

Middle Years of Schooling: The pressures on rural adolescents to achieve academically

Adele L. Demarte

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Declaration

I hereby certify that except where due acknowledgement has been made, this work is that of the candidate alone; the work has not been submitted previously, in whole or in part, to qualify for any other academic award; the content of the thesis is the result of work, which has been carried out since the official commencement date of the approved research program; any editorial work, paid or unpaid, carried out by a third party is acknowledged; ethics procedures and guidelines have been followed.

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Table of Contents

Declaration	i
Acknowledgements	iii
Abstract	1
Chapter 1 Introduction	3
1.1 Background to the Study	3
1.2 Research Question	4
1.3 Aim and Scope of the Study	4
1.4 Methodology	5
1.5 Outline of Thesis	7
1.6 Explanation of Terms	8
1.7 Summary of Chapter	9
Chapter 2 Literature Review	10
2.1 Introduction	10
2.2 Adolescents	11
2.2.1 The Nature of Adolescence	11
2.2.2 Changing Bodies and Sexuality	12
2.2.3 Psychological and Brain Development	12
2.2.4 Identity, Peers and Social Issues	13
2.2.5 Well Being	15
2.2.6 The Elements of Risk	20
2.2.7 Academic Ability	22
2.2.8 Academic Pressure	23
2.2.9 Rural Adolescents	24
2.3 School Culture	24
2.3.1 Comparing School Cultures: Primary versus Secondary	25
2.3.2 School and Class Sizes	27
2.3.3 Student Grouping	27
2.3.4 Teacher Labelling	30
2.3.5 Peer Labelling	30
2.3.6 Bullying	31
2.3.7 Transition	31
2.3.8 Rural School Culture	35
2.4 Academic Achievement	38
2.4.1 Motivation and Learning	39
2.4.2 Educational Perspectives	40
2.4.3 The Teacher and Student Relationship	41
2.4.4 Curriculum	41
2.4.5 Teaching Approaches	42
2.4.6 Assessment	44
2.4.7 The Nature of Feedback	45
2.5 Current Educational Initiatives in Adolescent Schooling	46
2.5.1 Successful Middle Schooling	46
2.5.2 Australian Initiatives in Middle Years of Schooling Education	47

2.5.3 Life-Long Learning	51
2.6 Summary of Chapter	52
Chapter 3 Methodology	54
3.1 Overview	54
3.2 Qualitative Research	55
3.3 Naturalistic Inquiry	56
3.4 Naturalistic Inquiry Methods	57
3.4.1 Non-Participant Observation	57
3.4.2 Sampling	58
3.4.2.1 Purposeful Sampling	59
3.4.2.2 Snowball Sampling	60
3.4.3 Case Study	60
3.4.3.1 Case Study Design	61
3.4.4 Research Design	62
3.4.5 Data Collection	63
3.4.5.1 Journals	64
3.4.6 Interviews	66
3.4.6.1 Interview Environment	67
3.4.6.2 Group Interviews	67
3.4.6.3 Individual Interviews	72
3.4.7 Questioning Techniques	76
3.4.8 Verbal versus Non-Verbal Information	77
3.4.9 Recording of Data	78
3.4.10 Interview Analysis	78
3.4.11 Observations and Supporting Documents	79
3.5 Data Analysis and Presentation	80
3.5.1 Pattern Matching	80
3.5.2 Coding Data	81
3.5.3 Content Analysis	81
3.5.4 Explanation Building	82
3.6 Meeting Quality Criteria	82
3.6.1 Credibility	83
3.6.1.1 Prolonged Engagement	83
3.6.1.2 Persistent Observation	84
3.6.1.3 Triangulation	84
3.6.1.4 Peer Debriefing	85
3.6.1.5 Member Checking	85
3.6.1.6 Multiple Perspectives	85
3.6.2 Transferability	86
3.6.3 Dependability	87
3.6.4 Confirmability	88
3.7 Ethical Considerations	88
3.7.1 Intrusion	89
3.7.2 Ethical Anxiety	90
3.7.3 Therapeutic Research	90
3.7.4 Harm and Deception	90
3.7.5 Confidentiality and Anonymity	91
3.8 Summary of Chapter	91
Chapter 4 Data Reporting and Analysis	93
4.1 Introduction	93

4.2 Background Information	94
4.2.1 Community Backgrounds	94
4.2.2 Family Backgrounds	97
4.2.3 Primary Student Participants	101
4.2.3.1 Case 1: Heather	101
4.2.3.2 Case 2: Thomas	104
4.2.3.3 Case 3: Louise	108
4.2.4 Secondary Student Participants	112
4.2.4.1 Case 4: Steven	112
4.2.4.2 Case 5: Kristy	116
4.2.4.3 Case 6: Dean	120
4.3 Thematic Analysis	123
4.3.1 The Selection of Themes	124
4.3.2 Overscheduled-hurried Lives	124
4.3.2.1 Perceptions and Expectations of Self	125
4.3.2.2 Perceptions and Expectations of Parents	130
4.3.2.3 Perceptions and Expectations of School	133
4.3.2.4 Perceptions and Expectations of Peers	136
4.3.3 The Nature of Feedback: Intrinsic and Extrinsic Rewards	137
4.3.3.1 Perceptions and Expectations of Self	138
4.3.3.2 Perceptions and Expectations of Parents	140
4.3.3.3 Perceptions and Expectations of School	143
4.3.3.4 Perceptions and Expectations of Peers	152
4.3.4 Labelling	153
4.3.4.1 Perceptions and Expectations of Self	154
4.3.4.2 Perceptions and Expectations of School	156
4.3.4.3 Perceptions and Expectations of Peers	160
4.3.5 Doing School: What's Next?	162
4.3.5.1 Perceptions and Expectations of Self	163
4.3.5.2 Perceptions and Expectations of Parents	169
4.3.5.3 Perceptions and Expectations of School	173
4.4 Summary of Chapter	179
Chapter 5 Discussion and Conclusion	180
5.1 Overview	180
5.2 Over-scheduled-hurried Lives	182
5.3 The Nature of Feedback: Intrinsic and Extrinsic Rewards	184
5.4 Labelling	185
5.5 Doing School: What's Next?	186
5.6 Recommendations for Further Research	194
5.7 Summary of Chapter	194
References	195

Figures

Figure 3.1	Copy of Front Page of Student Participant Journal	65
Figure 3.2	Drawing of Louise Trying to be Successful at School	68
Figure 3.3	Heather's Life-Line of Support Structures	70
Figure 3.4	Drawing of Susan Trying to do well at School after Participating in the Research Project	71
Figure 3.5	Rules for Living in Sophie's Home	71
Figure 3.6	Sample of Teacher Marking Strategies on Louise's Schoolwork	74
Figure 4.1	Heather Illustrating her Sense of Identity	128
Figure 4.2	Thomas' Feelings Associated with trying to be Successful at School	167
Figure 4.3	Reflective Drawing of the Pressures Experienced by Thomas at School	168
Figure 4.4	Louise's Life-Line of Support Structures	170
Figure 4.5	Thomas' Feelings towards his Transition to Secondary School	177
Figure 5.1	Diagram of the Nature of Optimal Support for Adolescents	181

Tables

Table 3.1	Overview of Participants	62
Table 3.2	Collective Case Study Participants	63
Table 3.3	Overview of Interviews	67
Table 3.4	Overview of Student Participant Group Interviews	68
Table 3.5	Overview of Individual Interviews	72
Table 4.1	A Brief Profile of the Family Home Context of the Primary School Participants in the Collective Case Study	99
Table 4.2	A Brief Profile of the Family Home Context of the Secondary School Participants in the Collective Case Study	100
Table 4.3	Summary of Teacher Feedback	144

Appendices

Appendix A	Department of Education and Training Research Approval Letter	209
Appendix B	RMIT Human Research Ethics Committee Research Approval Letter	211
Appendix C	RMIT Human Research Ethics Committee Consent Form	213
Appendix D	Plain Language Statement – Student Participant & Parent/Guardian	215
Appendix E	Plain Language Statement – Principal/Teacher Participant	217
Appendix F	Summary of Infrastructure of the Primary and Secondary School Townships	219
Appendix G	Member Checking Transcripts Cover Letter	221
Appendix H	Member Checking Reply Letter Example from Participant	222
Appendix I	External Auditor’s Report	223

Abstract

Within a climate of continual change this study offers insights into the academic pressures experienced by rural adolescents to achieve at school. In the often challenging transition from childhood to adulthood expectations from others place additional pressures on adolescents' lives.

To better understand these pressures, I conducted a qualitative study of six students (ages nine to 15) and their teachers in the Middle Years of Schooling within rural Victoria, Australia. Students were studied prior to the Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE) in order to examine the pressures on students facing the Middle Years of Schooling. The study was carried out over a 6 month period using a *Naturalistic Inquiry* process with semi-structured interviews and participant observation. This allowed access into the participants' subjective insights. A Collective case study approach was employed to situate the information in its holistic environment and offer thick and information rich narratives depicting the experiences of these early adolescents. The case studies also involved examination of the school experiences of the early adolescents. Academic pressure was then broadly viewed in light of these experiences and recommendations offered.

The findings from this research revealed that the early adolescents in the study all experienced degrees of academic pressure and demonstrated varied abilities to cope with these pressures. External support provided by parents, the school, teachers and peers tended to *provide* support more than fostering resilience.

The motivation to conduct this research stemmed from prior experience as an adolescent and through my work as an educator. As an adolescent I continually felt that both the school and my teachers were taking a misguided approach to academic achievement, pressuring students to gain high marks and celebrating top achievements, while students who failed to meet high expectations were left feeling neglected, worthless and stereotyped. Several peers throughout my secondary education took their lives which I believe to be a result of their negative school experiences during early adolescence. As an educator it continues to concern me that while schools place such high importance on academic achievement and success at school, little attention is paid to fostering well being and resilience in early adolescents.

Chapter 1 Introduction

'In all our efforts to provide "advantages" we have actually produced the busiest, most competitive, highly pressured, and over-organized generation of youngsters in our history.'

_____ Eda J. Le Shan

1.1 Background to the Study

With a growing focus on the Middle Years of Schooling over the past two decades extensive research highlights an increasing trend of individuals disengaged with schooling and not coping with the challenges of early adolescence or possessing the skills to build a strong sense of resilience (Abbott-Chapman, 2000; Arnold, 2000; Blakemore & Choudhury, 2006a, 2006b; Cormack, 1991; Cumming & Cormack, 1996; Frydenberg, 1997; Frydenberg & Lewis, 1991, 2000, Autumn; Ryan & Patrick, 2001, Summer).

Particular writers have guided this study and have become critical friends (Abbott-Chapman, 2000; Barratt, 1997, 1998a, 1998b, 1998c; Bond, Carlin, Thomas, Rubin & Patton, 2001; Centre for Adolescent Health, 2004, 2007; Cormack, 1991, 1998a, 1998b; Cumming, 1993, 1998; Elkind, 1986, January, 2001; Eysers, 1992, 1993; Frydenberg & Lewis, 1991, 1996, 2000, Autumn, 2004; Hargreaves & Earl, 1990, 1994, September; Howard & Johnson, 2000, 2001; Mac Iver & Epstein, 1991, 1993; McNamara, 2000; Muth & Alvermann, 1999). These authors, among others, are addressing the emerging and current needs of adolescents both inside and outside school, highlighting some of the changes required to better meet these needs.

Research (Centre for Adolescent Health, 2004; Bennett, Bridglall, Cauce, Everson, Gordon, Lee, Mendoza-Denton, Renzulli & Stewart, 2004; Muth & Alvermann, 1999) emphasises the importance of strong support structures and adolescent resilience to achieve academically.

While researchers continue to debate the degree to which pressure shapes early adolescent achievement, there is general agreement that it does impact upon their lives. However, less is understood about the extent of these pressures, the coping strategies they employ, and the support they require from others in order to become resilient and strategic learners.

This study further examines the needs of adolescents by exploring academic pressure from the perspective of the early adolescents, with a particular focus on the Middle Years of Schooling in rural Victoria. A rural environment was selected for the study because rural students are often portrayed as being potentially at risk as they are isolated, alienated and educationally disadvantaged (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 2000, May; Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs, 1999).

1.2 Research Question

The research question under investigation is ‘*What are the pressures on rural adolescents to achieve academically during the Middle Years of Schooling?*’ Supporting questions include:

What are the contributing factors to academic pressure on rural students?

What strategies can be implemented within the school and in the Middle Years classroom to support students managing such pressures?

1.3 Aim and Scope of the Study

The main aim of the research is to identify and better understand the sources of academic pressure on rural students in early adolescence; adolescents’ coping strategies; and the nature of external support offered.

No study is ever free of limitations. The scope of this study is bound by specific aspects of the research design which would have altered the investigation if changed. One of these is the specificity of the study which was necessary to ensure an in-depth understanding of the issues was attained. Therefore, the population of this study was restricted to one primary school and one secondary school in a particular region of the Victorian State Education system. The region and school locations were selected within similar rural environments.

Environmental factors surrounded the study; all interview and data collection took place within the school environment and were performed by an independent researcher. This meant that the interviews were conducted in familiar educational surroundings. Although this might have been conducive to stimulating thoughts and feelings about schooling, it may have done little to put the participants at ease. These limitations set the parameters for the research.

1.4 Methodology

A qualitative paradigm was implemented which allowed for deep exploration and thick description. This approach involved the analysis of subjective issues and personal understandings and placed the research within the world of the experiences, thoughts and feelings of the participants (Bouma & Ling, 2004; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005).

The research was carried out using a *Naturalistic Inquiry* process (also referred to as Constructivist Inquiry) which provided the opportunity to develop a better understanding of the participants' lives (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Guba & Lincoln, 2005; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005).

Employing a Collective case study approach, the study focused on several cases within the research in order to gain a broader understanding of the phenomenon (Stake, 1995). The

individual case studies that informed the Collective case, along with supporting documents from the adolescents' teacher and principals, were used to build thick and information rich narratives about the worlds of early adolescents, and identify themes presented through their thoughts, feelings and experiences (Stake, 1995).

The participants in this study included 16 students, 10 teachers and 3 principals from the Middle Years of Schooling in 2 schools. From this group, 6 students (3 primary and 3 secondary students) were selected as individual case study participants. Their teachers and school principals provided supporting documentation.

The student participants were aged between 9 and 15 years and attended school in year levels five to nine. Students in year nine were included in the research as at the beginning of the study the Middle Years of Schooling in Victoria was defined as including students in years five to nine.

The students participated in three individual interviews and five group-interviews. These interviews were semi-structured in design and occurred at regular intervals throughout the six month period of the study. The teachers participated in one individual interview at the conclusion of the study while the principals participated in individual interviews at the beginning and conclusion of the study. The interviews were recorded on audio tape and conversations were transcribed by an independent source.

Student participants were also asked to complete a journal where thoughts, feelings and experiences were recorded (either in written or visual format) and other supporting documents were obtained to help enrich the data collection process. Permission was obtained for all data collected and all efforts were made to ensure anonymity and confidentiality.

Several other supporting data collection techniques were employed (Anderson, 1998). Triangulation (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005) was used in order to gain a holistic impression of the participants' experiences and to limit personal bias through ensuring the trustworthiness of the research findings. Non-participant observation (Bouma & Ling, 2004) was employed to allow objectivity and focus on the features of the human and social scene and school culture, and to place interactions in context. Data was also obtained through observations within the teaching/learning environment of each participant.

1.5 Outline of Thesis

Chapter 1 provides an introductory overview and establishes the position of the study in the field of cultural research. It introduces the research and supporting questions, discusses the aim and scope of the study, and briefly outlines the study's methodology, research design and procedure.

Chapter 2, the Literature Review, examines the theoretical environment and background for the exploration of the research problem. It provides a comprehensive review of the literature, including the topics: Adolescents, School Culture, Academic Achievement and Current Educational Initiatives in Adolescent Schooling. This chapter considers the educational significance of this study, in terms of the current climate of fostering Middle Years reform, and aims to place the research problem in the context of the literature. It examines empirical research, past and present, and endeavours to construct a theoretical foundation upon which to continue the research.

Chapter 3 explains the methodological approach used in this study. It is written with two major functions in mind. The first is to provide evidence of the credibility, transferability,

dependability and confirmability of the study, thus justifying the value of the research findings. This is achieved by providing a detailed explanation of how the study met quality criteria, and the Ethical Considerations involved. The second is to provide sufficient description so that the study may be replicated or extended and results compared. This includes detailing the study's paradigm, inquiry mode and methods, data analysis and presentation techniques.

Chapter 4 deals with the presentation and analysis of the data. It seeks to provide insight into the *Complex Lives* of each of the six individual case participants in order to develop a Collective case highlighting the pressures early adolescents experience academically. This is undertaken in two sections; the first presents background descriptions of the six individual case study participants and their emerging identities in order for the reader to get a clearer understanding of each participant in a holistic environment. The second section provides analysis of the data according to the themes that emerged within a framework based on four human dimensions of young people's lives. Literature is used to support and highlight the relevance of each of the themes connecting the experiences of the participants to existing research in the field.

Chapter 5 is the final chapter of the thesis where data is discussed and compared alongside current literature within a framework of the major themes that emerged from this study. Wider implications are identified and recommendations made for further research.

1.6 Explanation of terms

The following are terms used on the thesis that may require clarification.

Middle Level – refers to the collective year levels five through eight.

Middle Grade(s) – refers to the year levels five through eight.

Middle School(s) – refers to an intermediate school, between primary and secondary, that encompasses the year levels five through eight.

Middle Years of Schooling – refers to the period of schooling defined by the year levels five through eight. Please note: At the beginning of this study the term *Middle Years of Schooling* referred to year levels five through nine which explains why student participants from year nine were included in the study. However, only students in year levels five through eight were included in the individual cases that formed the Collective case study.

Middle Years – is a shortened form of the term *Middle Years of Schooling*.

Elementary School – an American term that refers to a school for the first seven to eight years of a child’s formal education. It is also called *Grade School* or *Primary School*.

High School – refers to a school for the period of secondary education covering year levels seven to 12. It is also called *Secondary School*.

1.7 Summary of Chapter

This chapter introduced the topic of study, setting it in an educational context and describing the methodology undertaken. The scope of the study was identified and the plan for investigating the research problem introduced. The methodology was introduced, each chapter briefly described and terms used throughout the thesis were clarified.

Chapter 2 Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

This chapter will strengthen the research through examining the theoretical environment and background for the exploration of the thoughts, feelings, emotions and experiences of the student participants. These events will be contextualised, examined and explored in order to understand what early adolescents may be likely to experience under similar circumstances. The literature was collected prior to and throughout the research process allowing less relevant research to be excluded while further relevant research was included to help develop a stronger understanding of the writers and researchers who informed this study.

The literature addressed in this chapter falls under four broad headings: Adolescents, School Culture, Academic Achievement and Current Educational Initiatives in Adolescent Schooling.

These categories address:

- Social, physical, emotional and intellectual environments in which students are growing and living, and
- Personal and social development experiencing during the Middle Years of Schooling and the associated changes and challenges during this period.

The South Australian report *From Alienation to Engagement: Opportunities for Reform in the Middle Years of Schooling* (Cumming & Cormack, 1996) highlighted adolescents' disengagement with school and increasing academic pressure. The Victorian government responded to adolescent emerging needs by funding two research projects. The *National Middle Schooling Project* (NMSP) provided increased opportunity for professional learning and further research into Middle Schooling issues, and recommended development of Middle Years of Schooling (MYS) whole school curriculum approaches and the fostering of national

partnerships. The *Middle Years Research and Development* (MYRAD) project identified successful teaching, learning and assessment strategies and curriculum and school organisation design. These studies prompted the government to focus attention on strengthening student achievement outcomes, attendance and retention.

2.2 Adolescents

2.2.1 The Nature of Adolescence

In 1991, the Education Department of South Australia published the *Junior Secondary Review* that provided a current description of the nature of adolescents in South Australia as well as characteristics of their current school experience. This review highlighted the characteristics and needs of adolescents which are to:

- ‘Adjust to some profound changes; physical, social, emotional and intellectual,
- Grow toward independence (while still needing security in many personal relationships),
- Gain experience in decision making, and in accepting responsibility for these decisions,
- Develop a positive self-confidence through achieving success in significant events,
- Progressively develop a sense of *Who am I?* and of personal and social values which become part of that person’s life,
- Experience social acceptance, and to gain affection and support among peers of the same and opposite sex,
- Think in ways that become progressively more abstract and reflective,
- Become more aware of the social and political world about them, and gain skill in coping and interacting with that world, and
- Establish or maintain relationships with particular adults, who can provide advice and act as role models’ (Cormack, 1991, pp. 16-17).

As part of this review, a document entitled *The Nature of Adolescence: A Review of Literature Reviews and Other Selected Papers* (Cormack, 1991) intended to assist teachers in developing

a greater understanding of 11 to 15 year olds, put forward the argument that if teachers know more about the complex events and experiences of their students, they should be better equipped to teach them. It was also argued that with this information, teachers would be able to play a more positive role in the lives of their students.

2.2.2 Changing Bodies and Sexuality

Hargreaves and Earl (1990, 1994, September) argue that adolescents must adjust psychologically to the changes in their bodies as well as to the developmental variations that occur to other adolescents within their social circle. Adolescents often compare themselves to their peers, many whom may or may not be maturing at the same rate as themselves. This is also accompanied by the concern many adolescents hold about how they match up to behavioural and physical stereotypes within their peer group.

Distinctly different bodies emerge from adolescents as changes in both their physical appearance and personal development are more extensive now than during any other time of life. While physical changes are the most obvious to some, many adolescents experience profound changes in their mental, social, emotional and moral development.

At no other age level or stage in life is the development of the concept of self so important to the future of individuals. Adolescence is a time where individuals strengthen and firm their beliefs about themselves and their self-concepts, their philosophies of life and their values – the ultimate determinants of their behaviour throughout their life.

2.2.3 Psychological and Brain Development

During adolescence, individuals develop conceptual abilities from concrete-operational concerns to hypothetical, future, and spatially remote aspects of abstract thought (Hargreaves

& Earl, 1990). Schweitzer (cited in Lounsbury, 2002) argues that the period between 9 and 14 years is ‘the time to plant the seeds of knowledge in the mind’ (¶ 4). After this time adolescents have already firmed their beliefs and values and are passionately dedicated to these ideals.

The ‘psycho-social crisis’ theory of Hargreaves and Earl (1990) offers insights into psychological and intellectual development of adolescents. This period of conflict is characterized by adjusting psychologically to variance and discrepancies that challenge morals and values. If negative, these experiences have the potential to leave adolescents with a strong sense of alienation from people close to them.

Current brain research (Blakemore & Choudhury, 2006a, 2006b; Durston, Davidson, Tottenham, Galvan, Spicer, Fossella & Casey, 2006; Powell, 2006) shows that development of the human brain is far more protracted than first thought. Blakemore and Choudhury (2006a) argue that adolescent brain development is characterized by considerable structural change which can impact on an adolescent’s ability to deal with complex problems or develop sufficient coping strategies. Durston et al. (2006) found that between the ages of 9 and 11 years, many regions of the brain show a decrease in activity resulting in reduced cognitive ability. Powell (2006) suggests an adolescent’s ability to take risks, embrace new challenges and experiences, and restrain improper responses, can be attributed to this lack of cognitive ability.

2.2.4 Identity, Peers and Social Issues

Adolescence is strongly marked by a movement toward independence from childhood to adulthood and the establishment of a separate identity. For some adolescents, particularly those from ethnic or racial backgrounds, this process can be complicated by having to deal

with pessimistic scrutiny of their culture (Cormack, 1991). Cormack (1991) further argues that the development of adolescents' identities and their affiliation with peers can become major concerns. The value systems of adolescents move from being defined 'mostly by their parents to be more strongly influenced by their peers' (p. 6).

The research of George and Alexander (1993), Hargreaves and Earl (1990, 1994, September), Cormack (1991) and Oetting and Beauvais (1987, April) among others, examine adolescent peer and social relationships. George and Alexander (1993) stress the importance of teaching strategies for relating to others. These strategies and skills form the foundation from which peer relationships are formed and an adolescent's strong sense of self is developed.

Hargreaves and Earl (1990) argue that peer groups provide identity to adolescents and expand feelings of self-worth. When affiliation and identity become major concerns, 'adolescents must clarify in their own minds with whom they wish to identify, and evaluate the social implications of their own personalities' (pp. 21-22).

Cormack (1991) describes the period of adolescence as 'a time of reaching out beyond the immediate family to consider wider social and cultural issues, and of extending understandings about national and international issues' (pp. 8-9). He asserts that peer groups are not as resistant to family and educational values as is commonly thought, and that they are in fact characterised by diversity and flexibility.

Oetting and Beauvais (1987, April) suggest that within every peer group, each member is seen as an active, contributing power in moulding the customs and actions of that group. If people outside the peer group wish to believe in the innocence of an individual, it could appear that peer pressure is leading to compliance. However, what is actually occurring is substantial

behaviour modelling, where each individual is progressing toward a universal set of behaviours.

2.2.5 Well Being

Research (Frydenberg & Lewis, 1991, 1996, 2004; Frydenberg, Lewis, Kennedy, Ardila, Frindte & Hannoun, 2003; Roeser & Eccles, 1998; Brough, 1990; Scales, 1991; Adler, 1994, January 10) investigating the concerns of adolescents identifies kidnapping, AIDS, drug use, the environment, sexual issues, violence, education, war and divorce as their main fears.

Frydenberg and Lewis (1996) developed a classification system to record the concerns of Australian adolescents. In a highly technological age, adolescents are exposed to wider social and global issues and increased exposure can exacerbate feelings of isolation and disillusionment. Frydenberg and Lewis' (1996) findings identify achievement issues (employment, exams and marriage), relationship issues (family, peers and friends and independence from parents) and social issues (sexual equality, third world poverty, nuclear threats and drugs) as their main concerns. Achievement issues are a greater concern to adolescents than relationship or social issues with examinations the most significant (Frydenberg & Lewis, 1996).

