive student-teacher relationships as integral to all learning. In particular, secondary teachers commented on the '*closer relationships*' primary teachers seemed to have with their students; postulating that this may be '*because they are with the same kids all day*'. They envied the time that was available to primary teachers to form close, personal relationships with their students, but '*they can do this because they are not rushed all the time; they have longer than 35 minutes with their students*'. For these secondary teachers, knowing the students and recognising their adolescent needs was considered paramount to successful student-teacher relationships and hence student engagement in learning.

Primary teachers' responses to their work-shadowing experiences showed that they expected student-teacher interactions in secondary schools to be '*minimal*' and '*not as intimate as at primary level*'. To primary teachers, this was clearly an important element of learner engagement and some were actually surprised to find their secondary counterparts were able to have a relaxed dialogue with their students, with free interaction between students and teacher. Several primary teachers noted the more adult conversations that were possible in the secondary setting.

However, the primary teachers also commented on immature, attention-seeking behaviour from '*at risk kids*' that constituted much of the student-teacher interactions they observed in secondary schools. While some expectations of ordered structured learning with sensible mature workers with maybe one or two students not behaving were

often dashed, these were not expectations shared by all primary teachers. For these teachers, observing '*disruptive students disturbing other students*' with very little concern for other students' learning and a lack of '*awareness of consequences*' was not unusual because it was the norm for the same students when they were in primary school.

Generally, positive student-teacher relationships were seen by both groups as vital to Middle Phase learning. They believed that adolescent learners have particular behavioural characteristics that demand attention to issues around:

- Brain physiology and physical development;
- Peer and social relationships;
- Reward systems;
- Preferred learning styles;
- Time management; and
- Freedom and autonomy in learning environments.

Teachers also identified the classroom learning environment as important for successful student engagement. Perceptions of primary students' lack of maturity and cognitive capacities framed the expectations of a number of secondary teachers who thought they would see very structured and teacher-directed primary classrooms. Yet while there were instances of '*lovely quiet kids with behaviour directed by teachers*' and a '*high level of structure*', analysis of de-briefing session data revealed their surprise at also seeing '*engaged students, students self-directed rather than teacher-directed, activity-based, group work*'.

Finding a level of student '*ownership*' for the primary classroom environment was a particularly fascinating aspect of the exchange for secondary teachers. They expected primary classrooms to be visually stimulating, warm and engaging, busy and fun-filled places. This expectation was largely borne out in reality, with secondary teachers describing the '*busy people*' in '*beautifully coloured classrooms*' with '*students' work on display and cherished*' in '*classrooms well-equipped with resources*' and '*open environment[s] encouraging multiple, mobile group interactions*'. These secondary teachers remarked on the friendly learning climate/s that such environments supported, with the result that they observed '*primary students [who] were so happy to be at school and happy to see the teacher and wanted to talk to them*'. They noted that '*kids want to be there in primary and they want to learn...to do things, they were enthusiastic*'.

Most primary teachers expected to see sterile, barren secondary classrooms with little evidence of student ownership, and the data show this was the reality in most experiences. Only one teacher was surprised to find some instances where students' work was displayed in a room in the secondary school, along with several teaching resources. Although they did make note that the secondary classroom environments varied according to '*theory versus practical*' contexts for learning; thereby suggesting that the more practical subject areas had more evidence of student ownership of the learning environments.

Significant examples of effective pedagogical practices across the sectors were activities that gave adolescents ownership and responsibility for their learning. There were many similarities noted: *I found many things that I do in secondary [...] already done in primary schools*. For secondary teachers going into primary schools, the following practices were identified as noteworthy:

- allowing [student] independence;
- allowing noise and discussion;
- using integrated, thematic curriculum;
- extensive and detailed planning by teachers;
- using creative teaching and learning strategies; and
- planning across subject areas (KLA).

The personalising of primary classrooms enabled teachers to display good work, give students ownership of their room and recognition of their efforts. The personalised classrooms reflected both students and teacher's input into the learning outcomes achieved.

On the other hand, the primary teachers found the following aspects of secondary school practices useful:

- unit resources that other teachers could access;
- a resource bank of work, lesson plans;
- behaviour management strategies: [sending students to] the Responsible Thinking Centre room and being able to continue teaching, [then] re-entry conditions having to be met;
- structured assessment tasks;
- in the SEU: integrated learning cross-subject, shared case management; and
- confirmation that some aspects of Year 7 are useful in Year 8 and that '*I am on the right track*'.

To further this initial foray into understanding each other's side of the fence, the teachers unanimously agreed that they '*need much more work shadowing to find out what each [...] is doing*'. A brief overview of pedagogical practices in the use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs), assessment, higher order thinking, literacy and numeracy is now provided.

