CHAPTER 1

Challenges for teaching and learning in the middle years

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Every one of us who has attended school has faced the apprehension and excitement of moving from the primary years to secondary schooling. Even those who have attended schools that span the whole gamut of schooling still find themselves facing new circumstances, regulations, teaching and learning practices. In this first chapter of *Big Fish, Little Fish: Teaching and learning in the middle years* we set out to describe the ways in which these new arrangements impact upon those who experience them. We also seek to draw our readers' attention to the complex policy environment that school education confronts in both Australia and New Zealand. We recognise that a number of texts already exist that have acknowledged these critical years (e.g. Groundwater-Smith, Mitchell & Mockler, 2007; Smyth & McInerny, 2007; and Pendergast & Bahr, 2010) but argue that many of the challenges confronting teachers and their students are now exacerbated by a politicised and often intense set of considerations, many of them international in nature. Those studying to become teachers, as well as those who are beginning their teaching career, are often caught up in the practicalities of preparing to become safe and confident practitioners; however, we would argue that in professional practice it is also vital to understand the ways in which policies and practices intertwine and how they have come to be that way.

READER REFLECTION 1.1

As you prepare to become a teacher, or to broaden the scope of your teaching repertoire, how aware are you of the external conditions that may govern what you are able to undertake and why this is so?

But let us begin by thinking about what it is like to take on new directions in schooling from the learner's perspective: Tim Winton, in an interview with Andrew Denton on *Enough Rope* (25 October 2004), reported on his first day at high school in Albany, Western Ausrtalia, encountering senior students who seemed in his young eyes to be absolutely huge:

> And the great thing there was to stick your head down the dunny as a way of initiating you into high school and then flushing the bog on you and stuff. And the only smart thing I ever did in my life politically was to … I understood what was going on instantly – it took me 19 seconds, and seeing these kids getting dragged off to the dunny. So I went over to the taps and stuck my head under it and wet my hair. And they came running for me. I said, 'Mate, I've already been done.'

His other survival strategy was to change from being a 'nice kid' to one who was ready to be assertive, 'funny, cute or repulsive'.

This extract illustrates something of the title of this book, *Big Fish, Little Fish*. It represents but one of the signature stories told of the time in life when young people cease to be the older, senior students in their primary schools and instead become the youngest and least powerful in their secondary school communities. It is a time that is simultaneously exciting and unnerving. For most children who are moving from primary to secondary school the changes in the physical environment are not as significant as the changes they experience in their identity formation and their social relationships. From being esteemed as leaders, held to be capable self-directed learners, and well known among their peers and by their teachers, they go to being the small fry.

In their report to teachers and school leaders, *Easing the Transition* (Education Counts, 2010), the Research and Evaluation Unit of the New Zealand Ministry of Education noted that 'students often anticipate the move from primary to secondary schooling with mixed emotions' (p. 10). The report goes on to argue that how well students are equipped for and cope with this period of adjustment can have a critical influence on their ongoing education and future goals. In the chapters that follow we shall examine recent Australasian research and scholarship that discusses: the needs of learners in these critical years; appropriate curriculum and assessment practices; procedures for the preparation of teachers whose focus is upon the middle years of schooling; and the development of education policies in various jurisdictions.

READER REFLECTION 1.2

Go back to the time when you were about to begin secondary schooling (or perhaps, if you have children of your own, how they were feeling about beginning high school). What were your expectations? Had you visited the school beforehand? Did you have brothers and/or sisters who had attended the school? What did you imagine the opportunities and threats to be?

The challenges are considerable and ongoing

The middle years of schooling are often seen as little more than a matter of the transition from primary to secondary school, with little notice given to the actual impact of this transition on student learning, engagement and identity formation. This perspective has been reinforced by current global practices that require teachers to pay the most attention to externally imposed criteria of the perceived success of school systems, such as those related to standardised testing, school report cards and international comparisons.

