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**MOVING IN THE DIRECTION
OF YOUR DREAMS:
MIDDLE YEARS STUDENTS AND
EDUCATIONAL DECISION MAKING**

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ABSTRACT

Go confidently in the direction of your dreams. Live the life you have imagined.

Henry David Thoreau

(from a poster on a classroom wall, 2009)

This paper presents insights into the ways middle years students speak about educational decision making and how they see the future before them. Research conducted at 'Wilton College', a girls' school in a large urban centre in New South Wales (Australia), has investigated issues surrounding the event of elective subject selection with small groups of middle years students. Of particular interest was the process of giving voice to the discourses students use, create, struggle with or reject in order to create meaning when making and reflecting on their decisions. This study foregrounds the voices of students as they speak about how they made educational decisions and draws forth the ways the students interpret their connections with school, curriculum and the future.

In the first few years of secondary school, during the middle phase of learning, students move from a solidly compulsory curriculum, which has dominated the schooling experience, into curriculum which can be personalised through elective subject choices and co-curricular decisions. Whilst research has focused on the decision making process for upper secondary and tertiary students (Alloway, Dalley, Patterson, Walker, & Lenoy, 2004), there has been relatively little inquiry into the

process of educational decision making and subject selection within the framework of schooling structures, especially in the transformational middle years.

The research question is; how is educational choice and decision making understood and experienced by students in the middle years? Results indicate this group of young, female adolescents have a strong interest in engaging with school as they recognise the connections between learning at school and success in the world beyond. However, it is also evident during the middle phase of learning that students are negotiating new territory regarding their strengths and interests and they are often excluded from the formal opportunities for information gathering which are offered to older students. Whilst this does not appear to have restricted students' future imagining, it is evident that students are drawing from a base which is closely linked to family and school and as such is relatively limited. In the interests of furthering research in this field, findings from this study form the basis for further exploration into alternate discourses of middle schooling.

INTRODUCTION

Through making decisions about the elective subjects and courses they will study, and not study, young adolescents begin their experience with the learning process of educational decision making. This is a process which will be repeated in various forms and across many points throughout the lifespan (Brannen & Nilsen, 2002), with most adults recognising that decisions made at school can have a significant impact on future life paths (Sachs, 2002). To date, research into subject selection and educational decision making in the middle years has not attracted attention even though these processes occur during the well documented stage of adolescence when close attention is given to young people's identity formation (Kroger, 1993; Thomson & Holland, 2002) and decision making capabilities generally (Lewis, 1981; Mahaffy & Ward, 2002).

Considering this issue through the lens of middle school curriculum, pedagogy and structure allows for a richer and more contextualised analysis of students' experiences, especially as middle phase learning intentionally foregrounds notions of the constructive and active role that young adolescents can play in negotiating their learning. Middle years practices have been especially influential in promoting the authentic involvement of young people in their schooling by focusing on reforms to 'one of the most potent transition points for an individual in our society', the move from primary to secondary school (Bahr & Pendergast, 2006, p. 68). Of particular importance has been the emphasis that middle years of schooling research and practice has placed on student involvement and engagement in order to increase academic rigour and improve learning outcomes (Chadbourne, 2003; Pendergast,

2005). Integral to the realisation of these goals and other reforms has been an emphasis on encouraging teachers to locate students in the decision making process by utilising pedagogies that increase student engagement in the teaching and learning process (Hunter & Park, 2005).

The research question explores ways that educational choice and decision making are understood and experienced by students in the middle years through a focus on the students' own perspectives and understandings. Through providing insight into aspects of one school's middle years journey, which sits outside the mould often presented, this paper attempts to heighten sensitivity to alternate discourses in the middle years of schooling in Australia.

Selecting subjects

Schools appear to consider the process of subject selection in the 'junior' years as relatively straightforward compared with the more important decision making required of 'senior' students who need to think about life beyond school, either because they are preparing to graduate from Year 12 or because they are leaving school at an earlier opportunity. Even if the process of subject selection for Year 8 or 9 students receives attention at school level, for example through an information night for parents or the production of a special handbook, the process of subject selection overall is generally considered to be emblematic of a naturalistic rite of passage which most students experience a couple of times in their school career.

Contrary to the familiar and often dominant discourses within schools and society that view this process as unproblematic and straightforward, this paper suggests that the

process of subject selection for young adolescents is complex and contested. It is constructed by a range of factors which shape the types of choices available to students (school culture, parental expectations, mandated curriculum, school resources) and by attributes and characteristics of the students themselves (gender, social and financial status, family background, academic inclination, motivation and goals). The interplay between such forces is uneven and can be unpredictable, even for students within the same year group or class or for children within the same family. Yet it is within this complex, unstable and generally unacknowledged framework that middle years students engage in what is usually their first considerable process of self recognition and educational decision making.

