ALTERNATIVE SETTINGS – ALTERNATIVE TEACHERS? REFLECTIONS ON TEACHING OUTSIDE THE MAINSTREAM

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Abstract

While alternative educational settings in Australia have expanded over the past two decades, there has been little formal research into teacher perceptions of what it means to teach outside the mainstream. This paper outlines part of a longitudinal study involving the School for Student Leadership (SSL), an alternate educational setting in Victoria, Australia, which offers residential programs for Year 9 students. A research partnership between Monash University Gippsland and the SSL began in 2001, with this component commencing in 2009. The focus of this paper is the qualitative findings resulting from interviews with 33 teachers. Ongoing debate about how we should educate adolescents highlights that we live in a world of rapid global, technological and social change and that education should equip students to deal with these changes. This research provided an opportunity to seek teachers' perceptions about how this goal was achieved in a non-traditional setting. The findings provided interesting insights about the different focus required to be a teacher at the SSL. The alternate setting did provide more opportunity for equipping students to deal with change but also required teachers to respond differently, shifting the emphasis from content to context and from 'teacher' to educator, facilitator or mentor.

Introduction

The School for Student Leadership (SSL), a Victorian Department of Education initiative, began operating in 2000 as the Alpine School situated in the Victorian Alps at Dinner Plain. Two further campuses have since opened - the Snowy River campus in Marlo and the Gnurad Gundidj campus in Camperdown. The term 'alternative' is commonly used to describe both the setting and nature of the SSL residential program, which differs substantially from the traditional schooling model in terms of the overall environment and particularly in relation to curriculum design and implementation (Alpine School Charter, 2004; SSL Program Guide, 2012). The school provides a nine-week residential program for groups of Year 9 students from a mix of urban and regional areas. Groups of four to five students from any State secondary school can apply to attend the "innovative and high quality leadership and enterprise educational programs" offered by the school (SSL Charter, 2004, p. 4). The pedagogical approach combines cooperative and experiential learning and incorporates brain theory, outdoor and environmental activities and Information and Communications Technology (ICT). The curriculum design and delivery reflects the key ideas with respect to what is seen as appropriate education for Year 9 students. A key focus of the program is to assist adolescents to understand themselves and their value to groups and communities to which they belong (SSL Program Guide, 2012).

Whilst the residential nature of the program provides many exciting opportunities for students it also requires quite different levels of engagement from the teachers. Indeed it is more than just a level of engagement from teachers, because the program challenges in a way that calls for a re-examination of what is at the core of learning and teaching itself. Gore (2001) articulates this effectively by suggesting that the key emphasis ought to be on the student and what they personally gain from a particular learning experience,.

While students are able to learn more about themselves and their strengths and limitations, this is done within a scaffolded environment built by the teaching staff . All students have opportunities to take

formal leadership roles including running meetings, managing the day-to-day running of the school and active involvement in student governance. Students also participate in a large range of activities based on the unique environment of each campus. These activities are designed to encourage students to show and develop independence and include overnight bushwalks, white water rafting, mountain biking, first aid and initiative activities (SSL Brochure, 2006), culminating in three day EXPOS or expeditions. During EXPOs students' physical, social and emotional capabilities are challenged but within a supportive scaffold, provided by the teachers. This type of learning differs substantially from mainstream school environment learning previously experienced by both students and teachers.

Bauman (2001) makes the observation that those in educational institutions are heavily endowed with primary learning i.e. the direct instruction, and give at least some lip service to secondary learning or the process of thinking about learning. However he claims that real preparation for life, the perennial role of all education, comes about best through tertiary learning which cultivates the ability to live with uncertainty, without clear-cut goals and with a multiplicity of viewpoints. To embrace this process of tertiary learning means that the work of the teacher becomes one whereby the endpoint is not known, cannot ever be fixed and remains an open-ended formative process, which is more important that any specific end product. This type of learning seems to be what is encouraged and facilitated at the SSL and requires a different view of the role of teacher.

