

WHAT'S MISSING IN TEACHER EDUCATION? A MIDDLE YEARS PERSPECTIVE.

Tania Aspland and Leanne Crosswell

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Recently in Queensland a group of concerned educators raised a key question: What is missing in teacher education? The group of teacher educators, teachers, educational consultants and other significant stakeholders met in Warwick to interrogate the nature of teacher education with a view to reshaping the key constructs in the field for the future. It was agreed at this meeting, as it has been elsewhere, that there is a serious need to rethink pre-service teacher education programs in Queensland. Major employing authorities are currently engaging in curriculum and pedagogical reform. Further, the intensification of teachers' work has reached a point where all teacher education authorities are cognisant of the increasing numbers of teachers who are struggling to contend with what is expected of them from a myriad of stakeholders.

International interest in pre-service teacher education programs has been prompted by many factors such as: current school reform literature (eg Darling-Hammond, 1997); technological change; issues of globalisation; the predicted crisis in teacher supply (Preston, 2000); the intensification of teachers' work (Hargreaves, 1994); changing pedagogies; and new education organisational structures (Education Queensland, 1999, 2000). In the past fifty years a number of key questions have continued to shape and reshape the foci of teacher education in the Western World: The 'attributes' question, the 'effectiveness' question, the 'knowledge' question, and more recently the 'outcomes' question have shaped the changing emphases in teacher education courses since the 1950s (Cochran-Smith, 2000).

Current interest in schools, the work of teachers and teacher education in Australia is reflected in projects undertaken around Australia in the last decade. These include: the *Beginning Teachers'*

Competency report (Louden) 1992; the *Teacher Education in Australia* report (NBEET) 1995; the *National Competencies Framework* (Australian Teaching Council) 1996; the *New South Wales Review of Teacher Education – Quality Matters* (Ramsay) 2000, the *National Standards and Guidelines for Initial Teacher Education* (Australian Council of Deans of Education) 2001; *Teacher Standards and Professionalism* (Australian College of Education) 2001. There have also been the Education Queensland documents, such as the *Draft Strategy for Consultation* (Education Queensland, 1999) and *Queensland State Education - 2010* (Education Queensland, 2000) and the Queensland Board of Teacher Registration's *A Fresh Look at Teacher Education* (Queensland Board of Teacher Registration, 2000). More recently, the Australian Council for Educational Research has prioritised the importance of teacher quality in determining effective educational outcomes for student learning. These reports are instructive for reshaping teacher education in the future and in currently addressing the question: What is missing in teacher education?

More broadly, and of significance for this paper, the various reports emphasise the importance of capturing the complexity of teachers' work in new times by calling attention to the centrality of:

- the nature and context of educational, cultural, political and societal changes impacting on teacher education
- the range of backgrounds, experiences and beliefs that pre-service teachers bring to teacher education, and how these influence their experiences of professional learning and induction

- the particular types of learning in which students engage and how this learning is best fostered
- how students' understanding of content matter and of learning theory develops beyond a superficial level
- the kind of knowledge and understanding students acquire in the process of learning to teach, how they acquire it, and how it informs their classroom practice
- the factors that facilitate the processes of learning to teach
- how teacher educators are influential in guiding student learning and professional development
- the processes of accessing knowledge, knowledge creation and knowledge management, and the role of technology in these processes.

It is this key domain of teaching and learning and pedagogies that is of great significance in interrogating teacher education. If teacher education is centrally concerned with preparing graduating teachers to facilitate quality student learning outcomes for all students, it is in this domain that one can genuinely ask, 'what is missing'? This is a very significant question to those of us advocating for middle years of schooling reform.

The middle years literature is instructive in providing a partial response. For the purposes of this article, the point of reference here will be the Australian literature, but it is important to acknowledge the impact of the North American literature, particularly the work of the Carnegie Council (1989), and the National Middle Schools Association in raising teacher educators' collective awareness of the silences surrounding the education of adolescents in both schools and, by implication, in teacher education. In Australia, research and publications have pursued a slightly different agenda: that of pedagogical and

curriculum reform in the middle years of schooling rather than the US focus on school reform. As recently as 1993, the Education Department in South Australia identified a need to reconstruct pedagogies in South Australian schools to be more responsive to the needs of adolescents. Similarly, education authorities in Victoria established an advisory group to interrogate the field more fully. These initiatives prompted national action through the Australian Curriculum Studies Association (ACSA) over a sustained period extending from 1995 to the present time, raising key issues for all educational stakeholders as to the health and well being of adolescent learners in Australian schools. The findings of the national study conducted by ACSA (1996), *From Alienation to Engagement*, clearly indicated that many young people in our schools were positioned on the margins of learning engagement as a direct result of inappropriate pedagogies and lack of responsiveness by teachers to the demands of adolescent learners. The outcomes of the study were significant for Australian educators in realising the establishment of a Commonwealth funded (DEETYA) National Middle Schooling Project (1997). The activity promoted throughout Australia as a result of this funding led to a multitude of State based initiatives that advocated for reform in the middle years of schooling. The results of such energies, MYSA (The Middle Years of Schooling Association) being one of the outcomes, are evident today in a myriad of schools across all Australian states. These local reforms are emerging concurrently with ongoing discussions in all states including Queensland where debate across professional groups, teachers unions, the Board of Teacher Registration and major employing authorities is active. The Board of Teacher Registration in Queensland, as is the case in other states, has generated two reports, *Preparing Teachers to Work with Young Adolescents* (1994) and *Teachers Working with Adolescents* (1996), both of which have strategically advocated the centrality of teachers (and consequently teacher educators) in addressing what is problematic in schools for adolescent learners.

