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Reinvigorating the Middle Years: a review of middle schooling

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Abstract

It has been claimed that the first generation of middle schooling philosophy is unfinished and exhausted and this paper reviews this claim in the light of literature and research. Firstly, I present a brief historical review of the development of the middle schooling concept and report on the current situation in Australia. This review is couched within a call for a second generation of middle schooling (Luke et al, 2003) and details a response to this call by the *Redesigning Pedagogies in the North* middle schooling research project. Further, this paper provides a foundation for forthcoming papers in a symposium at the 2006 AARE Annual conference, which will consider the project's progress against its goals for reconceptualised pedagogy (Cormack & Sellar, 20006) that is strongly connected to student lifeworlds (Hattam, 2006).

Introduction

For the purposes of this paper, the term 'middle years' refers to the ages ten to fifteen years (Lee Manning & Bucher, 2005; Chadbourne, 2001; Cumming, 1993). Meanwhile 'middle school' refers to an organisational structure where school year levels six to ten (or some part of these) are a separate school, within or outside of a broader campus (Lee Manning & Bucher, 2005; Chadbourne, 2001; George et al, 1992). The paper's focus is 'middle schooling' (Chadbourne, 2001), which often includes:

- a separation of the middle years from the rest of the school;
- establishing teaching teams and/or sub-school groups to enhance teacher-student relationships;
- devising integrated and negotiated curriculum; and,
- using 'authentic assessment' of 'rich' learning tasks (Hattam et al, 2005).

While it is possible for teachers to apply middle schooling philosophy in the secondary school context, examples of this are neither widespread (Luke et al, 2003; Beane, 2001), nor easy to sustain. As a consequence, 'middle schooling' is often linked to calls for broader reform to make the application of the philosophy more sustainable (Smyth et al, 2003; Chadbourne, 2001) and it is the potential for such reform that is the backdrop to this paper.

A Brief History of Middle Schooling

The origins of middle schooling can be found in a difficult coming together of interests around reform for Junior High Schools in the United States approximately one hundred years ago.

Promoted by progressive reformers as a solution to serious national problems, this turn-of-the-century innovation promised fundamental, not incremental, changes in school organisation, curriculum, instruction and student outcomes (Cuban, 1992, pp.229-230).

The charge that the junior high school possessed an ambiguous mission... stems from multiple agendas that produced a coalition of diverse reformers (p.235).

As in viewing an ink blot, each organization, group and individual within this coalition of educators and outside reformers saw in the junior high school an image of their particular hopes for this novel experiment (p.236).

It is beyond the scope of a paper that focuses on recent developments in Australian middle schooling to explore in depth the contesting complexities that Cuban (1992) highlights around the emergence of American junior high schools. At its simplest, there are two renditions of the history of middle schooling in the United States. The first, from the *Turning Points* group (Carnegie Council, 1989; Jackson & Davis, 2000), focuses on the growth of middle schooling as a means to support adolescent

developmental needs and provide specific teacher training. The second, led by Beane (2005; 2001), provides an explanation that places the student at the centre of an integrated process of meaning making, while remaining sensitive to the social, economic and demographic influences on middle school reform. For the sake of brevity (and at the risk of smoothing over the contradictions highlighted by Cuban), I will rely heavily on Beane's history due to its inclusion of critique around a similar critical orientation to the middle schooling research project that is considered at the conclusion of this paper.

For most of the Nineteenth Century, American schooling had arranged itself around eight years of elementary school and four years of secondary school. It was not until the early 1900s that the precursors to middle schools, junior secondary schools, were formed. These schools emerged in response to concerns that reached back to the 1870s about adequately preparing students for college (George et al, 1992) and low student retention (Anafara, 2001; Cuban, 1992). As Beane (2005; 2001) explains, the influx of immigrants into the United States and their failure at school led to concerns about unemployment, youth labour abuse and inadequate skills training, as well as to a perceived need to teach literacy and American values. In 1899, American schooling reformed into two six year blocks to assist transition into secondary education (Anafara, 2001; Powell, 2001; Cuban, 1992; George et al, 1992). When this failed to address concerns about retention and transition, a second effort for reform was made between 1909 and 1913 with the opening of the first junior secondary schools (Lee Manning & Bucher, 2005; George et al, 1992). This reform separated year seven to nine from elementary and secondary schools (Anafara, 2001; Powell, 2001) to provide academic and vocational training (Beane, 2005; 2001), as well as demonstrated the growing influence on education by psychology through an interest in the developmental needs of adolescents (Anafara, 2001; Cuban, 1992; George et al, 1992).

The invention of adolescence, or carving out the years from 12 to 18 as ones worthy of differential treatment from both teachers and administrators, began to enter educators' vocabulary and thinking in the decades before and after World War I (Cuban, 1992, p.233).

However, when the junior secondary school was nationally approved in 1918 (Lee Manning & Bucher, 2005), the recognition of student developmental needs within junior secondary schools was still more rhetoric than reality (Beane, 2001).

During the 1930s and 1940s, the issue of student needs within junior secondary schools received renewed interest; however, this was quelled by the domination of university intellectuals over school curriculum and the impact of McCarthyism on American culture (Beane, 2001). With significant post war immigration to the United States and a burgeoning baby boom during the 1950s, pressure was again placed on schooling arrangements (George et al, 1992) which elicited pragmatic rather than pedagogic responses (Beane, 2001). By the early 1960s it was widely acknowledged that the junior secondary school movement had increasingly 'imitated what had existed in the past' (Anafara, 2001, p.ix) and had grown to match the title of junior 'high' school (Allen, 1992; Cuban, 1992). Beane described junior high schools at the time as a 'wasteland' (2001, p.xv) which was on its 'last legs' (2005, p.xii). It was in this context that William Alexander initiated the move toward middle schools when he called for a school for the 'in between ager' (Alexander & Williams, 1968).

