"I am smart and I am not joking": Aiming High in the Middle Years of Schooling

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Abstract

In this paper, we draw on accounts from students to inform a Middle Schooling movement that has been variously described as "arrested", "unfinished" and "exhausted". We propose that if the Middle Schooling movement is to understand the changing worlds of students and develop new approaches in the middle years of schooling, then it is important to draw on the insights that individual students can provide by conducting research with "students-as-informants". The early adolescent informants to this paper report high hopes for their futures (despite their lower socio-economic surroundings), which reinforces the importance of supporting successful learner identities and highlights the role of schooling in the decline of adolescent student aspirations. However, their insights did not stop at the individual learner, with students also identifying cultural and structural constraints to reform. As such, we argue that students may be both an important resource for inquiry into individual school reform and for the Middle Schooling movement internationally.

Introduction

When a 12-year-old Australian student living in a lower socio-economic urban fringe community tells a teacher and university research team about plans to become a dentist, adding that "I am smart and I am not joking", he/she is insisting that this aspiration be taken seriously. In contrast to the deficit views often associated with early adolescence (Carrington, 2006), this middle years student calls for explicit

recognition as someone who is "smart", someone who has cognitive ability and the potential to succeed academically. The insistence of this call confronts educators like us who work with and for such students and also challenges their teachers to contemplate their role in recognising and developing the potential that exists amongst all middle years students as learners and scholars (Sapon-Shevin, 2005). Indeed, in the context of lower socio-economic urban fringe communities, this student's assertion stands out because it is in stark contrast to the so-called skills gap that is mooted by employers and policy-makers. Yet such calls for teachers to take seriously students' high aspirations for their educational and working futures were common in the study we report on here. In this paper, we consider what educators might learn from listening to young people as they reflect on their learning histories, and project themselves into imagined and desired futures. In order to establish our proposition that students might become informants[1] to a new wave of Middle Schooling reform, we begin by discussing the Middle Schooling movement[2] and its recent trends, before turning to our own research with middle years students in the northern suburbs of Adelaide, South Australia.

The origins of the Middle Schooling movement

The Middle Schooling movement has its origins in the United States and can be traced back to the late eighteen hundreds (George, Stevenson, Thomason, & Beane, 1992). However, a distinct Middle Schooling movement did not to begin to take shape in the United States until the 1970s (Anafara, 2001; George et al., 1992) with over ten thousand middle schools built by the end of that decade (Daniels, Bizar, & Zemelman, 2001). Further, what developed as Middle Schooling philosophy around these sites in subsequent years was far from an uncontested notion (Cuban, 1992; Carnegie Group, 1989; Jackson & Davis, 2000; Beane, 2001). Throughout the 1980s, a number of state initiatives further established middle schools before the newly formed National Middle Schools Association commenced advocacy for new approaches in the middle years of schooling (including calls for more academic challenge, specific middle years teacher education, and teaching that catered for the developmental needs of early adolescents). With this shift to middle schools, and an associated call for more interdisciplinary and integrated curriculum (Beane, 1996, 1995, 1991), 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" report in the late 1980s (Carnegie Group, 1989; Powell, 2001). This report identified a mismatch between student needs and school structures/curriculum, as well as high levels of student alienation, significant absenteeism and poor quality teaching. The "Turning Points" initiative continues to shape the content of most middle years teacher education and other initiatives in the United States.

However, by the turn of the millennium, most critics agreed that much of the promise of the Middle Schooling movement had not been fulfilled and unresolved contestations had left American Middle Schooling in a state of arrested development (Dickinson, 2010). Across the United States, although schools might have had signs *outside* them that said "middle school", there were usually almost no identifiable aspects of Middle Schooling philosophy at work *inside* these schools. Beane (2001) observed that the vast majority of efforts in American Middle Schooling accounted for little more than a change of structure or stationery, with the survival of a movement that is at a "cross roads" (Anafara, 2001, p. xvii) and under threat by dominant conservative forces (Beane, 2001; lisahunter, 2007), being anything but certain. As we observe these developments from within an Australian context, we believe that a similar dilemma faces Middle Schooling reform in this as well as other western nations and, in response, we argue for renewed efforts in Middle Schooling reform.