Frydenberg, Lewis, Kennedy, Ardila, Frindte and Hannoun (2003) suggest coping represents an individual's internal efforts to manage emotional provocation in threatening situations or to change the situation. Rather than highlighting adolescent's distress, Frydenberg and Lewis (2004) argue it is more productive to consider how adolescents deal with their circumstances. Frydenberg and Lewis (2000, Autumn, 2004) found that adolescents use a range of productive, non-productive and less predictable coping styles to deal with pressures. The strategies employed include to:

- ‘Seek social support,
- Focus on solving the problem,
- Work hard and achieve,
- Worry,
- Invest in close friends,
- Seek to belong,
- Wishful thinking,
- Social action,
- Tension reduction,
- Not cope,
- Ignore the problem,
- Self-blame,
- Keep to self,
- Seek spiritual support,
- Focus on the positive,
- Seek professional help,
- Seek relaxing diversions, and
- Physical recreation’ (Frydenberg & Lewis, 2004, p. 30).

It is crucial for adolescents to be supported in their development toward a separate identity, a task that requires a delicate balancing act between providing the conditions from which to develop independence and experimentation within clear and reasonable limits (Cormack, 1991).

Social scientist Mayer Hillman (Hillman, Adams & Whitelegg, 1990) researched primary school students aged 7 to 11 at five English primary schools in 1971 and again in 1990. Hillman found that the freedom children in 1971 experienced was significantly greater than that of children in 1990 (Hillman, Adams & Whitelegg, 1990). Tranter (1996) replicated Hillman’s study in twenty-one schools in Sydney, Canberra and Christchurch and found that Australian children were more closely chaperoned than either English or German kids.

Cadzow (2004, January 17) and Grose (2006) report that Australian parents have become so safety conscious, that their interpretations of 'reasonable limits' are resulting in Australian children being more closely guarded than ever before. This notion of protecting children against life's setbacks has seen today's generation of adolescents referred to as the 'Bubble-wrap Generation' (Cadzow, 2004, January 17). Forbidden from riding their bikes to school, playing in the front yard or being given the 'opportunity to explore the world for themselves', these early adolescents 'lack the initiative and resourcefulness of the free-ranging kids of the past' (Cunningham, cited in Cadzow, 2004, January 17, p. 19). 'Coddled kid syndrome' is another term freely used with reference to children of 'Generation X parents', those aged from twenty-nine to forty-four, who shelter their children from 'life's knocks', ultimately preventing them from the opportunity to build up resilience and the ability to deal with the many and varied challenges life in the twenty-first century provides (Fuller, cited in Cadzow, 2004, January 17).

An adolescent's struggle to become emotionally separate from their families has been a much debated topic, with an increase in the cases of adolescents suffering from depression and anxiety and a vulnerability to drug abuse, self-harm and even suicide being levelled at the 'helicopter parents' who hover over their lives (Levine, cited in Meakins, 2006, October 2). Many parents see that the only approach to protecting their children from danger is to maintain an eternal vigilance or a 'better safe than sorry' approach (Cadzow, 2004, January 17).

'Bubble-wrapping' children in parental concern, is resulting in over-parenting and a tightening of the boundaries of kids of today (Cunningham, cited in Cadzow, 2004, January 17; Grose, 2006). Paranoid parents are raising edgy children who are growing up 'thinking the

world is a perilous place' (Cadzow, 2004, January 17). 'Generation X parents' have been described as being anxious, 'less child-literate than ever' and having little knowledge of child and adolescent development (Grose, 2006). These parents feel under pressure and lack confidence in their role, turning the focus of child rearing from siblings and community to the parents themselves. Like parents from other generations, 'Generation X parents' want the best for their children, take their child-rearing responsibilities very seriously; yet, they devalue their role and 'lack confidence in their own parenting ability' (Grose, 2006, p. 3). Although 'over-protection is not the worst thing that could happen to a child', parents need to stop raising their children with a focus on 'risk minimization', encourage them to 'go out on a limb now and again' and 'care enough to let them go' (Sarkissian, cited in Cadzow, 2004, January 17, p. 22).

Resilience refers to 'an individual's capacity to successfully adapt to change and stressful events in healthy and constructive ways' (Oliver, Collin, Burns & Nicholas, 2006, p. 1). It is not considered an innate attribute, rather 'an adaptive process involving interactions between risk and protective factors across multiple levels of an individual's lived experience' (Olsson, Bond, Burns, Vella-Brodrick & Sawyer, 2003, cited in Oliver, Collin, Burns & Nicholas, 2006, p. 1). Blum (1998, cited in Oliver, Collin, Burns & Nicholas, 2006) explains resiliency is developed when individuals effectively deal with stress and pressure through the use of coping skills and resources. In this context, resilience is a dynamic process which the ability to modify effects of negative life events.

Body image has a significant affect on adolescent well-being. Dyl, Kittler, Phillips and Hunt (2006, June) state adolescents with negative body image concerns are more likely to be depressed, anxious and suicidal than those with a positive body image, and argue feelings about one's appearance are central to the world of adolescents which are often not recognised

by parents and professionals. While body image concerns can be impairing, preoccupying and distressing for adolescents, Dyl, Kittler, Phillips and Hunt (2006, June) argue they significantly detract from an adolescent's quality of life.

George and Alexander (1993) stress the need for a school-based program that recognises and accommodates the changing nature of the adolescent's psychological and social development. They argue that self-consciousness is at its peak during early adolescence; yet, for students with poor self-esteem, self-consciousness may not be seen as a stage in this rapid period of growth and development.

Often associated with low levels of self-esteem and high levels of self-consciousness is the prominent and serious issue of youth suicide. Delisle (1992) believes that 'the decision to end one's life is not a conscious wish to die but rather a pronouncement that living has become too painful' (p. 102). In 1997, suicide was classified as the leading cause of death in young adults, indicating a three to four fold rise in suicide rates in 15 to 24 year olds since 1960 (Baume, Cantor & McTaggart, 1998).

Over the past decade the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) has recorded a worrying trend for Australian youth, indicating a steady rise in the number of young people committing suicide. Research (Centre for Adolescent Health, 2007) shows suicide is currently a 'leading cause of death of young people' in Australia and while suicide in childhood is rare, during adolescence it becomes much more common, most rapidly increasing 'between the ages of 15 and 19 years' (Centre for Adolescent Health, 2007, ¶ 1). In Australia 'approximately 5% of young people engage in self-harming behaviour' with females being more likely than males, and young people more likely than adults, to engage in such behaviour (Centre for Adolescent Health, 2007, ¶ 2). The Centre for Adolescent Health (2007) argues that between '23.5% and

49% of teenagers have [entertained] thoughts of suicide at some time', and suicide rates among young males in rural and remote Australia are 'nearly twice those of males living in capital cities' (Centre for Adolescent Health, 2007, ¶ 1).

The Centre for Adolescent Health (2007) indicates that within a community context, significant risk factors are associated with adolescent suicide, including 'anti-social behaviour, poor family cohesion and parental mental health issues' [as well as] stressful life events, academic failure, school drop-out, depressive symptoms and substance abuse' (¶ 3). Research (Centre for Adolescent Health, 2007) indicates that the 'scope for the prevention of youth suicide is broad [and] should occur within a developmental context and should take into account not just individual characteristics of a young person... but also risk factors which derive from important social environments such as school, the family and the community' (¶ 3). Research (Centre for Adolescent Health, 2007) argues some suicide risk factors are evident from early childhood, some tend to manifest in later childhood and adolescence, while others are even more immediate (Centre for Adolescent Health, 2007).

Current research (Centre for Adolescent Health, 2004) suggests school climate and a sense of belonging to both family and school can influence the emotional health, well-being and academic outcomes of adolescents. A feeling of belonging is created in a school environment where students feel a sense of security, are given opportunities and the chance to develop skills which will enable them to contribute meaningfully and add value to their school life. When teachers are caring and supportive and students are treated fairly, and given the opportunity to develop close and positive relationships, they feel they are a part of the school.

2.2.6 The Elements of Risk

Henry and Grundy (2004) identify the provision of quality education for adolescents as the pressure point in the education system in Australia. Lifelong and life-wide learning is a prominent issue in adolescent education, which is discussed in further detail towards the end of this chapter. Adolescents ‘are more likely to continue their involvement in education and training, gain employment-related skills’ and experience greater success if they complete year twelve, compared to those who do not (Fullarton, Walker, Ainley & Hillman, 2003 cited in Henry & Grundy, 2004, p. 5). School retention rates have increased from 38% in 1980 to 73% in 2001, reaching a highpoint in 1992 of 77% (Ainley, 1998; Fullarton, Walker, Ainley & Hillman, 2003 cited in Henry & Grundy, 2004). However steady the increase in retention rates, there will always be adolescents who are considered at risk of not making a successful transition from school education into further study or employment and adult life (Marsh & MacDonald, 2001 cited in Henry & Grundy, 2004).

In their report for the Australian Council of Deans of Education (ACDE), Kalantzis and Cope (2001) raise the notion of developing a system of equal opportunity for disadvantaged groups within Australian society. They note group and location-related factors as contributors to the uneven distribution of educational opportunities, directly impact upon:

- ‘Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students,
- Students from non-English speaking backgrounds,
- Students in poverty, or from low socio-economic status families and localities,
- Girls, and on some measures, boys,
- Students with disabilities, and
- Students in rural and/or isolated communities’ (Kalantzis & Cope, 2001, pp. 71-72).

The immediate problem faced by these groups is the difference between each of these worlds, particularly in community experience and institutionalised education and valued knowledge (Kalantzis & Cope, 2001). The future of education will be the key to closing these gaps between cultural and geographical differences and the equality of opportunity for all. However, this will only be achieved through the development of strong, resilient communities, elimination of social exclusion and the acknowledgment, appreciation and acceptance of diversity.

Malone (2006) raises the concept of risk as directly related to the present experience of 'living in uncertain and changing times' and defines it as 'the systematic way of dealing with hazards and insecurities induced and introduced by modernization itself' (p. 2). This is referred to as the 'individualisation of risk' (Baumann, 2002; Beck, 1992, 2000).

2.2.7 Academic Ability

The report *All Students Reaching the Top: Strategies for Closing Academic Achievement Gaps* (Bennett, Bridglall, Cauce, Everson, Gordon, Lee, Mendoza-Denton, Renzulli & Stewart, 2004), stresses academic ability and achievement as an important expression of 'human intellectual competence' which, in today's society is 'recognised as the universal currency of technologically advanced societies' (p. 1).

Bennett et al. (2004) argue that the development of academic ability, and thus achievement is the product of exposure to the demands of specific educational experiences and interactions with a wide variety of people. Academic ability and achievement is a developed skill, not one that is pre-set or defined from birth, but malleable in that it requires unique support and encouragement for each individual to ensure they reach their personal potential. The capacity to further develop academic achievement is made possible through the provision of

exceptional teaching and learning experiences, flawless support structures and encouragement of individual goal attainment. Bennett et al. (2004) suggest that the positive development of academic ability and achievement is fostered and realised through the implementation of specific school-based strategies that support students to develop their personal potential.

These include:

- 'High-quality teaching and instruction in the classroom,
- Trusting relationships in school,
- Supports for pro-academic behaviour in the school and community' (Bennett et al., 2004, p. 1).

2.2.8 Academic Pressure

The issue of pressure on adolescents to achieve in school has been given little attention in the literature however student competitiveness has been widely discussed. Griffiths (2000, December) highlights some of the most crucial aspects with respect to adolescent pressure and argues that the increasing competitiveness of education and credentials can be contributed to greater specialisation and choice, leading to pathways of possible employment. An increase in the sense of individual responsibility for group segregation, both in and beyond the school environment, is directly related to the pressure on adolescents not only to perform in school but to also make the right choices. This process is due to the discriminatory curriculum provided in schools where adolescents are required to choose between high-status academic or alternative vocational programs, potentially impacting on future employment pathways.

Roeser, Midgley and Urda (1996) highlight the urgency for schools to moderate the implementation of special privileges for brighter students and decrease the importance placed on competition among students. Middle Schools recognising and rewarding adolescents based on ability relative to others is a common practice and assumed to have a positive influence on the motivation of students (Roeser, Midgley & Urda, 1996). However, it is now believed

these incentives can affect adolescent perceptions that schools value and care for their individuality, which may influence some adolescents to feel a diminished sense of success and belonging at school.

2.2.9 Rural Adolescents

Cooledge, Barrons, Cline, Geller, Keeney, Meier and Paul (1995) researched rural education by exploring and identifying concerns of early adolescents. Although being raised in vastly different environments, the Cooledge et al. (1995) study acknowledged rural adolescents share the same concerns and worries as their urban counterparts. Grades or marks at school was their top concern, followed by family, war, violence and crime, environment, death, the future, what others think of me, boyfriends and girlfriends, drugs and people in need were identified as the major worries of early adolescents. However, many of these issues are common among individuals experiencing the challenges and turmoil of adolescence.

While rural students worry most about grades and marks associated with school-based tasks, their highest priorities are sporting activities, followed by activities with friends and peer groups, watching television, reading, playing computer games, participating in school or homework tasks and listening to the radio or music (Cooledge et al., 1995).

The Cooledge et al. (1995) study identified a gap in what rural schools teach through the curriculum at the Middle Years level, and what early adolescents need to learn. To ensure success in the education of rural adolescents, young individuals need to be exposed to quality life skills classes, adviser-advisee programs, networks and community resources, and increased parent involvement (Cooledge et al., 1995).

2.3 School Culture

Corbett, Firestone and Rossman's (1987) research into the issue of school culture in the late 1980's defined culture as a set of beliefs, values and norms that were shared among a group. Hargreaves and Earl (1990) believe there is more than one dimension to the understanding of school culture, prophesizing that culture includes both content and form, where 'the content of a culture is made up of what its members think, say and do, the form consists of patterns of relationships between members of the culture' (p. 31).

2.3.1 Comparing School Cultures: Primary versus Secondary

Although the cultures of primary and secondary school exist in isolation, they are interconnected through the journey taken by early adolescents. In the past decade much discussion has concerned the importance of connecting the primary and secondary school cultures to benefit students riding the wave of transition. Barratt, Cormack, Eyers and Withers (1992) claim that primary and secondary personnel, including teachers and school leaders, live in different worlds with their own separate and powerful cultures. This foundational study marked the initial focus on the Middle Years of Schooling in Australia and highlighted the need for reform.

While primary schools focus on the individual, curriculum is the major focus for secondary schools. Where primary schools display concern for social and personal development, learning is orientated around academic skills and employment opportunities in secondary. Although these two independent sectors hold differing beliefs for the learning and education of their students, they are both essentially dealing with the same early adolescents.

Barratt, Cormack, Eyers and Withers (1992) are concerned that teachers and school leaders accept their own working contexts, organisational structures and activity patterns as given, and believe these are unable to be changed through their own decisions and actions.

Hargreaves and Earl (1990) introduced the possibility of two cultures of schooling arguing 'the differences between elementary and secondary schooling, and elementary and secondary teaching, may in many ways be regarded as amounting to differences between two quite distinct cultures of schooling' (p. 28). These cultures are defined by patterns of teaching and relationships between teacher and student. Primary students are immersed in a generalist pattern of teaching where teachers have responsibility for teaching a number of different subjects and students the opportunity to develop a strong relationship with a single class teacher who knows them well; whilst early adolescents in secondary school are subjected to a learning environment where teaching and the curriculum becomes specialized, demanding the development of extensive relationships with a range of subject-specialist teachers, without time or opportunity to develop strong relationships.

The culture of secondary schools has received much criticism over the years, described as a complex and unpredictable environment, tilted toward a very specific set of academic values. Much of this criticism is directed toward the notion that most secondary teachers see too many students, too rarely, and too momentarily. The secondary education system has been described as caring more about the coverage of subject areas, than the care of the student (Hargreaves & Earl, 1990). Hargreaves and Earl (1990) suggest that development of a positive secondary school culture is found within 'curriculum and instruction' with a focus on 'strengthening the role of [the] homeroom teacher, appointing mentors or student advisors for all students [and] forming smaller teaching teams' (p. 47). The predominantly academic orientation in secondary schools results in a rather narrow definition of what counts as

achievement and success. Research has shown that once a school separates students into specific groups, divisions between the groups begin to emerge, with the more successful groups accepting and embracing the values and ideals of the school, while the less successful ones reject them (Hargreaves & Earl, 1990).

2.3.2 School and Class Sizes

In the early 1990's the goal for both large and small schools in the U.S.A was to create responsive learning environments that provided a supportive and caring community, which encouraged early adolescents to feel a part of their school environment. This goal is still relevant today in schools across Victoria and Australia. Mac Iver and Epstein (1993, May) conducted research on the effects of school size on students. Their findings indicate that in larger schools there are greater inconsistencies in learning opportunities and academic outcomes, and students feeling increasingly alienated can lead to escalating drop-out rates. Schools in the U.S.A have attempted to create smaller learning environments within larger Middle Schools to establish mini schools-within-schools and develop strong student and teacher teams. Mac Iver and Epstein (1993, May) also found that the grouping of students is directly affected by the size and number of grades in a school.

The latest State government data indicates Victorian primary school class sizes are currently at the lowest level on record. The data reveals the average Prep to Year 2 class size is 20.7 students, compared with 24.3 in 1999. Overall, the average primary school class size is a record low 22.3, compared with 26 during the mid-1990's, giving teachers more opportunity to better meet the learning needs of all students (State Government of Victoria, 2007, April).

2.3.3 Student Grouping

Almost two decades ago the National Association of Secondary School Principals' Council on Middle Level Education (NASSPCMLE) (1989) called for Middle Schools to use natural grouping procedures to assist early adolescents 'develop and preserve friendships, develop a feeling of group membership and help them learn the implications of their own roles' within a group to enhance intellectual development and academic achievement (p. 14). The NASSPCMLE (1989) recommends the 'fundamental purpose of grouping learners should be to place them in settings that best meet their needs' (p. 15) while specific principles should guide the identification and development of grouping practices in Middle Schools, including:

- 'Groupings should serve early adolescent developmental needs.
- Within classes, grouping on the basis of ability, achievement or interest in a specific area is more justifiable than grouping on the basis of general intelligence.
- Many criteria for determining pupil learning capacities should be utilized.
- The merits of ability, achievement, and interest must be clearly defined as they relate to grouping needs in specific areas of the middle level school program' (NASSPCMLE, 1989, pp. 15-16).

Subsequent research by Roeser, Midgley and Urdan (1996) highlighted the need for Middle Schools to develop schools-within-a-school and advisory periods to help create a caring and personalised learning environment to serve early adolescents.

Hargreaves and Earl (1990) believe when streaming students into ability groups within the Middle School environment, students placed in the lower stream tend to spend less time learning, are taught skills at a lower level, exposed to narrower instructional materials and provided less opportunity to learn. Most importantly, the experiences of students placed in a lower stream contribute to the creation of feelings of loss of dignity. Slavin's (1993) research concludes that ability grouping does not impact achievement of Middle Years students and sees a growing trend of Middle Schools moving away from ability grouping or streaming in favour of level or age groupings. Slavin (1993) further argues that practitioners must base

decisions about whether or not to group students, according to abilities, on other factors than likely achievement outcomes. To implement effective ability grouping, schools should consider factors such as current delinquency and drop-out rates for low achievers, social problems associated with grouping similar achievers, and the need for change in curriculum, program planning and instruction approaches to improve teaching (Slavin, 1993).

Advisory programs were established in response to the growing need to provide each student with a teacher who knows and cares about them and is available to provide support and guidance. This teacher also acts as an advocate and nurturer, shepherding individuals in the world of departmentalized Middle Schools where students attend classes with different teachers for each subject area (Mac Iver & Epstein, 1991). These advisory group periods can be called teacher advisory, adviser or advisee programs, homeroom, home base, life skills, and run for a short period of time, anywhere from 10 to 25 minutes, usually on a daily basis (Mac Iver & Epstein, 1993, May).

After the initial implementation of Advisory programs in the early 1990's, the notion of these programs spread, and so did research and support for developing an environment within Middle Schools where students and teachers were given the opportunity to get to know each other. Cole (1992) suggests that advisory periods should be a time when items of importance can be discussed in small groups with a higher level of trust than in a regular classroom, making it possible for students to feel they belong, enabling teachers to express their concerns to individual students, and making the role of carer manageable for teachers.

Although advisory periods have become the norm in Middle Schools across Australia, there remains concern that many of the activities that transpire during these sessions are mechanical tasks, such as taking attendance rolls, distributing notices, making announcements and dealing

with discipline issues, rather than student support activities that cater to student interest and needs (Mac Iver & Epstein, 1991).

2.3.4 Teacher Labelling

Research from Kerr, Colangelo and Gaeth, 1988; Cross, Coleman and Stewart, 1993; Manaster, Chan, Watt and Wiehe, 1994; Moulton, Moulton, Moulton, Housewright and Bailey, 1998, among others, argues that labels can impact an adolescent's psychological, emotional and social development. While some early adolescents successfully deal with labels, others are developmentally unable to deal with the negative consequences of labelling (Clark, 2002).

Mac Iver and Epstein (1993, May) contend labels can isolate and catalogue students and promote low self esteem. Pirozzo (1983) argues that labels can strongly influence relationships between teachers and students. While teachers play an important role in the labelling of adolescents, informal teacher labelling can impact an adolescent's self-concept and personal adjustment (Cross, Coleman & Stewart, 1993).

2.3.5 Peer Labelling

Adolescents frequently use labels to describe and interact with each other and labels can be used to socially manipulate and control adolescents (deVoss, 2001; Pirozzo, 1981). Research (Thurlow, 2001a, 2001b) demonstrates peer labelling typically emerges during adolescence and can lead to tension and isolation of individuals. Isakson and Jarvis (1999, February) suggest labelling among adolescents is based on social aspects rather than academic accomplishments.

Manaster, Chan, Watt, and Wiehe (1994) and Moulton, Moulton, Housewright, and Bailey (1998) highlight social implications as the greatest negative aspect of peer labelling. The health and well being of adolescents can also be severely damaged by the social consequences of labelling among peers (Clark, 2002).

2.3.6 Bullying

The issue of bullying has been a major focus for research (Bond, Carlin, Thomas, Rubin & Patton, 2001) in recent years. Adolescent health theorists Bond et al. (2001) identify the issue of bullying as a great concern to the health and well-being of adolescents. Their research shows that bullying occurs in all schools. Bullying is highly prevalent among early adolescents indicating that of students who are repeatedly bullied in year eight, two-thirds are bullied in year nine. Students who experience bullying over a considerable period of time are more likely to suffer the effects of anxiety or depression than those who are not victimized (Bond et al., 2001).

2.3.7 Transition

Research into the negative effects on early adolescents of school transitions into the Middle Years (Blyth, Simmons & Carlton-Ford, 1983; Eccles & Midgley, 1989; Eccles, Midgely & Adler, 1994, January 10; Simmons & Blyth, 1987) is extensive. From their recommendations, many Middle Schools developed Transition Programs to assist and support students during this shift from lower primary school to the Middle Years and on to secondary education where students experience many changes in school and classroom environments. During the early 1990's the most common activities for easing the transition from primary grades to the Middle Years were:

- 'Having Elementary School students visit the Middle-Grade School,

- Having the administrators of Middle-Grade and Elementary Schools meet to discuss programs and articulation,
- Having Middle-Grade counselors meet with Elementary counselors or staff members' (Mac Iver, 1990, p. 462).

Mac Iver (1990) argues that while students who participate in a more comprehensive and positive transition program experience greater success in their first year in the Middle Years, than those students who do not, there is a clear risk that the 'simultaneous adaptation challenges [of transition] will overwhelm the coping skills of some students and have pathogenic effects on their psychological adjustment, self-esteem and motivation to learn' (p. 462).

Parental involvement in transition programs helps 'parents understand their child's new school' or learning environment, assists students adjust throughout the transition process and promotes and sustains parental involvement throughout their child's education (Mac Iver, 1990, p. 463). Mac Iver (1990) found that schools that involve parents in transition programs are more likely to develop strong partnerships between the school and home. The greatest benefit of involving parents in transition programs is that teachers are 'more likely to continue to involve parents in the education of their children' through educating them on new ideas and approaches to assist their children's learning, school work and the development of strong study skills (Mac Iver, 1990, p. 463).

Simmons and Blyth's (1987) research indicates that adolescents need a safe and intellectually challenging environment that meets their changing needs, fosters the development of skills required to complete the challenges they will encounter during the Middle Years of Schooling and provides opportunities for personal growth. Eccles, Lord and Midgley (1991, August)

support this view and highlight that ‘the environmental changes often associated with transition to [the Middle Years] seem especially harmful in that they’:

- ‘Emphasize competition, social comparison, and ability self-assessment at a time of heightened self-focus,
- Decrease decision making and choice at a time when the desire for control over one’s own life is growing,
- Emphasise lower-level cognitive strategies at a time when the ability to use higher-level strategies is increasing,
- Disrupt social networks at a time when adolescents are especially concerned with peer relationships and may be in special need of close adult relationships outside of the home,
- Reduce the opportunity for close relationships with adults at a time when adolescents need to turn to non-familial adult for role models if they are to achieve independence from their parents’ (p. 534).

As environmental changes impact upon the potential to fulfil student needs, the secondary school environment is failing in the task to provide a supportive learning environment for adolescents, increasing the risk of negative motivational outcomes, particularly for students identified as being at risk prior to the transition period (Eccles, Lord & Midgley, 1991, August).

Hargreaves and Earl (1990) identify alternative approaches to improve and ease the transition experience for all students, teachers and school community members involved. Their suggestions, although dated, provide a solid foundation for the development of a supportive transition program, which caters specifically to the growing needs of individual adolescent learners on their journey from lower primary to middle and secondary school by:

- ‘Overcoming the obstacles of ‘choice’ of secondary school to build constructive liaison between secondary schools and their feeder schools,

- Encouraging and facilitating communication, joint planning and joint work among teachers from different school levels through meetings, visits, exchanges, and by establishing norms of collaboration and collegiality,
- Providing specific training for teachers who work with students in the Transition years,
- Providing for and encouraging some career flexibility among the teaching force to work on both sides of the elementary-secondary divide,
- Ensuring that student records are well-written, accessible, and used by receiving teachers,
- Creating orientation programs for students entering secondary school that allow students and their parents to get a realistic and thorough sense of what the next stage involves' (Hargreaves & Earl, 1990, p. 208).