The emergence of American middle schooling

By the mid 1970s, a distinct middle school reform movement was beginning to take shape in the United States (Anafara, 2001; George et al, 1992) and by the end of the 1970s, there were over ten thousand middle schools (Daniels et al, 2001). Behind this growth were more liberal values toward education and racial integration (Beane, 2005; Cuban, 1992; George et al, 1992), the growth in unemployment of early school leavers (due to improvements in technology within lower skilled work (Brown, 2005)), and community and demographic pressures brought about by the baby boom (Beane, 2005; 2001). The response took the form of building new secondary schools for levels nine to twelve, while adding a new gym to the local high school, which converted it to a middle school that could

cater for levels six to eight (Beane, 2005; George et al, 1992). It was a move that proved popular with local communities while reducing the demands on elementary schools (Beane, 2001).

Throughout the 1980s, a number of state initiatives further established middle schooling before the newly formed National Middle Schools Association made its call for more academic challenge in middle schools, specific middle school teacher training and teaching that catered for the developmental needs of adolescents (Lee Manning & Bucher, 2005). It was also in this period that progressive pedagogical approaches such as 'integrated curriculum' (Beane, 1996; 1995; 1991) and 'authentic achievement' (Neumann et al, 1996) first emerged. With this shift to middle schools and an associated call for more interdisciplinary and integrated curriculum, a heated debate erupted between progressive and traditional approaches. This resulted in a flurry of research papers culminating in the publication of the influential *Turning Points* paper in the late 1980s (Carnegie Council, 1989; Powell, 2001). This project identified a mismatch between student needs and school structures/curriculum, high levels of student alienation, significant absenteeism and poor quality teaching.

It is the *Turning Points* initiative that continues to shape the content of most middle school teacher education textbooks that are published in the United States. This project attracted significant public attention and provided grant funding to support schools that adopted its principles (Anafara, 2001; George et al, 1992), so influential was this initiative that some have dubbed it a 'phenomenon' in its own right (Powell, 2001, p.115). At the core of *Turning Points* was the promotion of small and connected community schools, a strong academic focus, the pursuit of success for all students, expert middle school teaching training, and the promotion of health and fitness amongst students (Jackson & Davis, 2000; Carnegie Council, 1989). *Turning Points* also listed a number of key qualities for middle schooling, which have subsequently been widely adopted, these include:

- a focus on student developmental needs;
- high academic expectation;
- life connection;
- interdisciplinary teaching;
- flexible scheduling;
- student advisory periods (Roney, 2001).

In addition to these qualities, both 'integrated curriculum' (Beane, 1996; 1995; 1991) and 'authentic achievement' (Neumann et al, 1996; Neumann & Wehlage, 1993) were increasingly accepted within American conceptions of middle schooling during the 1990s.

The history of middle schooling in the United States did not unfold without critique, in fact Cuban (1992) describes its history as one of where 'discordant voices' were silenced only 'long enough to establish the novel institution', and 'once launched it was only a matter of time' before 'talk of failure would surface' (p.241). Research on the state of middle schooling found that by the late 1990s few schools had made any reform effort (Daniels et al, 2001) with those who did making little more than a change of stationery (Beane, 2001). Repeatedly, research showed little improvement in learning due to a focus on organisational or structural change, which restricted the development of more rigorous curriculum and higher quality teaching (Anafara, 2001; Haycock & Ames, 2000). Most concerning for some critics was the apparently close ties between the development of middle schooling and economic interests (Beane, 2005), which resulted in middle schools that reproduced economic inequality, particularly according to race (Haycock & Ames, 2000). Further complicating matters were nationally published curriculum materials, which did not support principles of integration and authenticity (Anafara, 2001; Haycock & Ames, 2000).

[E]ven today, it is almost impossible to find a middle school that was formed primarily for educational reasons (Beane, 2001, p.xvi).

[T]he middle school concept as it was really meant to be is found on a whole-school basis in relatively few places. To see it in action one doesn't visit schools per se; rather, one tries to

find particular individuals or teams who are managing to keep the concept alive inside a school, often under attack from colleagues and public critics (Beane, 2001, p.xx).

Looking back at the turn of the Millennium, Beane (2001) located much of his criticism for a lack of middle school reform in that economic not educational interests had driven change. Meanwhile, the alternative historical overview, *Turning Points* (Jackson and Davis, 2000), argued that middle schooling at that time was typified by passive learning, incoherent curriculum, low academic standards and little recognition of diversity.

Spurred on by this, the *Turning Points* project (Jackson & Davis, 2000) revisited the issue of middle schooling by calling for more intellectual demand, 'backward curriculum' design and greater standardisation. However, some were wary of a move to align middle schooling in the United States with standardisation of performance within subject disciplines (Beane, 2005; 2001). Concern was also expressed about the ongoing role of business in defining educational priorities (Brown, 2005) and the resultant threat to progressive pedagogy and student centred values. For some, American middle schooling appears to be on a collision course with educational priorities for standardised testing (Beane, 2001), and is under siege from both neo-liberals and neo-conservatives through high stakes testing and aspects of the *No Child Left Behind* initiative (Yecke, 2005).

The response to these challenges will be crucial to the survival of middle schooling which is at a 'cross roads' in the United States (Anafara, 2001). However, some would suggest that this has been the constant state of middle schooling throughout its history as its increasing institutionalisation has left its efforts for middle school reform at the mercy of the priorities of the high status secondary school (Cuban, 1992). This said, when one looks broadly at the history of middle schooling in the United States, it can be argued that each new effort for reform (while directed toward improved educational outcomes) struggled to expand beyond localised settings or economic and demographic pressures.

