

Characterising the middle years

Public policy context

Post World War II across the western world 'youth' or 'young people' or 'adolescents' have emerged as a subject of policy concern as an identifiable group of people located between childhood and adulthood.

The Youth Affairs Council of Australia¹ determines 'youth' as aged between 12 and 25 years, locating the break from childhood at the commencement of secondary education. One categorisation of youth (acknowledging that any grouping is arbitrary), recognises the diversity of interests within this 13-year period of life, and marks 12-14 years as 'preparatory', 15-17 as 'transitional', 18-20 as 'young adulthood' and 21-24 as 'transition to full adulthood'.² These parameters reflect legal provisions in Australia.

In the Education context The National Board of Employment, Education and Training³ extends the 'preparatory' range, locating 'adolescence' between 10 to 15 years of age. The Education Department of South Australia considers that there are three stages of adolescence; the 'early' period or 'young adolescent' years being between ages 10-14.⁴ This age group, now widely acknowledged as having traits and requirements that distinguish them from those older and younger, span the upper primary and lower secondary years of schooling in Australia - the middle years.

Public policy responses to youth, including education strategies, have ranged across a broad spectrum relative to the perception/positioning of the phenomenon of 'youth'. Graycar and Jamrozik illustrate this range:⁵

Perceptions

1. Youth as an identifiable social group with common interests and claims on society.
2. Youth as a transition stage between childhood and adulthood.
3. Youth as a 'problem' group.
4. Youth as a 'threat to social stability'.
5. Youth as a 'disadvantaged' group.
6. Youth as a vehicle for social change.

Responses

- Uniform youth-specific services: income, housing, health, and education
- Remedial measures aimed at social control and preparation for adulthood.
- Support services - personal non-material
- Social control measures: juvenile justice, training, 'socially-useful' activities
- Remedial measures aimed at improving competitive strength, eg., improving employability,
- Measures aimed to increase young people's 'involvement' and 'participation' in decision-making affecting them as well as the society as a whole.

Physiological/psychological context

Much of the literature focusing on the middle years of schooling outlines in a problematic sense the developmental characteristics of young people in this 10-15 year age group. This focus is evident in much of the literature of the late eighties and early nineties in the USA, Canada and Australia and is embedded, increasingly, in the term 'adolescence'.

The *Junior Secondary Review* in South Australia, in its paper entitled *The Nature of Adolescence*⁶ describes adolescence in its biological, emotional, intellectual and social aspects focusing on identity, sexuality and intellectual development. This literature review draws on a number of American theorists and relies upon two key reviews: Elliott and Feldman's *Turning Points* (1990) written for the Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development in USA and Hargreaves and Earl (1990) *Rights of Passage* for the Ontario Department of Education in Canada. The conclusion supports a view that young adolescents are a group with "special needs". A list of adolescent needs is suggested as follows:⁷

During early adolescence, a young person needs to:

1. adjust to some profound changes; physical, social, emotional and intellectual
2. grow toward independence (while still needing security in many personal relationships)
3. gain experience in decision making, and in accepting responsibility for these decisions
4. develop a positive self-confidence through achieving success in significant events
5. progressively develop a sense of 'Who am I?' and of personal and social values which become part of that person's life
6. experience social acceptance, and to gain affection and support among peers of the same and opposite sex
7. think in ways which become progressively more abstract and reflective
8. become more aware of the social and political world about them, and gain skill in coping and interacting with that world
9. establish or maintain relationships with particular adults who can provide advice and act as role models.

It is argued that it would be desirable for schools and teachers to become involved in aspects of adolescent needs beyond merely the intellectual.

The Schools Council in its 1993 report on the middle - "the forgotten years" - of schooling drew similarly upon such overseas work as well as a series of Australian projects and reviews since 1973. As indicators of the need for an urgent response by education authorities to the needs of adolescents in schools, this report outlined statistics concerned with health, drug use, sexual activity and suicide. It arguing that the rate of change in the world of education was not keeping up with the rate of change in adolescents' other worlds.⁸

In Victoria, studies during the nineties concerning young people from years 5 to 8 show that there is significant slowing or "flattening" in achievement levels and a decline in student motivation and enjoyment.⁹ It is argued in *In the Middle - Education for Young Adolescents* that young people of this age range should be considered to be a "distinct developmental group" and rather than giving attention to improved connections between primary and secondary schooling