Middle Years education in Australia

In the case of Australia, the Middle Schooling movement emerged around an emphasis on student needs, student-centred pedagogies and authentic assessment (Braggett, 1997; Chadbourne, 2001; Cormack, Johnson, Peters, & Williams, 1998; Eyers, Cormack, & Barratt, 1993; Godson, 1995). Subsequently, proponents of such a philosophy linked it with efforts for socially just educational reform (Barratt, 1998; Brennan & Sachs, 1998; Cormack et al., 1998) through emphasising the importance of student engagement in order to avoid alienation, and arguing for greater pastoral care, student consultation and genuine decision-making opportunities (Cormack, 1996, 1998). Since that time, advocacy for a Middle Schooling philosophy of social equity, meeting student needs, supporting identity development, improving transition and boosting retention through the provision of quality teaching and learning for all, has continued to grow in Australia (Carrington, 2006; Groundwater-Smith, Mitchell, & Mockler, 2007; Lingard, 2007; Main & Bryer, 2007; Smyth & McInerney, 2007).

Australian critiques of the Middle Schooling movement have observed that it has been largely rhetorical (lisahunter, 2007) and relied more on advocacy than thorough research (Earl, 1999; Hill & Russell, 1999), with more teacher research needed in particular (Cumming, 1996; Main & Bryer, 2007). Meanwhile, it has been noted that there has been a lack of attention to student views in the development of a Middle Schooling philosophy that is supposedly student-centred (Main & Bryer, 2007; Powell, 2001), as well as relatively few opportunities for students to influence the direction of activities in classrooms (Lingard, 2007). In response to these criticisms, as well as the recent policy fascination with "the middle years of schooling" (Carrington, 2006; Lingard, 2006), there have been calls for a new generation of Middle Schooling reform in Australia.

A second generation of Australian Middle Schooling reform

The "Beyond the Middle" report (Luke et al., 2003) found that reform in Australia was *unfinished* because it had not secured systemic approaches or high intellectual demand, and that it was *exhausted* because it had not kept pace with the rapid changes in students' lives. The report also noted that the focus on integrated curriculum and authentic assessment in the first generation of Middle Schooling reform in Australia had not been matched with a corresponding interest in student-centred pedagogy. In response, the report called for a "second generation" of Middle Schooling philosophy with a focus on relationships, relevance, pedagogy and rigour, which is informed by students' experiences and enabled through sound educational research.

Much of the drive behind this new generation of Middle Schooling philosophy arises from the acknowledgement that the experiences of adolescents entering middle schools today are vastly different to those of the young people of almost two decades ago that shaped the development of first generation philosophy. Educationalists argue that issues around special needs, greater mobility, dislocation, terror, "risk society" and consumer culture – along with a greater range of cultural, economic and individual diversity amongst students – demand new pedagogical approaches in the middle years of schooling (Carrington, 2006; Lingard 2007). Further, the affinities, identities and literacies of even the traditionally "successful" students are increasingly divergent from the traditional practices of schooling in such a way that it presents schools with a crisis of relevance (Knobel & Lankshear, 2003). Since Green and Bigum (1993) observed that "there are aliens in the classroom" (and that the aliens are not necessarily the students), information and communication technologies have created a "greater generational cleavage between teachers and students today than ever before" (Hayes, Mills, Christie, & Lingard, 2006, p. 11). These chasms in classrooms highlight the importance of bridging the gap between school offerings and students' lives through teacher research that is informed by changing student experiences and views of schooling.