Since the school SSL for student leadership began in 2000, ongoing research has been conducted as part of a longitudinal project but most has concentrated on students and the student perspective (Dyson & Cairns, 2002; Zink & Dyson, 2009; Dyson & Plunkett, 2010) with very little reference to the teachers who become part of the SSL community (Plunkett & Dyson, 2010). While a small body of literature does exist in relation to the teaching perspective within environmental and experiential education (Brown, 2006, Schartner, 2000, Simmons, 1988, Smith-Cabasto & Cavern, 2006) there is nothing relating to a unique program such as that offered by the SSL which due to its breadth and depth does not sit in isolation from broader educational, social and global discourses.

The context of the current study

The three campuses of the SSL each have 11 teachers plus a range of support staff (chefs, house parents, expo assistants). Teachers' work in a very different fashion to mainstream or traditional schools where students only spend part of their day with their teachers. Rosters ensure that all teachers spend some nights at the campus and on the 3 day EXPOs (expeditions) that form part of the program. The current study involved surveying and interviewing the teachers at each of the 3 campuses of the SSL to explore their perceptions about working at the SSL. Through exploring teacher perceptions about working in an alternative educational setting, a picture emerges about what it means to be a teacher outside the mainstream. Indeed the purpose of this paper is to provide new insights into the changing role of teacher, especially in an alternate setting where the student is at the centre of the learning and teaching experience. The lenses through which these understandings have been interrogated involve a number of different bodies of literature, as outlined in the following section.

Theoretical framework and related literature

The bodies of literature that have informed this study are focused on some 'Big Picture' thinking about the rapid social, global and technological changes which are occurring at this time in history, the important work of teachers and the challenges of educating the children of the 21st Century – in particular those identified as the middle years. Especially over the last two centuries, and in particular over the last fifty years of rapid change, it would appear that humankind has arrived at the brink of little, or no control of change. Ward and Dubos (1972) explain it in the following way,

> …the power, extent and depth of man's interventions in the natural order seem to presage a revolutionary new epoch in human history, perhaps the most revolutionary the mind can conceive. Men seem, ….to be substituting the controlled for the uncontrolled, the fabricated for the un-worked, the planned for the random. And they do so with the speed and depth of intervention unknown in any previous age of human history (p. 3).

In addition to the notion suggested above in 1972 by Ward and Dubos of uncontrolled and rapid change further evidence of this can also be seen in the work of Singer (2002) in his writing after the terrorist attack on the World Trade Centre in New York, 2001. He directs his book 'One World' to arguing, "that how well we come through this era of globalisation – perhaps whether we will come through at all – will depend on how well we respond ethically to the idea that we live in one world" (p.14). Teihard De Chardin (1959), writing much earlier presents the idea that the dilemmas beseeching humankind's quest for a better world is focused squarely on the seeking of individualised Utopia and claims that it must be abandoned as soon as possible. "No, man (sic) will never succeed in going beyond man by uniting with himself" (p. 254). Perhaps unity within humanity is only possible through the recognition that we are social beings, within a defined space, and that we have a responsibility to the space, to each other and the world in which we live. Mackay (1999) adds to this by proposing, "Once we recognise that moral sensitivity is the product of social interaction, we can appreciate the importance of nurturing our personal relationships and our communal life" (p. 106). A world-centred communal life begins with interpersonal relationships. A core aspect of the pastoral philosophy that underpins the curriculum at the SSL is explained in the following statement from the SSL Program Guide (2012), "Our approach … encourages students to explore themselves as individuals, team members and members of the broader community" (p. 3).

The 'Big Picture', teachers and the power of thinking

One of the broad implications, or part of the 'Big Picture' with respect to this paper revolves around the question of how the future is to be, and can be, prepared for our successors, and by whom? This preparation, within the Western World, would seem to occur through the steps, processes and procedures implemented over time in and by our educational institutions. What takes place in these is conducted through and guided by our teachers, who following on from parents are major contributors to the success and the preparation of our successors. We recognise teachers charged with the work of education, to be one of the three most significant forces within society and in the lives of children. The other two are parents, and the media.

Arendt, as cited in Britzman (2003) views education in the following way,

> For education belongs among the most elementary and necessary activities of human society, which never remains as it is but continuously renews itself through birth through the arrival of new humans beings. These newcomers, moreover are not finished but in a state of becoming (Arendt, 1993) cited in (Britzman, 2003, p. 9).