"We must instead focus on the nature of early adolescence and its implications for reforming some of our existing educational structures and practices."¹⁰

Economic context

The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) has given much attention to the changing economic conditions in which schooling is situated. In its final report on adult literacy across 20 countries the following structural changes are outlined which, the report argues, will impact on the skills required of workers in 21st century:¹¹

- Globalisation: growing economic interdependency among countries and firms
- Technological change: Through their effects on production methods, consumption patterns, structure of economies, information and communication technologies (ICTs) are a key factor in the transition to a knowledge-based economy.
- Changes in Employment: A general shift in labour demand from lower to higher levels of skills has led to increased unemployment among those with lower skills and to increasing wage inequality.
- Changes in Work Organisation: Application of flexible management practices, ie., multi- skilling, extensive use of teamwork, reduced hierarchical levels, ongoing training, delegation of responsibility, higher degree of worker participation in decision-making.

Increasing levels of educational attainment of the populations in OECD countries is both a cause and a consequence of these changes it is argued.

Wiseman suggests that these globalising forces mean that while the gap between richer and poorer nations deepens, so does the gap within nations between those with access to well-paid jobs and those increasingly forced to the margins.¹²

Raper argues that, in the economic context in Australia we must become better at matching our intent for efficiency with our determination for equity; that while the economy is growing so is poverty. Writing in 1995, he lists a number of indicators concerned with those benefiting least from economic change. In terms of income, the lowest 20% earned only 4.5% of total gross income whilst the richest 20% earned 46.7% of total income. Regarding unemployment, 660,000 Australian children under 15 years live in households where there is no paid employment. If parents are unemployed young people aged 15-24 have an unemployment rate themselves of 36%. He cites the *National Census of Homeless School Students* which estimates that “in any one week there is likely to be up to 11,000 homeless young people in schools throughout Australia.”¹³

The impact of globalising forces on the economy and the long term economic and social costs of marginalisation have driven policy change for the post-compulsory years retention of students in schools and an accompanying emphasis on vocational and ‘competency-based’ training as a strategy to “accommodate those who currently are dropping-out, and generally to “beef-up” schooling’s contribution to a better-skilled and more productive workforce.”¹⁴

The Employment-related Key Competencies are now incorporated into syllabi in NSW.

The McGaw Report, *Shaping their Future*, which focused on reform of the Higher School Certificate in NSW, demonstrates the potential flow-on effect of changing economic conditions on young people in the middle years:

“Most of the debates about curriculum and assessment policies in senior secondary education have revolved around how best to provide for the two-thirds or more...choosing to continue beyond year 10. An emerging issue is how to attract and retain the one-third leaving at the end of compulsory schooling, since they are generally ill prepared for adult life. There are few employment opportunities for the early school leaver.”¹⁵

social, cultural and political context

In a more globalised world questions of knowledge, identity and power are common in recent literature.

“Postmodern thinkers have taken the opportunity provided by the decentring of culture to critically investigate...the relationship between language and the world, context, the spacial and temporal organisation of reality and... the narrative organisation of experience. In so-doing they have exposed the constructedness of previously taken-for-granted assumptions.”¹⁶

“...assumption of a monocultural, gender-free literate populace has .. persisted... But since the demise of the so-called “White Australia” policy in the early 1970s, the legal recognition of Aboriginal and Islander Australians and the educational recognition of migrant Australians has accelerated. At present almost 30% of Australian school students come from non-English-speaking backgrounds, and it is estimated that by 2000 only about one-third of the population will be of Anglo/Australian background. Educators at all levels must take seriously the knowledge and identity claims of Aborigines, Torres Strait Islanders, migrants and those of women.”¹⁷

The predominant socio-cultural model of the past century focused on assimilation to dominant cultural norms, expectations and aspirations but, say Cope and Kalantzis “The new citizen of the new state is a person with multiple citizenship and multiple identities.”

People will need a wider range of skills; the skills for negotiating diversity, locally and globally.¹⁸

Lo Bianco and Freebody¹⁹ support this notion by suggesting: “Young Australians will encounter a more fluidly-bounded world as they leave education”, one influenced by changing economic patterns, impact of communications technologies and global and national cultural diversity.