The symbolism of choice

The opportunity to make choices about at least part of their program of study represents a symbolic change in the status afforded middle years students. Subject selection inducts young adolescents into discourses of (Western) adulthood which are based upon choice, individuality and specialisation. It is acknowledged, however, that such discourses are counter-balanced by the responsibilities that stem from choice. Perhaps appropriately only a small component of the curriculum is open for selection initially. Then, usually after two years, as students progress into the senior secondary years, more choices become available, including options regarding 'core' subjects such as English, Mathematics and Science.

The opportunity to 'drop' entire sections of curriculum which have hitherto been mandatory can be in stark contrast to students' prior experiences of curriculum as a fixed entity and this may be an opportunity which not all students are ready to manage.

Some students may have been looking forward to subject selection for some time, vividly imagining and working through their pathways. Others may be desperate to leave behind subjects which have represented failure, struggle, or disinterest. Alternatively, students performing well in, and/or enjoying, a number of subjects on the elective list may feel frustrated because they have to now choose between subjects they enjoy and were previously not required to choose between.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In exploring the ways middle school students speak about their educational decision making, the following selection of literature provides a starting point to consider why greater focus in this area is important in relation to young adolescents.

Adolescence: Time, place, identity

Representations of the period of adolescence can be limiting as they often problematise young people as falling somewhere between childhood and adulthood which can lead to a focus on the need to train or remediate young people towards maturity (Stevens, et al., 2007). Reviewing what has become a dominant discourse since the seminal work of Hall (1904), Bahr and Pendergast (2006) challenged the view of adolescence as a time of deficit or as an interim period before real life begins; instead proposing a re-thinking of the notion of adolescence which embraces new understandings of time, place and identity.

Working to redress issues of definition, research into the middle phase of schooling has often focused on discourses of disengagement and alienation which explore

significant issues surrounding individual and community wellbeing (Australian Curriculum Studies Association, 1996; Lord & Jones, 2006; Smyth, McInerney, & Hattam, 2003). Research into middle schooling practices and middle phase learners must also take into account, however, the notion that middle years practice does not always centre around, nor necessarily include, these discourses.

The event of subject selection for young adolescents has attracted limited research interest although attention has been given to the experiences of students in their final years of secondary school (Ainley, Jones, & Navaratham, 1990; Alloway, et al., 2004) and to the experiences of students who plan to leave school early and/or who are at risk of not making an effective transition into work or further study (Beavis, 2006; Beavis, Curtis, & Curtis, 2005; Bryce, Anderson, Frigo, & McKenzie, 2007; Nelms & Taylor, 2007). Within the career education field a relatively small body of research focuses attention on the ways young adolescents prepare for and begin to embark upon career decision making (Akos, Konold, & Niles, 2004; Arrington, 2000; Fouad & Smith, 1996; Palladino Schulteiss, Palma, & Manzi, 2005; Pellegrini, 1985).

Why are the middle years significant?

Young people begin to formulate ideas about their careers and future from childhood but it is during adolescence that students develop an orientation towards their internal and unique self (Gottfredson, 1981). Gottfredson's influential work in this area included the view that young adolescents develop increasingly sophisticated world views as they integrate disparate pieces of information into a coherent whole and make judgements about how their activities and roles match or do not match with the image of who or what they are trying to become (Gottfredson, 1981).

From another perspective, the Australian Industry Group and Dusseldorp Skills Forum (2007) have expressed concern about Australia's economic future, drawing attention to the need for successful transitions and purposeful student learning in the middle years in order to sustain and increase productivity. A study with over 3500 Year 8 and 9 students in The Smith Family's Learning for Life program concluded that a lack of knowledge amongst students regarding 'how they could get to where they wanted to go in life' adversely affected future participation in the labour market (Beavis, et al., 2005, p. 8). Research has also identified a need for greater attention to the antecedents of how senior secondary students develop their post-school plans in order to enhance young people's sense of, and skills for, the future (Bryce, et al., 2007). As a counter point, however, lifelong learning and encouraging young people to choose and achieve what they value sounds a note of caution regarding overly utilitarian concepts of education (Carneiro, 2007; Wyn, 2007).