The emergence of middle schooling in Australia

Throughout the 1970s and into the 1980s there was a concerted effort on the part of many western countries to develop better schooling responses to address student disengagement, school failure and alienation (Hill & Russell, 1999). While the United Kingdom had a distinct tradition behind its middle schools that went back to the late nineteenth century, its explosion of junior high schools in the late sixties was due to financial expediency rather than any innovation around curriculum or pedagogy (Carrington, 2006). While more educational innovation did occur in subsequent years, most recently curriculum in the United Kingdom has become more standardised and enrolments have declined, which has resulted in new calls for a return to a 'two-tier system' (Carrington, 2006, p.60) and ongoing disputes about the future of middle schools. New Zealand also showed interest in middle schools during the 1970s although tension now exists around middle schooling, due largely to a 'turf war' (Carrington, 2006, p.60) between different sectors and middle schooling associations. While these difficult histories make the future of middle schooling anything but certain in the United States, United Kingdom and New Zealand, the history of middle schooling in Australia, however, is somewhat different. Many now look to Australia as an international leader in middle schooling philosophy.

In the late 1970s and into the 1980s, Australian middle schooling received support from 'the new left, humanism and constructivism' (Chadbourne, 2001, p.iii) and adopted approaches from the United States that emphasised student needs and student centred pedagogies. This came to the fore with arguments that supporting adolescent needs (such as developing independence and identity) should be the basis of middle school efforts (Hargreaves & Earl, 1990). Although such views were later critiqued for taking an overly psychological focus on the individual and neglecting important social contexts (Cormack, 1998; Cormack, 1996), they were keenly adopted at the time of the *Junior Secondary Review* (Eyers et al, 1993). This review emphasised the importance of schools meeting the developmental needs of young adolescents, including opportunities for abstract and critical thinking, more reflection and decision making, as well as success and confidence building. The review also emphasised the importance of student care and advocacy through greater teacher student contact to

address the risk of early school leaving. Around this time, the *In the Middle* report (Schools Council, 1993) emphasised separate schools to support students as they face the risks of adolescence, while other reports highlighted the challenges emerging from various forms of social and academic transition (Earl, 1999; Hargreaves et al, 1996). These papers were highly influential and formed the foundation of the middle schooling movement in Australia (McInerney & Smyth, 2004; Barratt, 1998; Braggett, 1997).

A number of longitudinal research projects were commissioned by the Australian Curriculum Studies Association throughout the 1990s with a view to using middle schooling as a site for socially just educational reform (Pendergast & Bahr, 2005; Brennan & Sachs, 1998). Some projects looked at the importance of engagement to avoid student alienation (Cormack, 1996; Cumming, 1996) and argued for greater pastoral care, consultation and genuine decision-making opportunities for middle year students. These approaches were associated with holistic middle school reform, more flexible school structures and greater team teaching (Cumming, 1996; 1993). Like the American situation, specific attention was given to 'integrated curriculum' (Brennan & Sachs, 1998) and 'authentic assessment' (Cormack et al, 1998). Another associated initiative was in the area of school reform (Hill & Russell, 1999) which identified broad principles for the development of middle schooling (including an emphasis on students' needs and community involvement). This project provided the conceptual basis for the recent Victorian *Middle Years Pedagogy Research and Development Project*, which uses school clustering to introduce an explicit framework for middle schooling pedagogy (Pendergast & Bahr, 2005).

During this 1990s, the Australian *National Schools Network* (NSN) emerged and emphasised new understandings of adolescent needs in changing socio-economic circumstances and youth cultures. It did this with a view to developing more motivated, engaged and academically successful middle school students (Barratt, 1998). However, during the 1990's:

the rise of middle schooling occurred side by side with moves to introduce devolution, corporate management and workplace agreements for teachers. Within this context it was possible to (mis)construe middle schooling as being part of a broader set of initiatives that were politically and economically motivated, rather than based on educational grounds (Chadbourne, 2001, p.iii).

This shift within education policy toward greater marketisation to serve global economic needs (Smyth et al, 1998; 2000; Thomson, 2002) was accompanied with political decisions to reduce support to the NSN and other initiatives such as the *Disadvantaged Schools Program* (DSP) (Connell, 1998; Lingard, 1998). While this seriously curtailed the expansion of these approaches (as Chadbourne noted above) it did not stop the development of a version of a middle schooling philosophy that emphasised educational goals such as meeting student needs, supporting transition, social equity and improving retention through quality of teaching (Hattam et al, 2005). What emerged was a consensus of middle schooling that centred on negotiated curriculum, team teaching, integrated curriculum and authentic assessment (Hill & Russell, 1999). There was also consensus around supporting students in identity development, relationship building, appreciating diversity, academic rigour and student centred learning (Chadbourne, 2001; Barratt, 1998; Cumming, 1998).

As was the case in the United States, the development of middle schooling in Australia attracted criticism. Some critics questioned if middle schooling was a 'fad' and only the result of a lingering interest in left wing and constructivist pedagogies from the 1970s (Luke et al, 2003; Chadbourne, 2001). Others critics suggest that middle schooling received far too much attention given its limited implementation and asked if middle schooling philosophy was thinly veiled positive discrimination for the socially disadvantaged (Chadbourne, 2001). This criticism derived from observations that the adoption of progressive pedagogies had been 'piecemeal, localised and shortlived' (Hill & Russell, 1999, p.174) and only popular in disadvantaged areas. Another criticism that has been levelled at what some have called 'the first generation of middle schooling in Australia' (Hattam et al, 2005; Luke et al, 2003) is that it relied more on advocacy than thorough research (Cumming, 1996; Earl, 1999; Hill

& Russell, 1999). Others, however, direct their criticism at an ironic lack of student voice in the development of middle schooling philosophy (Powell, 2001) and the gendered assumptions within the *Junior Secondary Review*.

Whitehead (200) argued that the *Junior Secondary Review* provided a limited view of the role of teachers because of its assumptions that female teachers are better at nurturing and not suited to secondary school environments, while male teachers are needed in the early middle schooling years to aide student academic development. Whitehead also argued that such assumptions not only polarise teachers and marginalise female teachers, they also shift the focus away from the inadequacies and contradictions of school expectations, cultures or structures.