Some initiatives have addressed the transition challenges; for example, in 2002, Fawkner Secondary College in Melbourne, Victoria, adopted the innovative approach of integrating 54 year seven students into one large class under the care of a group of teachers. The decision was made by the school to provide opportunity for students and teachers to develop and continually strengthen strong, supportive relationships. This new approach to student grouping and transition came about through the belief that, in the first year at secondary school, students needed a stable foundation. Working with the 54 students as a group allowed the students to become the focus and first priority, rather than curriculum or content, and ensured that individuals did not become lost. Structuring the teaching approach to include three teachers teaching the group of 54 students each session, provided greater opportunity for students to identify with at least one teacher and feel their needs were cared and catered for (Rennick, 2003, July 17).

In 2003, the Victorian Parenting Centre (VPC) developed a transition to secondary school program called *Vicparenting*, which provides opportunity for parents to study student fears and unexpected problems many students encountered during the transition experience

(Beaumont, 2003, February 5). The aim of this program is for parents to understand that adolescents are moving to another world, while at the same time they are experiencing a personal transition from childhood to adolescence (Beaumont, 2003, February 5).

2.3.8 Rural School Culture

The Department of Education and Training, Victoria (DET) classifies a rural school as located in an 'area with less than 20,000 people not receiving Country Areas Program (CAP) funding' while a remote school 'is defined as a CAP funded school... [located] more than 150km from Melbourne, more than 25km from the nearest Provincial city of 20,000 or more and located in a community less than 5000 people' (Department of Education, Employment and Training, 1999, p. 7). In 1999 the DET published data detailing the state of rural and remote education in Victoria which indicated that '40% of all Victorian schools are located in rural and remote areas' while 15% of all Victorian students attend rural schools (Department of Education, Employment and Training, 1999, p. 8). In 2005 the retention rates for students in years 7 – 12 in the Gippsland Region was 10% lower than the Victorian state average of 80.3% (Gippsland Research and Information Service, 2005).

In response to the release of these figures, the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC) conducted a National Inquiry into Rural and Remote Education (NIRRE), which investigated the provision of education for children in rural and remote Australia. The NIRRE inquiry report entitled *Recommendations: National Inquiry of Rural and Remote Education* (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 2000, May) identified important outcomes for the education of students in these areas. Of most concern were the discoveries that:

- 'Country students are less likely to finish school than their metropolitan counterparts',

- ‘Early school leavers are most at risk in the new age of transition’,
- ‘On average rural and isolated families and communities place a lower value on education and its relevance than urban families and communities’ (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 2000, May, pp. 5-7).

Two major disadvantages were identified that relate directly to student welfare and well-being. First, rural and remote students are ‘more likely than urban students to perceive discouraging inhibitors and barriers’, and they are ‘likely to experience lower levels of encouraging factors’ (James, Wyn, Baldwin, Hepworth, McInnis & Stephanou, 1999, cited in Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 2000, May, p. 7). A recent review of Australian education (Kalantzis & Cope, 2001) recommends that in order to address these disadvantages within rural education, numerous actions are required to lift retention rates and make rural education more attractive to potential high quality teachers, emphasizing the need to improve pedagogical practices in schools and trial new approaches.

The report *Recommendations: National Inquiry of Rural and Remote Education* (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 2000, May) outlined the inquiry’s findings of the investigation into the provision of education within rural and remote communities in Australia. The report found:

- ‘Many rural and remote schools lack educational facilities and resources and offer limited curriculum options to their students’,
- ‘There is a lack of early intervention programs for children with special needs’,
- ‘There is a lack of secondary education to Year 12 in many rural and remote communities’,
- ‘School retention rates for students in rural and remote areas are significantly lower, on average, than their urban counterparts’,
- ‘Staffing schools with experienced educators continues to be a challenge’,
- ‘Most teacher training does not adequately equip new recruits with the skills and knowledge needed for teaching in rural and remote Australia’,
- ‘Access to professional development can be difficult for rural and remote teachers’,

- ‘Student demand and staff expertise necessarily impact on curriculum offerings in every school’,
- ‘English literacy and numeracy rates are lower on average in rural and remote schools’,
- ‘Children in rural and remote communities are far less likely than urban children to have access to a diverse range of cultural, social, sporting and other experiences and events outside their own family and community’ (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 2000, May, pp. 36-50).

As a result of the NIRRE report, State and Territory education departments across Australia recognized the need to develop new policy and strategies to surmount rural disadvantages in education. In a summit of education leaders common and agreed upon goals were established to address this recognition and embarked on new approaches to overcome rural disadvantages in education through the development of policies and programs.

During the same period and in the decade prior to the HREOC inquiry, a number of other inquiries were conducted into the provision of education in rural areas, with the findings and recommendations from these reports having a significant impact on the context of rural education in Victoria, Australia.

When concern for the provision of quality education in rural schools began to surface in the late 1980’s, the Commonwealth Schools Commission (CSC) conducted an investigation, focused on improving access and quality for rural communities. From this research it was identified that drastic improvements to the system were required and the CSC proposed that this change should be the direct responsibility of the Australian government.

More than a decade later, the issue of the provision of quality education in rural areas was still prominent, prompting the Country Services Directorate, formed by the South Australian

Department of Education, Training and Employment, to develop *Education – Country Call*, which invited input of community members in the design of solutions to solve specific problems in their own country districts.

Access to education is the greatest disadvantage faced by people in rural locations; the costs of travel, board, loss of income and excursions heighten the need for financial assistance to families in these communities to assist in meeting educational related costs, which even with support can become a financial burden for many. As a direct result, many students in rural areas are required to assist in meeting such costs through participating in part-time work and, in extreme cases, forcing students to drop out of school early (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 2000, May).

2.4 Academic Achievement

The concept of achievement can be divided into four aspects including: intellectual-cognitive achievement, practical achievement, personal and social achievement, and motivation (Hargreaves & Earl, 1990). Although the term academic achievement is not used to describe a type of achievement, it is included in intellectual-cognitive achievement.

Roeser, Midgley and Urda (1996) conducted research into academic achievement. They argue that prior academic achievement is the strongest predictor to a student's end of year achievement. School achievement is relatively stable across the formal education years; however, students who experience greater academic success throughout the school year achieved higher end of year grades.

From an adolescent perspective, it has been suggested puberty and the onset of major developmental changes during adolescence may have indirect influences on school achievement, particularly in relation to issues of self-esteem and depression (Cormack, 1991).

Many primary schools relate their educational achievements to the priorities, success and academic achievement accomplished through student participation in learning (Barratt, Cormack, Eyers & Withers, 1992). An investigation (Barratt et al., 1992) into academic achievement and success showed both strong support and opposition for the notion that virtually all students could achieve success in regular academic programs. However, many teachers and school leaders felt this goal was pushed out of reach for many students due to factors outside the school and the students' control.

2.4.1 Motivation and Learning

Muth and Alvermann (1999) examined motivation and its effects on learning. They hypothesise that investigations should focus on an individual's approach to goal achievement, and stress that *achievement motivation* is directly related to learning and development. When adolescents are worried about their learning abilities and competence they seek positive feedback and recognition from others, while working toward furthering their knowledge and understandings or acquiring skills in a new area (Muth & Alvermann, 1999).

The successful implementation of cooperative learning strategies for individual and groups requires the rewarding and celebration of academic achievement, which contributes greatly to the development of academic achievement as a favourable norm among young adolescent peers (Slavin, 1984). This suggestion highlights the potential for the development of a more positive view of high academic achievement in early adolescents, yet research (Eccles, Lord & Midgley, 1991, August) shows a gradual decline in indicators of academic achievement,

behaviour and self-perception, which can be directly related to the nature of the Middle Years' school environment. Adolescence is a time where some students experience the onset of negative school-related behaviour and motivation, which often leads to a strong decline in academic achievement, increase in negative academic experiences and regularly leading to school dropout (Eccles, Lord & Midgley, 1991, August).

2.4.2 Educational Perspectives

Education is an ongoing life experience where most learning takes place outside the classroom and before and after school. In fact, it has even been suggested that most of the time spent in formal education within school walls is taken up by responding to learning experienced in the real world. In this light, education is the responsibility of many people, not only the classroom teacher. Families, parents, grandparents and siblings as well as the wider community contribute greatly to the learning experiences of individuals (Lounsbury, 2002). The creation of strong and supportive learning communities over the last decade, have highlighted the need to create communities for learning, where common knowledge is placed as the core to all teaching and learning experiences, and all students are provided with sufficient opportunity to achieve and experience success (Muth & Alvermann, 1999).

An important finding by Boekaerts (1993) suggests that some students may perceive supportive academic settings as immediate extensions of their personal resources, reducing feelings of anxiety and the negative effects of educational settings which focus on academic achievement. An impaired ability to concentrate and focus, a fear of taking risks to further learning, and a reluctance to participate in public speaking tasks in class, is directly related to a student's feeling of self-consciousness which could lead to lower performance (Muth & Alvermann, 1999).

2.4.3 The Teacher and Student Relationship

It is widely known that teacher-student relationships are one of the most crucial factors in creating a positive and supportive learning environment. Over the past decade, theorists (Barratt, Cormack, Evers & Withers, 1992; Eccles, Lord & Midgley, 1991, August; Goodenow, 1993; Midgley, Feldlaufer & Eccles, 1989) have argued that a special kind of relationship is required between teachers and their students during the Middle Years as early adolescents are searching for meaningful relationships with responsible adults outside the home.

Students in the Middle Years who feel a strong sense of belonging in school experience high quality teacher-student relationships. The reverse of this theory is also true (Roeser, Midgley & Urdan, 1996). Roeser et al. (1996) examined the interpersonal aspects of the Middle School environment and found a strong connection between early adolescents' academic achievement and motivation and a positive teacher-student relationship.

A study by Eccles, Lord and Midgley (1991, August) into the education of early adolescents highlighted the need for increased focus on teacher-student relationships during the transition journey from primary to secondary school, as these relationships directly influence student motivation and values and provide a supportive learning environment.

2.4.4 Curriculum

In the early 1990's, Mac Iver and Epstein (1993, May) identified that most students are not offered challenging academic curriculum or provided with opportunities to develop higher-level skills and many early adolescents fail to find schoolwork challenging.

Any curriculum strongly orientated around academia tends to provide an unbalanced and content-driven program, where students have limited opportunity to make connections with the real world and find relevance in their learning, often results in unmotivated and disconnected students (Hargreaves & Earl, 1990).

In most Victorian Middle Schools there is limited choice in course or study options with most primary and early secondary schools offering a basic curriculum covering the Victorian Essential Learning Standards (VELS) framework (Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority, 2005). In following this basic curriculum structure, students are given little opportunity to explore other subject areas outside the prescribed strands, limiting their options.

In the late 1980's and throughout the 1990's interdisciplinary teams, small groups of teachers, each representing or possessing strengths in a different subject or discipline area, were described as the foundation of education in Middle Schools (Merenbloom, 1986; Vars, 1987; McEwin, Dickinson & Jenkins, 1996). Interdisciplinary teams can benefit teachers through eliminating a sense of isolation by providing opportunity for colleagues to work together to discuss, solve problems, plan and conduct activities. This teaching structure provides increased integration and coordination across the curriculum, allowing teachers to respond quickly, personally and consistently to the needs of individual students as members of a supportive team (Merenbloom, 1986; Vars, 1987).

2.4.5 Teaching Approaches

Mac Iver and Epstein (1993, May) looked into the effects of teaching approaches and instruction. They argue that the quality and type of approach or instruction used in Middle Years education directly influences the development of student achievement and competence.

When a positive approach is used that provides for student success, encourages risk-taking behaviour in learning, involves the use of positive reinforcement strategies and provides quality support structures, students develop a greater feeling and sense of achievement and competence. However, when negative or unconstructive approaches are used, students develop a sense of failure in their achievement and competence.

Teachers need to recognize that the decisions they make and how they implement teaching and instructional approaches have important consequences for student achievement and the development of school and learning related attitudes. Research (Mac Iver & Epstein, 1993, May) shows students of teachers who deliver active, interactive and discovery-based instructional approaches develop a greater sense of self-confidence, are willing to ask for help and experience higher levels of achievement than students of teachers who implement traditional instructional approaches such as skill and drill. While the level of boredom at school is increased, homework completion rates decrease and lower levels of confidence are developed in students who are taught using passive, drill-orientated instruction approaches (Mac Iver & Epstein, 1993, May).

In response to the need for a variety of quality teaching and instructional approaches to be used in Middle Years classrooms, Muth and Alvermann (1999) developed the 'Strategy Continuum', which details superior instructional strategies for teaching and learning. The strategies cater for the majority of preferred learning styles of Middle Years students and detail different techniques and approaches to assist in the implementation of each strategy.

When teaching students with exceptional or special needs, teachers become responsible for the individual differences of a broad range of students and should use and implement adaptive instruction approaches to ensure they cater successfully for all students (Muth & Alvermann,

1999). It is important for teachers to be aware of the multi-cultural influences on young adolescent thinking, learning and development and use adaptive instruction approaches such as inclusion, identification and grouping strategies, to meet these needs (Muth & Alvermann, 1999).

2.4.6 Assessment

Griffiths (2000, December) argues that increasing pressure on students to achieve at school can be attributed to competitiveness of education, and as a consequence of choices, intensified workloads, assessment, testing and expectations, while Kohn (1993) reinforces that competition is one of the most stressful and destructive forms of tension among adolescents. As adolescents encounter a range of stressful events surrounding schooling, McNamara (2000) emphasises the significant impact these can have on the pressure they experience.

While the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (2005) describe achievement gains associated with formative assessment and testing as the largest reported educational interventions, Roeser, Midgley and Urdan (1996) highlight the urgency for schools to reduce the emphasis on academic achievement as it significantly contributes to the pressure experienced by adolescents.

Timmins (2002) argues that new pressures on upper secondary education are emerging in the twenty-first century, including an increase in the pressures on adolescents which can be contributed to VCE classes starting earlier, sometimes in Middle Years, to prepare students for the final years of schooling.

Research by the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Board (1998) identified that the Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE) places constant pressures on students with acute

pressure engendered by end-of-year examinations. In response to widespread community concern about the stress and pressure on students, the State of Victoria Committee of Review's (1997) evaluation of VCE assessment structures suggested that the open-ended nature of assessment created pressure on students to continually polish and perfect work that may already be of an excellent standard.

According to the research findings of Pirozzo (1983), the teacher plays an important role in an individual's success at school and can directly affect the pressures they experience. While at home, Frydenberg (1997) suggests many adolescents experience significant conflict with parents over schoolwork, achievement and expectations which can impact exacerbate the pressures they experience.

2.4.7 The Nature of Feedback

Research studies from Kohn (1987, January 19, 1993) and Beswick (2002, November) argue that while feedback can be motivating and supportive, it has the ability to manipulate behaviour, cause interest in a task to decline, lower performance levels and decrease the desire to learn. Thorndike (cited in Kohn, 1993) stressed the potential of feedback to manipulate, using the term Law of Effect to describe the notion of behaviour which will be repeated if it leads to a positive consequence.

The Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority (VCAA) (formerly the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Board) (2001) suggests that feedback encourages students to monitor and reflect on their own learning and set realistic and achievable educational goals for the future, directly improving the chance that adolescents will become successful, autonomous and independent learners. However, Arnold (2000) argues feedback provided by teachers can significantly affect adolescents' learning, academic performance and accepting

responsibility for their own learning progress. The research of Feldman (1989), Orsmond, Merry and Reiling (2005) and Higgins, Hartley and Skelton (2002) show that adolescents' assessment of feedback is directly related to achievement, potentially impacting upon the academic pressures they face.

Studies into rewards (Kohn, 1987, January 19; Hunt, 1999, January-February) have identified, the biggest problem with providing feedback through rewards is the de-motivating factor of hidden messages which encourage reduced risk taking, quick completion of tasks, and a narrow focus. Kohn (1993) argues that feedback and rewards can negatively impact upon adolescents and their relationships; creating tension, promoting competition, obliterating collaboration and destroying a sense of community.

While Johnston (2004) suggests language is an important tool for providing feedback, research (Sims-Knight & Upchurch, 2001; Kameenui, 1995; Pressley & Woloshyn, 1995; Pressley, Allington, Wharton-MacDonald, Collins-Block & Morrow, 2001; Milton, 2005) shows in some situations it can be irrelevant and harmful, at times, reducing motivation, preventing engagement in active processing and problem-solving and increasing the pressure on adolescents.

2.5 Current Educational Initiatives in Adolescent Schooling

2.5.1 Successful Middle Schooling

In an Australian context, leading educational theorists and decision makers identified and recognized a number of overseas initiatives as examples of good practice. Of these, advisory programs, promoting small communities for learning, authentic teaching and learning

practices, parent contact and involvement, school environment and professional learning are leading initiatives for educational reform in the Middle Years of Schooling (Lewis, 2000).

Barber (1999, March) identified foundation level strategies to assist in Middle Years reform through the development of a more supportive teaching and learning environment, including: 'never give up on the basics', 'guarantee cultural literacy', 'individualise', 'offer hope', 'teach thinking', 'encourage citizenship' and 'create teams' (pp. 14-18). To further promote Middle Years reform, schools should focus on setting high expectations for adolescents, foster and promote the development of high self-esteem, place an emphasis on individualised learning within a group focus, and adopting a fresh start approach with adolescents who have lost their way (Barber, 1999, March).

Fundamental attributes of successful Middle Schools identify what change needs to occur and what external factors need to be addressed to facilitate the transformation process. These attributes describe how changing Middle Schools:

- 'Begins with Personalising Adult-Child Relationships',
- 'Requires Personalising Adult Relationships',
- 'Requires Transformational Leadership',
- 'Requires Both Careful Planning and Ongoing Reflection',
- 'Requires Comprehensive Restructuring, Not Just Tinkering at the Edges',
- 'Requires Establishing Close Links Among Home, School and Community',
- 'Requires District-Level Support',
- 'Requires Both External and Internal Change Agents',
- 'Requires a Multifaceted Intervention Strategy' (Ames & Miller, 1994, pp. 178-196).

2.5.2 Australian Initiatives in Middle Years of Schooling Education

Throughout the 1990's, new attention to the MYS (Barratt, Cormack, Eysers & Withers, 1992; Barratt, 1997, 1998a, 1998b, 1998c; Cormack, 1991, 1998a, 1998b; Cumming, 1993, 1998;

Eyers, 1992, 1993) highlighted the need for Middle Years reform within Primary and Secondary schools across Australia. Active participation in the development, implementation and review of reform programs has provided further insight into the current state of Middle Years education.

Initial research (Barratt, 1998a) identified guiding principles as essential components of Middle Schooling reform within Australia that are reflected by a MYS program and curriculum design, including:

- ‘Learner-centered’,
- ‘Collaboratively organised’,
- ‘Outcome-based’,
- ‘Flexibly constructed’,
- ‘Ethically aware’,
- ‘Community-oriented’,
- ‘Adequately resourced’,
- ‘Strategically linked [to the Early and Later Years of Schooling]’ (pp. 30-31).

In the mid 1990’s two major research projects were funded: the first, *The National Middle Schooling Project* (NMSP), focused on professional learning and research into Middle Years issues, whereas the second, the *Middle Years Research and Development Project* (MYRAD), supported the development and implementation of whole school designs for the MYS.

The National Middle Schooling Project (NMSP) (also called the National Middle Years of Schooling Project) was established in August 1996 (Department of Employment, Education, Training and Youth Affairs, 1999) with the aim of providing professional learning and research opportunities into Middle Schooling issues. This project also contributed to the development of national partnerships between schools and assisted in the design of a specific Middle Years curriculum (Barratt, 1997). The NMSP was developed as a direct response to a

report on the state of Middle Years schooling in South Australian schools, which recommended reform in the areas of resourcing, policy and practice to ensure the development of effective Middle Schools (Barratt, 1997).

The Middle Years Research and Development (MYRAD) (1998-2001) project was commissioned by the Department of Education, Employment and Training and undertaken by the Centre for Applied Educational Research to aid in the process of developing and testing a new design for schooling in the Middle Years. The project highlighted the need for schools and education departments to identify highly specific, successful practices to ensure purposeful Middle Years reform in the following areas:

- Teaching and learning practices in the classroom,
- Curriculum and assessment, and
- School organisation for learning (Department of Education & Training, 2002b).

As a follow up to the MYRAD project, the Department of Education, Employment and Training (DEET) published a series of discussion papers that focused on stimulating conversations between teachers on important issues relating to the Middle Years of Schooling (MYS). This series entitled *Middle Years Matters* (2000-2003) outlined the relevant current information on specific Middle Years topics and encouraged teachers to discuss MYS issues within professional learning teams. At the same time, DEET published a series of booklets, entitled *Books for Middle Years Kids: A Guide for Parents* (2001) and *Transition: The Journey Continues* (2001), aimed at advising parents of MYS students of current issues and challenges their children face along with ways parents can support their children during the MYS. These changes signified some of first major steps in implementing change and reform in the MYS in Australia.

In response to the emerging need for Middle Years reform, the Victorian government increased funding for MYS and established the *Innovation and Excellence in the Middle Years* (2002) initiative, aimed at increasing the pace of innovation in teaching and learning. This was followed throughout the late 1990's and early 2000's by a number of supporting initiatives in order to improve Middle Years education. The Australian government's Department of Education (DoE) has achieved positive outcomes from these initiatives with annual reports highlighting the progress and achievements of Middle Years clusters, teachers and students in Victorian Schools. The *Middle Years Reform Program*, established in 2001, has provided funding for hundreds of additional teachers to support the implementation and development of Middle Years programs, while student action teams have contributed to positive changes in students' knowledge, skills, attitudes and connections with peers, teachers and the community. Literacy levels of students deemed at risk in years seven to nine have improved, while literacy skills of year seven students have also been enhanced through the *Restart* (2002-2006) and *Access to Excellence* (2003-2005) programs. However, the most impressive outcome is the collective involvement of every Victorian school with Middle Years students participating in the *Schools for Innovation and Excellence* (2002-current) initiative. Middle Years clusters provide strong support for other reform initiatives of the Department of Education. This collective involvement ensures that primary, secondary and special school principals and teachers are meeting together, visiting one another's schools and classrooms, and talking together about mutual concerns.

In 2001-2002, funding was increased in the area of education and training in rural and regional Victoria with the aim of increasing the level of participation and achievement among groups where it was low. At the same time, key department priorities included the development of a policy framework for systematic reform of the Middle Years of schooling to

enhance student engagement and achievement in rural and regional areas (Department of Education and Training, 2002b).

In 2002-2003 the Victorian government increased its funding into the Middle Years of Schooling, allocating \$84.3 million over four years for a new Middle Years reform program aimed at helping to further develop and strengthen the relationship between primary, secondary and special schools under the guise Schools for Innovation and Excellence (Department of Education and Training, 2002a).

In a direct investment into Middle Years education, in 2002 the Victorian State government committed \$248.2 million to Middle Years Reform through the development of innovative programs including the Access to Excellence initiative and the Achieving Innovation and Excellence Middle Years Program (Department of Employment, Education and Training, 2002a).

Reflecting on the need to invest in the improvement and provision of education in rural regions, in 2002 the Victorian State government invested \$105.3 million into rural education including a \$31.1 million boost to rural and regional school bus services and to implement the State government's review of this service (Department of Education and Training, 2002c).

2.5.3 Life-Long Learning

The concept of life-long learning is essential to the development of a strong future. Early adolescents need to recognise its importance and develop a strong commitment to the process of life-long learning, as it will have a considerable impact on their future lives. It is imperative to support early adolescents in this process, requiring Middle Schools to identify intellectual

competencies students need to develop in order to successfully function in society (National Association of Secondary School Principals' Council on Middle Level Education, 1989).

Just as important as the development of positive strategies for life-long learning is the need for early adolescents to develop a love of learning. Students who do not embrace this perspective have a much greater chance of experiencing difficulties in the future when they have to compete with individuals in the real world who have developed a preference for continued learning, and who hold greater confidence in their learning abilities (National Association of Secondary School Principals' Council on Middle Level Education, 1989, p. 28).

Having surveyed the literature and educational initiatives implemented within the Middle Years of schooling, a gap in knowledge concerning academic pressure during these years was confirmed; moreover, there appears to be little evidence concerning early adolescents' experiences with academic pressure. This study therefore examines early adolescents in a rural setting (where it is deemed resources are less available), their coping strategies and the nature of the support available.

2.6 Summary of Chapter

This chapter has surveyed and discussed relevant literature surrounding Middle Years education and academic achievement, building a theoretical base for the continuation of the study. The chapter has considered the educational significance of this study in terms of the current climate of fostering Middle Years reform and the parameters of academic pressure on adolescents have been explored through the literature. The cultures of primary and secondary school environments were compared, as was the nature of adolescence and local and global influences on early adolescents. Current educational initiatives in the Middle Years were

examined in relation to Middle Years reform, and empirical research, past and present, surrounding the research topic was introduced and a gap in the research identified.

The next chapter will outline the major features in the research design.

Chapter 3 - Methodology

3.1 Overview

The purpose of this study has been to investigate academic pressures on rural adolescents, the sources of these pressures and the inherent culture of upper primary and lower secondary school in order to address the question ‘*What are the pressures on rural adolescents to achieve academically during the Middle Years of Schooling?*’ The supporting questions are:

- *What are the contributing factors to academic pressure on rural students?*
- *What strategies can be implemented within the school and in the Middle Years classroom to support students managing such pressures?*

In order to address this research a qualitative approach was implemented. The research was carried out using a *Naturalistic Inquiry* process (also referred to as Constructivist Inquiry) and focused on observing people within a natural setting (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Guba & Lincoln, 2005; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). A Collective case study approach was employed in order to identify academic pressures and their sources, the learning environment and school culture. Individual case studies, along with supporting documentation from the student participants’ teachers and principals, informed the Collective case. This data was used to identify themes and build thick and information rich narratives about the worlds of the participants. A case study approach was selected as it provided opportunity to investigate the question through the analysis of individual experiences.

After ethics was secured and permission was granted by the RMIT Human Research Ethics Committee and the Department of Education and Training Victoria a number of schools were approached to determine interest and involvement in the research project (see Appendix A and B). Two schools accepted the invitation. One was a primary school where the principal, two classroom teachers and eight students participated, and the other was a secondary school

where the school principal, campus principal, eight students and their teachers agreed to participate. After distributing Plain Language Statements and receiving signed Consent Forms from all participants, the initial data collection process began (see Appendix C, D and E).