The "Redesigning Pedagogies in the North" (RPiN) Middle Schooling Project

The authors of this paper are members of a team of researchers in the "Redesigning Pedagogies in the North" (RPiN) research project working with thirty teachers across ten schools within the northern urban fringe of the city of Adelaide in South Australia[2]. The RPiN project is informed by calls such as that made by lisahunter (2007) in this journal for greater quantity, scope and theorisation in middle years education research. As such, it is part of a move toward a "next wave" of Middle

Schooling approaches that aim to build practice for curriculum and pedagogy that connects with young people's interests, experiences and knowledges. The foundation of the project is the attempt by teacher-researchers in schools in challenging circumstances to redesign their pedagogy to incorporate students' lifeworld experiences (Roche, 1987). This is done with the goal of increasing student engagement, participation and achievement in the middle years of schooling, with the ultimate purpose of increasing the perception among students that school is relevant and worth attending during the senior years. The project questions contemporary assumptions about middle years education to encourage a view that goes beyond just reproducing the status quo (lisahunter, 2007). Instead, it emphasises the life knowledge, abilities and learning of students in the process of curriculum planning, and promotes student successes more broadly in order to unsettle the negative stereotypes that are commonly expressed in the public discourses about the northern urban fringe of Adelaide.

By way of context, the northern region of Adelaide was developed as a manufacturing hub and a pillar of the South Australian economy during the nineteen fifties. However, as the recession of the early nineties hit the manufacturing sector hardest in the states of South Australia and Victoria (Megalogenis, 2006; Peel, 1995), it had devastating effects on income and employment in Adelaide's north, with some labelling these suburbs as Adelaide's "rustbelt" (Thomson, 2002). This area now includes suburbs that are listed among the most socio-economically disadvantaged in the city, state and nation (Elliott, Sandeman, & Winchester, 2005; City of Playford, 2006), while school card use (the government school measure of poverty) is around 10% higher than the state average (Centre for Labour Research, 2002). The area is also known for its struggle with long-term youth underemployment and intergenerational unemployment (Office of Employment, 2003), as well as a reduction in traditional career pathways due in part to the dramatic decline of the manufacturing industry (Thomson, 2002). The rate of early school leaving is higher than the state average in this region, and while data on government school retention rates are not readily available, the retention rate to the final secondary school year for all schools in the region is approximately eight percent lower than the state average (Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), 2005; Centre for Labour Research, 2002). Often low retention rates are the subject of television news reports and contribute to the challenges presented to schools and communities by negative stereotypes of the region, low staff morale, high staff turnover and student alienation, all of which impact on school communities.

By selecting to form a partnership with schools in some of the most challenging economic and social circumstances in Australia, the RPiN project took up the continuing challenge of differential schooling outcomes due to socio-economic disadvantage. The theoretical underpinning of this approach drew on a model of

pedagogical development that incorporates the "funds of knowledge" (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzales, 1992) from students' lives as well as teaching the codes of "cultural capital" (Bourdieu, 1984) in the mainstream curriculum. The logic of the project argues that young people from diverse social positions enter schooling with differing qualities and degrees of cultural capital, and that increasingly the gap between students' lives and standardised schooling is resulting in this diversity being deemed a problem. In response, the funds of knowledge concept provides a mirror to cultural capital through an understanding of how families generate, obtain and distribute knowledge, which is then used as a resource for making community and household assets "pedagogically viable" (Gonzales & Moll, 2002, p. 278). Thomson (2002) extends these ideas in her consideration of schooling in Adelaide's northern urban fringe through the metaphor of the "virtual schoolbag". This "schoolbag" of funds of knowledge that all students bring to school (only some of which count as cultural capital in the school setting) can be used as a resource to help teachers to identify stronger connections between students' lives and curricular learning. It is the attempt by teachers to engage in curriculum and pedagogical innovation, and to conduct research into these attempts, that is the basis of the RPiN methodology.

Connecting with students' lifeworlds

The RPiN project commenced late in 2004. Throughout 2005 we held bi-monthly meetings with teachers to explore generative ways of thinking about the resources that young people brought to school, including funds of knowledge (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992), their investments in globalised popular media culture (Dimitriadis & Weis, 2001; Dolby, 2003; Duncan-Andrade, 2004), and their relationships with place and the environment (Grunewald, 2003; Smith, 2002). Many of the teachers were enthusiastic to learn about students' lives and to use concepts such as virtual schoolbags to inform their curriculum. While many teachers found this a generative concept, some teachers understandably found it difficult to know how to begin to unclip and unpack these virtual schoolbags. To assist them, the university research team designed a survey, titled "Researching How You Learn", that would allow young people to tell their teachers more about their lives and learning. This paper draws on our analysis of students' responses to this survey.