Being and becoming

The opportunity to claim space in the adult sphere and assert one's identity is obviously important for young adolescents and education plays a significant role in helping a young person to become somebody 'well' (Wyn, 2007). Identity formation has been recognised as the 'central and defining activity in school' and 'what life in high school is about' (Wexler, 1992, p. 155). Identity formation has also been explored through the concept of possible selves which is defined as 'individuals' ideas of what they might become, what they would like to become and what they are afraid of becoming' (Markus & Nurius, 1986, p. 954). This concept is especially relevant for the middle years where possible selves can act as incentives for young people with

regards to what they want and what they want to avoid. Making a link to careers and futures, Sachs (2002) identified the developmental goal for young people to progressively develop more complex decision making skills and to understand that skills such as critical thinking and the ability communicate persuasively can determine social and economic pathways into adulthood. Csikszentmihalyi and Schneider (2000) described the need for school students to acquire the values and attitudes necessary to meet the future and to develop a future vocational identity.

Choice

Although choice, individuality and personal aims may be desirable, they are not neutral concepts. Choice can be problematic as education systems may not encourage students to question themselves about the life they want to live before they are consumed with the desire to acquire it (Lambeir, 2005). The role of schools in influencing students, however, was emphasised positively by Blenkinsop, McCrone, Wade and Morris (2005) who determined that schools did play a role and could make a difference in young adolescents' educational decision making when the schools made links between careers education and school decision making more explicit.

Offering insight into career indecision for gifted female adolescents, an issue of interest in this study, was Maxwell's (2007) study into career counselling for this particular group. Students' multi-potentiality was shown to present conflicting messages of trying to do your best, yet not be a perfectionist, and the subject selection period was highlighted as potentially a very complex and confronting time for gifted girls (Maxwell, 2007).

The role parents play

Parents represent one of the most significant and pervasive influences on educational choice and decision making (Author & Makar, 2008; Hill, Ramirez, & Dumka, 2003; Perkins & Peterson, 2005; Taylor & Nelms, 2006). A significant body of research in Australia, commissioned by The Smith Family, has consistently argued the importance of schools *and* parents proactively supporting young people to begin post-secondary planning before Year 10 (Beavis, et al., 2005; Bryce, et al., 2007).

In a study of five comprehensive high schools in England, Reid, Barnett and Rosenberg (1974) determined that students saw their school as relatively minor in its influence on which subjects to study at school, instead, parents were recognised as the most important source of help when students required guidance about subject selection decisions. More recent longitudinal research in Australia indicated that middle school aged students compared their lives to those of their parents and at this stage were more preoccupied with immediate family and peer relations than with abstract conceptions of the future (Yates & McLeod, 2007). Limitations to parental influence have been identified in situations where parents lack relevant skills, resources and information (Frigo, Bryce, Anderson, & McKenzie, 2007) and when parents have had little opportunity to be involved in post-school planning discussions at their child's school (Bryce, et al., 2007).

METHODOLOGY

Feminist poststructural approach

As a staff member of the school in the study, my research perspective has been both enriched and made more complex by my dual roles of researcher and teacher/administrator. Feminist poststructuralist theory, which guides my research perspective, allows me to recognise and consider multiple discourses and to work with my own positionality in the research environment (Davies, 1994; Hughes, 2002; Ramazanoglu & Holland, 2004; Weedon, 1997). Davies (1990, p. 504) counselled feminist poststructuralist researchers to ‘speak from [their] embodied knowledges, contradictory as they [are]’, an approach which invites recognition of the decisions I have made which influence the production, collection and interpretation of data.

The research site: ‘Wilton College’

Wilton College is a K to 12 girls’ school. It has an academic culture and it is anticipated by parents, teachers and students that upon successful completion of Year 12, students will enter tertiary education and follow a professional career path. Aspects of the school’s culture are depicted in the following excerpts which give insight into how two of the participants see their school and their education:

Considering we come from such a school like this you kind of get the idea, the future, it’s going to be OK. You can’t really go ... you can go downhill, but because of everything you know and all the information you know, we can only move forward. Like, we can’t really go back anymore because we just keep learning and we’ll end up being higher and higher.

(Emily, focus group interview #1, April 2009)

... I think that it's kind of expected that we could hold a job that can sustain a family ... our children should be given the same opportunities as we have ... We have to fund that for our children ... Like have a similar lifestyle to what you had.

(Claudia, focus group interview #3, April 2009)

These selected comments are obviously not representative of all data in the study but Emily and Claudia's insights into their school and their futures opens a small window onto the study's context and environment. Embedded within these comments is a strong sense of purpose, trust in the school to help them achieve their goals and a desire to replicate and maintain discourses which are dominant and dominating.