Additionally, within a broadened framework of school choice, opportunities for connection and continuity are negatively affected by the marketisation of schooling. For example, by 1991 New Zealand had moved to a market-based system of education, where parents could choose their child's school. This encouraged competition between schools for students (Morphis, n.d.). Indeed, the New Zealand shift to school choice and financial regulation has gone further than the development of such policies in the Australian states and territories. Nonetheless, as Campbell, Proctor and Sherington (2009) have indicated, the policy of school choice is pervasive and burgeoning.

In larger urban areas the links between primary and secondary schools have been largely lost; young people in their last years of primary school are well aware that they will have a range of possible destinations for their secondary schooling and that friendships that have been forged over many years may be disrupted, even broken. Teachers working in primary and secondary schools, even in the same neighbourhood, have little to say to each other and few opportunities to view each other's practices. The picture is one of disruption rather than seamlessness.

For a number of years in the past, attention was paid by policymakers to provisions that aimed to ensure that young people's specific learning needs were recognised and honoured, with a focus upon both pastoral and developmental dimensions during this critical phase. However, with current moves towards not only school choice, but also the standardisation of curriculum and assessment in secondary schools in Australia and New Zealand, a tension has developed between these broader expressions of 'good learning' in the middle years and regimes of accountability.

Thus the 'middle years' of schooling are increasingly subject to tensions and pressures. While generally accepted as less 'high stakes' than the senior secondary years, and so regarded as less constrained in terms of curriculum and pedagogy, in recent years the various manifestations of the global education reform movement (GERM) have brought new regimes of audit and accountability to the middle years. Pasi Sahlberg (2011), so well known for his role in the reforms embedded in Finland, coined the term 'GERM' as an ironic commentary on the pervasiveness of global policies and their impact on individual countries. These international

policies, often promoted by the OECD, do not give due consideration to countries' varying and exceptional circumstances. (For further discussion of the impact of global educational reform on teaching and learning in the middle years, see Chapter 17.)

Like so many other developed countries, Australasian education policy has been influenced and shaped by global factors. As Rizvi and Lingard (2010) have observed, the changes brought about by globalisation have led to a reconceptualisation of policy and hence practices. They note that policies are seen to be assembled as a response to perceived problems such as positioning on competitive league tables. To take an example: in Australia, the adoption of a national testing regime, the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN), is said to contribute to Australia's improvement in international competitiveness, as well as to improvement in school performance (when coupled with the *My School* website, which makes clear how schools stand, comparatively, in terms of achievement). In many instances the final years of primary school and the early years of secondary school are dominated by preparations for such tests at the expense of more liberal and creative practices, though the latter are often cited as critical to student engagement in the middle years (Groundwater-Smith, Mitchell & Mockler, 2007). Similarly, there is increasing attention paid to standards for teaching performance, with significant policy borrowings from the United States and the United Kingdom leading to the adoption of the Australian Teacher Performance and Development Framework (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, 2012). This is to be fully implemented in 2014/5. Once again, there is the potential for practice in the middle years, previously regarded as more creative and liberal than that of the senior years of secondary school, to become more constrained.

Too little attention is paid, in relation to international testing regimes, to the specific contexts in which nations function. New Zealand, for example, is acknowledged as doing well in literacy, mathematics and science testing but has a significant gap between its more and less advantaged students. It is noted that 20–25% of students are from an immigrant background (defined as being born outside the country and/or having foreign-born parents), and that they score less well than those without such a background. In both Australia and New Zealand, Indigenous, Māori and Pacific Island students struggle to achieve well.

Following a series of interviews with young people in New Zealand, the Research and Evaluation Unit of the Ministry of Education (2010) published a series of case studies, illustrative of the difficulties that such students face in their schooling:

CASE STUDY

UNDERSTANDING EACH OTHER

Despite saying they had 'settled' quite quickly when they first arrived, some students, rather than assimilating into their secondary school, for various reasons became increasingly distanced from some or most aspects of school life.