The "Researching How You Learn" survey was designed to give the RPiN research team and participating teachers a snapshot across the ten schools of students in middle years classes; to give teachers a quick way of finding out about their students' lives and learning histories; and to facilitate the design of classroom approaches based on "strong-connectedness" with students' lives and preferred ways of learning (Hattam, 2006). It was also intended to act as a catalyst to promote ongoing purposeful conversations between students, teachers and university researchers. Consequently, the survey questions were open, and students were encouraged to

respond either in writing and/or using drawings and diagrams. The survey prompts invited students to describe best and worst experiences of schooling, as well as how, when and where they felt they learned best. It also asked them to talk about their futures and what support they felt they needed for them to achieve these goals. The questions were designed to assist teachers to get to know their students better as learners and to use that information to redesign their pedagogy. The subsequent action research phase of the RPiN project explored how this new knowledge and pedagogy actually played out in classrooms. As such, the survey was a first step in fostering teacher research informed by the views, changing experiences and learning histories of students.

In practice, the surveys were used differently by the RPiN teachers. Some teachers gave the survey to their students with little introduction or explanation, not wishing to overly influence their students' responses. Other teachers found that their students had difficulty understanding the requirements of the survey and so provided suggestions to assist them. Still others saw the survey as a useful tool that assisted them to talk to students about their lives and to build relationships with them.

From the thirty classes across the 10 schools, twenty-seven returned 459 surveys. There was a distribution of 43% female to 57% male respondents from mostly Year 8 and Year 9 classes (one Year 7 and two Year 10 classes were also included in the data). Content analysis of the responses found that frequent topics of importance to students were student-teacher relationships, the classroom environment, school sport, school performances and activities at home. Prominent themes included the significance of positive relationships with peers and teachers, as well as the importance of public recognition of learning and other achievements. Across the surveys, the researchers were struck by students' overwhelming optimism about their futures (which were linked with specific aspirations), their acute social awareness about such matters as bullying and violence, and their shared desires for space, peace, quiet, safety and better material resources for their schools. While each of these discoveries is worthy of further consideration, what the university team found most challenging was what students had to say about their aspirations, and how they might be achieved. We focus on this aspect of the survey responses in the remainder of this paper.

Middle Years students articulate their future hopes and trajectories

The survey asked students what they would like to do when they leave school and why they think this occupation would suit them. It went on to explore students' ideas about the necessary steps to reach their objectives. The research team were struck, and moved, to read such an extensive and broad collection of students' thoughts about what they wanted to "do after school" (see Table 1).

Hairdresser/beautician	Electrician, plumber or labourer
Professional sportsperson	Army nurse, midwife or paramedic
Lawyer	Police, army, SWAT team, or fireman
Vet (zookeeper, park rangers, animal carer)	Forensic scientist
Marine biologist	Secretary
Mechanic (truck driver, wrecking yard)	Author, illustrator or graphic designer
Teacher (junior primary, physical education, English, Japanese)	Business or shop owner
Chef	"Further studies"
Horticulture/landscape design	Radio or news reporter
Musician or dancer	Cameraman
Child psychologist	Cabinet maker
Computer/game designer	Racing driver
Soccer coach or personal trainer	Doctor, social worker or dentist
Interior designer/architect	Egyptologist
Geologist	Work in a clothes shop
	Engineer
	Farmer

Table 1: RPiN middle years students' career aspirations

While the above imagined future careers are not arranged in any particular order, it is important to note that nearly all of the young people gave a clear and specific reply, with few giving "no response" to this question. Given the rates of endemic unemployment and underemployment in the region, the specific nature of the responses is notable. The variety of nominated careers, however, attests to an optimistic sense that all sorts of futures are possible, especially those that reflect the likes and strengths of young people of middle-years age. Students gave a range of reasons for their choices, often involving "liking doing it", or an awareness of the potential for improved prospects.