When the work of teachers, engaged in the process of education, is viewed as those persons responsible for enabling 'a state of becoming' to come about for the students in their care then the role of teacher appears to change. A significant part of this change would seem to be in relation to what Arendt (1990) refers to as thinking "the-two-in-one soundless dialogue" (p 446). Arendt encourages people in the plural, that is, people living and moving and acting in this world, to do one simple thing that all of us as humans can do. What she proposes is that, "we think what we are doing" (Arendt, 1958, p. 5). Although the whole idea, or the concept of 'thinking' seems obvious enough - because it is fundamental to human beings - it requires us to stop, stand back and examine what we are engaged in, what we are doing and what the consequences of our actions are. An essential part of the work at the SSL, as presented in the rhetoric in the Alpine School Program Guide "Much of the program involves the use of experiential and interactive teaching strategies to promote learning and skills development. This hands-on approach requires students to cooperate and communicate to successfully carry out tasks. Students learn through active involvement in tasks, which are real, purposeful and fun. Such an approach allows students to see clearly the action/consequence relationship and necessitates them taking responsibility for their actions" (p. 4). This, as referred to earlier, is Arendt's notion of thinking what we are doing. The role of the teachers at the SSL is highlighted in the SSL Program,

> Throughout the program students are given progressively longer periods of time to reflect on their experience. A variety of reflective activities are utilized to assist students to move from an experiential to a reflective mode. The discussion and processing of experience assists students to develop concepts and language with which to further examine and share

their experience (p. 4).

These reflective activities involving "thinking about what you are doing" are facilitated by the teachers at the SSL and would seem to be appropriate in the education of 'middle years' students – the year 9 cohort at the SSL.

Middle Years - Year 9 Education

Middle years schooling has received sporadic attention in Australia over a number of years. The impetus in Australia, as presented by Bahr and Pendergast (2007) is focused more on "philosophical concerns that have early adolescence and contemporary society at it core" (p. 207), rather than structural and organisational imperatives. Year 9 is considered the last year of middle schooling by many educators (Carrington, 2006; Groundwater-Smith, Mitchell & Mockler, 2007) and has been identified as a decisive year for young people in schools (Cole, Mahar, Vindurampulle, 2006; DEET, 1999) with many young people disengaged and underachieving (Carrington, 2004). Year 9 students are considered to have diverse learning needs as presented in a report by the then Victorian Department of Education and Training, which identified some of the implications for policy and practice if those needs are to be met (Cole, Mahar, Vindurampulle, 2006b). These include structures, which enable strong bonds to develop between students and staff; and a curriculum that facilitates deep engagement with learning; student engagement with support from the community and experiencing adult like roles and responsibilities (Cole, Mahar, Vindurampulle, 2006b).

The world in which adolescents now live is a vastly different world from that experienced by young people a generation ago and a number of authors argue that this has profoundly changed what it is to be an adolescent and that there have been major shifts in how this group understand and interpret the world (Carrington, 2006; Wyn & Woodman, 2006, 2007). Wyn and Woodman (2006) argue that shifting to a generational view of young people shifts the emphasis away from adolescence as a transitional phase to adulthood and locates this group squarely in the social and cultural processes in which they live. It is clearly stated in the Strategic Plan of the SSL,

> …that every student we now see has only been to school in the 21st Century. They are mostly educated by teachers who went to school in the 20th Century. They exist in a school system that was developed in the 18th Century. If ever there was a time to do education differently, it is now (p. 5).

Wyn and Woodman (2006) further suggest that the extended periods which many young people now live in the parental home and the increasing diversity of households and family lives has led to a valuing of relationships that takes different forms from pervious generations. The uncertainty and instability of working and family patterns suggests that young people have to work at creating long term relationships that may in the past have occurred through more stable and assured life patterns. Mackay, (1999) suggests that the present youth culture has "the desire to reconnect with 'the herd', [original emphasis] so that individuals obtain a stronger sense of identity and of emotional security from recreating communal connections that stimulate the 'village life' to which so many Australians aspire" (p. 3).