These excerpts reveal students feel no pressing need at this stage to rebel or construct alternate pathways into the next stage of adolescence (Butcher & Thomas, 2003; Wyn & White, 1997). Highlighted instead is students' willing participation in many of the construction of traditional meanings of schooling that are represented by 'Wilton College'.

Data production and collection

All Year 8 students (n=150) were invited to participate in the study with 73 students (48.5%) returning completed consent and permission forms. Two research/learning activities comprised the study with all Year 8 students undertaking both activities. The first activity was to complete the 'Lifelong Learning Passport' with input from talks given by staff members about subjects and from a presentation about decision making by the Careers Counsellor. The 'Passport', a guided reflection booklet created by school staff, aimed to increase students' reflexivity and self awareness during the subject selection period, July to August, 2008. The second activity was a visual

instrument developed specifically for the study which asked students to draw a picture of how they saw themselves and their lives in the future. This activity was completed in class groups. Both activities were completed in 2008 whilst the students were in Year 8.

Follow up data collection through focus group interviews occurred in April and May 2009 with a small group of participants who were now in Year 9. Interviews were held with 16 students who were organised into pairs or trios in order to promote interactive group discussion and to give ample time for each girl to speak. At the beginning of the interview, each girl was given a folder with her 'Passport' and 'Drawing' enclosed. As well as asking what they now thought of their comments and pictures from the previous year, the interview was structured around the following questions:

- What tips would you give to Year 8 to assist their subject selection this year?
- Was there a very difficult part of the subject selection process? What was easy about the process?
- Do you see a theme running through your documents?
- You'll need to make educational decisions again in Year 10 and you might have to make some earlier; how do you think you will approach this period when it happens?
- What do you think of your future?
- Do you see the future as clear or foggy?

Participants

Students at this school come from a variety of cultural and linguistic backgrounds but are relatively united in their parents' medium to high socio-economic status. Parents typically hold professional careers and are supportive of and attentive towards their daughters' education. Students in Year 8 are generally aged between 13 and 14 years and Year 8 is the second year of secondary school in New South Wales.

Following the premises of feminist poststructuralism which foregrounds awareness of power relations and the exercise of power in the research process (Ramazanoglu & Holland, 2004), the textual and visual excerpts below allow some of the participants in the study to introduce themselves with their own voice.

Yeah, I really want to help others. I'm really interested in being a specialist, like in medicine. And then just a few years ago, I found the brain really interesting, and I was like, being a neurologist would be a good idea because ... When I first started thinking of being like in medicine it was in Year 1 and someone came and they gave us a talk on eye surgery and I thought that was really interesting.

(Alice, focus group interview #4, April 2009)

Chloe: Well, [what I want to be is] pretty much the same [as before]. I want to be prime minister. People kind of put me down and say you're not serious enough or something.

SL: But that's still a goal?

Chloe: Yes.

(Chloe, focus group interview #1, April 2009, referring to her Drawing, May 2008)

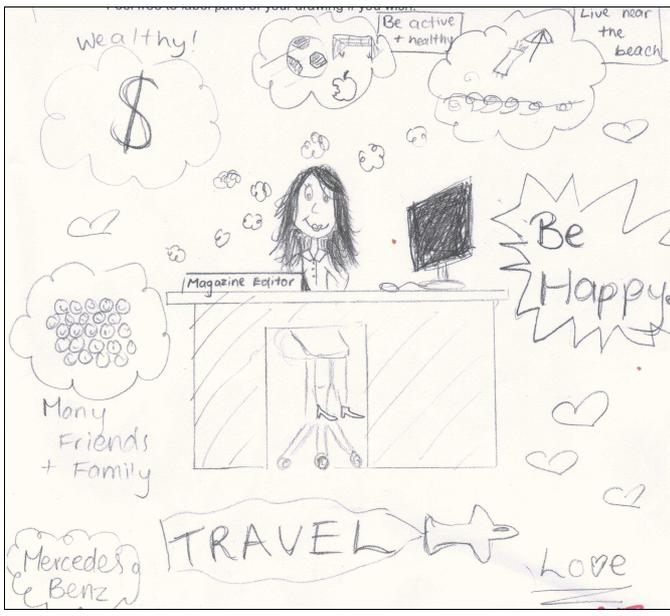
I know how I'd like to picture myself but to know if it will actually be the picture when you're that age, you just don't know. If I work to this goal, I may get here. If I work past this goal I probably will get here and if I put everything in, I probably, I will ... make it, most probably.