Data collection consisted of five group and three individual open-ended, semi-structured interviews. Observational data was also obtained within the teaching/learning environments of each participant and the complementary use of journals and other supporting documents helped to enrich the data collection process. At the completion of data collection the participants were sent copies of their statements to confirm their accuracy.

3.2 Qualitative Research

A qualitative research approach provided the best opportunity for the implementation of the research through the use of interconnected, interpretive practices to produce a series of representations, interpreted in relation to the meanings brought to them by the study's participants (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). The research under investigation focused on interpreting data 'expressed in the language of images, feelings and impressions' to describe the phenomena under study (Bouma & Ling, 2004, p. 20). This paradigm afforded an investigation into the phenomena and placed the research within the world of the experiences, thoughts and feelings of the participants. It required thick description to elicit participants' perceptions of their world. This was best achieved through a qualitative approach.

3.3 Naturalistic Inquiry

A *Naturalistic Inquiry* approach reflects the interactive link between the investigator and the object of investigation, the arresting nature of realities as constructions and the eliciting and refining of constructions through such interaction (Guba & Lincoln, 2005).

In exploring and evaluating the range of methodological approaches and what they could offer my investigation, a methodology was sought that would allow interconnected analysis in order to develop a deeper understanding of the information at hand and to answer questions that focus on how social experience is developed and interpreted (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005).

Naturalistic Inquiry was a means to better understand and reconstruct the ideas and meanings participants held whilst remaining open to new interpretations with the improvement of information and sophistication (Guba & Lincoln, 2005). In this light, *Naturalistic Inquiry* allowed access to participants within their natural environment to develop a better understanding of the meanings in their lives (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005).

Naturalistic Inquiry must be emergent, given the chance to develop and unfold (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The design of any case study needs to be well-constructed and defined prior to the commencement of the study in order to ensure that it satisfactorily reflects the original purpose of the study. Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggest the consideration of ten elements when planning for *Naturalistic Inquiry*. The design of this study considered and addressed each of these:

- ‘Determining a focus for the inquiry’,
- ‘Determining a fit of paradigm to focus’,
- ‘Determining the fit of the inquiry paradigm to the substantive theory selected to guide the inquiry’,
- ‘Determining where and from whom data will be collected’,
- ‘Determining successive phases of the inquiry’,
- ‘Determining instrumentation’,
- ‘Planning data collection and recording modes’,
- ‘Planning data analysis procedures’,
- ‘Planning the logistics’,
- ‘Planning for trustworthiness’ (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, pp. 226-247).

3.4 Naturalistic Inquiry Methods

Naturalistic Inquiry allows exploration of data from multiple perspectives. The data collection techniques were selected for this study in association with established ‘theoretical propositions to guide [the] data collection and analysis’ (Yin, 1994, cited in Anderson, 1998, p. 153). A number of complementary methods were used to build this dimension including non-participant observation, purposeful sampling and snowball sampling, Collective case study, journals, interviews including group interviews and individual interviews, questioning techniques, verbal and non-verbal information, interview analysis and supporting documents. These methods are further described below.

The data collecting techniques or methods are fundamental to any study in that they influence the variables that directly affect the study’s credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability. For example, data collection methods influence the nature of data collected, the reason for data collection and the way in which data is assembled. For this study I adopted the data collection approaches of Interviews, Non-participant Observation, Journals and other supporting documents.

3.4.1 Non-Participant Observation

A non-participant observer watches and records data, based on the actions and experiences of participants, in order to gain insights into their lives. Adopting the role of a non-participant observer allows objectivity and focuses directly on interaction in context as an outsider as opposed to immersing oneself within the study as a participant observer. Non-participant observation provides a distinction between researcher and participant that can sometimes become blurred within participant observation.

In conducting the research I became a non-participant observer, focusing on both the features of the human and social scene or school culture (Bouma & Ling, 2004). As a non-participant observer, I was making observations as an outsider, looking in on the action occurring (Bouma & Ling, 2004). Developing relationships with participants enabled the use of this position to gain deeper insights into their lives.

An integral part of conducting *Naturalistic Inquiry* is the relationship between the participants and the researcher. It can be difficult to maintain emotional detachment when dealing with peoples' feelings, emotions, thoughts and experiences, as it requires some form of relational shared response from the researcher in order to deepen responses from the participants. Throughout the data collection process, the rapport established with the participants was important in developing a sense of trust, which enabled them to express feelings more freely and convey meaningful experiences; from this, a greater appreciation and insight into the participants' lives was developed, thus enriching the study.

3.4.2 Sampling

Within *Naturalistic Inquiry*, the purpose of sampling is to make best use of information, rather than aiding simplification when considering the selection of the sample group to be used in the study. This promotes the use of smaller samples that are information and data-rich in order to enlighten the research focus and increase the breadth and variety of information obtained (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

3.4.2.1 Purposeful Sampling

The technique of purposeful sampling (Patton, 1990) was adopted in order to obtain and embrace as much data as possible or, as Lincoln and Guba (1985) describe purposeful

sampling, as a means ‘to detail as many specifics that give the context its unique flavor’ and to seek ‘information upon which the emergent design and grounded theory can be based’ (p. 201). Maximum variation sampling was implemented by selecting participants from two different schools, one being primary and the other secondary, and across five year levels from years five to nine, to ensure a well-balanced and non-biased sample. This would allow the research to capture and describe ‘the central themes [that] cut across’ participant variation (Patton, 1990, p. 172). In this study a sample was obtained by gathering data from all year levels under the Middle Years of Schooling and acquiring an equal balance of both male and female participants.

The student participants were selected from a range of backgrounds and all had adopted varied lifestyles. For instance, some participants worked in the family business after school most nights; others played and umpired basketball matches with their family members most evenings after school and on weekends. The participants were chosen on the basis of their lifestyles and on recommendations from their principals and teachers. As well, participants were selected based on their willingness to participate in and contribute to this six-month study. The teachers were selected based on the selection of the students they taught and the principals in relation to the selection of the schools. Many participants knew each other prior to the commencement of the study and some socialized regularly.

3.4.2.2 Snowball Sampling

Snowball sampling (Burns, 2000; Patton, 1990) was another technique used in the data analysis process. It involved ‘locating information-rich key informants’ and then asking those individuals for recommendations of other possible informants to accumulate new cases (Patton, 1990, p. 176). This technique was included in the data collection and analysis processes, as the principal participants recommended discussing potential student participants with the year level coordinators and leading teachers who in turn identified student participants who they believed would benefit from participation in the study.

Throughout the data collection process, other themes emerged over time and were used in the altering of subsequent interview questions on issues raised by the participants. I was also able to use the data collected as a method of providing a holistic view of the phenomenon under study. The notes were also used to cross-check with transcripts of the interviews, and with participants’ journals to help in realising credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability of analysis.

3.4.3 Case Study

Case study was adopted as a complementary approach to *Naturalistic Inquiry*, as it focuses on investigating ‘a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not closely evident’ (Yin, 1994, cited in Anderson, 1998, p. 153). The case study inquiry is essentially the study of the complexities of interaction within the context in which they occur, providing the researcher with a holistic view of the phenomenon studied.

3.4.3.1 Case Study Design

Stake (1995) defines a case study as ‘the study of the particularity and complexity of a single case, coming to understand its activity within important circumstances’ (p. xi). Case study looks at the intricacies and entanglement of what is being studied in order to make meaning of and fully grasp the enterprise within its own context. Cases were used to build a Collective Case of deep narratives about the lives and worlds of the participants. There are several different ways of conducting and classifying case studies, depending on which characteristics are in focus. I chose to adopt Stake’s (1995) Collective case study approach where I focused on several cases within the research project to gain a broader understanding of the phenomenon.

While using case study, it is important to place emphasis on the order of the occurrence of events in context with the world of the participant (Stake, 1995). For this study, the case was defined as a Collective Case Study informed by individual cases of three primary and three secondary student participants, their learning environments and cultures. Additional support was provided by the student participants’ teachers and principals.

The use of case study can be challenging, as it is often difficult to define the initial boundaries of a collective case study. It was necessary to possess the ‘knowledge and ability to collect data skillfully from multiple sources’ and ‘the capacity to interpret, synthesize and recast information’ during the data collection process (Anderson, 1998, p. 153). Skill was also needed to ‘triangulate multiple sources of information and place the findings into a context, supported by prior theoretical knowledge’, in order to enhance understanding of the phenomenon under study (Anderson, 1998, p. 153). This was achieved through the process of conducting an extensive literature review and the use of multiple methods and data sources.

Throughout the study, I adopted the role of case study researcher as interpreter where my task was to be the agent of new interpretation, new knowledge and new illusion whilst helping to expand the complexity of understanding (Stake, 1995). Varied roles were adopted including interviewer, non-participant observer, consultant and storyteller in order to conduct the study. The adaptation of these roles required continuous decisions of how much emphasis to place on each responsibility in order to best support the study, resulting in the selected style of research.

3.4.4 Research Design

The Collective case study initially focused on 16 student participants and how these participants perceived, experienced and responded to various pressures to achieve academically. Observations and interviews were conducted with two primary and eight secondary school teachers, while interviews were conducted with the primary and secondary school principals as well as the secondary school campus principal. New questions arose throughout the research process, stemming from the threads of collected data and provided the launching pad for further investigation into the phenomenon.

Table 3.1 Overview of Participants

		Primary School		Secondary School		Total Participants
		Male	Female	Male	Female	
Student Participants	Year 5	1	2			16
	Year 6	3	2			
	Year 7			1	2	
	Year 8			3	0	
	Year 9			0	2	
Teacher Participants		1	1	4	4	10
Principal Participants		1		1	1	3

It was decided that each case would inform the Collective case and be made up of individuals who were likely to encounter pressures to achieve academically which would allow greater insight into their experiences. The Collective case study was a total of six selected student

participants, including three primary and three secondary student participants. The individual cases documented the student participants' learning experiences within their learning environments and school cultures over a six-month period in rural Victoria. Supporting evidence was used from the groups of primary and secondary student participants, teacher participants of the selected six student participants, and principal participants. Certain parameters were then drawn up; all participants had to be attending the two focus schools prior to the commencement of the study, and each had to agree to the terms of the study. A timeline of six-months was decided upon in order to give me a glimpse of the experiences of the participants within two full school terms. This timeline was also decided upon in order to meet deadlines for the submission of this thesis.

Table 3.2 Collective Case Study Participants

	Primary School		Secondary School		Total Participants	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
Student Participants	1	2	2	1	3	3
Total Participants	3		3		6	

3.4.5 Data Collection

The greatest strength of case study research is its ability to use multiple sources of data, as the credibility of evidence gathered from a number of different sources is much greater than if collected from one single source. This approach was adopted within the research design to ensure the reliability of data and although it required substantial preparation and work during data collection, the advantage was that information obtained resulted in a more trustworthy and compelling commentary.

The major 'function of the qualitative researcher during data [collection] is to maintain vigorous interpretation' (Stake, 1995, p. 9). This is even more essential when concerning multiple data collection methods, as it requires the collection and maintenance of a traceable

chain of evidence, which aids in ensuring the study's credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability. A chain of evidence provides a pathway for any interested person to follow the trail of the researcher from the development of initial research questions to the findings and case conclusions. This study attempted to achieve this by clearly outlining the methodology and methods so that interested parties could replicate the study and document and clearly refer to all data used in the thesis. I have collated all data to create a database that consists of all original data, including taped interviews, interview transcripts, observation notes and both original and/or original copies of journals. However, as confidentiality was imperative, this information is not available to the general public. By request, this information, both edited for confidentiality reasons and information on the settings can be made available for the purpose of review, where from analysing the data, along with the methodological chapter of this report, the reader would be able to clearly follow the path created by the chain of evidence from initiation to conclusion.

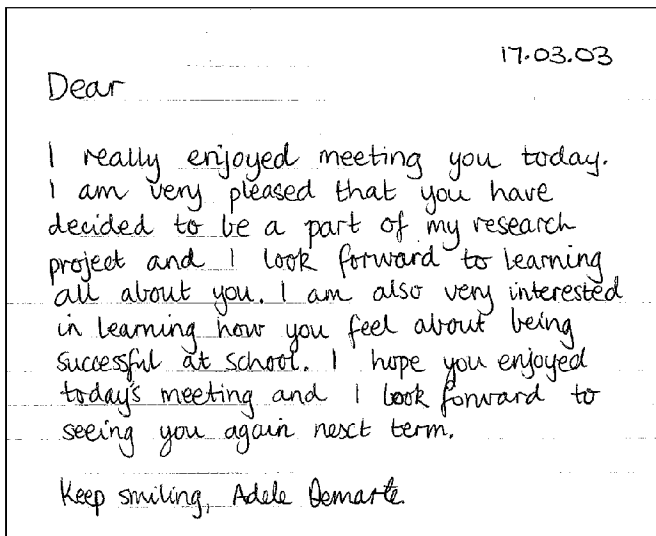
3.4.5.1 Journals

Another data collection method employed was personal journals. The journal was used as a form of interactive communication between the interviews to record information, ideas, thoughts, feelings, emotions and/or experiences about pressures at school and at home. The journals were introduced to students in the initial group interview along with an introductory letter. It was expressed to student participants that the journal could be used in anyway they liked, and they were encouraged to discuss their experiences. The journals provided opportunity for participants to express information, thoughts, feelings and experiences that they were reluctant to express face to face.

Lincoln and Guba, (1985) discuss the use of a journal as a beneficial source of information for a number of reasons. Journals are always available, stable in information and accuracy and,

with their ability to be analysed and re-analysed, they provide a rich source of information, are 'contextually relevant and grounded in the contexts they represent', and are 'legally unassailable' (pp. 276-277).

Figure 3.1 - Copy of Front Page of Student Participant Journal



17.03.03

Dear _____

I really enjoyed meeting you today. I am very pleased that you have decided to be a part of my research project and I look forward to learning all about you. I am also very interested in learning how you feel about being successful at school. I hope you enjoyed today's meeting and I look forward to seeing you again next term.

Keep smiling, Adele Demarté

Steven chose to write his journal in the form of letters. Some of these letters included descriptions of his experiences being bullied at school and the treatment he receives from his peers and teachers when he achieves at school. He also included descriptions of his home life and his parents' and sisters' responses to his school based successes as well as their support. According to these comments and the data entered, Steven felt equally comfortable in expressing his experiences and feelings via the journal as he did in oral interviews.

It is often difficult to express the intensities and complexities of emotions and experiences orally, and meaning is often lost in the flow of conversation. However, when it is written down it can be read and re-read, analysed and understood. While oral language relies more on verbal cues and communicative gestures, written language is a more concentrated

communication of thoughts, largely due to the time that can be taken in creating text as opposed to the requirement to orally maintain conversational flow.

Although each journal was used differently, with some participants unwilling to share their journal or partial entries, the information included was such that it allowed comparisons both within and between diaries. This was done by performing content analysis on the data (Hinds, 2000; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990) checking for similarities, frequency of word usage, contradictions and common themes. Reliability was also achieved by crosschecking entries with interviews for mood, tone of voice and so on. Similarities and discrepancies were noted and analysed.

The journal is an invaluable source of information because what is included has been considered important to the writer. It is written by the source, in his/her language, and due to its permanent nature, the information can easily be checked for meaning.

3.4.6 Interviews

The research approach consisted of open-ended, semi-structured group and individual interviews. During these interviews, participants were provided with both open-ended and closed questions. I chose to follow Patton's (1990) format of the open-ended, semi-structured interview whereby a set of questions were carefully worded and arranged before the interviewing began, with the intention of taking each participant through the same sequence of interview questions. Patton's (1990) interview guide was also used to add some flexibility to the interview structure to allow flexibility in probing. This combination interview format ensures the minimisation of variation in the questions posed to interviewees and reduces the

‘possibility of bias that comes from having different interviews for different people’ and ensures comprehensive data collection (Patton, 1990, p. 281).

Table 3.3 Overview of Interviews

	Individual Interviews (conducted with each participant)	Group Interviews (conducted as a group)	
Student Participants	3	Primary Participants 5	Secondary Participants 5
Teacher Participants	1		
Principal Participants	2		

3.4.6.1 Interview Environment

All interviews with secondary school based participants took place in private offices, the general staff room or empty classroom environments located within the school grounds and deemed acceptable by all participants. Every effort was made to ensure that physical conditions were as neutral and conducive to an interview setting as possible.

In order to achieve a relaxed, conversational atmosphere, some steps had to be taken prior to the interviews occurring. Pre-interview protocol had to be observed. Each potential participant was given a Plain Language Statement, written by the researcher, outlining the purpose and procedures for the study (see Appendix D and E). Each individual who agreed to participate then signed a Consent Form for persons participating in research projects involving interviews, questionnaires or disclosure of personal information, as approved by the RMIT Human Research Ethics Committee (see Appendix C).

3.4.6.2 Group Interviews

Group interviews occurred with both the primary and secondary student participants as two separate groups, taking place at varying intervals, spanning one six month period. Group

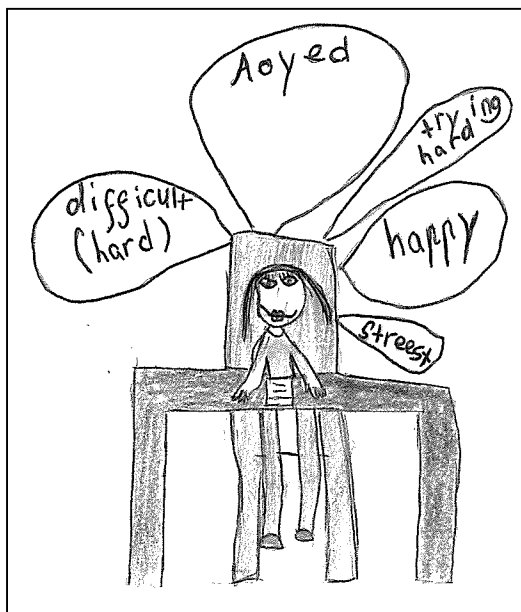
interviews provided a medium in which participants can discuss ideas, thoughts, feelings and experiences, which can then become a platform to encourage and motivate further responses from individual participants.

Table 3.4 Overview of Student Participant Group Interviews

	Number of Interviews	Length of Interviews
Primary Participants	5	30 - 45 minutes
Secondary Participants	5	30 - 45 minutes
Total	10	150 - 225 minutes

The first interview provided a platform on which participants could ask questions to clarify and further develop their understanding of their roles in the study and what was required of them. The main task asked of participants during the interview was to draw a picture of them self when trying to be successful at school. They were encouraged to express their ideas, feelings, emotions and experiences through this illustration to which most responded very positively (see Figure 3.2).

Figure 3.2 Drawing of Louise Trying to be Successful at School



(Interview 18, 17.03.03, Illustration - Louise)

Participants were involved in group discussion on stereotypes and feelings associated with school as well as teacher marking techniques on students' work where questions were asked such as:

- *What are some of the feelings you experience at school?*
- *What are some of the labels you hear people using at school?*

The second interview, completed approximately two months after the first, addressed the topics and ideas of achieving at school, classroom and school based awards, the notion of pressure, brainstorming and discussing ideas about school support structures and looking at examples of teacher marking of school work. Some of the questions asked included:

- *What do you think it means to achieve?*
- *What do you do when you feel pressure to achieve?*

The third group interview occurred only three weeks after the second, incidentally, immediately after all primary student participants had attended a school transition session at a local secondary college. The primary student participant group interview involved reflective discussions about prior knowledge and preconceptions of secondary school life and participant attitudes and feelings towards moving on to secondary school. The secondary student participant group interview discussed advice they would give primary students about secondary school. Both group interviews also discussed classroom environments, personal learning styles and preferences, teacher comments, school assessment and testing, oral presentations. Some examples of questions asked included:

- *What advice would you give to year six students beginning secondary school next year about what secondary school is really like?*
- *How do you feel about going to secondary school?*

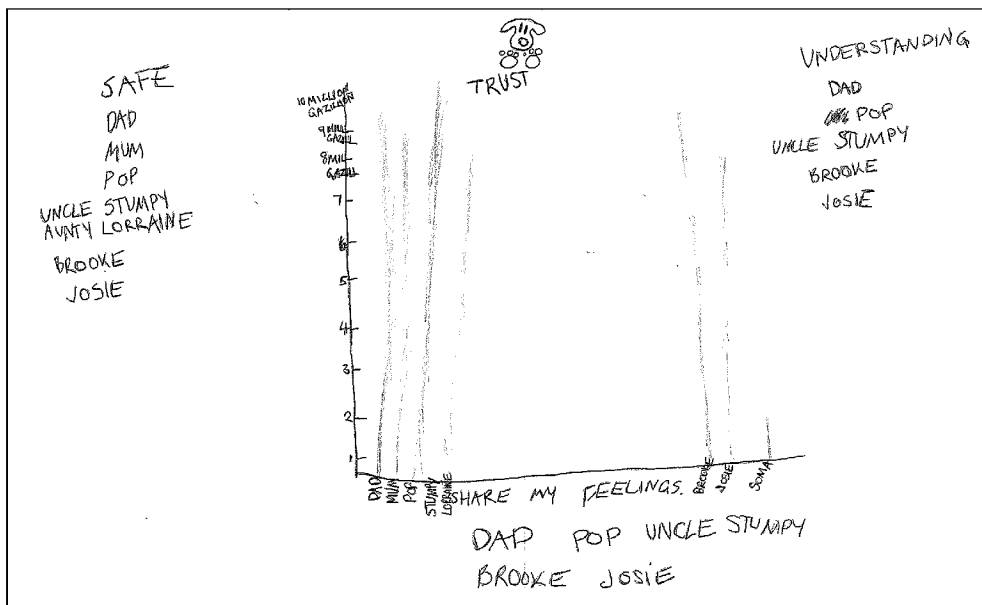
The fourth interview was conducted two months after the third and revisited the topics of achievement and doing well at school, school support structures, feelings of pressure and

stress, getting help with school work and how teachers could help participants become more involved with their school work. The technique of repeating these topics and ideas through different approaches to ascertain student feelings and perceptions from different perspectives served to aid in achieving consistency in responses, to promote familiarity and to demonstrate changes in attitude over time. Some of the questions asked included:

- *How do you know when you have achieved at school?*
- *What are some of the comments you hear people say about doing well at school?*

The fifth and final group interview, completed five weeks after the fourth, acted as a concluding interview, as it was conducted after the completion of all individual participant interviews. During this interview, participants were asked to draw a life-line, showing where they could get help if not feeling good about doing well at school. Student participants were encouraged to represent people who make them feel safe in this world, support and understand them, can provide help, and who they want to talk to and share their feelings with (see Figure 3.3).

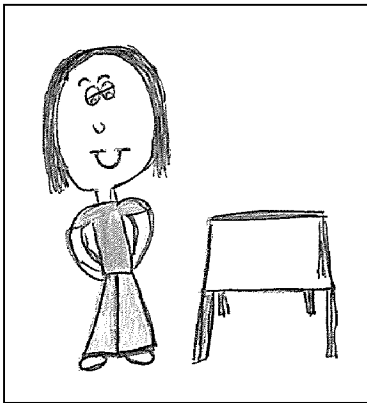
Figure 3.3 Heather's Life-Line of Support Structures



(Interview 22, 29.08.03, Illustration - Heather)

In order to compare changes in the participants' feelings and perceptions, from the beginning of the data collection period to the end, they were again asked to illustrate themselves trying to do well at school (see Figure 3.4).

Figure 3.4 Drawing of Susan Trying to do well at School after Participating in the Research Project



(Interview 22, 29.08.03, Illustration - Susan)

In order to gain insight into the family life of each participant they were asked to detail the rules a visitor would have to follow in their home (see Figure 3.5).

Figure 3.5 Rules for Living in Sophie's Home

Rules	
Allowed	Not
Dogs inside	were no
Clean room	Shoes on
watch TV	in house.
ride motor	No smoking
bikes and	no drinking
cars	underage
not M+15	not allowed
have to go	to eat dessert
to bed	if unfinished.
9.00	no M+15
as long as	no boys allowed
you want	
to watch TV	
not make	
bed.	

(Interview 22, 29.08.03, Illustration - Sophie)

The interview revisited the topic of how teachers could make students more involved with their own learning, and discussed extra-curricular activities, school charter and policy documents. Some examples of questions asked included:

- *After participating in the research project, how do you feel about trying to do well at school?*
- *Where can you get help when you're feeling pressured to do well at school?*

3.4.6.3 Individual Interviews

The implementation of individual interviews was made to ensure all respondents felt they had an equal chance to speak, to attempt to minimize loss of data which could be overlooked in the excitement of group conversation, and to provide for those students who felt more comfortable contributing ideas and thoughts in a one-on-one format. During individual interviews, each group of participants (student, teacher and principal) were asked the same questions, as it allowed for a comparison and contrast of answers to crucial questions between participants, and ensured that data was complete for each participant on the topics addressed in the interviews. Patton argues that consistency among participants is achieved by asking the same questions, in the same order and format, to each of the participants in a study (1990).