> I would like to be a mechanical engineer because I'm good with my hands. At first I wanted to be a mechanic, but I don't think I should because I feel like I'm better then that.

> I want to be a child psychiatrist so I can help children and teenagers with their problems.

> I want to be an Army Nurse. It would suit me because I'll be helping people in need and when I leave the army I'll be a qualified nurse.

> To be an engineer or a musical instruments maker. This would suit me because I like music and I like making things.

Respondents also articulated what they felt was required to achieve these goals. Many were specific about the kinds of study or training paths required, and/or about other concrete assistance they would need, such as money or transport. The most frequently mentioned need was support, encouragement, help and guidance from family members and teachers.

> I need help to keep me at school so I can get the grades and knowledge I need, and funds! (Goth clothing store owner)

> I need to finish school and go to Uni. I just need to be encouraged. (secretary)

> Get good grades. I need good teachers. (forensic scientist)

> Study hard at school and finish it all. I need a bit of help in maths and I need experience. (hairdresser)

> Learn heaps at school and when I'm finished go and do a mechanic course. (mechanic)

Not all of the students' perceived needs were for outside assistance. Many statements indicated young people's willingness to take responsibility for themselves and their attitudes and actions, and the need to "work hard" or "study hard" was mentioned by many students.

> I would study really hard to make it happen. I would ask for help when I really badly need the help. (truck driver)

> Go right through high school, and listen. (vet)

> Complete high school then go onto Uni. Controlling myself from stuffing around. (lawyer)

The intent and scope of this survey did not allow us to explore in depth the extent and nature of the hard work that students believed lay ahead if they were to realise their ambitions for a working future. However, this process did raise the issue of how middle years educators might productively respond to what students say they hope to do in the future, and how they might support their students to develop their identities as successful learners in school.

We also note here that over 100 of the nearly 300 students who responded to the open-ended question about what they need to do to reach their goals stated

specifically that they would need to do further study at university or other further education institutions in order to make it happen. On the one hand, this challenges claims that middle years students living in economically disadvantaged circumstances do not have high aspirations, and do not understand that tertiary educational credentials are often required to enter their desired careers. On the other hand, these figures contrast sharply with the statistics on school completion and the actual outcomes that are likely to eventuate for these students several years down the track.

Research on school completion suggests that an emphasis on post-compulsory curriculum had little impact, with most students who decide to leave school early having already done so by Year 9 (Marks & Fleming, 1999). This suggests that efforts to raise the compulsory school leaving age should be matched with more than just a focus on adolescent needs and engagement in the middle years of schooling. Middle years education needs to also be pursuing academic rigour (Hayes et al., 2006; Lingard, 2007; Luke et al., 2003) and supporting the development of successful learner identities (Hattam & Smyth, 2003) to improve student achievement and school retention. With the pursuit of rigour and successful learner identities in mind, we shared the student survey responses with the RPiN project teachers to find that they were genuinely surprised – but also dismayed – by the post-school goals of their middle years students.

Despite the obvious benefits of aspiring students and dedicated teachers coming together in the middle years to support academic success and student retention, it would seem that a lack of awareness on the part of teachers about potential learner identities could mean that a potential resource for the redesign of curriculum and pedagogy remains untapped. Meanwhile, a greater awareness would, theoretically at least, provide potential for engaging middle years students in substantive, rigorous learning activities which do not begin from deficit assumptions. Rather they could enable students to better understand – and hopefully cross – the existing gulf that these teachers perceive between students' current literacy achievement, learner identities, their future study requirements and their career aspirations. Explicit discussion about how learning is relevant to realising the futures that students desire and envisage in the middle years is needed, while the curriculum and pedagogy themselves need to be more closely connected to students' future as well as their current lives. But how can teachers develop greater awareness of student activities, abilities and aspirations? How might middle years teachers tap into this resource? We would suggest that one way forward is through university researchers working collaboratively with teachers in research with "students-as-informants".