According to the *Junior Secondary Review*, middle school teachers must adopt emotionally detached relations to mentor and monitor student behaviour, yet simultaneously, they are expected to form closer bonds to motivate students as learners (Whitehead, 2000, p.8).

In her argument that this conception is an inadequate basis for socially just middle school reform, Whitehead also alludes to the public influence on deficit views of adolescence within middle schooling practice (Cormack, 1996).

There is a danger that by emphasising the support of adolescent needs within middle schooling, advocates will inadvertently reinforce associated deficit views that feed into contemporary social and economic anxieties (Saltman, 2005; Chadbourne, 2001). The rationale used overwhelmingly by middle schooling advocates in Australia (Barratt, 1998; Braggett, 1997; Cumming, 1993; Evers et al, 1993) is that adolescents have specific developmental characteristics that need specialised support. The positive aspect of this view can be a middle schooling interest in student engagement, negotiated curriculum, integrated learning and authentic assessment. However, the negative aspect can be a popular construction or 'deficit view' (Carrington, 2006; Hattam et al, 2005) of adolescence as a time of hormone driven behaviour, incompetence, hazard, liability, and risk, which evokes fear and requires control. As Brown (2005) notes, the conception of 'adolescent' is built around the 'normal' white middle class boy and can perpetuate existing social and economic orders when diversity from this norm is viewed as a problem to be controlled (Cormack, 1998).

Its claims have been left almost completely unproblematic... with almost no attention to the possibility that it [adolescence] is at least as much a socio-historical and cultural construction (Beane, 2005, p.xiv).

There is a danger that the widespread application of this construction can mask inadequate responses by school institutions (McInerney & Smyth, 2004; Slee, 1994), relabel diversity as a biologically driven deficit (Carrington, 2006) and ignore the structural barriers to adolescents from disadvantaged communities making middle class choices (Cormack, 1998). Attention must be given not only to explaining why some students fail in school, but also to how schools may fail our students (Prosser, 2006). Rather than look at the social, cultural and political conditions shaping young people's schooling experiences and choices (Cormack, 1998), there is a possibility that we will only look to raging hormones and biologically-driven risk behaviour for explanation.

In this age of standards and high stakes testing, coupled with the current repressive political climate, there is a real danger that adolescents will soon be firmly characterized exclusively by the language of risk, danger and threat, rather than by a discourse of hope, possibility and growth (Sapon-Shevin, 2005, p.521).

The criticism that is levelled at such a 'deficit view' of adolescence is that it will result in limiting the 'liberatory possibilities in middle school education' (Saltman, 2005, p.19), with the emphasis on adolescents as either productive or problems (Cormack, 1998), which contributes to a growing emphasis on behaviour management practices.

Such representations [of adolescence] need to be critically examined because, I argue, they are constitutive. Not only do they have an effect on the institutions that are created in their name [like middle schools], they also shape up the ways that adolescents are understood and treated in classrooms, schools and the community (Cormack, 1998, p.56).

Cormack (1996) warns that a deficit approach to adolescence can result in a justification of less time and resources for curriculum/pedagogy, as well as a stripping away of many of the principles of middle schooling philosophy (through more surveillance, back to basics teaching and an emphasis on counselling/pastoral care).

A brief reflection on the relationship between behaviour management and middle schooling provides an example of how we socially construct adolescence, which in turn shapes our response to young people (Brown, 2005; Saltman, 2005; Sapon-Shevin, 2005; Cormack, 1998). Popular constructions of adolescence impact on policy and teaching practice:

In spite of the fact that many educators and parents are quite resistant to such representations, it can be argued that the sheer volume and repetition of such ideas has a material affect in school and education policy environments (Cormack, 1996, p.7).

As these constructions have moved from scientific notions of bodies switching on and minds switching off, to media constructions of a vulnerable and cynical generation emerging under the shadow of Cold War, and more recently to strongly psychological constructions of a generation of 'at risk' identities, there has been an aligned shift in behaviour management approaches. These have moved from the stern rod of discipline, to the silver bullet for rebellious behaviour, to rights, responsibilities and negotiation with a generation of master negotiators. With most teachers schooled and trained in a generation so different to the adolescents of today, there is a risk that rather than seeing difference, they will see deficit, and rather than respond to opportunity, they will respond with control. This is a challenge complicated even further when different teacher-student cultural capital around schooling is involved (Thomson, 2002; Bourdieu, 1984). Such views of adolescent diversity as victim, needy, risky or 'at risk', can create a hurdle to middle school reform moving beyond the solely organisational and into teaching practices and learning outcomes.

While Beane's approach to the history of middle schooling questions the extent that middle school reform was ever more than a pragmatic response to economic and demographic pressures in the United States, the Australian experience is one, that at least initially, was centred around social equity, student needs and constructivist pedagogy. Since that time, changing economic priorities in education, complexities in the construction of adolescence and a range of socio-political changes have challenged the basis of the first generation of middle schooling.

Middle Schooling in Australia: unfinished and exhausted?

The contemporary middle schooling situation in the United States has been described as in a state of 'arrested development' (Dickinson, 2001, p.xi), with only 'cosmetic structural changes' (Beane, 2001, p.xx) occurring. In Australia, it has likewise been claimed that the adoption of middle schooling has been limited (Hill & Russell, 1999). Research into the first generation of middle schooling in Australia would seem to support that reform has not gone far enough. If one looks at a middle school reform model based on the advances of the *National Schools Network* (Smyth et al, 2003; Harradine, 1996), we can see that there has been a lot of effort put into structural changes in schools (Hattam et al, 2005) and there has also been some re-culturing work. However, the pedagogical changes required if middle schooling is actually to improve students learning has been underwhelming (Hattam, 2004). Some argue that changing structures without culture and pedagogy has limited educational achievement and created complex tensions within schools (Smyth et al, 2003), while Luke et al (2003) note that the creation of middle schooling as a distinct phase can lead to discontinuities between primary and senior secondary levels.