Table 3.5 Overview of Individual Interviews

	Number of Interviews	Length of Interviews
Student Participants	3	30 - 45 minutes
Teacher Participants	1	30 – 60 minutes
Principal Participants	2	45 – 60 minutes

The first student participant individual interview was conducted after the first group interview and provided opportunity for the researcher to get to know the participant as an individual with discussions about their home life including responsibilities, commitments and personal interests. It also provided an insight into the participant's school experiences, with discussions about homework and schoolwork, doing well at school, the participant as a student and their

views and visions about Secondary School and the Victorian Certificate of Education. Participants were also asked to respond to a list of common labels used in a school environment. Some of the questions asked included:

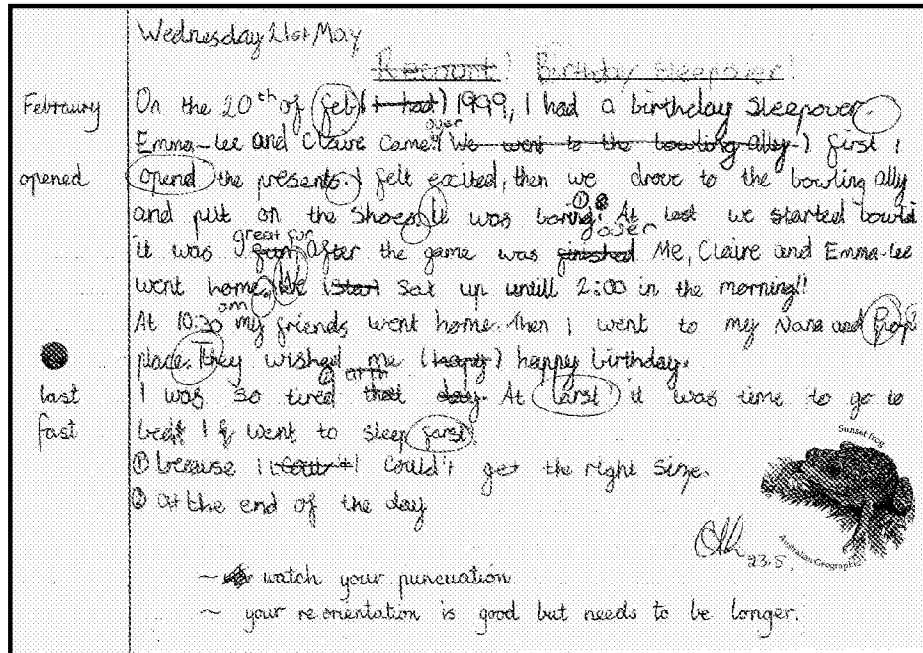
- *Tell me about yourself so I can get to know you better.*
- *How would you describe yourself as a student or a learner?*

The second student participant individual interview was conducted half way through the data collection period and provided further opportunity to build a clear picture of the participant as an individual, with discussions on who they admire, what they would change about themselves if they could, visions for the future, and activities and spare time at home. Further issues of awards and rewards, the participant's assessment and testing experiences and strategies, their views on urban versus rural school life, and pressure to achieve at school, were also discussed. Participants were also asked to respond to a series of commonly used teacher and parent language in relation to achievement. Some of the questions asked in this interview included:

- *What do you want to do with your life when you are older?*
- *What are some of the things you chose to do in your spare time?*

The third student participant individual interview was conducted prior to the final group interview and involved the participants reflecting on and discussing teacher marking strategies on examples of their own schoolwork.

Figure 3.6 Sample of Teacher Marking Strategies on Louise's Schoolwork



(Interview 7, 28.08.03, Work Sample - Louise)

It provided an opportunity for student participants to identify and discuss teacher and parent comments about achievement, and discuss learning environments, peer conferencing, seeking assistance from teachers, peer discussions about achievement and the influence of peer negative behaviour. Some of the questions asked included:

- How do you feel about the feedback your teacher has given you on this piece of schoolwork? What does it tell you?
- How do you feel when other students talk about their achievements?

Teacher participant interviews were conducted at the conclusion of the student participant interviews and provided an opportunity for teachers to reflect on their students as learners, and to provide an insight into their knowledge and understanding of their students as individuals. It provided an opportunity to discuss pressure to achieve, conveying expectations, reward systems, celebrating student successes, taking ownership and control of learning, and student welfare and support. Teacher participants were also provided an opportunity to reflect

on themselves as teachers and their teaching environments. Some of the questions asked included:

- *Describe (name of student) as you see him/her as a learner.*
- *How do you convey your expectations to the students you teach?*
- *How do you respond to your students' successes?*

The first principal participant interview provided an opportunity for the principal participants to clarify information or questions about the research study, and their participation. It involved discussion of the finer details of the research study, and how it would fit into their school's daily structure. It also involved a brief discussion on pressure on students, academic achievement, student support and welfare, transition programs and general information about the school community, to gain an initial insight into the state of Middle Years education in their school environment. Some of the questions asked included:

- *How does academic achievement impact school budget funding decisions?*
- *What is the typical level of education of parents in the school community?*
- *How is the school involved in transition programs?*

The second principal participant interview focused on their views, thoughts and experiences, with issues surrounding the research study from current perspectives and how these issues have changes within their school environment and education in general over time. It included discussion about pressures on students, academic achievement, celebration of student successes and excellence awards, advertising student success, school budget funding, student welfare and support structures, transition programs and relationships, extra-curricular activities, staff professional learning, school charter and policy development, further education and tracking student education. Some of the questions asked included:

- *What are the pressures on students that are pertinent to this community?*
- *How does the school acknowledge the achievements of students?*
- *What sort of relationship does the school have with other schools in the community?*

3.4.7 Questioning Techniques

One method employed to ensure the comfort and enjoyment of the experience for each participant was to ensure that questions asked were engaging, yet not confronting. However, some issues that were dealt with at times were of a delicate nature, requiring a sensitive approach.

A variety of question types were used in order to cater for all participants and to maintain conversational ambience. Most questions were open-ended in order to gain an insight into the participants' experiences, accommodating unanticipated viewpoints and encouraging the sharing of information (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2000). At times, closed questions were needed to clarify ideas and points. Although closed questions often have the tendency to elicit brief and one-word answers, I found that they also prompted participants to explain their views which lead to deeper explanations (Hinds, 2000).

Active listening, without interruptions, was used throughout the interviews which encouraged participants to freely express their thoughts, feelings and experiences. It also catered to Denzin and Lincoln's (2005) theory that people generally divulge more when allowed to offer information freely, than when answering specific questions.

Interview questions were designed to be both thematic and dynamic in nature (Kvale, 1996). They were thematic as the research had set a topic that was broad enough to allow participant input and direction, yet maintained focus on the issues at hand. The questions also reflected a dynamic nature, which promoted a positive social experience, where participants were enthusiastic to interact and contribute ideas. I believe the interviews reflected both of these aspects.

In order to ensure continuity in the thematic nature of the interview probes and prompts were implemented (Hinds, 2000). The aim of the interviews was to promote a conversational environment where the participants did most of the talking. Probes were used to encourage the participant to elaborate further on a point, while prompts were used when participants appeared to need a little assistance to find the correct word, or to be reassured of the credibility and content of their answers.

The role of silence in the interview was another important interview technique, although I found it difficult to maintain this at times. The use of pauses and silence in an interview prompts participants to fill in the gaps and often leads to the revelation of new insights that would probably have been lost if they were interrupted with a question. Effective techniques such as repeating back the participant's words, nodding my head, smiling and maintaining eye contact, to help show the researcher was interested in what the participants were saying and to encourage them to continue, were also implemented (Burns, 2000).

3.4.8 Verbal versus Non-Verbal Information

It is important to be aware of how the researcher conveys messages and information through not only words but also through the use of non-verbal cues. The notion of quality of voice was important as different meanings could be indicated through the change of tone or speed or emphasis of the voice. During and after interviews, the researcher made reflective comments and notes about participant responses together with observations, including participants' intended meaning and interpretation of non-verbal cues. Non-verbal cues aided in the interpretation of comments, particularly when body language was suggesting a very different meaning to the words used. Non-verbal communication, the language of gestures, actions, facial expressions, body movements and body positions, can speak louder than words, often

confirming, emphasising or even contradicting the verbal message (Burns, 2000). Lancy (1993) discusses how articulation, gestures and inflections, when not included in an interview record, defect and distort the credibility and dependability of the data. The taking of notes on facial expressions, body movements and gestures, and how each participant responded and reacted during interviews attempted to combat this distortion. Transcripts were also sent back to participants in order for them to verify the researcher's interpretations of the script.

3.4.9 Recording of Data

All interviews were audio-taped (with participants' permission), and then transcribed by an independent source. Through taping each interview the researcher had direct access to quotes and voice tone and a means of authenticating each interview. To ensure reliability of the transcriptions, random sections of transcriptions were checked against the researcher's interpretations of the data with that of the transcriber. In all cases checked, differences in transcriptions were minimal and not significant enough to bias the data. As a further measure an independent source completed an audit on some of the interview transcriptions by checking them against the data from the audio-tapes in order to establish reliability of the data transcriptions (see Appendix I).

3.4.10 Interview Analysis

All transcripts were analysed according to Patton's (1990) strategies for interview analysis, including case analysis and cross-case analysis methods in line with Glasner and Strauss' (1867, cited in Burns, 2000) concept of *grounded theory*, which argues that theory emerges from data, rather than data working to support existing theories. See the following section on data analysis and presentation and chapter 4 (Data Analysis) for further information and details.

3.4.11 Observations and Supporting Documents

Two further sources of data emerged throughout the data collection process. Two of these differed to the above in that I was the primary source of this data. The first consisted of a journal I wrote while conducting the data collection outlining my experiences as a researcher. The second involved the observations made in classroom settings, and observations made during and after interviews and incidental meetings, with participants and others. Both these sources have been analysed for the insights they provide about my experiences as a researcher and the light they shed on the phenomenon under investigation.

A research journal was useful in that it was accessible, read and revisited for deeper reflection and analysis and provided access to insights that may have been otherwise overlooked or forgotten. However, entries are only one source of information. They needed to be placed in context and viewed alongside the other data. The journal was kept regularly, throughout the research period, including daily entries after interviews, observation sessions or meetings. In it I recorded my own thoughts and feelings and experiences as researcher and of the study. The journal provided an insight into the nature of the study, experiences and personal reflections. It was an important tool in allowing me an objective view of my own experience throughout the data collection process. This was important as it highlighted how researchers bring their own values and biases to a study.

Observations were made of each student and teacher participant combination, for one hour, each week during the data collection period as well as during interviews, at incidental meetings with participants and subsequent conversations with others not directly involved in the study. These observation notes were dated and filed for analysis at a later date.

3.5 Data Analysis and Presentation

The presentation and analysis of data has been carefully linked to evidence and is focused on the more significant aspects of the study. The use of expert knowledge and interpretations has been drawn upon to assist in this process in order to produce high-quality analyses, which attends to all evidence, displaying and presenting the evidence separately from any interpretation and showing ‘adequate concern for exploring alternative interpretations’ (Yin, 2003, p. 109).

It was decided to interpret the findings in several different ways, as determined by the data, and to realise the purposes of this study. Initially data was analysed and themes identified; however, through a thorough process of analysis using multiple techniques, new evidence was identified and new themes emerged which lead to the refinement of the study’s themes and issues. In summary, the data analysis techniques I employed were Pattern Matching (Yin, 2003), to strengthen the study’s internal credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability; Coding Data (Stake, 1995), then identifying themes and issues; Content Analysis (Hinds, 2000) on the interview and journal data; and Explanation Building (Yin, 2003), to build an explanation about the case through the linking of data. These techniques are further detailed below.

3.5.1 Pattern Matching

In the search for meaning, patterns help identify consistency (Stake, 1995). Pattern matching can help strengthen a study’s internal credibility when an ‘empirically based pattern [and] a predicted one [coincide]’ (Yin, 2003, p. 116). Pattern matching was performed on the data in comparison with predicted patterns of variables, defined prior to data collection as required with descriptive case study (Yin, 2003). In an attempt to strengthen the case study, precise

measures were implemented to identify significant matches, while subtle patterns were avoided.

3.5.2 Coding Data

The technique of Coding Data was implemented to assist with identifying themes and issues (Stake, 1995). Once data was collected, summarising and organising the information occurred in three steps; first, categorising data involved looking at data to ascertain if any patterns emerged, then working through the data to identify patterns, the second, sorting data into categories and finally, presenting data in tables and charts to assist in drawing conclusions about the research study (Bouma & Ling, 2004). Coding data was used as a supportive data analysis technique to validate interpretation directly from observation, and to provide an objective tally of incidents to support descriptive events, and to help develop understanding and meaning from the data (Stake, 1995).

3.5.3 Content Analysis

Content analysis was performed on the interview and journal data to examine and analyse content of communications with the purpose of identifying common themes, ideas, words and phrases used by participants (Hinds, 2000). Initial exploratory analysis was conducted to identify themes and issues emerging from the data; a measurement unit was determined and categories constructed for analysis before coding took place and analysis completed (Hinds, 2000). Content analysis was used with interviews and journals to establish if a topic or theme was established; it provided an opportunity to study the behaviour of participants indirectly, to identify their beliefs, ideas and attitudes relating to the research questions, and provided rich data to support emerging themes (Hinds, 2000).

3.5.4 Explanation Building

Explanation building is a specific type of pattern matching that assists in building an explanation about the Collective case through analysis and linking of data (Yin, 2003). Links between the data and theoretical propositions were identified with the goal of building a general explanation about the Collective case study (Yin, 2003). The explanation building process followed Yin's (2003) iterations which involved a gradual process of examining case study evidence, revisiting theoretical positions, examining evidence from a new perspective and entertaining 'plausible or rival explanations' until an explanation about the Collective case was developed (p. 122).

3.6 Meeting Quality Criteria

The procedures employed in any study are usually how a study is judged in terms of internal and external credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability. In a *Naturalistic Inquiry* process however, these issues cause difficulties because the nature of the study prevents judgement along the same criteria. Creswell (2005) argues that it is best to justify a study according to the existing language but adjusting these to qualitative concepts. Lincoln and Guba (1985) argue that terms that address the same issues, but are more appropriate from a naturalist's perspective, can replace the existing language. Therefore the truth of the study or *Internal Validity* can be judged in terms of its *Credibility*. *External Validity* or the study's applicability can be addressed by *Transferability*. *Dependability*, as the study's consistency in place of *Reliability* and the study's neutrality can be addressed by its *Confirmability* rather than *Objectivity* (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

3.6.1 Credibility

The criteria for a study's credibility can be judged in accordance with the techniques employed by the researcher to ensure that credible results will be produced and the validity of these can be confirmed. To ensure the study's credibility, Lincoln and Guba's (1985) suggestions of techniques designed to meet the criteria for establishing trustworthiness were implemented. These include:

- Activities designed to increase the 'probability that credible findings will be produced' (prolonged engagement, persistent observation and triangulation).
- 'An activity that provides an external check on the inquiry process' (peer debriefing),
- 'An activity providing for the direct test of findings and interpretations with the human sources for which they have come – the constructors of the multiple realities being studied' (member checking) (p. 301).

The technique of multiple perspectives, involving accepting alternative perceptions, was also implemented and supported by peer debriefing. These techniques are discussed below.

3.6.1.1 Prolonged Engagement

One method of producing dependable results is to ensure that all data is viewed in the appropriate context. Prior to commencing the research project, extensive literature searches were conducted, exploring the issue of pressure and academic achievement. This was to ensure a context was established in which to place the participants' experiences and perceptions. Lincoln and Guba (1985) discuss the technique of *prolonged engagement* that is spending sufficient time during the data collection period to meet particular objectives. They argue that 'it is not possible to understand any phenomenon without reference to the context in which it is embedded' (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 302). In this study student participants

were interviewed within their natural environments and the six months data collection period helped to ensure that all observations could be placed within the specific context of the study, allowing time for trust and rapport to develop and for the participants to feel comfortable in divulging information. Prolonged engagement in the study enabled the establishment of a context in which to place the interactions and information cultivated through the data collection process as truthful and trustworthy.

3.6.1.2 Persistent Observation

Spending that length of time at the study also meant that I could engage in *persistent observation* through detailed focus on the identification of characteristics and elements that are most relevant to the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Persistent observation added depth to the study as details could be explored, those elements within the study that really count, identified, and irrelevancies eliminated (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

3.6.1.3 Triangulation

Another technique for achieving credibility is through *Triangulation* of data which involves the use of a number of data collection techniques within the one study (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). As previously stated, data was obtained through observations, interviews, journals and the collection of other supporting documents. This promoted greater flexibility in the type of information gathered and provided added insight into the initial findings and interpretations. It also increased the credibility of the study, as the same data, generated from a number of different sources is more likely to be accurate, as the same biases or limitations would seldom be obvious in the different types of data sources.

3.6.1.4 Peer Debriefing

The method of *peer debriefing* encourages the use of a neutral source to act as a sounding board to the researcher's ideas, in order to establish credibility (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Through checking interview questions, possible content of interviews, theories and so on with colleagues, peer debriefing was implemented to enhance the reliability of the study. Peer debriefing promotes credibility as the independent source serves to ensure that preconceptions are identified and addressed, biases probed, meanings explored, and the basis of interpretations clarified.

3.6.1.5 Member Checking

Another technique employed was that of *member checking*, 'the most crucial technique for establishing credibility' (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 314) as the researcher can claim authenticity if the participants verify that their realities have been accurately represented. Member checking involves continuous checking of data with participants, having them verify facts and comment on interpretations. Member checking was employed during and at the end of interviews and after interviews had been transcribed, to clarify meaning, summarise and check interpretations were accurate (see Appendix G and H).

3.6.1.6 Multiple Perspectives

Accepting alternative perspectives was the final method implemented to enhance the study's credibility. This reduced researcher bias as it forced the researcher to remain open to new perceptions. This was partially achieved in peer debriefing where the researcher intentionally expanded on the process by seeking out different theories and explanations of events. This allowed different perceptions to be formed both in data collection and analysis processes.

3.6.2 Transferability

Within *Naturalistic Inquiry*, transferability is indicated through the use of thick description of time and context, enabling the judgements of conclusions as transferable or not. Thick description is achieved through the presentation of detail, context and emotion in the data and information collected through a study, so that the reader can interpret the study and make judgements concerning its transferability (Denzin, 2001). The Collective case was written and rewritten with the intention of developing thick description. Lincoln and Guba's (1985) advice on descriptive writing was followed to allow the reader to enter into the situation and thoughts of the participants in order to make their own interpretations.

Another technique implemented to achieve transferability was that of the reflexive journal (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The reflexive journal promotes transferability through the rich data it presents; it provides credibility through the inclusion of dates and time to substantiate data collection and information about the philosophical positions and methodological decisions made by the researcher (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Finally, with all issues of transferability, the matter of generalizability should be addressed. The purpose of *Naturalistic Inquiry* is the interpretation of unique events, not generalizability (Oyen, 1990). However, if it is deemed necessary, thick descriptions provided within the study, as well as a detailed methodology, ensure that this study could possibly be repeated to assess the finding's generalizability. Although replication could never be precise, similar subject matter and settings could be observed under replicable conditions, thus testing the dependability of the findings.

3.6.3 Dependability

Lincoln and Guba (1985) argue that a study's dependability relies on the researcher considering issues of instability and change. The reliability or dependability of a study increases when these factors are taken into account. There are several ways of achieving this, none of which may be conclusive in its own right but, when noted in relation to the others, reliability is significantly improved.

According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), the audit trail is considered the chief facilitator of dependability. They argue that an independent auditor should be brought in to authenticate the final product of a study through examining the processes undertaken in the *Naturalistic Inquiry* process to ascertain its dependability and confirmability. The auditor should be able to review all raw data used in the study and confirm that the findings were directly related and that the study did not make any false claims. For the purpose of this study, an independent auditor (see Appendix I) was employed to examine both the process and product of the research providing an attestation to certify that both process and product fall within acceptable professional, legal and ethical limits (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Through the implementation of this audit, and through maintaining a traceable chain of evidence by describing the methodology in full, carefully citing all data and maintaining a database of all data and additional information, the dependability and confirmability of the study was able to be verified.

Unreliability is considered the greatest threat to a study's dependability due to the use of unreliable measures, participant or observer bias or observer error (Robson, 2002). In order to combat this, all measures were based on existing techniques, and findings analysed to ensure that the data directly related to the questions asked. By identifying and obtaining the skills

necessary to be a case study researcher, I ensured I was sufficiently trained to carry out this study. In order to further develop the researcher's skills, observations were conducted as part of the data collection process for a PhD research student. The techniques of prolonged engagement and triangulation were also employed to reduce participant bias and prove the accuracy of the findings.

3.6.4 Confirmability

Within a *Naturalistic Inquiry* methodology, it is prudent to judge the data instead of judging the investigators in terms of their objectivity. If this is achievable, and the data regarded as confirmable, the fourth quality criteria of confirmability will have been met.

A study's confirmability is judged by its audit trail. An auditor tries to determine if the data and findings are truly based on fact through assessing whether the findings are supported by data and whether the findings are reasonable and the extent of any biases are evident. The auditor then uses this information to judge the confirmability of the study. Evidence has been presented to show how the study maintained its evidence trail (see Appendix I). In addition, the reflexive journal promotes confirmability by providing or refuting the occurrence of biases, as well as information regarding the researcher's thought processes in drawing conclusions.

3.7 Ethical Considerations

A vital consideration in any research study is the attention the researcher has paid to her ethical responsibilities. The ethical considerations in this study involved the nature of the study, the questions asked, the participant's rights and the researcher's obligations. All participants' identities were protected as were the location of their home environments and

schools. Questions were phrased carefully and care was taken to not probe into deeply sensitive areas. If students' discussion or journal writing moved into areas injurious to themselves or to others, they were steered away from furthering these admissions.

3.7.1 Intrusion

The nature of *Naturalistic Inquiry* requires close examination of and familiarization with others' lives, through their experiences, emotions, thoughts and feelings. This close involvement is the strength of the research process but it can also be intrusive. The researcher should be open with participants in order to build trust and rapport, without endangering the research. The nature of a participant observer needs to be addressed and can quickly become a dilemma if conducted in an unethical way, such as planting a researcher within a group in order to gain information otherwise inaccessible (Schloss & Smith, 1999).

In order to reduce possible risk, a number of safeguards were employed (Creswell, 2005). These included ensuring participants (and their parents/caregivers) understood the nature of the study, the data collection techniques and how the data would be used. As a precautionary measure, the psychologist associated with each school was recruited to be on hand to provide assistance if participants raised any serious issues of concern. For instance, when a student participant raised a sensitive and troubling issue during an interview, the issue wasn't furthered and the student's teacher and principal were informed. Transcripts, interpretations and the draft study were made available to all participants to give them the right of reply and, if required, to deny its use or publication. All participants had the right to withdraw from the study at any point. This was communicated to them verbally and in writing.

3.7.2 Ethical Anxiety

Of great concern was the issue of 'ethical anxiety'. This related to the exploitation of friendly relationships for the benefit of the research (Burns, 2000). The very nature of the study involved building trust and fostering rapport, yet maintaining distance as an objective observer. The research was passed by the RMIT University Human Research Ethics Committee (see Appendix B), confirming that no harmful or malicious intentions were involved. Through involvement in the study, participants had the potential to gain a greater understanding of the academic pressures they were experiencing and how to gain support best suited to their needs, as well as eventually benefiting from the research results. In this way all parties involved stood to gain benefit from the research study.

3.7.3 Therapeutic Research

The emotionality of research has been referred to as Therapeutic research. During the process of disclosure of intimate experiences, participants may turn to the interviewer to help them explain self-revelations the study has promoted (Schloss & Smith, 1999). Throughout the study, participants had the opportunity to examine and reflect on their own and others' experiences, leading them to a detailed insight into what they were experiencing as pressure to achieve academically. It was important for the participants to be able to explore issues together, making their own links and coming to enhanced levels of understanding and wisdom together.

3.7.4 Harm and Deception

At no point in this study was anything done to harm, embarrass or deceive participants, as this could never be justified. The research process was entered with a spirit of openness and trust,

and the research study as the very essence of *Naturalistic Inquiry* requires the establishment and maintenance of certain ethical standards. The participants volunteered to be part of this research process, and I honoured this by reciprocating with honesty and security.

3.7.5 Confidentiality and Anonymity

By guaranteeing participants confidentiality and anonymity, security is ensured. The participants were very open, allowing an insight into their inner thoughts and feelings. Each participant was assured confidentiality and anonymity throughout the study, with this written explicitly on the informed consent form (see Appendices A & B). Pseudonyms were given to participants and place names and an effort was made to alter any identifiable information. Yin (2003) suggests that it is best to disclose all identifies for reliability and credibility purposes. While I agree with this in theory, it was more important to protect the participants' identities. No information was discussed with other participants or anyone else involved in the Collective case in order to assure confidentiality.

All data, including tapes of interviews, journals and research notes have been kept in a locked secure place known only to the researcher and all outside access has been denied. The only breach of this was when tapes were transcribed. In this case, it was ensured the transcriber was independent of the study and had never met any of the participants involved. There are only first names used on these tapes, so recognition of individuals involved was unlikely.

3.8 Summary of Chapter

Chapter 3 described the methodology used in this thesis in order to address the research question. *Naturalistic inquiry* was identified as the methodology used, with Collective case study being the vehicle to analyse and present the data. The role of participant observer was

detailed and ethical considerations outlined. The design of the study presented the methods and techniques of data collection in detail, ensuring the research met the necessary rigour. The experiences of the participants will now be examined in greater detail through analysis of the data.

Chapter 4 – Data Reporting and Analysis

4.1 Introduction

Having explored the current literature in the field and the methodological considerations, this chapter will seek to provide insight into the *Complex Lives* of each of the six participants in the study in order to develop a greater understanding of the pressures these students' experience academically. The chapter will be presented in two sections: Section one will provide case studies of the six student participants and their emerging identities; Section two will provide analysis of the data by discussing the themes that emerged. The framework for the themes is based on the human dimensions of young people's lives:

- Perceptions and Expectations of Self,
- Perceptions and Expectations of Parents,
- Perceptions and Expectations of School, and
- Perceptions and Expectations of Peers.

Literature will be used to support and highlight the relevance of each of the themes connecting the experiences of the participants to existing research in the field.

It is essential to examine the participants' lives as dynamic and from a multi-layered whole-self perspective. There are numerous influences that impact upon these early adolescents' sense of self including that from the people around them, life experiences and the wider society. Each influence shapes who they are and the people they will become. The participants' rural environment, socio-economic status, culture, gender, age, peers, parents, teachers, biological changes, extended family members and lifestyle choices are some of the ways the participants position themselves and in turn are positioned in the world. The issues of rural environment, biological changes, peers, parents and family backgrounds will be discussed in greater detail later in the chapter. The language of others is a potent determinant

of self-confidence and self esteem. The participants are also powerful agents of their own identities. They do not simply exist ‘in themselves’ but they also exist ‘for themselves’. Marcel (1949) refers to this duality as ‘being’ and ‘having’.

Brice-Heath’s early, yet highly influential ethnographic study (1983) demonstrates the importance of developing a picture of the whole child by identifying the external influences surrounding the learner, and acknowledging these as important contributors to the environment in which the processes of learning take place.

4.2 Background Information

The six participants in this study, Heather, Thomas, Louise, Steven, Kristy and Dean are unique individuals who have been shaped by a wide range of genetic and environmental factors. All participants were born in Australia and have spent most of their lives growing up in the communities in which they now live. Heather grew up in a large rural town located nearby and recently moved to the area, while Louise was raised on a farm outside the township. Thomas who is country born and bred, lives on the outskirts of the town, within walking distance of the school, while Kristy has always lived in the centre of the township. Dean’s family has been raised in the district and lives on the edge of the town, while Steven has been raised in the country and lives just outside the township on an exclusive acreage where his family plans to build a vineyard.