Integration of ICTs was identified as important for enhancement of students' learning. Secondary teachers celebrated the diversity of ICT resources available to, and deployed by primary school students:

*When I went to the primary I saw kids working with video-cameras, data projectors and power point and digital camera. No wonder they're bored when they come to see me as all they get is me and a blackboard.*

Another secondary teacher believed that ICTs took the '*tedium of out routine tasks*' with resultant '*high quality products leading to increased standings*' which in turn led to '*higher student expectations of self*'. They expected to see '*teacher directed, high dependence activities being carried out in a lab situation*' but on the contrary, they observed '*kids interacting with computers throughout the day in their classrooms with substantial levels of independence*'. Including computers, ICTs were used '*for rewards as well as for research and extension of completed work*'.

Conversely, primary teachers generally expected computers to be featuring heavily in secondary school learning. They expected students to have high levels of access to computer labs and hi-tech computer skills being performed on clusters of computers in dedicated work areas. They also expected to see a focus on assessment of ICT skills with a high use of ICTs to enthuse learners with low engagement levels and learning difficulties. The reality of primary teachers' experiences with secondary ICTs revealed a broad spectrum of activities from '*no reliance on ICTs at all*', to classes with wireless lap-tops and multimedia presentations for assessment. ICT labs featured frequently in primary teachers' observations of secondary sites. However, the availability of computer labs seemed to present a problem due to the large number of bookings. Current practices around ICTs in the Middle Phase of learning in these cluster schools illustrate that, unlike primary classrooms that routinely integrated ICTs in student learning, the nature of ICT use in these secondary schools was dependant upon the subject areas and the availability of resources.

Expectations around assessment practices were largely confounded by the lived realities. Primary teachers found secondary school assessment practices were characterised by: (i) criterion based judgements, (ii) student negotiated tasks, (iii) group/individual work and (iv) a real-life connectedness invoking ownership on the part of the students. They commented specifically on:

- the facility for students to improve their grade e.g. '*if you want to achieve an A then...*';
- the notion that assessment tasks could be completed over a period of time;
- the choice of tasks for students with the grade level/s to be achieved; and
- unit work folders for year levels with assessment tasks that other teachers could use.

Secondary teachers expected primary schools to have less formal approaches to assessment, in fact one teacher thought assessment would be, '*quite baby-like and easy*'. In reality, they found assessment in primary school to be characterised by a range of strategies and practices including:

- the development of a rubric based on student expectations;
- criteria negotiated with students using their own words;
- portfolios of individual work;
- a complexity of applications (with good use of ICTs);
- more use of observation using anecdotal information and the collection of evidence for assessment rather than formal tests;
- projects and group work; and

- scaffolded self-monitoring in a challenging yet safe environment.

Pedagogical practices connected with higher order thinking also confounded expectations from both sides of the fence. The primary teachers involved in work-shadowing secondary teachers had expectations of seeing advanced thinking strategies, high level challenge questions and students engaged in working and thinking at a high order level. As one primary teacher explained, “[secondary teachers]...*move more quickly to higher order thinking- at primary school we need to set up the basic knowledge before handover thinking takes place- only some students get there*”. What they found varied from class to class and appeared to be determined by the class dynamics. They observed cooperative problem solving, and students working on design tasks that were at a higher level than expected. On the other hand they reported observing little higher order thinking due to distractions, lesson structure and organisation, and student ability.

Overall, secondary teachers reported that they had not expected to see higher order thinking strategies taught explicitly in primary classrooms. They noted that the basics were taught and then opportunities were provided for students to apply the knowledge or extend their thinking processes in group situations. Comments during the debrief from one secondary teacher indicated that they would like to know more about higher order thinking skills, asking, ‘*how do we develop this skill within us to be able to expect this from the students?*’. The importance of learning more about teaching and learning practices for higher order thinking was mentioned again in the final session where teachers had the opportunity to state what they required in terms of professional learning on an upcoming student free day on middle phase learning. The request was for a short session on higher order thinking pedagogies along the lines of ‘*these are the pedagogies, here are the activities*’.

Literacy and numeracy are central tenets of the Middle Phase of Learning reform agenda and expectations in this area of pedagogical practice yet again met with mixed realities. Primary teachers expected to find: Year 8 students working at or above Year 7 level; project work that extended on genres; and elements of literacy within all subject areas. They found life-like contexts used for tasks, and literacy tasks that were self-directed (such as oral presentations and project work). One teacher commented that much of the literacy and/or numeracy work repeated work covered in primary.

Secondary teachers reported expecting to see literacy as a focus, and the explicit teaching of grammar, spelling and punctuation rather than how to write in a particular genre. They commented that the planning was much more extensive with a specific focus on language, which was the overall organiser. Some secondary teachers expected that literacy would have specific time allocated to it but found it was embedded in other subjects and that one primary teacher focused on genres and taught language skills as the need arose.