In this environment of fragmentary reform along with the introduction of key learning areas, even the traditionally strong students are at best only being maintained and the integration of curriculum has been stunted (Brennan & Sachs, 1998). For many schools, there remains a line of distinction between the established school position and the teeming world of multiplicity that flourishes in the everyday lives of young people outside of school (Dimitriades & McCarthy, 2001).

With the growing pervasiveness and persuasiveness of twenty-first-century youth culture, most particularly the media, traditional school curriculum, coupled with traditional pedagogies, stand little chance of capturing the hearts and minds of young people (Duncan-Andrade, 2004, p.317).

Pedagogy and curriculum cannot be 'hostaged' to every change in cultural tools and uses that appear on the horizon. At the same time, if certain limits to learners' affinities, allegiances, identities and prior experience are transgressed, even 'successful' learners will decline the offer made by formal education (Knobel & Lankshear, 2003, p.80).

That most schools have not moved beyond changes to structure and toward middle schooling approaches to curriculum, engagement and student identity has been confirmed in case studies in South Australian schools (Smyth et al, 2003) as well as in the Victorian school reform project (Hill & Russell, 1999).

The *Beyond the Middle* (Luke et al, 2003) report is the most significant review of middle schooling in Australia and provides the most recent snapshot of the state of Australian middle schooling. The Federal Department of Education, Science and Training commissioned the report to explore the progress of middle schooling, the quality of teaching and learning, as well as literacy and numeracy outcomes. The report found that the first generation of middle schooling was unfinished because it had not secured systemic approaches or high intellectual demand. It also found that the movement was exhausted as it was a decade old and had not kept pace with the rapid changes in students' lives and contexts (possibly due to what Brennan and Sachs (1998) called a 'reform fatigue' in schools). The report found that while middle schooling was a professional response to changes in students and society, currently its implementation in Australia was patchy and unsustainable. Most significantly, the report noted that the focus on integrated curriculum and authentic assessment in the first generation of middle schooling in Australia had not been matched with a corresponding interest in pedagogy. As a result, the report highlighted the *Productive Pedagogies* project (Hayes, 2006b; Lingard et al, 2001) which extensively researched the pedagogies of teachers in Australian middle schools. This project found that there were some excellent examples of middle schooling practice in individual Australian schools, but that this was not consistent within schools or across the nation. *Productive Pedagogies* saw a need for more specific training of pre-service teachers as well as development of effective pedagogy around rigorous and engaging curriculum that was sensitive to the diversity of students' lives. It expressed concerns about disengaged middle year students, a misalignment between curriculum, assessment and pedagogy, as well as organisational structures that did not support student learning. While *Beyond the Middle* (Luke et al, 2003) reported a slightly more positive situation, it concurred that there was a need to consider greater cultural diversity, the impact of information communication technologies, and changing social contexts on student experiences of middle schooling. Further, both studies agreed that a new generation of middle schooling was needed in Australia to provide more engaging, connected and intellectually demanding pedagogy that was enabled by new research, conceptualisation and theory.

It is my view that the complex and contested development of middle schooling in Australia and the United States can be collected around four broad themes, each of which are reinforced within the above literature review. The development of middle schooling can be seen as an effort to change teaching practices to make them more responsive to adolescents' developmental needs (Jackson & Davis, 2000; Barratt, 1998; Braggett, 1997). It can also be seen as a focus around which progressive and constructivist educators have united to work towards student-centred pedagogical change (Cormack et al, 1998; Cumming, 1996; Beane, 1991). Thirdly, it can be seen as a vehicle and/or

victim of institutional and economic interests (Beane, 2001), which in part is used to explain why its reform has been limited (Hill & Russell, 1999) or incremental (Cuban, 1992). Finally, middle schooling can be seen as a site of hope for new socially just reform in schools (Carrington, 2006; McInerney & Smyth, 2004; Brennan & Sachs, 1998; Cormack, 1998). At different times and in different places, each of these themes has held greater or lesser prominence. However, at a time where the states are reducing resources and leadership for middle schooling, the Federal Government seeks to restore traditional curriculum and the right publicly attacks many of the key principles of middle schooling, it is this latter view that is of growing importance if other nations are to look to Australia as a leader in this field.

Australian Middle Schooling: continuing challenges

A new wave of middle schooling in Australia need not dismiss completely what came before. Clearly, in the findings of Luke et al (2003), middle schooling is both *unfinished* and exhausted, which would suggest that we are still only 'halfway up the mountain' (Davis, 2001, p.236) of middle schooling reform. The insights and initiatives of the NSN and DSP that brought Australia to the fore of the international middle schooling movement have not lost their relevance, even if new contexts need to be considered.

One insight from the NSN is that the involvement of teachers in school reform is significant and effective. The NSN is one of the longest lasting examples of teacher centred reform internationally and still powerfully informs the practice of many principals, school leaders and teachers. That the NSN was successful in engaging students and securing improved academic outcomes demonstrates that it is important that we do not develop what Pat Thomson calls 'policy amnesia' and forget what was done before. Another insight from the NSN is that a commitment to connected pedagogy and integrated curriculum that flows to authentic assessment can create relevant life learning and deep student understandings of self, community and the world. In this way, the work of Boomer et al (1992) is still relevant today. However, while the NSN secured some success in student learning outcomes (Brennan & Sachs, 1998), a failure by schools to implement the NSN reform model (Hattam, 2005; Smyth et al, 2000), restricted the extent of this success as did the imposition of key learning areas and the standardisation within disciplines (which undermined integrated learning (Brennan & Sachs, 1998)). These challenges must be addressed by a second generation of middle schooling in Australia.