Tapping the Potential of Students-as-informants

The foundation of "teacher-as-researcher" approaches is a belief that teachers are more than technicians who are able to deliver curriculum; rather, they are professionals who are involved in highly complex intellectual practice. We would argue that teachers are people who continue to learn from teaching, rather than people who have finished learning how to teach (Reid, 2004). For this reason, it is important for teacher-researchers to be informed by research literature about their questions, to use systematic methods and to pursue rigorous analysis. We would argue that in the field of teacher research there is an important need not only to identify evidence of children's capacities, strengths and cultural resources, but also to be consulting students as informants. Following Boomer and colleagues (1992), we do not see curriculum development as a one way process. Rather we see teachers negotiating and co-creating curriculum with students, which inevitably requires a change in approach from traditional transmission models of pedagogy. Further, we would argue that these changes also need to be systematically researched, and agree that there is a need for more middle years practitioners to engage in action research (Arhar, 2005).

For instance, the "Turn Around Pedagogies" project (Comber & Kamler, 2005), which grew out of similar beliefs, demonstrates how teacher research into the lives of students can "turn around" deficit views of students and their communities. Focusing specifically on literacy in the primary and middle years, this project supported teachers to research aspects of students' family lives and their lives outside of school, and this gave many teachers cause to think again. Many began to realise that the child (and sometimes that family), whom they had judged as in deficit, in fact had a rich and full family life. These teachers were then encouraged to identify positive metaphors to reassess the potential of students and to design pedagogies that could reconnect their students to the literacy curriculum. One of the most significant findings was that teachers realised the need to change how they saw their students if they were to have an impact on literacy achievement. These teachers demonstrated that a *turn around* in how they saw the student – a *turn to* informed research into diversity, and a *turn away* from deficit thinking – could result in "turn-around pedagogies" that made notable differences in student literacy achievement. Shifting its focus from a study of literacy to a study of pedagogy more broadly, the RPiN project sought to reapply the principles of the "Turn Around Pedagogies" project in an attempt to inform Middle Schooling reform.

Although the RPiN project takes as its focus the redesign of pedagogy, it would be a mistake to think that supporting high student aspirations and changed teacher pedagogy is all that matters in socially-just school reform (Lingard & Mills, 2007). The RPiN research team is also informed by a model that argues the importance of three intersecting arenas of change: pedagogical, cultural and structural (Harradine, 1996;

Smyth, McInerney, & Hattam, 2003). Accordingly, we contend that while attention needs to be paid to pedagogical innovation in classrooms, unless attention is also given to cultural and structural factors within schools, then reform will continue to be restricted to what can be achieved by energetic individual teachers (Beane, 2001; Wallace, Sheffield, Rennie, & Venville, 2007), and is unlikely to be sustained beyond their tenure.

Students as Informants to Middle Schooling Reform

Without Middle Schooling approaches that move beyond a focus on student care to unsettle deficit views and foster notions of students as successful learners, schools will continue to contribute to declining student aspirations. With this in mind, one factor that seemed to constrain the arena of cultural change among participating teachers was an apparent inability, or level of resistance, to engaging in intellectual discussion and debate about pedagogy as a professional practice (Comber & Nixon, 2006). Whereas the survey showed that students were able to inform teachers and researchers about the kinds of pedagogies and learning environments that best support their learning, the university research team did not find the same clarity about pedagogy in the accounts of teachers who participated in our regular meetings; rather, the term pedagogy encountered some resistance. Most teachers, initially at least, preferred to talk about "what their students do", or what "curriculum content" they cover. From our study we conclude that more research is needed into how teachers might be assisted to develop appropriate discursive tools that allow them to participate in intellectual debate about concepts such as pedagogy (Sellar & Cormack, 2007), and to reflect not only on what "students do", but also on what "teachers do" in the process of teaching and learning. In other words, ways need to be found to change the cultures surrounding middle years teachers' professional reading, conversations and reflections.