In the UK Norman Fairclough²⁰ discusses social tendencies at work in the contemporary era: democratisation, commodification and technologisation. Democratisation is an apparent weakening of the traditional power relationships or codes of authority in families, in schools, between doctors and patients, in gender relations etc. eliminating overt power markers towards greater informality in social relations. Commodification is the process whereby most aspects of life have become colonised by the terms of commodity production, distribution and consumption; a marketing paradigm. Advertising is in the business of constructing images and their identities and personalities. This positions the ‘consumer’ as powerful, having the right to choose but simultaneously as powerless to the evocative nature of the construction, seeking to construct her/his own world in replica to the advertised ideal. Fairclough argues that such commodification has flowed through to most aspects of life, including education. Technologisation refers to a tendency for increasing control over people’s lives by way of the development of highly refined techniques by institutions for testing, interviewing, counselling, selling, and even holding conversations. Young people are very much engaged in these social processes both within and beyond schooling.

Jamrozik et al comment on socio-economic relations: “More than ever before Australia...has developed the characteristics of a class society.” The late 20th century growth in the middle class whose position is derived from its ‘cultural capital’ of knowledge and professional expertise has relegated the population at the bottom of the socio-economic scale - “the human residue of the market economy “ - as the new ‘underclass’.²¹

Young people are active players in these social and cultural dynamics, engaged in democratising processes, alert to dominant and other knowledges and their inequitable distribution and value, parties to the commodification tendency and participants in the technologising process. Their identity formation and positioning in relation to school learning are affected by these multiple literacies they possess.

the institutional context

According to Luke and Freebody²² schooling until well into the twentieth century in Australia was not aimed at successful achievement or completion for all children.

“..patterns of differential success and failure between urban and rural students or ... between Anglo Protestant and Irish Catholic students for example, were not viewed...as principally educational problems. ..The substantial Aboriginal, Islander and Asian populations that existed in Australia...were effectively not even recognised as Australian citizens, let alone legally entitled to state schooling...”

They describe the shifts in Australian schooling from the colonial “moralistic” goals current until the first quarter of the 20th century targeted at an elite minority equipping men for professional, business and government positions and women as teachers, governesses or ‘gentlewomen’ to the impact of American educational psychology movements which gave a more “scientific” basis and a more “urban-industrialised” identity to curriculum. From the 1960s, within the educational psychology framework, more humanistic and cognitive models influenced a move concerned with the “personal”; with individualised voice and response. Known as “progressivist” these models, Luke and Freebody suggest, culturally isolate the individual, raising the self-interested individual as the central platform for effective action in late capitalist society. More recently a “critical-social” approach has emerged. This view suggests that ..

“...practices that are developed in schooling contexts constitute selections in practices, and these selections are not accidental, random or idiosyncratic. Rather they are supportive of the organisational needs of the institutions of schooling and the stratified interests within social organisations.”²³

The Project of National Significance *Student Alienation During the Middle Years of Schooling* (1994) sought to generate understandings of what it means to be disengaged from learning in the middle years focusing in particular on those 10-14 year-olds considered to be most ‘at risk’; those who are ‘switched-off’, ‘tuned-out’ or simply not achieving. The project’s key findings were the need for:

- A comprehensive, holistic approach to reform which makes an explicit commitment to young adolescents,
- Teacher teaming requiring organisational infrastructure support is needed,
- Teacher research requiring training and support,
- Genuine consultation with students requiring pedagogical reform,
- Student participation or active citizenship requiring a shift in classroom power,
- More flexible Time and Space arrangements,
- Practical activities challenging students with real-life issues and hands-on learning,
- Varied approaches providing for choice and responsibility regarding the ways students undertake learning requiring access to varied technologies,
- Pastoral care embedded rather than distinguished as welfare requiring students to believe there is care, interest and trust,
- Parent and Community participation requiring clear, practical means of engagement.

Jim Cumming, an active proponent of reform in the middle years suggests:²⁴

“The middle years offer a unique opportunity in which to introduce new models of collaboration and cooperation. With greater freedom from the pressures of basic literacy and numeracy skills acquisition in the early years, and the dominance of determining post-school pathways for senior years, teachers and other professionals can be more flexible in responding to the developmental needs of young adolescents. The challenge is to empower today’s teenagers by helping to establish their independence through self-directed and self-managed learning, while simultaneously providing the necessary support through adaptive structures and integrated services.”