The success of the DSP in addressing disadvantage and promoting social equity as a whole school issue, rather than a matter of individual deficit (Lingard, 1998) points to another unfinished challenge for middle schooling. Within the DSP, there was evidence that once teachers were given space to be intellectual about their practice, the innovative and negotiated pedagogy that resulted helped disadvantaged students, while less emphasis on formal teaching and the competitive academic curriculum enabled teachers to harness student diversity (Connell, 1993). This reveals that pedagogy can still seek to resist inequality and unsettle deficit views (Hattam et al, 2005) through positive discrimination (Lingard, 1998). By positive discrimination, I mean teaching students overtly about what it takes to do well in schools, as well as valuing their experiences outside of school. As the gap between rich and poor in Australia continues to grow (McInerney & Smyth, 2004), such an approach is no less relevant today than it was a decade ago (Lingard et al, 2000).

The first generation of middle schooling in Australia left business unfinished, especially in relation to the impact of poverty and disadvantage on differential outcomes for students and the need for greater teacher involvement in efforts for middle school reform. These continuing challenges must be not be overlooked in a second generation of middle schooling in Australia.

Australian Middle Schooling: new challenges

However, while these insights from the first generation of middle schooling still have currency, there are also new contexts and challenges facing middle schooling today. After the social, economic and political changes of the nineties it is time to look again at middle schooling (McInerney & Smyth, 2004), especially as the middle schooling movement now faces changing factors in demography and youth identities (Hattam et al, 2005), which include:

- increasing levels of social and cultural complexity at a time in which governments have shifted concern from the 'social' to 'community' (Rose, 1996; 1999);
- a significant collapse of the full-time youth labour market and a normalising of precarious employment (Pocock, 2003; Pusey, 2003; 1998);
- a substantial number of families and youth living in difficult financial circumstances and a concentration of the new poor (Bauman, 1998) living on the urban periphery of most cities;
- a dissolution of community spaces and networks that supported the development of healthy and active members of society (Prosser, 2006; Hadringham, 2001);
- the re-emergence and/or unleashing of deficit views of 'disenfranchised' communities, refugees, and indigenous people (Luke, 1997);
- the influence of media and consumer culture on the identity formation of young people (Carrington, 2006; Sefton-Green, 1998); and
- parental factors, class issues, economic pressures and hostile home/school relations which contribute to a range of other rapidly changing challenges (Hayes et al, 2006).

Change is occurring swiftly in our society with home, family, work and economic contexts far less stable and futures less secure. Mobility, dislocation, diversity and 'terror' form a much greater part of young people's lives (Carrington, 2006). In addition to this, changes in technology and communications (as well as the growth in media and consumer culture) are changing the way that adolescents think and act, which has implications for how educators respond.

The kinds of skills sets and knowledge that early adolescents will need as they leave the school system and move into the workforce and the larger society are increasingly divergent from those that the traditional education system was designed to deliver (Carrington, 2006, p.20).

The views that inform the first wave of middle schooling philosophy rely on attempts to 'retool schools' (p.50) and to respond to a view of adolescent needs that 'predates the move to a society characterised by discourses of risk and risk taking' (p.51). Members of a second generation of middle schooling must be aware of their own generational baggage, so that the opportunities for adolescents and middle schooling will not be limited by an inability to imagine and respond to life in the new knowledge economy.

A second generation of middle schooling also needs to align with efforts to address early school leaving and academic failure in the post compulsory years (Holden & Dwyer, 1992). The impact of continuing disengagement, negative adolescent stereotypes and alienation in the middle years on student retention is significant (Hattam, 2005; Smyth et al, 2000) with research showing that:

Students who in Year 9 thought that they would leave school before Year 11 had a strong tendency to do just that (Marks & Fleming, 1999, p.11).

Research shows that the formation of positive individual, community and learner identities in the middle years is vital to keeping students at school longer, as is training and support for teachers in this identity development (Smyth et al, 2000). There is a need for educational reform that is based in such research as well as new moves to develop models of curriculum, pedagogy and assessment that reflect the research into student diversity and changing contexts (Pendergast & Bahr, 2005). As Carrington (2006) argues, the experiences, attitudes and literacies of each of today's adolescents are very different to that of education researchers, policy makers, the most recent teacher graduates and even their peers.

The students sitting in our middle years classrooms come with different experiences and understanding of racial and cultural diversity than those we brought with us. In fact, they come with different experiences and understandings that the students who sat in our classrooms a decade ago (Carrington, 2006, p.8).

The thing that has changed most since Green & Bigum (1993) observed that there are ‘aliens in the classroom’ (and that the aliens are not the students), is that information and communication technologies have created a ‘greater generational cleavage between teachers and students today than ever before’ (Hayes et al, 2006, p.11). While middle school students only know life on the super information highway, many of our teachers struggle to move out of print-based practices. It is chasm in our classrooms that drives much of contemporary public debate about Australian schooling and brings into sharp focus questions such as: how can schooling, and especially contemporary curriculum and pedagogy, connect with the identity work of young people in educative and productive ways (Hattam & Smyth, 2003)?

By highlighting the changing needs of adolescents, a second generation of middle schooling assists teachers in their responses to new identity, literacy, numeracy and information technology challenges. It must also shift beyond blaming individual students for ‘dropping out’ or being disengaged and move toward reinvigorated, rigorous and engaging middle schooling experiences that give students reasons to stay on at school. A second generation of middle schooling must also respond to criticisms of the first generation of middle schooling by fostering academic and intellectual rigour (Luke et al, 2003). It will include relevance, negotiation, integration and authentic achievement as well as an appreciation of the growing diversity among students (Carrington, 2006; Lingard et al, 2001) and be aware of changing social and technological contexts (Carrington, 2006; Luke et al 2003).