Despite the emergent initiatives across all educational sectors in Queensland, the question remains, how have teacher educators taken up the challenge?

A number of universities throughout Australia - Australian Catholic University, University of Queensland, Deakin University, Edith Cowan University, Flinders University, University of South Australia, and Queensland University of Technology (Chadbourne, 2001) - have recently responded to the call to place the needs of adolescent learners more centrally within teacher education programs. The education staff of one university in Queensland, reporting here, have successfully incorporated a Middle Years of Schooling Pathway into their undergraduate program for the past two years. Two course work units and two field based units have been completed by over 100 graduates (both primary and secondary) during the past two years, with another 70 students enrolled for Semester 2, 2002. The foci of the units are inclusive of adolescent psychology, case studies of adolescents as learners, pedagogies that are responsive to adolescent needs as learners, modelling of middle years pedagogies, dialogical conversations with adolescent workers, presentations by policy writers, educational authorities and teachers actively reconstructing their policy and school curriculum to be more responsive to the needs and interests of young adult learners.

During the past two years, a team of two of the lecturing staff have monitored student interest in middle years reform and their responses to their readings and learnings in this program. In reviewing their initial experiences in engaging with the middle years literature and practices in the field, they have raised some serious concerns as they graduate into the profession. These concerns will be outlined below.

The first of the questions raised by the students is related to their emerging graduate identities as classroom teacher: *How much can I do as a first year teacher and how do I get started?*

One of the most significant concerns the group had was with their emerging teacher identity as a middle years teacher and whether, with their

perceived limited understanding of middle years pedagogies, they would be respected by adolescent students and teaching colleagues as credible. The primary graduates were concerned as to whether they 'could handle the older student', based on their field experiences across year levels P-7, while the secondary students felt equally challenged by 'the younger students and a lack of understanding of child development.' Both groups felt pressured by the demands of beginning teaching within their specific sectors (primary/secondary) and felt that to enter into the middle years challenges, based on 'just these few subjects', was beyond their perceived capabilities as beginning teachers. Further, they expressed quite strongly that they would be unwilling to do so unless they were actively 'inducted' into an existing middle years context.

Related to this concern was the expression of the sentiment: *I feel that going into the middle years would mean a loss of my teaching skills and a devaluing of my professional status.* Clearly, students graduating from this course situate themselves as 'expert' within a specific sector (primary or secondary). The secondary graduates expressed even stronger commitment to their discipline area, eg as a geography teacher or a history teacher or, as in some cases, a social science teacher. Graduate identities are unquestionably discipline-based and built around concepts of teacher as expert in specific content knowledge (secondary) or specific pedagogical knowledge (primary). They felt personally comfortable and rated themselves from professionally adequate to high achieving as the transmitters of certain predefined knowledge to a specific cohort of students. Their understanding of middle years demands prompted them to express feelings of professional insecurity and inadequacy concerning issues of transdisciplinary, interdisciplinary or cross curriculum orientations, particularly the secondary cohort. The primary cohort expressed a sense of professional congruence with the integrated approaches to teaching and learning, but they were reticent to express confidence in themselves as teachers of secondary content matter in a transdisciplinary or interdisciplinary team. One student felt that 'it is the students who would suffer as well as me.'

Further, both cohorts of graduates expressed a view that *team teaching in the middle years of schooling was problematic*. The graduates had not witnessed a great deal of successful team teaching during their field experiences. They expressed feelings of inadequacy as to what they might offer to middle years teams, both in terms of content and pedagogical knowledge and in their skills of teaming. They had witnessed primarily single class teacher arrangements (one teacher per class of 25-35 students), and some cooperative teaching in the primary sector but had had very limited, or no, experience observing or contributing to team teaching across disciplines. They argued that they needed to consolidate the 'basics of planning, teaching and assessment alone before they could make a contribution to a middle years team.' They expressed concerns about themselves as 'specialist teachers', as holding inadequate knowledge of resourcing, timetabling and administration and were concerned about the effectiveness of team teaching, particularly in relation to the quality of content knowledge in the secondary sector. 'I am sure that I would do it the wrong way because I don't know enough about it.' Despite these feelings of uncertainty, they expressed strong support for, and a willingness to work in, teams as they perceived this mechanism provided invaluable infrastructure support for their evolving professional growth in their beginning years.