4.2.1 Community Backgrounds

The participants have been raised in rural settings, far from remote, and these settings are undergoing continual growth and change. For the secondary participants, town infrastructure has developed over their life times to provide a population of approximately 5000 (South

Gippsland Shire Council, 2005). The Shire boasts the lowest rate of unemployment in the Gippsland region at just over 4%, lower than the state average. Income figures also remain lower than the state average (South Gippsland Shire Council, 2005). Five schools operate in the town with one specialist school, two primary and two secondary schools as well as a TAFE college and University Agriculture Campus. Students travel to and from school, mostly by bus, from farming areas surrounding the town. There is an abundance of Professional, Medical and Emergency services and both Telecommunications and Energy resources are continually being updated and improved; for example, connecting natural gas to all homes within the community. Entertainment is well provided for with a local theatre, regular visiting musicians, local band gigs and a cinema complex. The vibrant Arts community includes shops, galleries and museums. Recreation facilities have been upgraded in the past five years and now include an indoor swimming, leisure and aquatic centre and rail trail, used for walking, cycling and horse riding. Thirty-one sporting and recreation clubs are in operation, most with access to their own sporting facilities. Currently, fifteen service clubs and town associations are operational and the town hosts a broad range of services and facilities for visitors and locals, including Civic parks and gardens and a Library. Access to facilities is often hampered by a lack of local public transport. The adolescents need to ride bicycles, walk, get car rides or organise to catch a lift through town. In a large rural community, a lack of transport can also limit the availability of social interaction and communication between peers. However, the internet and email is frequently used by participants, along with telephones, both home and mobile, to maintain contact. Steven explains he spends *'two and a half [to] three hours in a week'* talking on the telephone to friends and relatives while Kristy talks on the telephone *'everyday [for] probably 15 minutes...[my friends and I] call each other up every night'* (Interview 13, 18.06.03, p. 14, line 2) (Interview 14, 27.08.03, p. 4, lines 29-30).

For the primary school participants, infrastructure improvement and change in their smaller rural town has been minimal in comparison with that of the secondary school participants. With a population of approximately 550, the shire has achieved its lowest rate of unemployment in over a decade of 6.6%, which is significantly higher than the state average (Latrobe City Council, 2006). The average taxable income for the Shire within which the township is located is approximately \$39,500 compared to the Victorian average of approximately \$42,100. One preschool and one primary school, with approximately one-hundred and sixty students, currently operate in the town (Latrobe City Council, 2006). There are no professional, medical or emergency services located in the township, however an abundance of these services can be accessed in one of the nearby larger townships within a twenty to thirty minute drive. Standard telecommunication services are available in the town as well as electricity, water and bottled gas services with families living on the outskirts of town requiring tank or bore water. Entertainment consists of a drama club and scout group both located in the local community hall. The Arts is strongly supported by an Independent artist-run initiative, including a gallery and studios which accommodate a variety of different art forms, a performance venue and retail outlet as well as art classes run throughout the year. Recreation and sporting facilities include two asphalt tennis courts, a shared football/cricket oval, netball courts, a meeting and function room and a pavilion. There are currently four sporting clubs in operation that cooperatively use the recreation facilities and two service clubs, including a Historical society and Museum and Community Association. Town services and facilities for visitors and locals include a park with a playground and an information board. A Transfer Station dealing with garbage disposal and recycling is located just outside the town.

Although the town covers a much smaller area than the secondary school participants' experience, access to facilities is hampered by a lack of public transport and the distance

recreational facilities are located outside the residential area. While the secondary student participants all live within the town boundaries, the primary student participants live within a much more diverse area. Some reside a distance of five kilometres away or on a road with a one-hundred kilometre per hour speed limit which means the town and facilities are only safely accessible by car. Individuals living within the town are generally able to ride a bicycle or walk to their destination. In a small rural community, the distance of residential spread hampers the availability of social interactions and communication between peers; however, as with the secondary student participants, email and internet chat rooms as well as home telephones are all used to maintain contact with peers. Louise explains '*[I like] the Internet and... chat rooms I like going on*' while Thomas spends little time on the phone and prefers the internet or to '*play [games on the] computer*' (Interview 6, 09.05.03, p. 7, lines 4-5) (Interview 4, 14.05.03, p. 4, line 28). For further information see Appendix F.

4.2.2 Family Backgrounds

Each participant hails from distinctive family backgrounds and has experienced wide ranging external influences on their lives. Heather lives in a single parent family, with no other siblings and has moved schools and rental properties on three separate occasions during her primary education. She has regular contact with her father, with whom she identifies most and shares a happy relationship with her mother's new partner. Louise has grown up in a single parent family with one younger sibling who attends the same primary school. She has regular contact with her father during school holiday periods and maintains close relationships with her grandparents who live in the region. Thomas lives in a two parent family with two younger siblings who also attend the same school. He has access to a holiday house, a boat and a large property belonging to his grandfather. Thomas enjoys helping out completing various farm chores. Kristy resides with both her parents who work together in the same large company in the town. Kristy has a strong relationship with her father, with whom she shares

the same sporting interests, and she has an older brother who has just turned twenty-two and recently moved out of home. Dean and Steven are from large families: Dean's father owns and runs a family business in town where Dean works after school, while his mother helps out in the office at the business in addition to home duties - Dean has two older brothers, one who is completing a TAFE course and the other, who has an apprenticeship in the family business; Steven's parents own and run a family business in a neighbouring town - he has two older sisters, one who attends Holmesglen TAFE in Melbourne and the other who attends the same school as himself. Special note should be made of the fact that all secondary participants held regular paid employment and all participants had specific responsibilities and duties to uphold within the home (see Tables 4.1 and 4.2).

Table 4.1: A Brief Profile of the Family Home Context of the Primary School Participants in the Collective Case Study

	Heather	Thomas	Louise
Gender	Female	Male	Female
Age	12	11	11
Living Arrangements	A small house on the outskirts of a small country town - rental property.	A large house with considerable land on a property outside a small country town	A small house on a property outside a small country town
Family Structure	One parent household, plus mother's boyfriend, 1 child. Father lives in nearby town, sees regularly	Two parent household, 3 children	One parent household – Mother, 2 children. Father lives in WA
Family Background	Attended three different primary schools, moving house three times in six years	Father works on family farm and mother is a teacher at Thomas's school	Attended primary school in WA before moving to current school
Siblings	None	1 younger sister and 1 younger brother attending primary school	1 younger brother attending primary school
Responsibilities	Clean bedroom, occasionally walk dog	Extensive daily chores including cutting fire wood, feeding calves, putting out bins and lighting the fire	Feed all pets, morning and night, dry dishes during the week, clean bedroom
Employment	None	Unpaid work completed daily on the family property	None

Table 4.2: A Brief Profile of the Family Home Context of the Secondary School Participants in the Collective Case Study

	Steven	Kristy	Dean
Gender	Male	Female	Male
Age	13	13	14
Living Arrangements	A large house on the outskirts of large country town. House built on 2½-acre block	A medium house in large country town.	A medium house on the edge of a large country town
Family Structure	Two parent household, 3 children. 1 child lives in Melbourne during the week and comes home on weekends	Two parent household, 1 child. Older sibling moved out of home this year	Two parent household, 3 children
Family Background	Both parents work in the family business full-time	Both parents work at same company	Father runs family business in town. Mother completes home duties and helps out in the family business
Siblings	2 older sisters, 1 attending high school, 1 attending university	1 older brother	2 older brothers, 1 attending TAFE in the town, 1 completing an apprenticeship at his dad's business
Responsibilities	Mow lawns, feed and entertain cat, keep room tidy	Wash dishes every second week, dry and put away dishes, bring in clothes washing, fold and put away clothes, feed dog everyday, feed and care for rabbit every second day	Wash own dishes every night, wipe down kitchen bench, help with odd jobs, feed the dog
Employment	Paid - work twice per week in family business after school	Paid – basketball refereeing two games per week, volunteer refereeing one game a week	Paid - paper round every morning six days a week, work at his father's business each day after school

The following case studies are structured to provide greater understanding of the personality of each participant and to offer insights into the backgrounds and life experiences that shape them. The cases have been constructed to provide a general overview of each student

participant and include first impressions, then a description of their personalities, home lives, hobbies and school experiences.

4.2.3 Primary Student Participants

4.2.3.1 Case 1: Heather

Heather comes across as an eccentric twelve year old who identifies closely with the highly confident and opinionated Canadian teen rocker Avril Lavigne especially Avril's attitude of *'this is what I am and you can't change it'* and that she *'isn't afraid to be herself'* (Interview 2, 05.06.03, p. 21, lines 29-30). On first meeting Heather, it is her openness and individualism that sets her apart from her peers. She presents herself as a strong, self-sufficient individual who *'tells it how it is'*. Heather has a dry sense of humour, which isn't lost on her classroom teacher who seems to hold a soft spot for her rebellious nature. She doesn't quite know what she wants to be when she's older however she sees a wide range of career options open to her. Most likely it will be as an illustrator, professional tree climber, author, singer or actor. Heather gives the impression she doesn't care too much for her appearance, giving little attention to her mop of frizzy, strawberry blonde hair, which is cut just above her shoulders. She is of average height and wears a small pair of black-framed reading glasses to correct her short-sightedness. Heather's skin is fair, covered in freckles and has a sun-soaked glow that reflects the time she spends outdoors. If she could change something about herself it would be her hair, which she describes as being *'out of control'* and always the opposite of what she wants it to be (Interview 2, 05.06.03, p. 21, line 11).

Heather is an only child and lives with her mother, Mrs. Wide and her mother's boyfriend, Russell in the small township, after moving from a larger country town nearby. Her family is male dominated. While her best friend is female, Heather can most easily identify with males and feels more comfortable around them. As the second eldest on her father's side, she has

played with male cousins since she was born and remains the only child and grandchild on her mother's side. Heather has a good relationship with Russell but doesn't talk about him much. She sees her father every second weekend and during school holiday periods when they visit special places and go for long drives. Heather cherishes these times as she has a close relationship with him and feels he is the person with whom she holds the greatest connection.

Heather has minimal responsibilities to fulfil at home; these include keeping her room clean and taking her dogs for a walk. She loves animals and enjoys playing with and walking her two dogs, Zac and Rastis, spending considerable time entertaining herself alongside her trusty companions. However, Heather doesn't enjoy tidying her room and her mother is continually working on ways to persuade her to complete this job, such as offering her ten dollars if she can keep her room clean for a week. This is a feat Heather is yet to achieve.

A self confessed tomboy, Heather spends her time outside school climbing trees which is her favourite pastime, along with swimming in the local creek, playing soccer with her friends in the front yard and riding her bike around the town. She admits to being regularly teased by her peers about being a tomboy, which she doesn't mind, but believes that for some reason her peers are using the term as an insult. Having recently moved to the township, Heather is still in the process of establishing strong friendships but she says it doesn't worry her to not have a defined friendship group with which to associate. Heather's best friend, Sally, attends her former school. She describes her friendship with Sally as special because they have similar interests such as climbing trees and riding bikes. Unfortunately, they now have limited contact, usually restricted to during school holiday periods or on weekends when Heather and her mother visit friends in her old neighbourhood.

In her spare time, Heather likes watching television ‘lots’, which translates to about five hours per day. She spends the majority of her time at home playing her ‘Game Boy’ or drawing. Heather often is multi-tasked with her head buried in a book reading while talking on the telephone organising visits with friends. However, she doesn’t enjoying being stuck on the phone to her relatives who often like to talk for long periods of time and ask her annoying questions she can’t be bothered answering.

Schoolwork, Heather admits, is too easy and she confesses to spending a considerable amount of class time doodling in her workbooks, or reading from a novel hidden under the table or behind her workbooks. She describes herself as ‘*a person that does not listen and likes to read books more than do work*’ (Interview 1, 07.05.03, p. 13, lines 46-47). Heather identifies herself as a member of the top maths group because she works fast and knows lots of answers; however, she doesn’t like maths, even though her peers think she’s really good at it. She likes her new school and describes it as ‘*cool, cause there is not many popular snobby people*’ (Interview 1, 07.05.03, p. 2, lines 2-3) like at her old schools, but she still finds some of her peers annoying, particularly those who pick on her and call her names. Heather looks up to her school principal, who she thinks stands out as being different to her other principals, because he plays games with the students in the yard at recess and lunch times and is always walking around the school, chatting to everyone about their day and asking them questions to get to know everyone better.

Heather is concerned that her mother doesn’t want to send her to a high school in a neighbouring town next year: ‘*Mum’s having a blue about it because she doesn’t want me to catch the train and the bus and how is she supposed to get up there if something happens*’ (Interview 2, 05.06.03, p. 5, lines 25-27). Convinced that she is old enough to travel to school on her own, Heather doesn’t understand her mother’s concerns as she regularly allows

Heather to participate in activities that promote independence. Heather essentially feels her mother is only thinking about herself which is a cause of great tension between the two of them.

Heather stands out through her bright and bubbly nature, fiery personality and enthusiasm to share her opinions, ensuring that she always has her say. She comes across as an intriguing individual yet her outgoing nature and eccentricities have resulted in feelings of alienation from her peers. Heather consistently achieves high results in her school work and finds school less challenging than she expects and thinks it should be. She exhibits well developed thinking skills and likes to ‘think outside the square’ when approaching new challenges. Heather eludes a strong sense of self, yet comfortably acknowledges her weaknesses as well as strengths. She openly and confidently shares how she sees life and learning, providing a rich insight into who she is and into her learning in the Middle Years of Schooling.

4.2.3.2 Case 2: Thomas

Thomas comes across as a cheeky and confident 11 year old who idolises Motor-cross champion Chad Reid. Thomas describes his hero as ‘*the best Australian Motor-cross rider in the world*’ because he has the speed and skill to get past the bumps sections and is really good at jumps (Interview 5, 12.06.03, p. 13, line 30). When I first met Thomas it was his laid-back attitude and passionate sporting interests that immediately defined him. He presents himself as a confident individual who exhibits a mischievous smile and wicked sense of humour. Thomas is a dedicated sportsman who enjoys following the Australian Football League (AFL) and barracks for the Essendon Bombers. He is very clear about his future career and direction when he is older: ‘*I want to be an architect and I want to either play for the AFL or be a professional motorbike racer*’ (Interview 5, 12.06.03, p. 12, lines 47-48). Thomas is of average height for his age and of solid build. His striking features and dark brown eyes and

hair complement his tanned skin. Thomas shows attention to his appearance, styling his hair with gel every morning however he shows little care towards the look of his school uniform. He demonstrates a relaxed and carefree attitude in school and demonstrates respect towards both his teachers and peers, ensuring he is a well liked individual. If Thomas could change one thing about himself, he would love to be a faster runner and be able to jump higher which would help him with his football skills: *'I normally play centre positions and I have to run around... catch people and jump'* (Interview 5, 12.06.03, p. 12, lines 37-39).

Thomas lives with his mother, father and younger brother, Danny and sister, Janine on their farm outside the town. They have a considerable amount of property on which his father works however *'we don't have cattle, we raise calves for [our] next door neighbours'* (Interview 4, 14.05.03, p. 1, line 34). Thomas seems to enjoy a positive relationship with his mother who works as a teacher's aide at the same school Thomas and his siblings attend. He gives the impression of being comfortable with his mother working at his school as she isn't his teacher and he doesn't see her around much during the day. Thomas and his father appear to enjoy a relationship based on similar interests and an enjoyment of life on the farm. They work alongside each other during the calving season and Thomas cherishes the time they spend together at sporting practice and competitions. Thomas also appears to enjoy a healthy relationship with his siblings and often spends time playing with them when he isn't working on the farm or playing with his friends. His family owns a house at a popular holiday spot where his family goes for vacation during school holiday periods and for long weekends. They also have a boat which Thomas and his family use for fishing adventures and outings on the water. His grandfather owns a large property which Thomas and his family regularly visit and where he enjoys helping out completing various farm chores.

As Thomas is the eldest in the family he is both a role model and aide to Danny and Janine and is often called upon to help them with their homework or with chores around the house. Most of the work Thomas is required to do around the home are tasks his father doesn't have time to complete. During the calving season Thomas's responsibilities increase dramatically when he is expected to clean out calf feeding trays and assist with raising the calves on his next-door neighbour's property. Aside from these farming duties, it is Thomas's responsibility to put out the rubbish bins, clean the dishes every second day, cut wood for the fire when required and light the fire every day during the colder months. These extensive tasks take up the majority of his spare time.

Thomas is very passionate about his personal hobbies and interests outside of school, enjoying riding his motorbike each day on the jumps circuit he has designed and built himself in the front paddock of his family's property: *'I've had [my motorbike] for three years but I have just started riding it everyday'* (Interview 4, 14.05.03, p. 3, line 8). He dreams of being a motor-cross rider one day and becomes quite frustrated when his father moves the cattle to the front paddock and *'the cows keep wrecking [the circuit]'* (Interview 4, 14.05.03, p. 3, line 16). Thomas appears to relish the opportunity to be outdoors, particularly during the warmer months when he regularly participates in push bike riding with his brother and sister and fishing in the creek and river on a nearby property where they catch mainly carp. He always finds time to 'muck around' on his skateboard after school and has recently been occupied with a litter of kittens, the newest additions to his family pets. Twice a week Thomas visits his friends on neighbouring properties. They spend the majority of their time together playing simulated army games where they build bunkers on the banks of empty dams then *'pretend the cars coming past [on the nearby road] are enemy vehicles'* and work in teams to shoot each other to win fantasy battles (Interview 4, 14.05.03, p. 4, lines 36-37). When the weather deteriorates and he is unable to play outside, Thomas spends time playing Playstation,

computer games and surfing the internet, taking great pleasure from playing combat style games against opponents and friends. Thomas is also heavily involved in the community based Scouts program.

A keen sportsman, Thomas maintains a hectic sporting schedule throughout the year participating in both football and cricket: *'half the year we have cricket and the other half we have footy'* (Interview 4, 14.05.03, p. 3, line 38). He plays football for the local junior footy team during the winter months, training on Wednesday nights and competing on Saturday mornings. Thomas plays district cricket during summer, attending training on Monday nights and competitions on Wednesday evenings after school. He describes himself as a talented cross-country runner and is looking forward to participating in the school cross country championships. As *'the only 12 year old boy running [for his school]'* Thomas is very proud of his achievement (Interview 4, 14.05.03, p. 17, line 42). He enjoys playing tennis and would like to compete competitively in motor-cross one day. Thomas describes himself as a talented sportsman because he is a high achiever in the sports he plays. *'I can't do every sport really good so that would make me a high achiever at some sports and not other sports. I'm a high achiever at more sports than I am a low achiever'* (Interview 4, 14.05.03, p. 17, lines 20-22).

School isn't a high priority for Thomas. He explains that socialising with his friends and kicking the footy during recess and lunch breaks are the highlights of his school day. Thomas describes himself as *'not a good learner cause I rush things a lot. I can learn things quite easily but then I rush them too much... or I leave it 'till the last minute'* (Interview 4, 14.05.03, p. 10, lines 30-43). He identifies that his learning strengths lie in his maths ability, believing that external factors also have an influence on his maths skills: *'I'm really good at it... 'cause my dad's good at maths... I pay attention... [and] the teacher likes me'* (Interview 4, 14.05.03, p. 9, lines 11-23). He has been identified by his teachers as possessing leadership

qualities and recently participated in the Young Leaders Conference in Melbourne, along with nine other students from his school. Thomas dislikes people who think they're smarter than everyone else and has little respect for the 'smart alecks' in his class. He displays an air of self-confidence however admitted to feeling '*very nervous*' when having to present work in front of his peers as he doesn't like people watching him and '*because I might stuff up... or miss something*' (Interview 4, 14.05.03, p. 23, line 36) (Interview 4, 14.05.03, p. 25, lines 12-13). Thomas feels nervous prior to and during tests at school and worries about his results. He also feels very apprehensive about going to secondary school next year.

Thomas stands out as a unique individual who maintains a busy lifestyle outside of his schooling and education. He is a popular member of his peer group because of his sporting abilities and achievements. Thomas comes across as a self-confident individual yet has feelings of insecurity when it comes to academic achievement.

4.2.3.3 Case 3: Louise

Louise presents herself as a delightfully cheerful and sensitive 11 year old who adores animals and enjoys spending time with her friends. She grew up admiring her older cousins who she saw as being 'really clever', however recently has started admiring her parents for their individuality and '*because they've got jobs*' (Interview 7, 28.08.03, p. 15, line 20). On first meeting Louise it is her quiet, reserved and shy nature that stands out and her willingness to please. She appears to be always trying to supply the 'right answers' (the answers she thinks you want). However, over time as I came to know her better she revealed her bubbly and sparkling nature. Louise relishes interacting with her younger brother Ryan and prep buddy at school, and has thought seriously about her future career direction: '*I'd like to be a school teacher... and I'd like to be a hairdresser or work in one of those shops where they sell gem stones and all the pretty stuff like that*' (Interview 7, 28.08.03, p. 15, lines 26-28).

Physically, Louise stands out amongst her peers as a tall, slim grade five student with long lanky legs, golden locks, porcelain skin and a cheeky smile. Her kind and caring nature and friendly disposition ensures she is well liked by her teachers and peers and she is considered one of the more popular students in the school. If she could change something about herself it would be to improve her maths skills: *'I'm okay with it but I would like to be a bit better... maths is an important part in your life because you basically need it for everything'* (Interview 7, 28.08.03, p. 14, lines 37-43).

Louise is in a single parent family and enjoys a close-knit relationship with her mother, brother and grandparents. She lives in a house on a small farm outside of town with her mother and brother, while her father lives and works in South Australia. Louise remains in contact with her father and visits him occasionally, mainly on school holidays. Her mother works as an accountant for Louise's grandfather in a nearby town and regularly works long hours. On the weekends Louise goes to work with her mother and looks forward to spending time with her grandfather while she is there. She displays a casual attitude towards her grandparents' recent marriage break up, simply stating: *'my nana and pop don't live together anymore'* (Interview 6, 09.05.03, p. 1, line 31). Louise's family dedicate one night a week, on Thursdays, as family night and it's Louise's favourite as her mother takes them out for tea: *'That's my night off [from my sporting commitments and homework] and we go to the pub'* (Interview 6, 09.05.03, p. 3, line 48).

At home Louise has specific duties she is responsible for, besides caring for her brother each day after school: *'I have to feed all the animals'* morning and night and assist with drying the dishes during the week (Interview 6, 09.05.03, p. 6, line 17). Louise also has to maintain a clean and tidy room although she doesn't have to make her bed: *'mum doesn't worry about my bed because I'm the only one that sleeps in it'* (Interview 6, 09.05.03, p. 6, lines 21-22).

Louise admitted to not having much time to herself outside of school as she spends most nights completing homework and looking after her brother, leaving the impression that her responsibilities around the home are far more than she admits.

Louise is very passionate and enthusiastic about her hobbies and interests. A self professed animal lover, she keeps a wide array of pets at home that are considered to be a special part of her family: *'I have a princess parrot [that's] tame and we can take it out [of its cage]. I have a cockatiel [that] bites all the time ... and we've got chooks and a cat. We used to have a Labrador and a blue heeler ... and we [recently] gave our ducks and geese away'* (Interview 6, 09.05.03, p. 1, lines 28-49). Louise and her family have recently adopted a new dog, a yappy yet lovable Jack Russell with whom she plays every day. In her leisure time at home, Louise enjoys spending time on the computer, particularly when researching information, playing games on the Internet and talking to people in chat rooms. She enjoys watching television however, due to her sporting commitments, her time is limited to watching programs on Tuesdays, Thursdays and on weekends, and only then after she completes at least 15 minutes of homework. Louise enjoys talking on the telephone to her friends for about 30 minutes and only on weekends. She also enjoys spending time playing outside, reading, riding her bike, jumping on the trampoline and making birthday presents for her family and friends using craft materials.

An enthusiastic sportsperson, Louise participates in a number of sporting activities throughout the year: *'I do sport, a lot of sport. I do tennis and netball two times a week'* which includes tennis lessons and competitions on Tuesdays after school and netball training on Wednesdays, with matches on Saturday mornings (Interview 6, 09.05.03, p. 2, line 30). She is heavily involved in Taekwondo, attending classes on Mondays for two hours and *'Little Athletics [on Saturday mornings]... it's just like running and jumping and stuff like that'*. On Fridays,

Louise participates in a swimming club whilst her brother attends swimming lessons (Interview 6, 09.05.03, p. 2, lines 30-31) (Interview 6, 09.05.03, p. 3, line 7).

Louise appears to enjoy school and seems to have developed a positive relationship with her teacher Mrs. Kay. She values the comments she makes about how Louise can improve her work and is pleased that she looks at effort, not just results. Louise comes across as a studious individual who is focused on her schoolwork and happy to spend as much time as needed to complete her work at school, and to take it home to finish if necessary. She works hard during class time and has achieved consistently high outcomes, however she experiences instances when she feels concerned about her progress: *'I usually feel relaxed with normal school work...[however] when we have a test... like a really big test and you don't know the answers you kinda get a bit worried that you might not pass...[it] kinda stresses you out'* (Interview 6, 09.05.03, p. 11, lines 28-39). Louise is an avid reader who reads for at least 30 minutes every day and enjoys visiting the community library in the nearby town to borrow new books each week. When she needs help with her homework her mum is always willing to assist although she is usually encouraged to use the resources available, such as looking up words in dictionaries or using the 'Encarta' encyclopedia program they have on their computer at home.

Louise displays mixed feelings about moving to secondary school next year: *'I kinda don't want to go to high school because I don't want to grow up [but on the other hand] I want to go to high school because I think it might be fun, a bit more of a challenge [and] harder work'* (Interview 6, 09.05.03, p. 11, lines 9-11). Louise seems to embrace challenges in her learning and believes that in the later years of high school she will have to make decisions and study subjects relating to *'what you're going to be when you grow up'* (Interview 6, 09.05.03, p. 11, lines 2-3). Louise already knows the high school she will be attending and has

participated in transition days at the school over the past two years where she has participated in classes and was able to '*see what it's like*' (Interview 6, 09.05.03, p. 10, line 40).