(Jess, focus group interview #3, April 2009)

Physiotherapy, Head physiotherapist
 In either /any profession, I want to have a family
 Architect, Lead architect
 Anaesthetist, Leading anaesthetist
 FAMILY with every profession



Figure 1 Jennie, Drawing, May 2008



Wealthy, Be active and healthy, Live near the beach,
 Be Happy
 Love, TRAVEL, Mercedes Benz
 Many Friends and Family

Figure 2 Estelle, Drawing, May 2008

Finding ways to position students' voices more centrally in research supports the aim of engaging young participants in the stories researchers tell about the lives of young people (Bryce, et al., 2007; Fielding, 2004). However, it is recognised that working towards this aim is complex. Theorists have acknowledged that the rendering of voice

is problematic in terms of the interconnection with power (Clarke, 2005) and that simply ‘giving voice’ to subjects is insufficient (Walshaw, 2007). Consideration has therefore been given to finding multiple ways to elicit voice from and give voice to student participants; for example using interviews, written text and visual data, and by revisiting data that students produced previously and asking students to speak about their own data in order to construct the next cycle of meaning (Moss, Deppeler, Astley, & Pattison, 2007).

Analysis

The first phase of data analysis involved coding the data using the qualitative data analysis software program, Nvivo 8. Once coded, the data were re-read and re-viewed in order to develop an understanding of recurring themes and patterns (Patton, 2002). This was followed by further reading of data and the re-positioning of themes in order to recognise the discourses within and surrounding the texts (Davies, 1994). Describing discourse analysis as a lens through which to explain the learner, discourses are seen as unfixed and powerful sets of rules that ‘sketch out ways of being in the world’ (Walshaw, 2007, p. 42). Utilising this viewpoint has allowed for an exploration into modes of behaviour, speech and thought that appear to be considered ‘normal’ by the participants within this particular context.

RESULTS

The data have been grouped under four categories which emerged as significant during the initial phase of analysis. The categories are:

- decision making strategies,
- the role of parents,
- purposeful learning, and
- middle schooling.

The following sections illustrate these themes by presenting relevant data and accompanying analytical observations.

Decision making strategies

Overwhelmingly, the girls in this study identified the importance of choosing subjects that they enjoyed. They explained how studying a subject of interest raised motivation, effort and results. The following excerpt indicates emerging confidence with the ways personal identity links to decision making.

... really ensure you are doing it for you and not someone else. Because you have to enjoy what you're doing, well, I find. Cause otherwise you don't really find it interesting and you don't pick up things as well, I don't think, if you're not enjoying it 100%.

(Jennie, focus group interview #2, April 2009)

On a practical level, students outlined decision making strategies which were closely connected to growing self awareness of pleasure in learning.

Well, I thought about what I looked forward to most, umm, during the week and you know when you look at your timetable and you see things that you like and you think, 'oh yes I've got that today'. So I just chose the ones that I had that reaction to.

(Jennie, focus group interview #2, April 2009)

... when I thought harder I started to see that there were ones I was more excited to do ... I would make kind of little maps and have three subjects with three possibilities and when I saw Art wasn't there, I'd be like "oh". OK, so I really want Art obviously so I knew that had to be there.

(Julia, focus group interview #5, May 2009)

The language used by students when talking about their decision making noticeably revolves around references to 'I', 'me' and 'my'. The length of the following comments allows readers to gain a sense of the speech patterns of students and the importance of 'I'.

I mean it's not absolutely compulsory that I must do well this year; therefore I must do all my work. I don't have to do it. There's no one telling me that you have to be here today. I mean sure, I'll get into trouble. But it's not compulsory that I have to do well but somewhere, obviously, I want to do well and therefore, as much as I might say I don't want to do the work, somewhere along the line, I must want to do it for me to do it.

(Helena, focus group interview #3, April 2009)

I did choose Sports Science but then in the end I changed to History, because after, like, hearing, I think they had a speech about Sports Science and after hearing that I thought, umm, I'm not exactly a practical person so, cause Sports Science is about sports and, like, physical activities, and umm I really like History because I like learning about the past so I decided that my interests are more leaning towards History so I chose History.

(Anne, focus group interview #2, April 2009)

Notably absent from the interview data is a sense of awareness regarding how most adults work in teams and groups and how decisions are often made in concert with partners, family and others. Students appear not yet ready to consider factors related to others and they speak very singularly. However, this appears developmentally appropriate and emphasises the importance of allowing middle years students the opportunity to construct and speak about their own meanings as they reflect on identity and goals.

It's not on what other people think you should do. Everything should be your decisions. Everything will affect you and it's for your benefit.

(Helena, focus group interview #3, April 2009)

The role parents play

It is apparent that students highly value their parents' input into educational decisions and the support parents offer during decision making.