Some of these views are reflected by 1999 in the NSW Secondary Principals Council *Futures Project*:²⁵

“The traditional concept of a school will be challenged by the rapidly changing nature of society, work and learning. The future will see:

...Schools which will operate

- within flexible learning environments where the curriculum, organisation, timing, entry, progression and exit points are determined to suit the needs of learners,

- as multi-dimensional learning communities where quality personal interactions and relationships give individual learners a sense of connection and security,
- in a culture of mutual support and care where risk-taking and the development of skills for life-long learning will be the driving force,
- in flexible learning environments where the broad range of educators and support personnel will interact with them to meet academic, welfare, cultural, social and vocational needs.

Learners who will:

- take initiative in designing their own learning pathways,
- use individualised programs to learn how to learn and develop the skills to acquire and apply knowledge and understanding,
- use holistic, cooperative and collegial approaches to learning, thinking and doing,
- take part in authentic assessment processes and procedures which articulate locally, nationally and internationally.”

What is clear from the current literature is that the institution of education is now concerned to ensure achievement for all. A multitude of techniques have been developed for determining learning goals, assessing, tracking and reporting, sorting, classifying and targeting students. Close surveillance of students’ in-school activity is occurring. As Hill and Crevola put it when describing the growth in the ‘learning gap’ between students as they progress through school: “...high levels of education are essential for economic prosperity, particularly through the formation of a flexible, dynamic and highly skilled workforce. The demand for unskilled labour has almost disappeared in advanced economies as they have experienced the full impact of globalisation and the technological revolution.”²⁶

Further .. “Narrowing the learning gap and ensuring that all students meet high standards will not happen given existing practices and structures. The answer lies in re focusing the mission of schools and school systems and redesigning how they operate so that meeting the standards comes first in everything that schools do.this means identifying all of the critical elements of schools and of schools systems that have an impact on reaching the standards, working out what needs to change in order for the elements to operate effectively and in alignment with one another, and then redesigning the elements accordingly. ...all students should have a right to an education system that ensures high standards for all.”²⁷

In the UK, Michael Barber ²⁸ comments “ ...too many pupils become disaffected too fast during the middle years of schooling and many of the rest are bored most of the time.” He also describes the widening ‘learning gap’ showing a range of 6 years at age 11 on standardised tests. Referring to the research of Jean Rudduck (1996)²⁹, Barber concludes that while approximately 60% of students appear to be progressing reasonably the rest can be categorised as “the disappointed” 20-30%, “the disaffected” 10-15%, “the disappeared” 2-5%. “...our education system is upside down. We expect primary schools to fire the imagination and secondary schools to get down to the serious business of education when the reverse would be preferable.”

Barber proposes eight features of middle years reform in order to “make their heads spin”:

1. Expect the impossible
2. Never give up on the basics
3. Guarantee cultural literacy
4. Individualise
5. Offer hope
6. Teach thinking
7. Encourage citizenship
8. Create teams

In the US, a decade after the Carnegie Council's *Turning Points*, Norton and Lewis³⁰ in their analysis of middle school reform suggest "...it's apparent that 'Turning Points' message about social and emotional support had a far greater impact on educators than its corresponding message about the need to strengthen the academic core of middle schools."

They interview Anthony Jackson about the imminent publication of *Turning Points 2000*. Jackson comments:

"Turning Points was a very good outline of the kind of changes that needed to happen and its was highly catalytic in raising consciousness about the needs of young adolescents and the need for reform in middle-grades schools....there has been an overemphasis on the structural and organisational kinds of changes and a lack of emphasis on changes in teaching practice and the actual work of creating and implementing more powerful forms of assessment, instruction and curriculum."³¹

In Australia middle years reform has been underway following the School Council report of 1993, in the form of the *National Middle Schooling Project 1997*³². Following consultations during 1996-7 a "common Australian view" was formed of:

the needs of adolescents for

- identity
- relationships
- purpose
- empowerment
- success
- rigour
- safety

and the values underpinning middle schooling practices:

- learner-centred
- collaboratively-organised
- outcome-based
- flexibly-constructed
- ethically-aware
- community-oriented
- adequately-resourced
- strategically-linked

An area for discussion in response to symptoms of educational disadvantage has focused on the boundary of the role of the teacher. Doran³³ suggests that schools are important sites for community but that the role of the teacher must be confined to serving learning whilst other institutions e.g., health, law, sport, welfare, arts must be encouraged to localise their expertise on school sites. The trend to expand the role of the teacher diffuses focus. The 'Full-Service' school concept is developing both in Australia and the USA.³⁴

Another institutional trend, important to the middle years, is the tendency to target and label groups of students causing differential strategies for their educational provision. As Luke and Freebody note, when pedagogy is reformed with a view to improvement for the 'mainstream', residual forms of the redundant approaches - or those perceived as less satisfactory - frequently continue to be applied for certain targeted groups and in the introduction of specialised content areas.³⁵

Significant to the context in which middle years schooling is performed in NSW are the various accountability and credentialling procedures most of which have been developed or reformed within the decade including the Basic Skills Tests for years 3 and 5, ELLA for year 7, the new School Certificate (Year 10) and the revised Higher School Certificate. All of these examinations of student achievement condition the nature of curriculum and the criteria for success.