As suggested by Tapscott (1998), the Net Generation is characterised by "interactivity based on participation rather than observation, a tolerance of social diversity, a propensity for challenging the conventions of authority and acceptance of economic insecurity and career changes as norms" (p, 78). Adding to this, Prensky (2001) refers to this Net Generation as Digital Natives and makes the claim that "our students have changed radically. Today's students are no longer the people our educational system was designed to teach…Our students today are all "native speakers" of the digital language of computers, video games and the Internet" (p. 1). As such they communicate differently, form relationships differently and have a different set of values and needs to other generations.

Adolescents are not just on a transitional pathway to adulthood; they actually live in a different world and therefore have different learning needs. Bahr and Pendergast (2007), in their text the *Millennial Adolescent,* assist in readdressing this deficit and claim that "to know and understand young people,

how they learn and respond in situations, is likely to enhance their life outcomes and make life easier for other generations connecting with them" (p. 27). This notion fits well with the core values and beliefs statement espoused by the SSL, which guide their school and program decision-making. Specifically they state a belief in and valuing of - diversity and inclusiveness; experiential learning, creativity, challenge and fun; a holistic approach to health & wellbeing; respect for self and others; living sustainably; fairness, equity and community; opportunities for growth socially, intellectually & personally; exercising rights, accepting responsibilities; and accepting accountability (2012b, p. 6).

Since teachers are considered one of the three most significant influences in the world today it is essential that they have a firm grasp upon the significance of both their role in society and the power to influence - that they share with parents. With this in mind the teachers of the 21st Century, and indeed the teachers at the SSL cannot alone be the holders of knowledge. As highlighted in their Position Description (2012) the SSL informs prospective candidates of the following;

> Middle year's educational best practice informs our curriculum content and pedagogy. These include fundamentally engaging activities as the basis of our work, project-based work, inquiry based learning, experiential learning, working on concrete work tasks, team work, integrated use of ICT, reflective practices, meta-cognitive learning, thinking and learning profiling and community living. The deliberate limitation of resources and the creation of learning/decision-making tension points, among many others are keys to the success of learning. The school deliberately and explicitly uses these modalities for the delivery of the innovative curriculum.

In other words the type of teacher required at the SSL is one that is able to point themselves and others to knowledge and resources, encourage thinking and reflection, be flexible in their thinking and operations and be adaptable to the changing demands of an evolving community.

In summary this literature review has touched on some of the 'Big Picture' thinking about a world of rapid social, global and technological change, which is anticipated as continuing unabated, and for the most part will remain out control, well into the future. Considerable pressures are being exerted upon all of society, but in particular in the vital field of formal education, which is challenged to act in ethical and moral ways and to 'think what they are doing'. Furthermore the implications and challenges of educating in a Digital Age, populated with Digital Natives, within an educational system designed for the Industrial Age suggests that a different kind of teacher is required to educate those students 'in a state of becoming' in the 21st Century. Particularly challenging are those in the middle years of schooling who expect diverse ways of being learners, and a different focus on relationships and community.

Methodology

During Term 4 of 2009, as part of a sequential mixed methods study (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2010), an online survey was developed and following analysis of the survey, a set of semi-structured interview questions was designed. The question most pertinent to this paper asked - How would you perceive your role as a teacher in this educational setting compared to a more traditional educational (secondary college) environment?

At each of the three campuses all 11 staff members willingly participated in the interviews, which lasted for an average of 30 minutes. After transcription, data from the 33 teacher interviews were managed using the qualitative software package, NVivo9. Emergent themes were discovered utilising a process involving both inductive analysis (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005) and constant comparison (Patton, 1990). Following repeated reading and re-reading of the data, representative quotes were drawn from the interviews, forming the first-order analysis where thematic descriptions relating to teacher perceptions about their experience of being part of the SSL were highlighted. Initially descriptive codes were used to assist in the identification of pertinent and note-worthy concepts, which were then further explored through inferential coding where conceptual linkages were made and then used for developing new categories. The second order of analysis

explored emerging patterns relating to teacher perceptions of the SSL educational environment and what it meant to be a teacher in that setting. Additional processes were utilised to assist in the establishment of trustworthiness of the data including establishment of an audit trail with an international colleague who although familiar with the research was not directly involved; peer debriefing with colleagues; and finally a systematic relationship with the school established over a 10 year period with the same lead researcher maintaining regular contact (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Results and Discussion