Well, for instance, when I was choosing my electives they said 'Do whatever you want to do. We will, like, decide with you but we are not going to push you to do anything you don't want to do'.

(Stephanie, focus group interview #5, May 2009)

Data from the focus group interviews which references parents and family reveal that students articulate little or no desire or need to separate from, challenge or act independently from their parents through educational decision making. By contrast, students represent a strong desire to remain within family culture as they transpose their own family structures into their future goals. This theme is particularly strong in the Drawings, many of which depict a family with male and female parents and children standing outside a house. Alice's drawing (see Figure 3) is typical in this

regard. In her labels she indicates that she is married to a ‘successful business man’ and has four children. She notes that the house has a big yard. Insights into constructions of family and gender roles are addressed only briefly here but provide a rich area of investigation for future research.

- Big group of friends that can all be trusted and trust me
- HOME – Big yard 5 ac. or more, Family house and another holiday one, Married to a successful business man, 4 children
- WORK – Brain surgeon or specialist OR Barrister in the law
- Get over 95% in HSC!
- Take a year travelling either before or after uni
- I want to get my name on one of the plaques
- Earn a lot of money! \$\$\$\$
- I would like to move up a maths & English class
- I would like to go to a great university/ Finished uni
- I would like to travel around the world. Especially to France

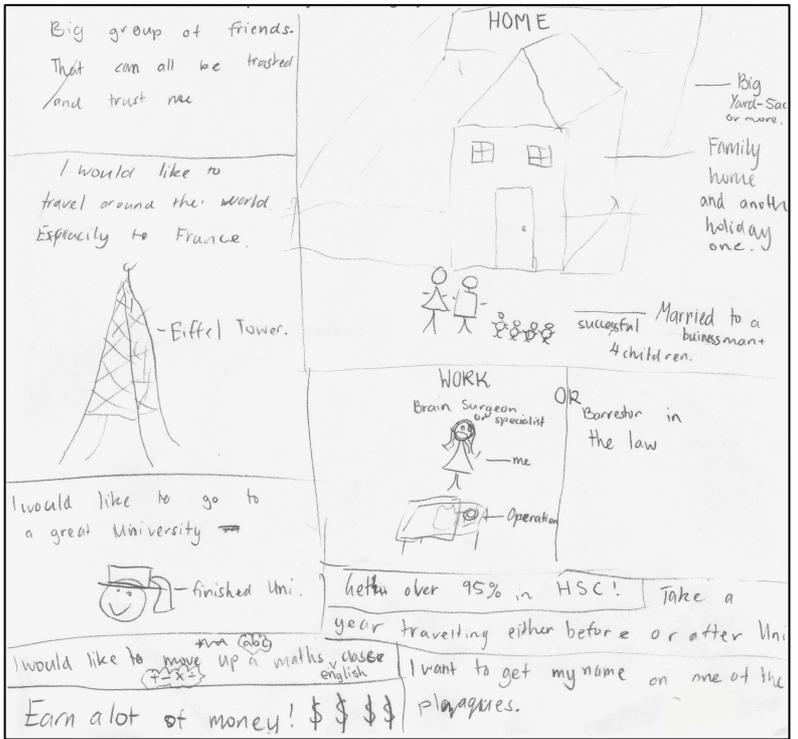


Figure 3 Alice, Drawing, May 2008

By point of contrast, Jess’s perspective is relatively unique within this study. In the context of the discussion in Focus Group #3, Jess voices a clearly feminist perspective and cautions the other girls not to ‘bank on’ partners for secure futures.

You have to also not bank off it [and not just think]: “I’m going to get married, I’m going to have kids and I’ll have enough money to sustain them”. You have to think, “What will help me if I get into trouble, like without any partner, without anything?” You have to think, “Well, if I

do this, I can do this by myself and get the jobs by myself and I don't need anyone". You need to do it.

(Jess, focus group interview #3, April 2009)

Learning for a purpose

Strong themes about engagement in lifelong learning are represented in the data. Figures 5 and 6 depict very specific professional (and non-gendered) pathways (veterinarian, paediatrician, accountant, lawyer) which are integrated with lifestyle aspects (family, good friends, pets, enjoying music and travel). Such blending is a recurring pattern which suggests students have a strong awareness of the discourses of balance, healthy lifestyles and relationships which increasingly influence many adults in their decision making. Interestingly, their listings of careers in these Figures does not appear to overtly reflect gendered decision making (Skelton & Francis, 2009).