Louise stood out for the openness she displayed about her experiences and feelings, enthusiasm for learning and her approach of living life to the full. She entertains a very busy lifestyle outside of school, with her various commitments during the week, however she maintains a sense of balance in her life with regular time spent with her family. Louise is a young lady with an experienced outlook on life. She appears shy at times however she will stand up for what she thinks is right, displaying an inner strength and self-confidence. Louise is highly intelligent, easily identifying and accepting her strengths and weaknesses, and she continually works towards improving her skills, which reflects the mature, focused, yet realistic outlook she holds towards learning.

4.2.4 Secondary Student Participants

4.2.4.1 Case 4: Steven

Steven comes across as a highly intelligent individual and often displays introverted behaviour, preferring to be alone at school during recess and lunch breaks where he visits the library to search the internet, read books or flip through magazines. He admires skilled culinary artist Neil Perry '*because he's an excellent chef... he's got a good sense of humour [and] he's got a great attitude to everything*' (Interview 10, 26.08.03, p. 15, lines 4-6) (Interview 10, 26.08.03, p. 14, lines 46-47). Steven is an articulate and strong-willed individual who periodically demonstrates wisdom beyond his 13 years. He displays a dry sense of humour yet can be very serious at times. Steven is health conscious, ensuring he eats a balanced diet and running for forty minutes every day, which he refers to as '*my daily jog*' (Interview 10, 26.08.03, p. 14, lines 26-27). He is very clear about his future direction in life and wants to be '*a chef*' because '*I just love to cook*' (Interview 10, 26.08.03, p. 15, lines 35-

41). Steven's appearance can be likened to that of a typical adolescent 13 year old boy. He has recently been through a growth spurt and is above average height for his age. Steven is fair skinned and skinny with long limbs giving him a lanky form. His sandy blonde hair is cut in an unfashionable style, however he spends time each morning ensuring it is styled the way he likes it. He is well aware of the image issues that plague his peers during adolescence and, although he likes to fit in, he stands apart through his desire to maintain his own style and ensure his school uniform is looking neat and tidy. If Steven could change one thing about himself it would be *'to change myself [so] I don't get picked on but I don't know how'* (Interview 10, 26.08.03, p. 15, lines 15-16).

Steven lives at home with his mother, father and older sister, Julie. Their large two-storey home is set on two and a half acres in a new, exclusive estate on the outskirts of town. Steven explains that there is a large patch of yard, about one acre, behind his house where his family *'plan to put a vineyard... and make our own wine'* (Interview 9, 26.05.03, p. 2, lines 1-2). His parents own and manage a small business in the local area which requires the family to run on a tight schedule and follow a strict daily routine. Steven finds it annoying that his parents work such long, inflexible hours because it limits the time he has to spend with them each day. However, he makes the most of the time they do have together when he works at the business after school and tries to *'hang out with them as much as possible'* on weekends (Interview 9, 26.05.03, p. 5, lines 1-5).

Steven idolises his eldest sister, Sue, in many ways: they regularly spend time together and he describes her as a positive role model because she is always *'trying to keep my life happy. [If I'm] down or something she will try and cheer me up'* (Interview 9, 26.05.03, p. 6, lines 11-12). His relationship with Julie, who is completing year ten at the same high school as himself, appears to be somewhat strained. They regularly have arguments and disagreements

which Steven believes is the direct result of the responsibility his parents have given him to ‘*keep an eye on Julie*’ when they are out or go away for the weekend (Interview 9, 26.05.03, p. 4, line 23). During these times, Steven’s parents ask him to make a list of everything that happens and at times he worries about the consequences of his actions. Steven is concerned that ‘*if I get in [her] bad books I really have no one to speak to cause mum and dad are always at work apart from on weekends*’ (Interview 9, 26.05.03, p. 4, lines 41-45).

Steven has a number of responsibilities to fulfil at home including mowing the lawn on the ride-on-mower every second Sunday ‘*which is really fun*’ but a large task on a two and a half acre property (Interview 9, 26.05.03, p. 3, line 18). He is also expected to keep his room tidy and look after, feed and play with the family’s pet cat. In his leisure time, Steven enjoys playing billiards, kicking the footy, having a hit of cricket, playing on his ‘Playstation’, watching television and ‘*hanging out*’ with his sisters or friends (Interview 10, 26.08.03, p. 5, line 4).

Like many teenagers his age, Steven entertains a very busy social calendar involving school, sport, work and interest-based commitments five days per week. He is heavily involved in school-based extracurricular activities and currently attends school production and circus rehearsals on Monday afternoons ‘*which I’m really enjoying*’, band practice after school on Tuesdays and plays soccer in a weekly competition against other local secondary schools throughout the year (Interview 9, 26.05.03, p. 2, line 26). Outside of school, Steven’s commitments extend to Football training on Wednesday afternoons and working in the family business on Thursdays and Fridays after school, where he is paid for his employment. On the weekend, Saturdays are filled with a family trip somewhere, usually to go shopping or staying at home and spending time together. On Sunday mornings Steven’s dad takes him to junior football where he plays ruck or on the wing and after the game ‘*dad normally kicks the footy*

with me', while most Sunday afternoons are *'wiped out'* with completing jobs around the house (Interview 9, 26.05.03, p. 3, lines 14-15).

Steven started school as a four year old and turned five at the beginning of year one so he is therefore younger than most of his year eight peers: *'I'm supposed to be in year 7, I started school early'* (Interview 10, 26.08.03, p. 5, line 29). He enjoys most aspects of school although he has experienced some rough days where negative experiences at home have translated into a bad day at school. Steven explains that *'the only real [bad] thing that happens at school is the people that bully me'* which makes him feel down (Interview 9, 26.05.03, p. 12, lines 41-42). He enjoys English class at school, particularly when the work involves writing-based tasks: *'I've always had a liking to writing stories'*, which is *'something I do in my spare time'* (Interview 9, 26.05.03, p. 7, lines 10-32). Steven has already written a fifty-two page 'James Bond 007' movie script and three episodes of 'The Simpsons', however he would never hand in these writing pieces at school because he'd feel *'too embarrassed'* (Interview 9, 26.05.03, p. 7, line 40).

Steven describes himself as *'fairly good at maths'*, as it takes him little time to complete the maths homework he receives each week and to complete class-based work. He also believes he is good with people as he is always trying to help out, particularly in class when his peers are experiencing difficulties. When Steven sees people who look like they're feeling down, he always tries to cheer them up, or if there is a fight in the playground he'll try and break it up, at times ending up getting punched himself. He takes time to present his work well, enjoys writing neatly and works hard at maintaining neat and tidy workbooks. *'I don't like to get stuff in late so I try and take them home and get as much done as possible and get [my work] in as soon as possible so then I know it's in and I don't have to worry about it'* (Interview 9, 26.05.03, p. 6, lines 23-26).

Steven stands out as a passionate and vibrant individual who acts with a strong social conscience. He appears to be very aware of and enthusiastic about contributing to school life, which is reflected in the school-based commitments he upholds. Steven has a busy schedule with his work commitments, responsibilities and the activities he participates in outside of school time. As a victim of bullying Steven feels that his role in the research study is important in helping other students deal with difficult school experiences.

4.2.4.2 Case 5: Kristy

Kristy comes across as a self-confident and energetic 13 year-old who displays a positive attitude to life and learning. On first meeting Kristy, it is her sense of fun and zest for life that sets her apart from her peers. She is a very social individual who likes to chat to her friends, particularly during class time which usually attracts the wrath of her teachers: *'I'm a bit of a naughty student'* she explains (Interview 14, 27.08.03, p. 13, line 43). When she's older Kristy wants to be a professional singer and dancer: *'because I love singing, and dancing is just something that comes with singing'* (Interview 14, 27.08.03, p. 5, lines 16-20). She is quite short for her age with long brown hair which is usually tied back into a pony-tail. She has a round shaped figure and would be considered overweight for her age and height. Kristy describes herself as 'special' because she has one green eye and one blue eye and has a wide smile that stands out as her most attractive feature. She appears very proud of her appearance, spending considerable time each day preparing her hair and clothes for school, yet seems to be a little self conscious when around her peers. She wouldn't change anything about herself if she had the chance: *'I'm me... people know me as me'* however she admitted *'I wish I was older, I'm sick of being a kid'*, older people *'get to explore more... you can do more, you can get a job, you can earn your own money and move away... I can't wait to grow up!'* (Interview 14, 27.08.03, p. 4, lines 36-45) (Interview 12, 21.05.03, p. 5, lines 3-12).

Kristy is one of two children, the youngest by eight years and lives in the original family home on the main road into town with her mother and father. Her parents both work at a local company that provides employment for a number of people in the district and her mother is also responsible for *'all the housework and everything'* around the home (Interview 12, 21.05.03, p. 1, line 12). Kristy appears to enjoy a healthy relationship with her mother although they do experience moments of tension, most likely due to a clash of strong personalities. She seems to have developed a strong bond with her father through spending considerable time together each week, participating in their sporting commitments. Kristy's older brother, Gary recently turned twenty-two and has just moved out of home. He works as a plasterer in the district and sees the family regularly; however, Kristy is still adjusting to what she sees as a 'new life' as the only child in a two-parent household. On the weekends Kristy and her parents regularly travel to Melbourne to visit their relatives and to go shopping. She enjoys most of the shopping expeditions yet gets bored and tires easily when having to visit a number of different relatives in the one day.

At home Kristy is expected to assist her mother with the day-to-day running of the house and has a number of jobs she is expected to complete. Her responsibilities include washing, drying and putting away the dishes every second week when her mother is working, and bringing in the clothes from the clothes line, then folding and putting them away. Kristy is also responsible for feeding her fox terrier named Jordan and taking her for a walk after school each day. She is also required to look after her pet rabbit named Bugs including brushing and changing her water every second day. Kristy estimates that her responsibilities around the home take a total of one hour each day to complete.

In her spare time Kristy enjoys going to the movies and talking to her friends on the telephone. She enjoys singing and likes dancing, however she doesn't attend formal classes and prefers to sing and dance on her own at home and with her friends. Kristy likes watching television when her sporting commitments and responsibilities allow; however, she always makes time to watch her favourite show 'Australian Idol'. She enjoys cooking and will often decide to do some baking when she feels there is nothing else to do: *'I made a cake the other night because I was bored'* (Interview 12, 21.05.03, p. 4, line 20).

Outside of school Kristy entertains a busy schedule of sporting commitments and activities each week. Her father is heavily involved in basketball as a referee, referee advisor and a member of the local club committee. Kristy seems to resent the intensity of his involvement in the sport, having described his commitments as restricting her participation in other sports. In the past she has participated in swimming classes and competitions which she enjoyed, however *'I gave them both up because we have a busy schedule with basketball [commitments five nights a week]'* (Interview 12, 21.05.03, p. 3, lines 8-9). She used to be a member of the local representative team and has recently qualified as a beginning basketball referee. On Monday, Tuesday or Thursday nights Kristy is employed to umpire two basketball matches in a row. She volunteers to referee the modified basketball games for under 12's on Friday nights and plays in a basketball competition following a training session on Wednesday after school. Kristy is also a keen netballer, attending training on Wednesday evenings and competing in a local competition on Saturday mornings.

Kristy enjoys school, particularly the social opportunities it provides and the time she is able to spend with her friends every day. She finds her school work relatively easy and as a learner describes herself as obeying the rules. *'I can manage, I'm not dumb, I'm quite smart but I'm not boasting or anything... I'm good at most of my subjects [and] I ask for help when I need*

it' (Interview 12, 21.05.03, p. 8, lines 22-24). Kristy identifies that her strengths lie in English and maths because she hasn't had to ask for help from her teachers all term and was given rewards for finishing work on time and producing consistent grades. She likes her high school; *'I love it here, I absolutely love it'* (Interview 12, 21.05.03, p. 9, line 26); however, Kristy had difficulty explaining exactly what she loved about her school. She thinks her two principals *'do an excellent job....cos no one tries stuff because they know they won't get away with it'* (Interview 12, 21.05.03, p. 9, lines 38-44). Kristy is confident about asking for assistance and believes *'it is important that you ask for help [because] if you don't you will never learn'* (Interview 12, 21.05.03, p. 8, line 29-32).

Kristy is currently preoccupied with her frustration with the amount of time her teachers expect her to spend on completing homework each week. *'Two hours is way too much! The average is supposed to be an hour a week on homework and we get two or three hours of homework each week ... I can't stand it. It cuts into your social life... it's just so annoying!'* (Interview 12, 21.05.03, p. 7, lines 42-44). After completing primary school last year, Kristy finds it very difficult to handle the large amounts of work she has to complete in year seven, which causes her stress and also reduces the time she gets to spend with her family: *'I feel chained to my room the whole time [I'm] doing homework'* (Interview 12, 21.05.03, p. 11, line 19).

Kristy presents herself as a serious individual who said she felt honoured to be asked to participate in the study. She gives the impression that she had spent a great deal of time contemplating what we might talk about and even consulted her peers on what they felt about issues she thought might be raised. As a case study participant, Kristy offers considered thoughts and openly shares her experiences and feelings. She is an enthusiastic participant and provides great insight into her own thoughts, as well as those of her peers. The most striking

outcome of Kristy's participation in the study is her willingness to offer valuable suggestions on how teaching approaches and student support can be improved.

4.2.4.3 Case 6: Dean

Dean comes across as a strong-minded, self-confident 14 year old who exhibits a laid-back attitude, and rather casual approach to life. He greatly admires his older brother, Jai because *'everything he does is cool... I want to be like him!'* (Interview 17, 26.08.03, p. 5, lines 2-24). When I first met Dean he exuded independence and was not afraid to be himself. *'I don't really care [if] people don't like me for who I am... I have friends being me... I don't care what anyone [else] thinks'* (Interview 16, 23.06.03, p. 3, lines 37-39). He presents himself as very outgoing and not afraid to voice his opinion, which often leads to conflict with his peers. In the future Dean would like to be a jet or helicopter pilot or *'a front liner in the military'* because his friend John wants to join the army, along with his brother Jai *'so that's a bit of an influence [and] that's what got me into it as well'* (Interview 17, 26.08.03, p. 5, lines 32-44). Physically, Dean is very focused on his appearance, and I would suggest spends a great deal of time preparing his hair and clothes for school each day. He spikes his brown hair with gel and strategically wears his favourite tee shirt underneath his school uniform every day so others will notice. Dean wears the latest fashionable 'skater' sneakers to school, although they are not an accepted form of footwear. He is tall for his age, having just experienced a growth spurt, and bears the marks of teenage acne on his face of which he is well aware. Dean believes that he mumbles too much and repeats the word 'whatever' all the time. Therefore if he could change anything about himself it would be to stop mumbling *'which I do a lot'* and find some new words to use in conversation (Interview 16, 23.06.03, p. 26, line 31).

Dean lives with his mother, father, and two older brothers, Jai and Hayden, in a house on the edge of town. His father is the owner and manager of the family business, situated in the town

centre at which Jai also works and is completing an apprenticeship. Hayden attends the local TAFE College while his mother works occasionally in the family business and runs the household. Dean enjoys positive relationships with all members of his family. His father seems to apply a tough love approach with his three boys and is not only their father but their boss as well. Dean highly respects his father and looks to him as a role model for his future. As the youngest child, Dean appears to be the 'apple of his mother's eye' and they share a warm and loving relationship. However, she is well aware of his cheeky personality and at times over self-confidence. Dean shares healthy relationships with both his brothers. He looks up to and admires both of them in different ways, and they are always willing to help out with his school work, jobs and support him in all that he does. Dean's family enjoys spending time together whenever the opportunity arises. They have a permanent caravan at a popular local holiday spot where they keep a boat and enjoy water sports such as fishing, water-skiing and swimming during school holidays and over long weekends.

At home, Dean is expected to help out and has specific responsibilities including washing his own dishes each night after dinner, wiping down the benches in the kitchen and helping to pack away cooking equipment. All three boys are expected to help out with other tasks when asked. Dean is also responsible for feeding the family's pet dog each day and maintaining a tidy bedroom. Recently, his parents have employed a local person to mow the lawn and take care of the garden, a job Dean used to share with his brothers.

Outside school, Dean retains two jobs. The first involves unpaid work with his father at the family business, where he is expected to help out after school every day for about an hour sweeping floors and cleaning benches. Dean is also employed by the local newsagency and completes a paper-round each morning from Monday to Saturday, every second week, which he enjoys as *'it keeps me fit, it's good for my legs, it's good exercise... and it's pretty good*

pay' (Interview 15, 27.05.03, p. 3, lines 21-24). With his unpaid work in the family business and paid employment as a paper boy, Dean works each day before school every second week and after school each day every week, making for a very hectic schedule outside of school.

Dean spends a great deal of his personal time socialising with friends and identifies himself as a member of the 'cool' group at school. *'I'm popularish but I'm still smart'* he explains (Interview 16, 23.06.03, p. 8, line 26). He regularly attends parties and get-togethers with his friends on most weekends and school holidays and enjoys sleeping over at their homes. Dean enjoys listening to music, is an accomplished water-skier and watches television and movies regularly. He confesses that he enjoys watching sport more than he likes playing it; however he regularly participates in a weekly basketball competition on Monday afternoons.

Dean enjoys school for the social opportunities it provides, the chance to complete a broad range of subjects and because his friends attend the same secondary school. He comes across as not very focused on learning and frequently forgets about homework, resulting in a last minute hasty effort to complete work on time. In his second year at secondary school, Dean feels his strengths lie in Studies of Society and the Environment (S.O.S.E) and *'I'm good at English except for writing, I haven't got neat writing'* (Interview 15, 27.05.03, p. 6, lines 45-46). He identifies himself as *'a quick learner...'* and although he experiences strained relationships with many of his teachers, claims *'I try to be a good student'* (Interview 15, 27.05.03, p. 6, line 32). Dean regularly finds himself in trouble in relation to behavioural issues in the classroom, although he believes he makes a considerable effort in most of his classes and responds positively to warnings about his behaviour. He believes his teachers don't really understand who he is or recognise his true personality, finding they respond negatively to his laughing and smiling. Often offended by his teachers' comments that he is immature, Dean disagrees with their assessment of his behaviour. He believes all students

should be mucking around and misbehaving during the Middle Years of Schooling and that any student in years seven, eight and nine not rebelling is simply a ‘poser’, someone who is putting on an act and trying to look good.

Dean stands out through his high level of self-confidence and a straight-talking manner. He conveys a strong belief that students should be allowed to be themselves at school, and their teachers should respect individual personalities rather than trying to squash who they really are. Dean feels strongly that students should have the right to have fun at school and that learning should be enjoyable for everyone. He is hard working, yet has a light hearted approach to life, enjoying living every day to the full and making the most of the social opportunities available to him. Dean provided honest insight and interesting analysis on his inner thoughts, feelings and experiences as a student in the Middle Years of Schooling. He enthusiastically offered suggestions on strategies to improve the educational experience for himself and his peers and demonstrated a real love and enjoyment of the social aspect of schooling.

The six participants in the study: Heather, Thomas, Louise, Steven, Kristy and Dean are unique and fascinating in their own way which distinguishes them and defines each person’s individuality.

4.3 Thematic Analysis

This section will provide analysis of the data by discussing the themes that emerged. The themes will be addressed within a framework defined by human dimensions of young people’s lives. Literature will be used to support and highlight the relevance of each of these themes, connecting the experiences of the participants to existing research in the field.

4.3.1. The Selection of Themes

As the research question concerns the pressures on rural students in the Middle Years of Schooling to achieve academically, the data analysis process identified themes that highlighted the pressures faced by these students. These themes all comprise the central issue of identity and as such, they intersect with one another. The themes that emerged include:

- Over-scheduled-hurried Lives,
- The Nature of Feedback: Intrinsic and Extrinsic Rewards,
- Labelling, and
- Doing School: What's Next?

The themes intertwined in that the experiences, thoughts and feelings of participants in one area of the analysis intersected with experiences, thoughts and feelings in another. However, each of these themes was fundamental in influencing the participants' lived experiences.

The framework for the themes is based on four significant human dimensions of young people's lives:

- Perceptions and Expectations of Self,
- Perceptions and Expectations of Parents,
- Perceptions and Expectations of School, and
- Perceptions and Expectations of Peers.

While these four dimensions provide a framework for the discussion of identified themes, not all four dimensions were used in the analysis of data for each theme.

4.3.2 Over-scheduled-hurried Lives

During the intense period of early adolescence, individuals need time and space to assimilate change and make sense of the world around them. Adolescence is called the time in between

childhood and adulthood, yet early adolescents are often being pushed towards adulthood and independence on one hand while being overly protected on the other. The busy lives of young people are becoming increasingly complex, and while some adolescents accomplish equilibrium without major struggle, others grapple with the challenges of creating a sense of balance (Smart & Sanson, 2005, Autumn).

Throughout this theme, elements of time and time-out, identity, the hurried child, family commitments, responsibilities and support, along with parental expectations, advertising academic achievement, accelerated programs, support structures, peer groups and bullying emerged as integral components of over-scheduled-hurried lives, as well as the impact of these external influences on perceptions and expectations.

4.3.2.1 Perceptions and Expectations of Self

As the twenty-first century is often described as a risk society where adolescents must navigate their own life journeys, the key characteristic to successfully negotiating life is individualisation (Winter & Stone, 1999, cited in Abbott-Chapman, 2000). The development of the concept of self is one of the most significant changes to occur during early adolescence, when individuals establish and confirm their beliefs about themselves and their self-perception, their philosophy and views, morals and ethics and the way by which they will live their lives. Self-concept theory (Seligman, 1995, cited in Howard & Johnson, 2000) emphasises the importance of self worth on the development of functional individuals, and at no other stage in life is self-concept so important to the future of early adolescents. Added to the development of self-concept is a hurried existence that disallows early adolescents the opportunity to stand back, examine their lives and develop strategies for fostering resilience.

Competing for time in the participants' lives were music and drama classes, socialising and social events, sport training and competitions, family gatherings and outings as well as household chores and work outside the home. Many appear to simply 'fit' school and homework into their already busy schedules. For Thomas and Heather these competing forces assist in creating balance in their lives. For example, Heather doesn't bother spending much time on school work that doesn't interest her, seeing her personal interests as more important, and time outside of school as time for herself, while these competing forces create further stress and conflict for Dean, Steven, Louise and Kristy. Steven feels he is always rushing through each day, trying to fit everything in and having little spare time to himself, while Louise says with her home responsibilities and chores, along with sporting interests and family commitments, '*I haven't got time to study*' (Interview 7, 28.08.03, p. 6, line 7). Kristy believes that school demands are taking time away from the things she enjoys, such as going to the movies and socialising with friends.

As the early adolescents maintain filled lives, they are left little time to themselves. Dean has roughly half-an-hour to himself each day during the week when he chooses to squeeze exercise into his hectic life style. Responsibilities around the home as well as sporting commitments, school and homework demands impact significantly on his amount of personal time. Louise spends each night after school looking after her younger brother until her mother arrives home from work, leaving little time to herself to develop a sense of resilience. Masten, Best and Garmezy (1990, cited in Howard & Johnson, 2000) argue that the 'successful adaptation despite challenging or threatening circumstances' requiring a strong set of personal attributes, coping behaviours and positive beliefs about self including a high self esteem and a positive attitude. Research (Howard & Johnson, 2000) shows that individuals who demonstrate these factors have a significant advantage over those who hold a negative self belief. In order to develop resilience, these young adolescents need time to themselves to

develop personal coping strategies, generate new ideas, develop problem-solving skills and reflect on the experiences and challenges they face in life.

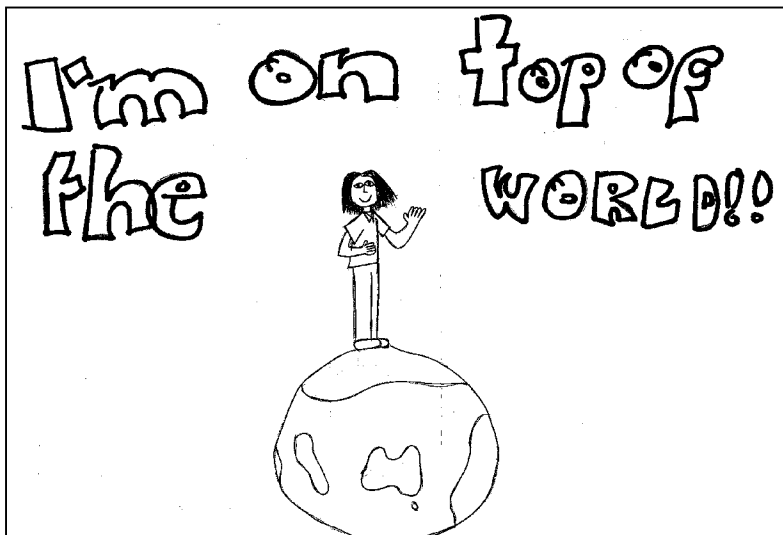
In order to manage the demands of a hectic schedule and maintain a sense of balance in their lives, many adolescents are forced to prioritise the activities in which they participate. In the past Kristy has been involved in swimming classes and competitions; however, she gave them both up due to a busy schedule with basketball. She used to be a member of the local representative Basketball team but resigned for similar reasons. Abbott-Chapman (2000) suggests that adolescents need to take time out from their overly structured lives, which requires clearing time and space in their day. While some adolescents achieve this with ease, others struggle to ensure this time is spent on activities of their choice. When Dean's basketball team missed out on the opportunity to play in the basketball finals, he decided not to take up another sport or participate in other extra curricular activities and took a break from organised sport until the following season began. Although Steven considers the time he has at home to be his own, he struggles to ensure it is spent on activities of his choice explaining *'if I've got homework, I'll [always] do that'* first (Interview 10, 26.08.03, p. 13, lines 39-40). Yet, while clearing time creates opportunities to retreat, process and develop understanding of the experiences and challenges they face, early adolescents are essentially removing the opportunity to engage in new experiences and learning (Abbott-Chapman, 2000).

When early adolescents are denied this time and space, they are also denied accepted forms of sanctuary such as hanging out with friends or spending time alone. While none of the adolescents in this study expressed having participated in destructive forms of time out including binge drinking and drug taking, Thomas casually mentioned he had experienced thoughts of suicide when feeling depressed about not meeting his academic expectations. He passed off the comment. The simple severity of this thought highlights the need for early

adolescents to be provided with 'sufficient opportunities for constructive time out and sanctuary for reflection and identity building' (Abbott-Chapman, 2000, p. 24). In extreme cases, some adolescents feel compelled towards suicide. However fleeting, Thomas' response needs to be seen as a warning sign to address the academic pressure placed on students.