There are other cultural constraints to reform in schools that the students' survey responses have brought to our attention. One of the most evident constraints relates to what students perceived as signs of teacher stress, anger, and lack of concern about student learning. When one considers the changing nature of teachers' work in Australia (Smyth, 2001; Smyth, Dow, Hattam, Reid, & Shacklock, 2000), as well as the significant demands placed on teachers working in urban fringe schools (Thomson, 2002), these observations by students are perhaps not surprising. However, they highlight the fact that middle years teachers are struggling to sustain the high levels of emotional involvement and individual support that are required to teach in urban fringe schools (Comber & Nixon, 2006; Prosser, 2008b). It is a struggle made all the more difficult when viewed in the light of the high levels of violence and the cultures of disrespect that the students reported in the RPiN survey. Reform at both

government policy and school levels is needed to provide teachers in urban fringe school communities with the resources required to respond adequately to the needs of their school communities, especially when low socio-economic areas carry a larger load in the early career training of teachers (Lamb & Teese, 2006; Teese, 2006).

The students we surveyed also reported on an associated challenge to reform within the broader culture in the middle years of school through a focus of teachers on managing the behaviour of "bad students" which took time away from teacher support for learning among other students. These observations can be seen in part as a result of education policy that emphasises response to poor behaviour over curriculum development and pedagogical innovation (Adams, 2006; Cormack, 1996; Slee, 1994). However, these observations should also be considered in relation to the fixation on developmental psychology within first generation Middle Schooling literature (Carrington, 2006). The danger here is that this discourse can encourage teachers to view student diversity and the influence of complex, changing or difficult lives as barriers to pedagogy or in some cases as behavioural deficits that need to be controlled (Prosser, 2006, 2008a). Such approaches rely uncritically on psychologically and pathologically informed models of adolescence that are bankrupt of resources for developing learning (Carrington, 2006; lisahunter, 2007). Instead, educators need ways of conceptualising young people that are more suitable for today and are of more benefit to all (Stevens et al., 2007), to avoid a focus on behaviour which gets in the way of student learning, student choice, and democratic practice.

The third arena within the model for school reform adopted by the RPiN project is structural change, and again student survey responses highlighted important constraints that require attention. On a practical level, students asked for an increase in basic facilities, books, computers and materials to support learning, as well as more specialist teachers to support specific student learning needs. In relation to staffing, they described the negative impact of teacher turnover, regular relief or substitute teachers, half-year courses and large class sizes. Student responses also told of their desire for safe, quiet and supportive learning environments, with regular student calls for the separation from mainstream classes of students with seemingly no interest in working or learning, or disruptive behaviours. Meanwhile, debates about class sizes, quality curriculum, teacher education and the inclusion of all students in mainstream classes are politically charged and work their way out in Australian daily newspapers. While it is beyond the scope of this paper to engage with each of these debates, we note that such issues should remain topics of academic research in the future.

Concluding Remarks

According to Carrington (2006), there is reason to be concerned that teachers will view the growing diversity amongst adolescents in the middle years of schooling as deficit rather than difference. In the case of urban fringe community schools, there is even great potential for the emergence of deficit views, as many students do not have access to the cultural capital that their teachers have accessed and is required for success in schooling. Yet a significant component of the RPiN project is the creation of space for teacher views of students that are enabling rather than deficit-laden. In our survey of over 400 students in Adelaide's northern urban fringe, we found that students were ready to step into that space and assert that they are smart, they want to succeed and they have high aspirations. Jaded educators may dismiss these assertions as naïve given the perceived low levels of literacy and statistics that show stubborn socio-economic barriers to their success. Yet we would reply that students are not as naïve as it is often assumed and, in our survey, students articulated strategies for success as individuals and described the opportunities for developing their learner identities that they saw in the school context.