In the US the National Forum to Accelerate Middle-Grades Reform has implemented the *Schools to Watch* - a search for exemplary middle schools. The following are the criteria developed by Joan Lipsitz and her team:

- academic excellence
- curriculum, instruction and assessment are aligned with high standards,
- curriculum emphasises deep understanding, development of essential skills and ability to apply what one has learned to real-world problems,
- instructional strategies are clearly related to teaching goals,
- students learn how to assess their own work against performance standards,
- the school provides students time to meet these rigorous standards,
- adults in the school have opportunities to plan, select and engage in professional development,
- curriculum is both socially significant and relevant to the personal interests of young adolescents,
- students have opportunities to exercise their voice,
- school develops alliances with families,
- equal access, various approaches, adaptive methods towards social equity,
- ongoing opportunities to learn about and appreciate their own and others' cultures,
- faculty is culturally and linguistically diverse,
- shared vision of what a high-performing school is and does drives every facet of school change,
- shared and sustained leadership propels the school forward,
- school directs sufficient resources to ensuring that teachers have time and opportunities to reflect on classroom practice and learn from one another,
- professional development is intensive, high quality and ongoing,
- the school holds itself accountable for its students' success,
- the school collects, analyses and uses data as a basis for making decisions,
- the school works with colleges and universities to recruit, prepare and mentor novice and experienced teachers,
- all stakeholders are involved in ongoing and reflective conversation, consensus building and decision-making.³⁶

Irvin, in her presentation to the Australian Middle Years of Schooling Association (MYSA) Conference (2000) lists the following “necessary elements of reform:

- professional development
- technical assistance
- coordination from District/State
- networks between and among school, universities and state departments,
- data-driven decision-making
- leadership from superintendents
- state-level leadership
- improved teacher preparation
- well-informed public constituencies
- comprehensiveness of reform efforts³⁷

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- ¹ in Graycar, A. and Jamrozik, A., 1993 at p.248
²² ibid
³ Schools Council, 1993 at p. 3
⁴ Cormack, P 1991 at p.4
⁵ supra note 1 p. 252
⁶ supra note 4
⁷ supra note 4 p.16
⁸ supra note 3 at pp.13-27
⁹ Hill, P. 1995 p.3
¹⁰ Kruse, D. 1996 p.2
¹¹ OECD 2000 at pp.1-9
¹² Wiseman in Farrar & Inglis 1996 at p.62
¹³ Raper, M. in ACEE 1995 at p. 19
¹⁴ Morrow, A. 1992
¹⁵ McGaw, B 1997 at p.1
¹⁶ Gare, A. 1994/5 at p.160
¹⁷ Luke, A & Freebody, P. 1997
¹⁸ Cope, B & Kalantzis, M. 1997 at p. 264
¹⁹ Lo Bianco & Freebody, P. 1997 at p.2
²⁰ Fairclough, N. 1992 pp. 200-224
²¹ Jamrozik, A., Boland, C & Urquhart, R. 1995 at p.60
²² Luke, A & Freebody, P. 1997, at p.3-4
²³ ibid at p.8
²⁴ Cumming 1994 at p.18
²⁵ 1999 at p. iii
²⁶ Hill, P.W. & Crevola, C.A. 1999 at p.117
²⁷ ibid at p. 138-9
²⁸ Barber M. 1999 at p. 3
²⁹ ibid citing Rudduck, J. et al 1996
³⁰ Norton, J & Lewis, A.C. 2000 at p.1
³¹ ibid at p. 32
³² Cumming, J. 1998
³³ Doran, S. 1995 p.10
³⁴ ACEE Equity Network 1996 at p.1
³⁵ supra note 22 at p.6
³⁶ Lewis, A. 1999
³⁷ Irvin, J. 2000