Figure 4 Annika, Drawing, May 2008

Veterinarian, Listening to music always, Vet labcoat, travels but always comes home, 2+ animals as pets, Technology savvy

Figure 5 Isabelle, Drawing, May 2008

What I want to become: Family, Accountant, Successful & Happy, Paediatrician, Lawyer, Good Friends

The data indicate a very high awareness of tertiary study and the recognition, even in the Middle School, that tertiary study pathways often link to professional careers (see Figure 7).

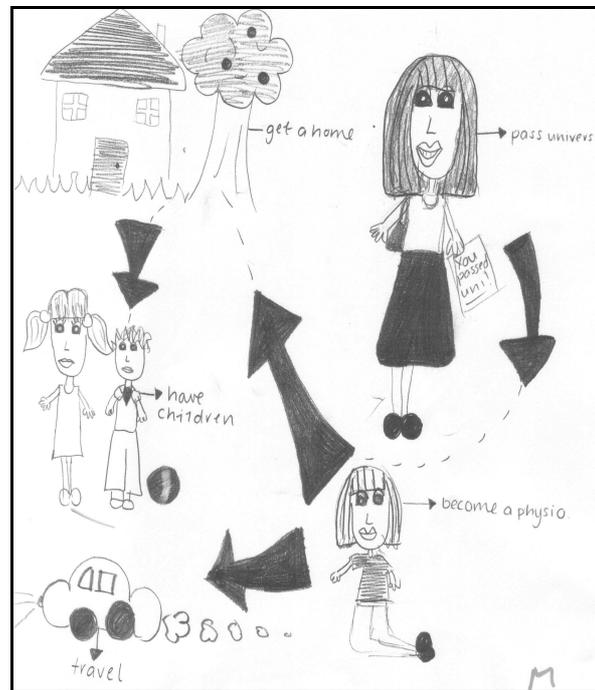
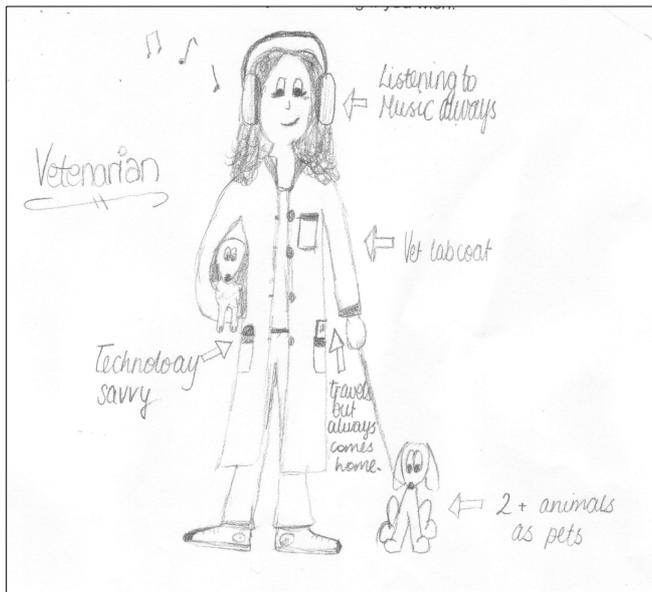


Figure 6 Amy, Drawing, May 2008

However, there is little mention of options other than the Higher School Certificate (the HSC is the external end of Year 12 assessment in New South Wales) and university. Students consistently spoke, drew and wrote about the need to achieve high results in the HSC if they were to reach their next step to the future. Whether ‘high marks’ were actually needed to access a particular course was usually unknown but this assumption appeared not to be questioned.

Helena: I can picture myself in Year 12 and that's it. I think anything else past that is based on the results I get in Year 12.

Claudia: I've got absolutely no clue about what I want to do when I get past Year 12. So I think getting the marks in Year 12 will open up choices about what I want to do.

Focus group interview #3, April 2009

With this end goal in mind, students' relatively high engagement with learning in the middle years is contextualised. Students are attuned to the role that curriculum and schooling in the middle phase play in preparing them for the school years. However, understandings of 'curriculum' and 'schooling' are revealed as relatively narrow as noticeably absent from the data was any mention or depiction of alternate pathways to the future; such as learning through TAFE, apprenticeships, traineeships, private colleges, work experience, on the job training, mature age entrance, leaving school to set up businesses or joining family in work. The absence of awareness or interest in these possibilities possibly explains students' high investment in middle years learning as they see successful senior school matriculation as the sole pathway beyond school. This is represented by Hayley's drawing (see Figure 7) which optimistically pictures a young graduate, with her dog, perched 'on top of the world' whilst travel tracks depict her journey (just taken or to come) on the globe below her feet.