There needs to be a fresh approach to middle years philosophy, longitudinal research and school-based development to explicitly address new and more difficult economic and social conditions. There is a specific need for higher order intellectual engagement in literacy and numeracy by members of target groups in order for all to access employment and to pursue improved life pathways through school to post-compulsory study, work and community life (Luke et al, 2003, p.7).

Carrington sees the challenge facing middle schooling is to take the opportunity for greater engagement with the wider world through more recognition of student lives, productive approaches to notions of risk or self, and ‘glocal’ (p.169) approaches to local and global issues. This approach needs to not only encourage stronger pedagogical knowledge, repertoires and intellectual rigour but herald the examples of outstanding practice that currently exist. It needs to embrace new pedagogies and literacies, as well as devise learning environments and experiences that cater for the highly individualistic, reflexive and agentive nature of our emerging citizens. Pleasingly, such an emphasis on student diversity, identity, agency and reflection is beginning to appear in contemporary middle schooling research in Australia, along with an emphasis on progressive pedagogy and school reform. The challenge is for a second generation of middle schooling in Australia to take up these new challenges through a rethinking of the middle years that is based in socially just collaborative research with school communities.

How might we design a research project to address these challenges?

The *Redesigning Pedagogies in the North* (RPiN) project is an attempt to respond to the challenges facing a second generation of middle schooling in Australia. Its progress against its goals for ‘strong connectedness’ (Hattam, 2006) and ‘(re)conceptualised pedagogy’ (Cormack & Sellar, 20006) are the subjects of subsequent papers in this symposium. For this reason, this paper will limit itself to a brief introduction to the project and how it plans to take up both the new and continuing challenges facing middle schooling.

By way of brief introduction, the RPiN project is a three-year Australian Research Council Linkage project working with ten middle/secondary schools within Adelaide’s northern urban fringe. This region experiences high levels of poverty, early school leaving and youth unemployment, as well as a reduction in traditional career pathways (due in part to the dramatic decline of the manufacturing industry over the last fifteen years (Thomson, 2002)). In its grant application, the project proposed to use the expertise of a team of leading education researchers from the University of South Australia

(Comber & Kamler, 2005; Hattam, 2004; Reid, 2004; Brennan & Sachs, 1998; Cormack et al, 1998) to develop a project that would work with teachers to redesign their pedagogy to:

- connect with student lifeworlds (Roche, 1987);
- increase student engagement (Beane, 1995; 1991);
- foster academic rigour; (Luke et al, 2003; Lingard et al, 2001);
- unsettle deficit identities (Hattam et al, 2005); and
- work in the middle years to support school retention (Smyth et al, 2003; 2000).

The *Beyond the Middle* (Luke et al, 2003) and *Productive Pedagogies* (Lingard et al, 2001) reports were highly influential on the team who commenced the design of the RPiN project and informed a reading of the new and continuing challenges facing a second generation of middle schooling.

By selecting to form a partnership with schools in some of the most socially disadvantaged suburbs in Australia, the RPiN project took up the continuing challenge of differential schooling outcomes due to socio-economic disadvantage. In particular, the project looked to the work of Thomson (2002) that considered 'rustbelt' secondary schools in Adelaide's northern urban fringe. Particularly useful in the project's conceptualisation was the concept of the 'virtual schoolbag'. This is the acquired skill that every child brings with them on the first day that sets them up for success or failure in a middle class institution. The project aimed to work with teachers to teach these skills to students so that they have the same toolkit as their peers, as well as to make time to link what they have brought from home in their 'virtual schoolbags' to the curriculum in meaningful ways. The goal of such an approach is to both value the student and equip him or her for success in the future. The theoretical underpinning of this approach drew on a model of pedagogical development that incorporates the 'funds of knowledge' (Moll et al, 1992) from student lifeworlds as well as teaching the codes of 'cultural capital' (Bourdieu, 1984) in the mainstream curriculum.

The RPiN project also sought to take up the continuing challenge of involving thirty teachers across ten schools in middle schooling reform. Informed by the NSN model of reform through changes to pedagogy, structure and culture (Hattam, 2004; Smyth et al, 2003; Harradine, 1996), the RPiN team saw the actions of teachers through pedagogy and pivotal to reform efforts. However, the thinking of the project also developed with an awareness of the contemporary 'backlash' (Hattam et al, 2005) against Australian teachers, which involves them in a struggle over their pedagogical identity. This struggle is to:

- maintain their role as curriculum designers and not be merely technicians;
- sustain critically reflective learning communities of colleagues and friends; and
- not succumb to pedagogies of resentment that are driven by a logic of deficit views of students and their communities.

It is the aim of the RPiN university research team to create a community of inquiry with the teacher researchers to provide the intellectual space so that resources can be created to support them in their struggle to reclaim their work and realise reform. A central underpinning of the RPiN approach is the belief that a successful teacher needs to know not just their subject, but also their students. As a consequence, previous projects in the area of critical practitioner inquiry (Comber & Kamler, 2005) and notions of 'teacher-as-ethnographer' that go back to the work of Friere and Dewey informed the planning within the project.

The planning of the RPiN project also sought to take up other contemporary challenges facing middle schooling. One of the central tenets of the project is that it is vital to keep students at school longer by assisting them to develop positive identities as learners (Smyth et al, 2000). As such, the project has embraced a critical attempt to foster a deeper understanding of the deficit views of identity that effect students and teachers, as well as provide opportunities for students, teachers and school communities to unsettle these views. A range of resources have been accessed to challenge deficit views including 'turnaround pedagogies' (Comber & Kamler, 2005), 'funds of knowledge' (Moll et al, 1992), 'place-based pedagogies' (Smith, 2002), 'virtual schoolbags' (Thomson, 2002), as well as positive

constructions of narrative identity (Hattam et al, 2005). The project has pursued a line of thinking that if students experience in school is constructed through deficits, then it is likely that they will have deficit identities; but if we can begin to identify their unique successes, we can begin to develop a more positive outlook of the learner.