Tale was a student who had been well liked by all the teachers and students in his primary school: his Year 8 teacher described him as 'sweet, dreamy and shy', adding that everyone loved these qualities in him. While Tale had been very anxious about the move to secondary school, feeling he would be out of his depth in a big place with lots of strangers, he found, to his pleasure, and surprise that he got on well initially, and even enjoyed much of his time there. He attributed this in large part to 'being introduced around' by older siblings and cousins so that he got to know and be known by people and was able to play sports with them during lunch hour, which he really enjoyed.

Family meant a great deal to Tale and he spoke often during interviews for the transition study about how he enjoyed spending time with his siblings (usually playing various outdoor games), helping out his parents and grandparents, and just generally being with members of his extended family. Tale had friends at school and in his neighbourhood whom he valued, but he seldom saw them on the weekends, choosing to put his family commitments first.

However, as his first year at secondary school progressed, Tale began to get 'offside' with teachers; he was eventually suspended for a few days for surly behaviour and answering back. He felt that he and two of his friends had been unfairly picked on 'because they were Pacific Islanders', accused of something they hadn't done and not given the chance to explain. The downward spiral for Tale had begun over homework: he refused to do it (by simply abstaining rather than outwardly protesting) because he did not believe in the need for homework, feeling strongly that spending time with family was more important and that formal learning should be kept within the school day and not take up out-of-school time as well.

Tale was making reasonable progress at school, although he did not always find it easy to stay sufficiently focused on his work in class, mainly because of his tendency to day-dream. He was well aware that his parents valued education highly and he generally wished to please them. It was evident that although Tale had genuine reasons for his beliefs about the homework situation, he was not able to convey this and his behaviour was seen by his teachers as deliberately uncooperative and disobedient. The result was a lack of understanding and effective communication between Tale and his teachers, leading to an impasse, and no acceptable compromise. Tale was at risk of becoming seriously alienated from school, including disengaging from his learning in class. (p. 113)

Initiatives such as the adoption of continuous testing and assessment – of students and their teachers – are tied to the 'what works' agenda, which in turn is linked to government funding that can define what is to be done and how it is to be done, with an eschewing of qualitative research methods in favour of measurement regimes that leave little room for variance and difference (Furlong, 2013, pp. 38–41). Biesta, among others, argues that evidence-based practice holds greater promise than it can actually deliver, offering a way forward that recognises the nuances and complexities of practice (2007, 2010).

If, as Rizvi and Lingard (2010) suggest, problem setting is increasingly determined in global discussions, as opposed to locally, it is our contention that there is little current attention currently being given to very real problems for learners in schools in Australia and New Zealand regarding the important transition stage from primary to secondary schooling and that this particular problem setting is one that is largely ignored in the international context.

READER REFLECTION 1.3

How aware are you of the global policies that influence decisions about schooling in your local context? How do you see these policies being played out in terms of the learning needs of children in schools?

Losing and regaining the momentum

Initially there was some momentum for middle years reform in Australian and New Zealand schooling in educational thinking from 2000 onwards. At the Australian national level, this can be attributed to the ACSA report, *From Alienation to Engagement* (Cumming, 1996) and the *National Middle Schooling Project* funded by the Australian Government Department of Employment, Education, Training and Youth Affairs (Barratt, 1998). However, more recently there has been a slowing down of the various initiatives undertaken across the country as they have been eclipsed by discussions centred on national curriculum and testing reform, as discussed above. Bahr and Crosswell (2011) point out that current evidence suggests that middle schooling has lost ground in the Australian context, and mainstream education agendas are falling silent on the subject. This is reflected in the work of the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY) project *Betwixt and Between* (2011), in which the authors argue that:

> Despite a mounting body of evidence on the importance of this period of development (adolescence), public policies and practices tend to focus on earlier or later developmental periods such that 'the middle years' appear to be largely overlooked. (p. 3)