Expectations about numeracy teaching and learning practices in secondary school matched the perceived reality for the primary teachers. One primary teacher expected to see numeracy skills being applied to ‘*frightening stuff like algebra equations*’ and ‘*frightening stuff like fractional equations*’ – and was not disillusioned. Secondary

teachers expected a strong focus on literacy and numeracy with concrete practical activities to support student development. While they observed a strong focus on both, one teacher reported that the numeracy focus was incidental rather than planned. Of importance in these findings is the emphasis placed on the need to explicitly teach for literacy and numeracy by teachers of both sectors.

### ***Reflections on the professional learning process***

The work-shadowing experience was at the heart of this professional learning process. Collectively and individually, it was highly valued by the teachers and viewed as a significant professional learning activity. While many of the participants did not claim to be experts in the Middle Phase learning pedagogies, they acknowledged that participation in the project extended their understanding of issues surrounding students' transition from primary to secondary school. They appreciated the opportunity to dedicate time to Middle Phase issues and considered the work-shadow experiences a powerful instrument for cross-sectoral understanding and their own professional learning. Within the cluster, there is an obvious capability and enthusiasm for the development of a professional learning community on pedagogies that foster student engagement during the Middle Phases of learning.

During the debrief sessions the teachers had the opportunity to reflect on their experiences to date. A constant comment was that the peer debriefing time allowed on the work-shadow visits was too short to allow substantial conversations and to thoroughly document the teacher exchange outcomes. Furthermore, teachers found the brevity of the project and its location in the school calendar unfortunate although despite reported clashes with exams and revision periods, all were happy to have participated. In particular, they valued the professional relationships established with their counterparts and the possibilities these networks provide for exchange of ideas and information on Middle Phase learners, and collaborative planning across Years 7 and 8.

In some cases teachers reported that the work-shadowing reduced their anxiety about the learning experiences they provide for their students. The teachers realized that the '*grass is not greener on the other side*'. Some teachers admitted that they had not anticipated the degree of difference faced by students when moving from Year 7 to Year 8. The goal of a seamless transition from primary to secondary was central to many discussions and it was noted that to achieve this goal it is important for teachers to see what happens before or after a student comes or leaves their sector. To be effective at a whole school level, they felt that discussions between primary and secondary teachers needed to involve more of their colleagues and that an upcoming student free day might provide an opportunity for teachers not currently involved in the project to establish connections with teachers from other sectors.

The teachers involved in the project wanted continued exchanges and structured meetings, with discussions progressing to curriculum issues and inevitably collaborative planning between primary and secondary schools. However, they warned that unless their school administrators support and value this process through allocation of funds and time, the benefits derived from the project thus far may not be realised.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, the teachers found their participation in this project helped build relationships, settle misconceptions and clarify preconceived ideas. They found it *'great to jump the fence to understand environment[s] students have come from'*. Significantly, the project facilitated teachers' *'moving out of your comfort zone to rethink how to put the student as the focus of learning'*. As with any initiative, suggestions for improvement have been put forward. Primarily these centre on the notion of time, that is, the timing of the project in the school year, the amount of time to do the work-shadowing and time for any future collaborative planning. The focus of this paper has been the expectations versus the lived realities of thirteen primary and thirteen secondary teachers, work-shadowing colleagues in their opposite sectors. Findings have been presented according to the three research questions which investigated teachers' knowledge about student engagement strategies, pedagogical practices across the sectors and the efficacy of this professional learning process for their developing knowledge and understanding of middle phase of learning issues.

Strategies which led to close student-teacher relationships, knowledge of adolescents' behavioural characteristics and student ownership of the learning environment were identified on both sides of the fence. Yet the primary school learning climate with one consistent teacher for longer periods of time and a designated 'home' room was identified as being more conducive to successful student engagement in learning for this age group. The teachers recognised effective pedagogical practices which they believed facilitated student ownership of, and responsibility for, their own learning. Practices from both sides of the fence included: curriculum planning and integration across key learning areas (in terms of delivery and assessment); shared resource development and use; behaviour management strategies that were seen to work; the development of higher order thinking strategies; explicit literacy and numeracy learning strategies; and ways to foster students' independence in their learning. While the teachers did not explicitly relate their professional learning to the *Professional Standards for Teachers*, their responses to discussion questions during the de-briefing sessions were framed around those standards. Given the time allowed for the project, it has given but a snapshot of teachers' pedagogical repertoire however, all participants overwhelmingly agreed that it provided valuable professional learning opportunities, both during the work shadowing activities and the de-briefing day discussion sessions.

Disparities between teachers' initial expectations and the realities experienced throughout the project shows how the 'fence' between the sectors has become erected largely out of stereotypical notions and 'urban myths' about each sector. Without the teacher exchange project to interrupt stereotypes and demystify the opposite sector, the fence would continue to act as a barrier to change. The findings add to the body of research currently being produced in schools in response to, not only system demands authorities to develop ways to make teaching relevant to the middle phase of learning, but also young people's learning needs in this unique period of their lives.

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