The RPiN project has also sought in its planning to respond to the challenge of developing new middle school pedagogy; not just curriculum and assessment (Luke et al, 2003; Lingard et al, 2001). The challenge for the project is not only to design curriculum that is connected to student lifeworlds by identifying issues in student lives and exploring them in an integrated manner, it is also to work with teachers to explore the necessary changes in pedagogy that result from such a redesign. In aiming for a 'strong connectedness' with students' lives, the project hopes to move beyond the level of using student lives as a pedagogical hook, to also use their lifeworlds as a source of new and innovative middle schooling pedagogical approaches. Drawing on the influences of Moll et al (1992) and Beane (1995), the project seeks to not only draw on students' 'funds of knowledge' but also their 'funds of pedagogy' to see what community ways of learning can be incorporated into the middle school.

Within its planning stages, the RPiN project specifically addressed the continuing challenges of both differential student outcomes and teacher involvement, as well as new challenges in relation to identity and pedagogy. As the project has moved from planning to implementation, we continue to face challenges of academic rigour (Luke et al, 2003), student diversity (Carrington, 2006) and the 'difficult knowledges' (Britzman & Dippo, 2000; Britzman, 1998) within students' lives. The nature of these challenges and subsequent responses by RPiN are the subject of other papers at this conference.

Summary: possible RPiN contributions to a second generation of middle schooling

There are a number of ways that the RPiN project may contribute to the second generation of middle schooling in Australia. Using the four broad themes drawn from within the preceding literature review, I now propose briefly to summarise the ways in which this research may provide new knowledge and contribute conceptually to each.

The economic and structural situation of middle schooling

One of the central arguments of this literature review is that the development of middle schools in the United States had more to do with economic interests than meeting student needs. In comparison, middle schooling in Australia initially centred on engaging curriculum and social equity, but over time school reform has not progressed further than the largely organisational. RPiN by responding to a call for multi-partnered and research based middle schooling initiatives (as well as adopting the NSN model of school reform and teacher participation), has the potential to contribute to and explore the extent of structural, cultural and pedagogical change within the ten participating schools. While the focus of RPiN is primarily around reinvigorated pedagogy, these partnerships with teachers and schools enable collaborations that explore the capacity for structural and cultural reform in urban fringe communities. Currently, the RPiN research team are conducting interviews with principals and teachers in the participating schools to document the emergence and extent of middle schooling reform in each site. With some schools having established separate middle schools within secondary and R-12 sites, there is also the potential to explore the extent that 'strongly connected' pedagogical change has accompanied these structural changes. Hattam (2006) will undertake a more detailed examination of these research findings in a paper later in this symposium.

The focus on 'adolescence' in middle schooling

Another central argument in this review is that the concept of 'adolescent needs' can have both positive and negative implications. While supporting the developmental needs of middle years students is a key tenet of middle schooling, the adoption of negative and deficit construction of adolescence can result in practices under the banner of middle schooling that limit rather than liberate students. The RPiN project hopes to resist deficit views of young people and their communities by drawing on their 'funds of knowledge', 'virtual schoolbags' and 'funds of pedagogy'. The project also hopes to unsettle deficit views of adolescent students and promote middle schooling as a locale for developing adolescent advocacy rather than catering for developmental needs (Cormack, 1998). Early

reports indicate teacher projects showing signs of using popular culture, community and lifeworld resources to contribute to greater students engagement and opportunities for student success that run contrary to established deficit school identities. The progress of two of these projects will be explored in a presentation by Prosser (2006b) which focuses on the responses of the most disengaged of students (those diagnosed with the deficit label ADHD).

Middle schooling as a site for reform

This literature review has noted that while it is possible for individual teachers to use middle schooling philosophy in secondary settings, it is often difficult to sustain. The collaborative research process used within RPiN has already produced data on the constraints experienced by teachers redesigning middle schooling pedagogy, as well as the resources they draw on to support them in their work. Consideration of such influences is vital if the second generation of middle schooling is to be sustained. Research around sustaining middle school reform is the topic of another symposium hosted by the RPiN project at this conference. This symposium speaks to these concerns by considering recent research into teacher identity (Comber, 2006), the complex and multiple person in teachers' work (Prosser, 2006c) and the social and policy constraints on efforts to support quality teaching through Middle Years reform (Reid, 2006). A further symposium will also consider issues of social justice for middle school reform and school renewal through community capacity building including relations with teacher perceptions of their work (Ovsienko & Zipin, 2006), challenges to strong connections with community (Reid, 2006b) and the problem of redistributing cultural capital (Zipin, 2006).

New pedagogical conceptualisations

Finally, this review has stressed the importance of a sound research base to the development of a second generation of middle schooling. In response, the RPiN project has adopted a particular approach to education research, namely critical action research by teachers in the middle years. This form of research, as demonstrated by Comber and Kamler (2005), supports teachers to turn around deficit views of students and teachers to reclaim their work by producing knowledge and enhancing their expertise over their practice. It is an approach that seeks new pedagogical approaches that exist beyond the progressive-traditional binary and align with pedagogies of relationship (Lusted, 1986) and friendship (Albrecht-Crane, 2005). This practice centred approach differs to other recent middle schooling projects in that it starts with teachers' experiences of pedagogy and its constraints, rather than assesses teacher practice to see if it conforms to pedagogical principles derived from the literature. Cormack and Sellar (2006) will undertake a comparison of the RPiN project with other pedagogical research approaches in this symposium. It is hoped that such an approach will produce practical and insightful examples of second-generation middle schooling at work.

Conclusion

This paper has presented a brief historical review of the development of the middle schooling concept in the United States and its implementation in Australia. It has also considered the possible future contributions of the *Redesigning Pedagogies in the North* middle school research project to a second generation of middle schooling in Australia. It is hoped that the paper will provide a useful introduction to a number of subsequent RPiN presentations at this year's AARE Annual Conference.

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