However, in New South Wales, the largest education authority in Australia, the government has reinvigorated work in this area based on a 2008 inquiry conducted by the NSW Parliamentary Committee into the needs and issues facing 9–14-year-olds. The Committee published its report, *Children and Young People aged 9–14 in NSW: The Missing Middle*, in 2009. It stated that:

> As the years between the ages of 9 and 14 are crucial to physical, social and emotional development, they provide a key opportunity for positive intervention to help children and young people reach their full potential. Identifying and responding to early warning signs can help prevent children in this age group from becoming more vulnerable and make a significant difference to their current and future lives. Research indicates

> that intervening in the middle years can be effective, and that this period of major transition and heightened risk can be a key turning point.

This re-emergence of concerns regarding the middle years is reflected in the 2011 ARACY project, which was developed in response to concerns that existing public policies and services do not adequately address the developmental needs of children aged 9–14, a view endorsed by Knipe and Johnstone (2007). ARACY reports on a growing body of evidence that indicates that biological, psychological, neurological and social changes occur as children make the transition into adolescence and that this has a major impact on how they feel, think and act, including how they:

- understand and manage their emotions;
- view and relate to themselves and to others;
- respond to emotional and social challenges; and
- establish a social identity and develop skills that will enable them to participate in, and contribute productively to, Australian society.

These persuasive arguments are further embodied in the Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians (MCEETYA, 2008):

> The middle years are an important period of learning, in which knowledge of fundamental disciplines is developed, yet this is also a time when students are at the greatest risk of disengagement from learning. Student motivation and engagement in these years is critical and can be influenced by tailoring approaches to teaching, with learning activities and learning environments that specifically consider the needs of middle years students. Focusing on student engagement and converting this into learning can have a significant impact on student outcomes. Effective transitions between primary and secondary schools are an important aspect of ensuring student engagement. (p. 12)

A similar dance of advance and retreat around the middle years of schooling is also to be found in New Zealand. Bishop (2008), during her year's tenure in New Zealand as a holder of the Ian Axford Fellowship in Public Policy, argued that cultural, historical, political, procedural and structural conditions all contribute to the current lack of specialised middle years teacher preparation in New Zealand. The barriers include:

- a perceived lack of Ministry of Education priority on the middle years;
- a historical tendency to divide the tiers of schooling into primary and secondary, as evidenced in reports, legislation and policy;
- a strong teachers' union presence divided along primary and secondary lines; and
- a relative lack of identity for middle years schooling, given as many as six different school types. (p. x)

Bishop, too, refers to 'the missing middle' (p. 31) when she identifies the lack of a specific preparation of teachers who will be able to work successfully with young people across the early years of secondary schooling.

Hinchco (2004), almost a decade ago, reminded readers of the critical connections and relationships that are required for engaged learning as students make the transition. His study described the historical and political contexts that had emerged over many years. This discussion has been taken up more recently by Durling, Ng and Bishop (2010) as they focus upon student learning needs in the New Zealand context. Among their many findings they summarised students' responses to the question as to what they desired of their teachers:

- The importance to them of having a positive relationship with their teacher and knowing that the teacher cared about them as an individual;
- The need for teachers to have effective classroom management skills so that a disruptive and/or disharmonious classroom environment didn't interfere with their learning;
- The necessity for clear instructions and a range of examples to help them understand;
- The value of having (well-managed) opportunities to work collaboratively with other students in class. (p. 5)

As will be seen in Chapter 5, these responses hold equally true for young people in Australia.

READER REFLECTION 1.4

Why do you think it is that such an important phase of schooling ascends and descends in the policy context? Is it only attributable to the international considerations cited earlier in this chapter?