All thirty-three teachers from across the three campuses of the SSL agreed to participate in the interviews. The composition was 15 females (45%) and 18 males (55%) with the vast majority (79%) fitting into the lower age bracket of between 21 to 39 years of age. Table 1 outlines the major themes that emerged from the analysis of the interview data in relation to the question about teaching in the alternative setting of the SSL. Following the Table is a series of representative comments (using pseudonyms) related to each of the themes.

Table 1: Emergent themes from teacher interviews

Theme	Aspects within theme	No. of times mentioned
Role of teacher	Facilitator/mentor rather than traditional teacher	11
	Student rather than teacher led	11
	Providing strong role model for students	5
	Involvement is 24/7 and you are part of a community	5
Total number of references to this theme		**32**
Teaching and learning approach: Curriculum	Less focus on traditional curriculum	9
	Greater focus on experiential learning	9
	Strong focus on teaching students to know themselves	8
	Less time spent on administrivia (marking, report writing etc)	7
	Shift in focus – teaching students to be learners rather than students	3
Total number of references to this theme		**36**
Teaching and learning approach: Environment	Holistic approach to behaviour management	7
	Focus is on preparing challenging activities and learning that occurs in the outdoors	7
	Environment is open/warm/friendly so students have different relationships with teachers	6
	Smaller class sizes also impact on relationships	5
Total number of references to this theme		**25**
Teaching and learning approach: Social/emotional	More rapport with students which helps learning	9
	Students are there 24/7 so lots of different emotions to deal with	8
	Need to be prepared for engagement and learning at both the academic/social level	6
	Intensity of seeing student growth in weeks rather than years	4
Total number of references to this theme		**27**

Role of teacher

Comments by Jayne, Chris, Paula and John highlight points made by most of the respondents in relation to perceptions about the different role that teachers play in the different learning environment of the SSL. Jayne emphasises the value that the extra time with students gives to enhancing learning opportunities;

> We're not rushed so much because the lesson, a lot of the time is for them to grow through that kind of experience. So, it's not necessarily task orientated, it's what they're trying to achieve while they are doing a particular task. And so I think, in that way, from teaching in the schools that I've taught in before, which have been mainstream schools, where there's not a, not as much time I guess to be able to focus on....fumble through, learn from, and try it again, and not.... stepping in too much, letting them make those decisions and yes..... it takes longer but that's what we've got time for, if that makes sense? The program that I was doing at the last school I was working at, it was good but it didn't work as well. It was one day a week, they do this type of thing but it was interrupted by everything that was going out, in their lives outside of school, so they couldn't really focus on it as much (Jayne).

Chris highlights the need for balancing the level of intimacy that the environment enables with the need for boundaries to ensure that there is still an adult/student relationship;

> I think in this environment you're definitely more of a facilitator than a teacher, so it's not as authoritarian and I think the students really appreciate that and on some ways you have to really do a balancing act because by the end of the term like right now, they're starting to get really friendly with us and calling you, you know nicknames and all sorts of things, and so it's really great to have that, but at the same time, it's like okay, you need to know when to switch that on and switch on the other, okay I need to explain this to you and you really need to listen to me as an adult, not as your buddy, so I think that's a challenging thing to get right... you have to do a lot of that role modelling for them...(Chris)

Both Paula and John point out that the role of teacher is still there irrespective of environment but that without the limitations of most traditional settings, the SSL provides an opportunity for teachers to be more effective;

> In some ways yes, in some ways no. I think still at your, core role you're a teacher, your core responsibility is firstly do you care, I think that's first and foremost and then secondly providing an education, teaching these kids how to think, how to learn, facts about the world and to become material to take responsibility in to how to act, something simple as manners and things. What's different about my role as teacher I think here is I'm able to for fill it a lot better because there's just not the discipline issues or the other, the planning time all the responsibilities that you do have it in a mainstream school, so I believe I'm a much more effective teacher in this setting, yeah (Paula).