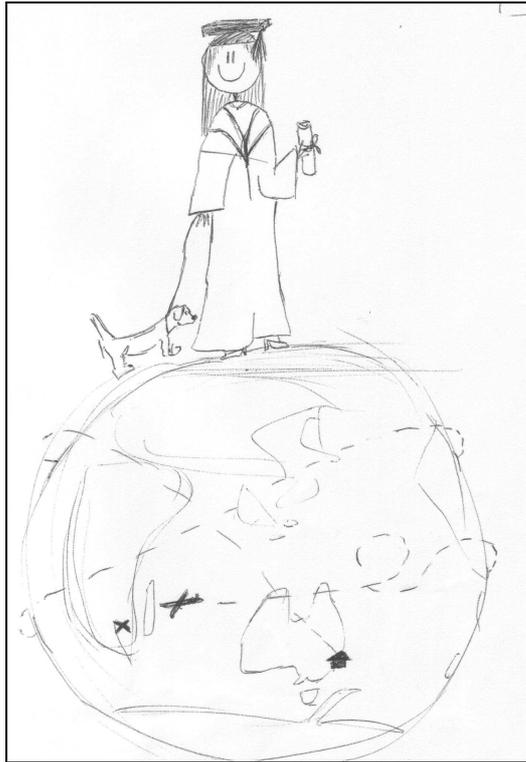


Figure 7 Hayley, Drawing, May 2008

Connecting the middle years to the future

Whilst middle years' discourse and research can be dominated by themes of disengagement, data from this study indicates a very high level of engagement in learning for these students. Making sense of her learning, Claudia recognises how her current interests may carry her into a tertiary course, "*In university, I think that I would like to study some sort of medicine or science as they are the subjects at schools that I enjoy*" (Learning Passport, August 2008). Emily draws connections between possible futures and school subjects by explaining her decision making process to select Art over Design and Technology as an elective.

... I thought I would learn more from Art than from Design and Technology. I thought Art would give me in the future a better option rather than just doing Design and Technology.

(Emily, focus group interview #1, April 2009)

Helena reflects on the differences between assessment in the school context and what she expects in the world beyond school; “*I think when you leave school, you’re not judged in lots of different sections. It’s all one big result and ... everything counts to the one thing*” (focus group interview #3, April 2009). In the following excerpt, Helena discusses a History project which gave students the option to present the information in a form of their own choice. Helena’s comments trace the ways she is making sense of integrated learning, student choice and authentic assessment, all of which are signifying practices of middle schooling.

I think you sort of get the feeling that every subject now is every subject combined ... somehow you’ve got to use, umm, your creative side, English side, and Maths side in every subject because you don’t have one outlet. You’ve got to use it where you can ... We just had a History assignment to hand in. It was some sort of presentation. There were videos, there was skits, there was interviews, there was the biggest range of presentations that I’ve ever seen and they were the most amazing ‘put togethers’ ... The video that one of the girls did. It was absolutely amazing - there was music in it, there was the creative in it, there was all the English, there was the text. It was all the subjects that they could put into one ... they had to bring it all into one.

(Helena, focus group interview #3, April 2009)

CONCLUSION

This study gives insight into a group of young adolescents who are actively thinking through educational decisions and drawing heavily on influential discourses from their family and school. The space of intersection between family and school appears to be providing students with input which contributes to them feeling well prepared to make educational decisions which are personalised and motivating. However, it is apparent that students’ thoughts about pathways into the future are relatively limited to professional, academic arenas.

As this study involved only girls, this finding raises valuable insights into the ways the next generation of young women view the influence of their gender, or lack of influence of their gender, on school subjects, learning, career and family. As may be expected, participants revealed no awareness of the long standing challenge of combining parenting and career, indicating this issue was either too complex for their consideration at this stage or their upbringing (with parents juggling roles) has both sensitised and desensitised them to making it work. The students' affluent backgrounds may also have masked some of the challenges faced by their parents in this domain. These aspects will be pursued in future research.

Prevalent themes of active engagement and motivation in the middle years appeared to be strongly connected to students' desires to achieve 'success' in school, especially in assessments and examinations in Year 12. This factor both contributes to, and challenges, middle years philosophies of learning as although students demonstrate strong commitment to their current stage of schooling, they are falling in line, mostly without question, with some of the narrow discourses of schooling which middle schooling has been committed to challenging.

Hence, although many aspects of this study affirm middle years practice, it is evident that a critical stance must be maintained and alternate discourses continually pursued in order to elucidate the complexities of the schooling experience for young adolescents.

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