I don't think I know enough about middle years of schooling. Despite a thorough interrogation of the literature in the area, both student cohorts (primary and secondary) expressed dismay about their engagement with middle years at the level of practice. Some students still felt that they did not understand or support the principles of middle years fully. They were concerned about the lack of empirical evidence that is available within Australia in support of improved student learning outcomes, and many students were concerned that they had only witnessed the early stages of development of middle years practices in schools. Further, a large number of students had interacted with teachers in schools who were confused about principles of middle years, or were clearly not committed to the initiatives being advanced in their specific school contexts. As one student

reported: 'The teachers in my school didn't really know what was changing or why. They only did it because they had to.' This sentiment was affirmed by many, despite the efforts by a small minority who argued greater confidence in middle years based on the more positive experiences that they witnessed. 'My school is doing great stuff and both the students and the staff are engaging with the middle years principles and they all love it.' Another student added: 'Middle schooling is like the weather - constantly changing, unpredictable and always exciting.' It was the concept of uncertainty and change that clearly troubled a number of the students.

The students were also concerned about their understanding of the literature on adolescent development. '*I am trained to teach history, not manage difficult adolescents.*' There was very strong agreement from both cohorts that their understandings of adolescent development and issues were superficial. While they affirmed their status as well qualified, the graduates expressed concern that the crowding of teacher education courses did not allow enough space for this area of significance. They were cognisant of the centrality of adolescent development and learning, youth culture and learner centred pedagogies to middle years reform, but expressed a general consensus that their expertise in this area was limited. They argued that greater knowledge and experience would have to be the focus of their ongoing professional development early in their careers. Further, they felt the implementation of a learner centered curriculum placed huge demands on them professionally while they 'will be struggling to survive their first year.'

Both groups of graduates raised questions such as:

- How do I know what their (students) needs are?
- How will I keep up with these needs? How will I keep coming up with these ideas and keep on being creative?
- How will I find all of the necessary resources?
- How will I do all this and stay on top of my class?
- Am I really equipped to deal with all of this?

One question that was raised by a graduating middle years enthusiast prompted ongoing, lively debate: *How do we curb our enthusiasm and excitement in our first year and implement these fantastic ideas and concepts particularly in schools that are not ready for us or this reform?* There was a general concern across the cohorts about a clash of cultures when they were appointed to schools that upheld 'traditional cultures', 'had no commitment to middle years principles' or 'think we are idealistic graduates that need to be re-taught what the real world is like.' These concerns were not merely about the congruency factor, although this was a real concern. As one student stated, 'I don't want to dive head first into a disaster, I would rather swim with the tide for a while and see if these new ideas fit into the school.' Students feared that after they had gained appointment in the field they may lose enthusiasm for middle school reforms or that, due to their schools' poor adoption of middle years initiatives, they may lose their personal vision of best practice. It was generally felt that, despite some exceptions, schools were not highly committed to middle years philosophies and that induction and enculturation into existing school cultures would hamper their commitment to engaging adolescent learners. Further, graduating students did not feel that they would be empowered to take on leadership in this area in their first or beginning years of teaching.

On analysis, the data collected over two years shares a myriad of further ongoing concerns about ideals, professional status, token commitment to middle years reform, middle years becoming a political football, the place of assessment and reporting, concerns with the quality of work offered to students in preparation for Year 10, crossing disciplinary boundaries and parental approval. The report presented here reflects only the key concerns across a cohort of approximately 150 students. It gives some insight into what is problematic within middle years reform for graduating preservice teachers. Of significance here though, are the questions raised for teacher

educators who are interested in investigating what is missing in teacher education, particularly from a middle years perspective.

Clearly, despite positive attempts by some teacher education faculties, five recommendations must be pursued if middle years issues are to be more fully interrogated:

- teacher education courses must challenge traditional discipline constructs as the platform on which to build sector specific programs
- curriculum and pedagogical reform should be central to the delivery of teacher education courses
- learning and development components of teacher education courses should be more inclusive of adolescent development, youth culture and responsive pedagogical practices
- graduate identities should be reshaped through teacher education courses that reflect teaching for the new work order
- there should be stronger alliances between universities and schools that are actively reconstructing their curriculum, pedagogies and assessment practices to be responsive to the middle years reform agenda.

With these agendas in mind, the program at this specific university will be implemented for a third time in 2002. It is anticipated that many of these concerns have been addressed and the recommendations listed above have been taken up for further training. The program has been reshaped to develop in students flexible and transdisciplinary pedagogical practices that can assist the graduates in being more responsive to specific contextual variables they will encounter in differing sites. More importantly, as future undergraduate courses at this university and others are redesigned, it is anticipated that middle years reform, the literature underpinning the reform and the practices that are emerging within such reform will become central to the interrogation of teacher education throughout Australia.

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- About the authors: Tania Aspland is Assistant to the Dean (B.Ed.) and Leanne Crosswell is Lecturer, Faculty of Education at Queensland University of Technology. t.aspland@qut.edu.au.*