> No I'd like to think I would be the same in a mainstream school setting, but I think there are a lot more limitations in a mainstream school setting, we don't have here (John).

What this group of teachers revealed is that that they understand the changing role of teacher required to engage and facilitate learning for these Digital Natives, as suggested by Tapscott (1998). They as a group also recognise that in this alternate setting they can be, and are, more the facilitators of learning and the facilitators of the 'state of becoming' which both Arendt (1993) and Britzman (2003) emphasise as important.

Teaching and learning approach – curriculum

The core ideas that emerged in relation to curriculum centered on the freedom provided through not being constrained by traditional disciplinary based requirements. Focusing on experiential learning and assisting students to understand themselves as learners and how to become more effective learners was seen as liberating. Both Jason and Con discuss the implications of working within an imposed framework that doesn't necessarily value where students are at, with Jason implying that the freedom to move out of such restraints can be transformational;

> *It's a different role here because of the nature that you're trying to let them experience it and come to the learning through the structured program but it is also, it can be replicated in schools in a similar way that parts of this sort of philosophy in that you can have students think about values as a core part of the program....but also your typical curriculum probably doesn't allow also for a lot of that to happen and so it happens more through this living in a community and through learning in the outdoors or rather than through doing maths or writing an essay.... I think quite often in our system it's compulsory for students so it's given to them and therefore you're dealing with some who don't want to be there too so here most of them want to be here and have chosen it and therefore they're wanting to take on the experience and there's this passion, desire for change and when you've got that desire there's a chance that you do transformation as an educator (Jason).*

> *...it seems like within mainstream schools there's sub-sections of just working towards their own outcomes, like maybe science is getting theirs, maths is getting theirs, but here we're all trying to work towards a common understanding once we figure out what that is...(Con).*

Samantha raises the point that learning occurs in many ways and that the SSL provides different opportunities for this through the focus on life skills;

> *I continually try and create points of tension you know, ... talks ... yeah, he talks about that a lot, you know, ethical tensions and I tell you what, you can definitely get some really decent learning from that stuff, through creating challenges you know and I don't go out to create challenges and tension all the time, but if I can see that there's a point where there's perhaps a few different ideas going on in the room, I'm more than happy to sit back and let that flow out, rather than try and nip it and you know and try and stop any potential conflict, I'd let them work through it, but knowing that we've given them the tools to manage that, because we teach a lot of life skills, so you're able to create that shared language of communication and shared language of problem solving that a lot of students in other schools don't have (Samantha).*

As these teachers move away from presenting the traditional curriculum of mainstream schooling they find renewed freedom and flexibility, which enables them to engage in teaching and learning experiences that promote the development of life skills, including encouraging the students in their care to come to understand themselves and their core values and beliefs. In enabling this kind of learning the students are being guided in their understanding of what it is to be a moral and ethical human being, committed to knowing themselves and the others in the community in which they live. This supports Teihard De Chardin's notion that "No, man (sic) will never succeed in going beyond man by uniting with himself". Mackay (1999) adds to this by proposing, "Once we recognise that moral sensitivity is the product of social interaction, we can appreciate the importance of nurturing our personal relationships and our communal life" (p. 106). A world-centred communal life begins with interpersonal relationships, which are indeed promoted and encourages by the teachers at the SSL.

Teaching and learning approach – environment

The most salient points relating to the environment of the SSL included small group teaching with less emphasis on assessment and reporting thereby creating a learning environment in which students are engaged and less likely to require conventional behavior management. The holistic, warm and supportive environment was seen as conducive to positive relationship building between teachers and students. Collette and Gill both mentioned the strength of relationships that can be built because of the residential nature of the program;

> *I suppose here we're really lucky in that I think we get the time – we have small classes and we get to do a lot of challenging activities with the students, and when you're out of your comfort zone with people, I think it's a different way of developing your relationship... just being able to, as a teacher spend that time with students as well, you do develop more of a rapport and a real relationship, which I think is really important for real learning to take place as well. Like it's, you know, if you've got a relationship with someone you're going to listen more and you're going to be able to communicate more and understand each other, which I think helps everyone learn and grow. In a traditional school you get a big group of*

kids for a certain amount of time each week sporadically, and you have certain things you have to teach them that they're not even necessarily interested in, whereas I think a lot of the stuff here, at least it's about them and I think – yeah, most of them are interested in most or all of the stuff we do (Collette).