We would suggest that students are disengaging from schooling in the middle years not because they cannot or will not work for school, but because they come to see that school will not work for them. The results of our survey in the RPiN project problematise the belief amongst teachers that a good relationship with students in and of itself equates to good pedagogy (and may be the best you can hope for in urban fringe schools). While students agree that good relationships with teachers are important, they also report a desire for rigour, and a desire to succeed and reach toward high aspirations. These findings align with the recent research of Lingard (2007) which found the supportive and therapeutic nature of teacher pedagogies alone is not sufficient to maximise teacher and school effect. Rather these pedagogies fail to make a difference with connectedness and intellectual demand, and do not work across the range of diversity that currently constitutes a community of difference in our classrooms. Rather, as Lingard (2007, p. 246) labels them, these are "pedagogies of indifference" that neglect to prepare students for the globalised world of the present in socially just ways.

However, a second significant contribution of the RPiN project is the redefinition of teachers as part of the solution rather than the cause of the problem. So while we acknowledge that teachers in urban fringe school communities may be struggling to imagine and enact pedagogies of difference, our research suggests that students in these communities are ready and willing to respond to any pedagogical innovation that may occur. But first we must turn around deficit views and challenge a tautology in teacher and school expectations, which argues that urban fringe adolescents choose not to succeed because they do not have the skills to succeed, and they do

not have the skills because they choose not to succeed. The RPiN project will use the finding of this survey (that something different is occurring in the lives of these students than what a "common sense" tautology would lead many to assume), as the foundation for the outworking of its future method. Rather than supporting the view that working class young people are giving up on themselves, this project will work collaboratively with teachers to address student perceptions that schools are giving up on them, by making the connection between student lives and their learning the centre of curriculum.

The findings of this survey also align with the argument that the prominence of educational psychology (with its emphasis on adolescent needs, risks and deficits) in past generations of Middle Schooling philosophy has done little to support student aspirations, learning and rigour (Carrington, 2006). Thus, the findings present a challenge to an emerging new generation of Middle Schooling in Australia. While recent initiatives such as "Beyond the Middle" (Luke at al., 2003), "Productive Pedagogies" (Lingard, Ladwig, Luke, Mills, Hayes & Gore, 2001), "Teachers in the Middle" (Smyth & McInerney, 2007) and "Redesigning Pedagogies in the North" have focused on teacher views, practices and pedagogies, they have only briefly considered the expertise of students (who all have at least six years of experience observing pedagogical practice). Although students' language used to describe pedagogy in our survey was not sophisticated, it revealed that students have a strong sense of what works inside and outside of the classroom, and in response, we emphasise the importance of future research from a Middle Schooling perspective making use of both teachers and students as informants.

In summary, this paper has argued that the information gained from students about their life and school experiences in urban fringe communities challenged the assumptions and deficit views around adolescents living in those communities. This challenge came in the form of high student aspirations, which links with an emphasis on Middle Schooling approaches building positive learner identities. However, in the everyday life of classrooms, it would seem that the expectations of many middle years teachers do not tap the potential of these aspirations and leave little opportunity for their pursuit. We argue that students must become a more important resource for teachers, not just because their views and aspirations can contribute to student success, but because students have important insights into pedagogical practices and the constraints on school reform. As such, we argue for more research that uses students-as-informants to contribute to the future development of the Middle Schooling movement internationally.

Notes

[1] We note the substantial body of literature in the area of "student voice" and "students-as-researchers". However, for the scope and purposes of this paper, we frame this article in the context of literature around middle schooling, rather than that of student voice. Thus, we deliberately use the term students-as-informants to emphasise that the student participants were respondents to a survey that was designed by the research team, rather than co-instigators or co-inquirers in the research.

[2] We note the confusion around the various terms used to describe aspects of middle years education. For the purposes of clarity in this paper, we take the "middle years of schooling" to be Years 5 to 9, "middle schools" to be an organisational structure within or separate from a primary or secondary campus and "Middle Schooling" to be a philosophy that underpins an education movement that emphasises features such as constructivism, interdisciplinary learning, negotiated curriculum and authentic assessment.

Acknowledgements

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