Of course, and as evidenced by later chapters in this book, it is neither possible nor feasible to believe that the experiences of young people during the middle years of their schooling are undifferentiated. Poverty, ethnicity, race, gender and social geography continue to play their part. As Prosser, in his review of middle schooling in Australia (2006) concluded:

> The first generation of middle schooling in Australia left business unfinished, especially in relation to the impact of poverty and disadvantage on … outcomes for students and the need for greater teacher involvement in efforts for middle school reform. These continuing challenges must not be overlooked in a second generation of middle schooling in Australia. (p. 10)

Assembling the evidence

While we have alluded to Biesta's concern that evidence-based practice is problematic in that, too often, it takes insufficient account of the vagaries of context, there is some agreement among researchers that we have evidence for establishing the viability of well-honed policies with respect to the middle years of schooling and that these can be tuned to meet the needs of given groups and given communities. Two reviews of literature are worth considering here. Luke, Elkins, Weir, Land et al. (2003) undertook to report on middle schooling in Australia with a particular focus on literacy and numeracy. They argued that there is a tendency to turn to programs that are uniform in their nature, thus not acknowledging the diversity of literacy, language and culture found in our society. They point out that middle schools should consider how schools can tailor strategies, in particular literacy activities, to be meaningful and engaging for all students.

They conclude that:

> A principal finding is that the middle years reforms are not a momentary 'fad' or an isolated orientation, but should become focal and core. But such a move in policy and practice will require another wave, another generation of middle years research, policy and development. Without further professional and policy debate, substantial system attention and investment, there is a danger that the reforms described here will remain 'stuck in the middle'. (p. 135)

Dinham and Rowe (2007) undertook a review of teaching and learning in the middle years for the New Zealand government and suggested that the general area was something of a 'black hole' and that much that is published is little more than advocacy:

> It is noted that whereas *middle schooling* might be relatively under-researched, there is no shortage of strong views on the subject, both pro and con. The concern is that writings from advocates for *middle schooling* tend to be little more than aspirational, frequently bordering on mere rhetoric and ideology. (p. v)

Their emphasis was that rather than making claims on the basis of emotional and developmental needs, the concern should be for improvements in age-appropriate pedagogy. Quoting Dowson et al. (2005), Dinham and Rowe report that it is vital that the following are key elements of effective school practices:

- Relevance – personal meaning derived from middle-school curricula which engages students with the 'real world';
- Responsibility – appropriate self-control over learning, accountability and responsibility;
- Belonging – sense of acceptance and affirmation within a supportive and safe learning environment;
- Awareness – both self and social awareness, through appropriate curricula and learning;
- Engagement – defined here as meeting students' developmental needs through tasks which are motivating, challenging and invite affiliation;

- Competence – developing personal expertise and competencies, knowledge and skills;
- Ethics – ethical awareness facilitated; personal values developed; and
- Pedagogy – active rather than passive learning. (p. 15)

However, they go on to argue that these practices should be common to good schooling in general and not middle schooling in particular.

READER REFLECTION 1.5

Taking each of these teaching and learning elements, can you identify examples from your own schooling or occasions when you have been engaged with young people in the classroom? Are they too idealistic and unformed, or do they constitute a set of concerns that all teachers should have?

In this opening chapter, we have argued that the matter of transition from primary to secondary schooling during this critical phase in the lives of young people is one deserving of close and particular attention.

Conclusion

The challenges of the middle years of schooling today are about more than transition issues. The policy contexts that frame the work of teachers and students in the middle years may have a significant impact on practice, potentially narrowing both curriculum and pedagogy in ways previously unseen. In this book we aim to explicitly address the historical and policy contexts within which this work is enacted and to explore some of the implications of these key framing policies in relation to the needs of learners, curriculum and assessment, and teacher preparation.

READER REFLECTION 1.6

In 2013, an Australian Senate Inquiry was held into the effectiveness of the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN). Submissions were made by teachers, parents, schools and students, and can be found on the Senate Committees Website: www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Senate/Education_and_Employment/Naplan13/Report/e01

Read a small selection of submissions, including number 90, which was made by a group of Queensland children. If possible, in small groups, interview several students from the final years of primary school and the early years of secondary school, and examine their perceptions of the impact of NAPLAN on their school experience. What comparisons and contrasts can you make?