Relationship wise you don't have kids 24/7 in a normal school, they've got a lot of other distractions around them, they go home, there's so many other influences occurring, the large number of kids that you deal with in a classroom, you just don't get to know kids on the level that we do, that - that more intimate knowledge about them about them as people and I think that is one of our strengths (Gill).

...I don't know how to word it – but encouraging them to develop – giving them opportunities to develop and get stuff from it and if they don't then it's kind of a bit of their choice and we don't – we don't really force it on them, we just try to help them understand it that's it's good for them or it's like beneficial...(Adam).

Living in a structured community 24/7 enables what Cole, Mahar, Vindurampulle, (2006) suggest as important for middle years students to come to fruition. "These include structures, which enable strong bonds to develop between students and staff; a curriculum that facilitates deep engagement with learning; student engagement with support from the community and experiencing adult like roles and responsibilities". The teachers at the SSL are attempting to put into practice the core values and beliefs espoused by the SSL and as highlighted by Bahr and Pendergast (2007) "to know and understand young people, how they learn and respond in situations, is likely to enhance their life outcomes and make life easier for other generations connecting with them" (p. 27).

Teaching and learning approach – social emotional

Responses by teachers highlighted the difference in the way they related to students socially and emotionally in the SSL, mainly as a result of the greater rapport that developed as a result of the time spent together and the nature of the program. Dealing with emotions that would normally be dealt with by families, and getting to know students in an environment that is neither home or school provided challenges but also great rewards as teachers witnessed growth of students in a very different way. Miles, Paulo and Greg all commented on the nature of the relationships that were able to develop within the unique environment;

It's a lot more personal here. You get to know the students a lot better because you're overnight with them some nights, you're their parental figures in a way, and because it's such small groups, which is really nice, and I think the students really enjoy that too, they feel like an individual and not part of the crowd (Miles).

The relationships are different from the start because it is residential and teachers and students spend a lot more time together – you can be with the kids for 3 days at a time on an EXPO and its full on. So the whole focus of what you are trying to achieve in a student-teacher relationship changes from a subject or content focus to sort of personal growth or development – the important things about getting on in a community like this and thriving - that is what we try to help them learn not specific content (Paulo).

It's a pretty unique place where they're living together...they've got lots of opportunity to do presentations and lots of small groups discussions where they're sort of asked to give their input, give their opinion, so it's pretty hard to hide, so they actually have to do it. But we are there to support them and help them grow. Whereas, in a class of 25 or whatever it's pretty hard to give every student the opportunity all the time to develop in this way – to become confident both academically and emotionally (Greg).

As referred to earlier by Mackay, (1999) the teachers at the SLL are attempting to address the present youth culture which has "the desire to reconnect with 'the herd', [original emphasis] so that individuals obtain a stronger sense of identity and of emotional security from recreating communal connections that stimulate the 'village life' to which so many Australians aspire" (p. 3).

Conclusion

Alternative educational settings like the SSL do not operate in the same way that mainstream schools do in terms of curriculum content or context, yet the vast majority of teachers who come to the SSL are from mainstream educational backgrounds. How these teachers perceive their role within an alternative setting is of interest as the residential and experiential nature of the program places very different expectations on them as educators, particularly as they are interacting with middle years students. Findings from interviews with teachers at the SSL illustrated that they perceived their role more broadly than that of a 'teacher', referring more often to themselves as mentors and facilitators. They also acknowledged that the environment provided by the SSL offered more opportunities for assisting students to develop skills in a range of areas that compliment the academic focused skills they arrived with. In particular, the emphasis that teachers placed on developing self-awareness and moral and ethical growth were viewed as positive contributors to help students deal more effectively with the type of change required to survive in our technologically evolved global world.

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