The development of a positive self-image requires reflective time, however over-scheduling and a hurried existence can deny the opportunity for this needed reflection. Identity, the individual characteristics which define a person including individuality and personality, is an essential contributing factor to perceptions and expectations of self. The early adolescents in the study possess individual characteristics and demonstrate distinct personalities that help define their identity.

Figure 4.1: Heather Illustrating her Sense of Identity



(Interview 22, 29.08.03, Illustration - Heather)

Heather and Dean demonstrate a strong self-concept. Heather is able to shrug off negative comments from her peers, while Dean has the strength to stand up for his beliefs and views even when they differ from those of his peers *'I like the opposite stuff to some people... I hate Eminem and the rest of the people like Eminem... I like Ford better than Holden and most*

people in my grade like Holden' (Interview 16, 23.06.03, p. 3, lines 14-18). While a strong self-concept helps early adolescents understand their social environment and guide their future behaviour, it holds strong links to students' motivation, achievement, confidence and psychological well-being (Hay, 2000; McCombs & Marzano, 1990). Kristy, Louise, Thomas and Steven appear to lack self-confidence and show low self-concept. Kristy behaves self-consciously and anxiously around her peers, while Louise feels nervous and uncomfortable when dealing with life's challenges. Thomas appears awkward and uncomfortable when discussing his personal thoughts and feelings and worries about achieving, explaining '*I don't know*] *how good I'm going to be*' (Interview 5, 12.06.03, p. 2, line 9). Research (Hay, Ashman & Van Kraayenoord, 1998) shows self-concept is formed within an adolescent's social environment and is often based on feedback from significant others and self-evaluation. Steven struggles to deal with being bullied which makes him feel depressed and upset. During his individual interviews, Steven revealed:

'Well I like most of school, it's just like some days I'm a bit down because like stuff sometimes happens...when I'm getting picked on...I just like need a helping hand sometimes....[I get picked on for] general stuff, like trying to, um, get things in on time...general picking on me, like picking on how I look and stuff.... they just say what are you, a girl, trying to keep your hand writing neat.... in the next class they will keep going....some of the stuff they do say is pretty bad....[I feel] down...[and] I get annoyed...[because] people are picking on me [and] the teachers don't really do anything about it...I'm just trying to tell them [about it] and they're not really listening' (Interview 9, 26.05.03, pp. 9-12, lines 24-42).

Furthermore, in his journal Steven wrote:

'Today I yet again got picked on...I get really annoyed when they do that and the teachers don't do anything to fix it...another problem is when I get picked on, all the girls laugh at me and they always try to follow [them] like puppy dogs....I get really annoyed...the teachers are [now] trying to understand what's happening....this week was much worse than last week, I got picked on heaps and I got really annoyed and upset...I can't really think of much [to do about

it]...those boys are just laughing when they pick on me and it pisses me off

(Steven's Journal Entries 07.05.03, 16.05.04 & 23.05.03)

Steven's low self-concept, resulting from these experiences is reinforced by Hay, Ashman and Van Kraayenoord (1997) who studied children with low self-esteem and found that they experienced less positive classroom experiences and peer interactions. Further research (Rudd & Evans, 1998, cited in Abbot-Chapman, 2000) suggests that while battling for a sense of identity, independence and power over their lives, early adolescents must make life choices which often lead to 'feelings of powerlessness and alienation' (p. 21). More often than not, this struggle for autonomy sees early adolescents experience significant crises or focus on their problems, rather than on positive outcomes (Dwyer, Harwood & Tyler, 1998, cited in Abbott-Chapman, 2000).

4.3.2.2 Perceptions and Expectations of Parents

The 'consistency, quality of care and support' experienced by adolescents throughout their lives are important family support factors (Howard & Johnson, 2000, ¶ 5). The perceptions and expectations of parents impacted strongly on the experiences and challenges of the early adolescents in this study. Placing expectations on adolescents can directly affect the pressures they experience and the challenges they face.

The adolescents in this study lead increasingly busy lives. Research (Elkind, 1986, January, 2001; NSW Department of Education and Training, 2002) has shown that parental influence is a contributing factor to the hurried lives of early adolescents. Louise's responsibilities and obligations outside the home are influenced by her mother's work and sporting commitments, while Thomas' father expects him to be 'on call' to help out on the farm when required, and Kristy's involvement in basketball is strongly influenced by her father's participation in the

sport as a player, coach and referee. The term ‘hurried child’ was coined over two decades ago by Psychologist David Elkind to describe the ‘phenomenon among parents of involving their children in dozens of extra-curricular activities’ intended to support and further the academic, social, sporting, cultural and psychological skills of their children (NSW Department of Education and Training, 2002, ¶ 2). The ‘hurried child’ syndrome is becoming more apparent as the pressures on children’s time are intensifying. Contemporary parents believe that involving their children in rigorous extra-curricular activities will promote their child’s development and future success (NSW Department of Education and Training, 2002). This ‘hurried child’ phenomenon can be likened to intense ‘hot housing’ where parents push children into ‘learning more quickly and earlier than is appropriate’ for their cognitive age (Bainbridge, n.d, ¶ 1). Seligman (1995) reports that early adolescents are overprotected by their parents, display lower levels of resiliency and an ‘inability to bounce back’ (cited in NSW Department of Education and Training, 2002, ¶ 19).

Family commitments consume a large portion of the participants’ lives; home duties require the participants to spend time each day completing chores around the home, from taking care of pet animals to cleaning bedrooms and helping out with the dishes. Each participant is involved in family outings and activities from shopping trips to Melbourne, to weekend visits to the family farm or holiday house, and Sundays working around the home. For some, school holidays and long weekends involve travel to visit relatives or time together on a family vacation, while for Louise and Heather it often involves sharing time between parents and homes, requiring a significant change in environment and routine.

The early adolescents in this study consider family support vital in assisting them to cope with the experiences and challenges they face in their lives. Steven’s oldest sister, Sue, is his greatest support, taking time to talk to him about his life, helping him with his homework and

just having fun together. Sue provides Steven with advice, unconditional love and support. Kristy never worries about asking for assistance because she believes that *'it's important that you ask for help'* and feels secure that her parents are always there to provide help when she needs it (Interview 12, 21.05.03, p. 8, line 28). The early adolescents in this study appeared to value the advice of their parents and to trust the adults in their lives to allow them to make their own decisions about their future, and decide what is most important in their lives. While Steven and Kristy see the high level of support they are provided as positive, it may also be preventing them from building the problem-solving strategies they will require throughout their lives.

Many of the early adolescents mentioned their need for privacy, with some finding their personal space invaded by siblings or parents to the extent that they feel they have little space they can truly call their own. Kristy and Heather's mothers freely enter their daughters' bedrooms, much to the girls' disapproval. Kristy dislikes it when her mother changes her room around when she is at school, while Heather is frustrated that her mother hassles her to tidy up her room. By invading personal space, parents are contaminating a haven or sanctuary where their children feel safe and have time to process and make sense of the experiences and challenges they face in life (Abbott-Chapman, 2000). Participants also expressed concern that their parents were not only invading their personal space, but also helping themselves to their personal possessions. Heather expressed her displeasure when her mother sorts through her clothes and toys, believing that she has no right to look through her private belongings. Kristy explains *'my mum goes through my diary...she just gets it out of my bag and [asks] have you got any homework'* (Interview 13, 18.06.03, p.14, line 47). Parents may feel a need to regulate and schedule schoolwork and homework for their children, which may add to the academic pressures these adolescents experience. However beneficial this parental minding may be, it still seeks to control the time and space these adolescents have to themselves, their ability to

learn from their mistakes and the opportunity to develop the resources they require to establish autonomy.

The early adolescents are aware of their parents' high expectations that they will find employment to gain valuable life skills and assist with personal finances. With each of the secondary students holding regular employment, and one primary student participating in unpaid work, it appears they fit the mould of 'the student worker', a growing phenomenon and adolescent lifestyle of full-time student, part-time employee (Yap, 1991, p. 1). It is certainly true for Steven and Thomas that working students may be more confident and organised, have an established daily routine, develop maturity and responsibility, plan their time more carefully and take control over their lives (Yap, 1998). However, Dean and Kristy reflect some of the negative aspects of the student worker lifestyle, feeling tired and having a lot to do, restricted leisure time, feeling pressured, withdrawing from personal interests, and not studying as much as they need to (Yap, 1998). Spending time with their parents on a regular basis can assist early adolescents develop positive relationships and provide opportunity to face challenges together, helping to create a sense of balance in their lives. Yet, working alongside parents can also reduce the time and space adolescents have for themselves, and can limit opportunities for them to make their own decisions. For Steven, working in the family business provides the opportunity to spend time with his parents and develop a closer bond, while for Dean it can be a source of frustration and conflict when he has to make time in his life to fulfil his work responsibilities.

4.3.2.3 Perceptions and Expectations of School

Brendan Nelson, the former Federal government Minister for Education, Science and Training, advocated schools using billboard advertising that focused on student achievement. Since then, Victorian schools have used advertising campaigns aimed at promoting student

academic success to attract new students to their schools. An approach by one school was to use an image of early primary aged students dressed in academic caps and gowns next to a statement highlighting the average Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE) results and University placement of graduating students from their school. Although the schools in this study do not advertise academic achievement to this extent, they do announce student results and award academic honours through their school newsletters, assemblies and presentation evenings. Griffiths (2000, December) argues that increasing levels of pressure on students to achieve at school can be attributed to increasing competitiveness of education and the need to gain credentials. Students are encouraged to maximise their learning and skills for future success; increased pressure on individuals, as a consequence of choices, intensifies workloads, testing and expectations.

Accelerated programs where students fast track their way through high school are now becoming more popular, with schools competing against each other for the prize of student achievement and success. Steven and Kristy experience the pressures of a crowded and fast paced curriculum. Steven admits feeling he is constantly rushing; rushing to school, rushing from class to class, from project to test, feeling he is constantly squeezing in more information and activities.

'I'm rushed to get ready for school and...to [get] to school and then after school, I've got to rush around and put mail in boxes and stuff and like I said, I've got other commitments too and then homework [to do]...' (Interview 9, 26.05.03, p. 4, lines 50-51).

Kristy complains that she has too much work to do; spreading her time and efforts across many tasks results in lower quality output and prevents her from submitting her schoolwork and homework on time. She explains, *'I get scared [that if I] don't get the work in on time...I won't pass'* (Interview 13, 18.06.03, p. 1, lines 32-40). Roeser, Midgley & Urdan (1996)

highlight the urgency for schools to reduce emphasis on student academic achievement as it is deteriorating students' sense of success and belonging at school.

The School is an important environment that provides students with opportunities and capital for developing the skills and attributes that promote resilience (Howard & Johnson, 2000). A strong sense of belonging and connectedness is developed when schools are child-focused, collaborative environments where students feel cared for, safe, secure and empowered (Howard & Johnson, 2000). School support structures including access to teachers and councillors and time available to students for this purpose, are important elements of a supportive environment. The early adolescents in this study felt they were given little opportunity to experience these support structures, stating that only students experiencing major problems or issues were referred to the school councillors, while teachers had little time for their students outside class. Teachers are living fast-paced teaching lives like their students. Mrs. Green discusses this pace.

'Unfortunately in this game we don't have any time for reflection...I would like more time for reflection....I just do [everything] on the run so much here, no day is the same and there's no time, I don't have the luxury of [taking] time to suit me...I don't get [time to myself]...you don't get it here [at school] and my home environment, I don't get it either...If I really, really want to be on my own...I really have to lock myself in my bedroom' (Interview 35, 10.09.03, p. 5-6, lines 19-9).

Mrs. Wilson also highlights her hectic lifestyle at school: *'I had a bit of a crisis week...it's just so busy at the moment...I was rushing to class... [then I had to] rush off to a meeting, but that's the reality of teaching really'* (Interview 37, 02.09.03, p. 10, lines 1-5). Mr. Linley further reinforces the pressure on teachers' time: *'it comes down to that lack of time...as a teacher my preparation's done whenever I've got time in whatever conditions are available'* (Interview 36, 02.09.03, p. 3-4, lines 13-3). With continuously changing curriculum,

increasing school standards, greater demands on time and resources along with busy private lives, many teachers are living similar hurried lives to their students.

4.3.2.4 Perceptions and Expectations of Peers

Peer recognition and socialization often take over importance from family and parents in influencing a young adolescent's life, and the perceptions and expectations of friends and friendship groups can significantly impact upon the lives of individuals. Kristy is a self-confident individual yet doesn't want to admit to her peers that she is bright, for fear of being singled out and excluded from her peer group: *'I sound like a bitch, like I love myself...if you say I'm usually excellent, they say oh my god, look at her, idiot'* (Interview 12, 21.05.03, p. 14, lines 23-32). Hargreaves and Earl (1990) argue that adolescents harbour a strong need to be liked and included within their peer groups, however the development of peer groups and the process of becoming a member of one or more such groups can be challenging. Through the development of strong peer relationships, the young adolescent is able to redefine their sense of self in terms of what is normal in everyday life (George & Alexander, 1993). The acquisition and development of social skills and the ability to relate to others are fundamental skills that form the foundation from which peer relationships are formed. An adolescent's strong sense of self is developed through these relations with peers. Feeling a sense of belonging and connectedness to peers, and issues of bullying, significantly influence the participants' lives.

The early adolescents in this study communicated a sense of belonging and connection with their peer groups with many participating in social activities. Activities involved playing with friends on neighbouring properties, to socialising and talking on the telephone with their peers and with people in chat rooms on the internet. They also enjoyed going to the movies, attending parties, sleepovers and get-togethers with their peers. The struggle for some

participants to develop strong relationships with their peers was also evident. Heather experiences difficulties relating to her peer group after moving schools on three occasions, while Steven, despite his effort to get along with peers, is regularly teased by a group of students, including friends, resulting in his exclusion. Resilience is fostered by a supportive group of pro-social peers, who share common interests and experiences, and are willing to help, talk and actively listen to each other (Howard & Johnson, 2000). In order to fit in, feel they belong and can relate adolescents require the opportunity to be involved and participate in social and cultural activities (Howard & Johnson, 2000).

Issues of bullying are of great concern to the health and well-being of adolescents. Amongst peers, the effects of bullying can hinder the development of a positive concept of self. Although most participants admitted to experiencing bullying to some extent during their schooling, Steven experienced a history of bullying throughout his secondary school education, which has caused him to feel vulnerable, depressed, and to accept bullying as just a part of school life. However, Steven didn't tell his parents about the bullying for a year: *'I don't really know [why]... I thought I could handle it cause I was starting to get into the hang of...them picking on me, so I just sort of got used to ignoring them'* (Interview 9, 26.05.2003, p. 11, line 20-22). Victimisation, including being teased and deliberately excluded, experiencing physical threats or violence or being the target of rumours can be considered a common or normal developmental experience. Alternatively, it can also be a significant cause of stress and physical and emotional problems for early adolescents (Bond, Carlin, Thomas, Rubin & Patton, 2001).

4.3.3 The Nature of Feedback: Intrinsic and Extrinsic Rewards

When adolescents seek acceptance and positive reinforcement, constructive feedback can make a significant difference to their learning experience, achievement and their overall self-

concept. To improve learning and enhance achievement, feedback, the information given in response to, or derived from, a process or activity, must be responsive and timely. Although feedback can be seen as potentially motivating, much has been said (Kohn, 1987, January 19, 1993; Beswick, 2002, November) of feedback as manipulating behaviour in the form of rewards and punishments, with extrinsic rewards seen to reduce intrinsic motivation. Some Adolescents may find feedback to be motivating and supportive, yet others may experience declining interest in a task, lower performance levels and a decreased desire to learn (Kohn, 1987, January 19; Kohn, cited in Brandt, 1995, September).

Kalantzis and Cope (2001) argue that while personal identities change under the influence of technology, domestic economy and culture, and there exists increased scope to be yourself in a way which is different, early adolescents are increasingly navigating their own ways through life. Amidst this change, feedback provides early adolescents opportunity to develop strong, yet realistic expectations of them self, create a self-made identity or diverse identities and a sense of belonging through new kinds of self expression and community building (Kalantzis & Cope, 2001).

Throughout this theme, elements of intrinsic motivation and self-concept, self-talk, extrinsic motivation and rewards, power and competition along with parent and teacher language emerged as integral components of feedback as well as the influence of these external factors on perceptions and expectations.

4.3.3.1 Perceptions and Expectations of Self

Developing strong intrinsic motivation ensures early adolescents learn to set their own standards and priorities, identify intrinsic rewards available through their own efforts, believe in their ability to determine value in a task, and develop a strong sense of self (Hunt, 1999,

January-February). Intrinsic motivation is the ‘desire to engage in an activity for its own sake [or] the satisfaction it provides’ rather than from a result of the activity (Kohn, 1993, p. 270). This self-motivation can be seen as incentive, with the satisfaction gained from a task reflecting the intrinsic value to the individual (Beswick, 2002, November).

When early adolescents begin to question the world around them, it is important to establish an understanding of motivation: the psychological characteristic that provokes an individual into action toward a desired goal, where the reason for that action gives purpose and direction for behaviour (Ames & Ames, 1984, August). Of the six early adolescents in this study, Dean and Heather appear to have developed strong intrinsic motivation to learn, while Steven is motivated to assist his peers with their learning as it gives him a sense of satisfaction and pride. He explains: *‘I’m good with people, like I’m always trying to help people out if they don’t get something...if someone is down in class I’ll try and like cheer them up, and just help them out’* (Interview 9, 26.05.03, p. 11, lines 35-37). In stark contrast, Kristy, Thomas and Louise exhibit signs of grappling with what motivates them. While Kristy is not certain why she bothers putting so much time and effort into her work when she doesn’t get anything out of it, Thomas appears to be a determined individual; yet if he doesn’t achieve his goals he believes: *‘I have let myself down in a way... [and] I feel really disappointed in myself’* (Interview 4, 14.05.03, p. 10, lines 16-25). Intrinsically motivated people can be seen as autonomous, independent individuals with strong self-esteem which comes from understanding the limits of their knowledge and skills and knowing their strengths and weaknesses (Kohn, 1993; Grohol, 2003, March 17). Developing intrinsic motivation assists early adolescents to develop ‘faith in [their] own judgment’ and a strong sense of self to be ‘independent, self-confident [and] self-motivated’ individuals (Hunt, 1999, January-February, ¶ 15). However, to develop intrinsic motivation and a positive sense of self, adolescents need

time and freedom to make choices, collect and analyse information and develop an appreciation for effort as well as the finished product (Beswick, 2002, November).

Adolescence marks a turning point in the life of a young individual when the experience of personal transition can lead to uncomfortable emotions, moods or even crises. Although Heather appears to display a healthy level of self-confidence, she expresses the belief: *'I'm never really good with homework unless [it's] something I like to [do]'* (Interview 2, 05.06.03, p. 5, lines 8-9); and while her school reports show her spelling skills are in line with a year eight student, she responds by participating in negative self-talk, stating *'that's really hard to believe'* (Interview 2, 05.06.03, p. 8, line 37). Calvete and Cardeñoso (2002, August) argue that during adolescence, it is vital that early adolescents understand the significant role of self-talk in the process of analysing events and emotions. Self-talk or inner conversations can have a powerful impact on an individual's motivation, emotional well-being and confidence to make the most of their talent and abilities (Braiker, 1989, December). While research (Braiker, 1989, December; Burnett, 1996; Calvete & Cardeñoso, 2002, August) shows the real power of inner speech is how it can change behaviour and impact on emotions, state of mind and psychological health (Beck, cited in Braiker, 1989, December; Burnett, 1996), early adolescents need to be aware of the impact positive and negative self-talk can have on behaviour. Furthermore, inner speech allows consideration of an individual's thoughts and beliefs about oneself, the world and relationships with others, providing opportunity for reflection (Calvete & Cardeñoso, 2002, August).

4.3.3.2 Perceptions and Expectations of Parents

Young individuals who are successful in negotiating the challenges and life experiences of early adolescence have often developed an awareness of self, built from a foundation of positive experiences, praise and learning from significant people in their lives (Grohol, 2003,

March 17). The influence of parental feedback can have positive and negative effects on an adolescent's perception of self, directly affecting the pressures they experience and eventually impacting on the academic pressures they face.

Motivation is something that all children are born with, however by early adolescence intrinsic motivation is declining rapidly, while extrinsic motivators are becoming more prominent. Steven is rewarded by his parents for excellent homework results and school reports:

'My parents congratulate me... and like the next day when I come back home they'll be like sometimes a present on my bed... and if my report's good for the year, both of them, I get a present at the end of the year as well' (Interview 10, 26.08.03, p. 8, lines 21-35).

While these extrinsic rewards make Steven feel *'more confident and [I] think oh great, I can do it... if I do this more often [I'll be rewarded]'* (Interview 10, 26.08.03, p. 8, lines 44-45), these extrinsic rewards have increased in value and frequency since Steven began secondary school. In 1898 psychologist Edward Thorndike coined the term Law of Effect which supports this notion that *'behaviour leading to a positive consequence will be repeated'* (Kohn, 1993, p. 4). Kohn (1993) describes rewards as a form of manipulating behaviour that destroys the potential for learning. Dean feels happy, proud and that he has accomplished something when his parents congratulate him on his schoolwork, however when he is not offered positive reinforcement for work to which he has contributed he feels cheated, explaining *'[I feel] angry... [and] unhappy because like, [I] tried'* (Interview 17, 26.08.03, p. 10, lines 27-33). Often, if there is no reward, an individual loses intrinsic motivation to perform the task (Hunt, 1999, January-February). Extrinsic motivators are considered ineffective and counterproductive with respect to a desire to learn, while rewards are most damaging to interest when a task is already intrinsically motivating. Not only can rewards

lower performance levels, reduce intrinsic interest in an activity, and provide less enjoyment, they encourage individuals to take fewer risks, complete the task too quickly, and focus narrowly on the task at hand (Kohn, 1987, January 19). At a time when early adolescents should be encouraged to take risks in learning, the negative effects of extrinsic rewards can have debilitating effects and increase the pressures they experience to achieve.

Adolescence is a time when individuals can hold complex feelings toward their parents and are well aware when their parents do not provide their full or genuine attention. Kristy feels her father doesn't care much for her school work as he pays little attention when she discusses it with him; *'he might look at it and say oh, that looks really good sweetie, hold on, I've got to finish this game'* (Interview 13, 18.06.03, p. 14, lines 40-42). Language is one of the most complex tools of communication. Although words and phrases hold specific meanings, words individually mean nothing without a social context that allows them to express meaning (Johnston, 2004). While the meaning of language is defined by the interaction histories and contexts of an individual, it is important parents are aware of the cultural tools of language, para-language such as facial expression, voice tone, gestures and spatial arrangements and the message they convey (Johnston, 2004).

The early adolescents in the study demonstrated a sense of worth defined in part by the feedback provided by their parents in the form of rewards, as well as verbal praise or reprimands. Although Thomas' parents encourage him to do well at school, he feels hurt when they focus on negative aspects of his work, such as its messiness, or make comments such as *'this isn't as good as that, you should have done a bit better'* (Interview 4, 14.05.03, p. 11, line 25). Heather feels her mother diminishes the value of her work, explaining *'she'd give me her opinion on something and she'll say if I were you I would have gone this way instead of that way'*, which makes Heather feel *'kind of angry that she's trying to control my*

work, even though I've already done good' (Interview 2, 05.06.03, pp. 4-5, lines 35-3). Sims-Knight and Upchurch (2001) identified that in some situations language can be irrelevant and harmful, particularly when the language of feedback is communicated by parents who are unaware of the potential impact of social context or cultural tools, and at times underestimate the effects that diminishing intrinsic motivation and preventing adolescents from engaging in active processing and problem-solving, can have on their level of understanding and learning.

4.3.3.3 Perceptions and Expectations of School

While adolescents' personal agendas are persuasive, a teacher's influence on a student's feelings and aspirations can be profound, requiring interactions based on constructive, mutual respect. Feedback provided by teachers can have significant effects on an adolescent's learning, academic performance and accepting responsibility for their own learning (Arnold, 2000). However, feedback can become ineffective, directing attention away from learning and toward ego issues such as questioning intelligence and comparison of success and achievement with peers. Research (Feldman, 1989) has shown that adolescents' assessment of achievement is related to feedback and potentially impacts upon the academic pressures they face.

During observations of the teacher participants, a tally was taken of their modes of delivery and verbal feedback. The observations were made over 5 to 8 class sessions of 30 minutes each, conducted over a three month period. What follows are the categories used to identify the teacher modes and interactions and a summary of those interactions:

- *Addressing the whole class.* For example, introducing and explaining a topic and focus for the session or leading a class meeting.
- *Addressing individual students.* For instance, answering questions or discussing work.

- *Offering praise.* For example, providing verbal and/or written affirmations in response to student work or directing comments toward students such as ‘Good girl’ and ‘Well done’.
- *Providing criticism.* For instance, identifying disruptive student behaviour or commenting on student work completed incorrectly.
- *Comparing students.* For example, commenting on a student’s work or behaviour in comparison with the work or behaviour of another.
- *Communicating expectations.* For instance, explaining the work students must complete by the end of the session or requesting no talking during a quiet working session.
- *Offering support.* For example, prompting students during oral presentations or comforting and assisting a student who is confused and upset about their work.
- *Rewarding student work behaviour.* For instance, distributing rewards to students who offer to present their ideas to a class discussion or awarding raffle tickets to students who demonstrate desired work behaviours.

Table 4.3 Summary of Teacher Feedback

	Teacher Participants				
	Mrs. Kay	Mr. Hannan	Mrs. Wilson	Mrs. Green	Mr. Linley
	Year Level				
	4/5/6	4/5/6	7	8	8
Feedback Elements	Tally				
Addressing the whole class	8	13	11	13	17
Addressing individual students	69	63	64	70	72
Offering praise	28	21	10	4	14
Providing criticism	1	2.5	0.1	0.75	0
Comparing students	0.25	0.65	0.4	0	0
Communicating expectations	18	14	27	23	15
Offering support	17	19	19	26	35
Rewarding student work behaviour	8	5	6	8	4

(Observations taken from 05.05.03 to 31.07.03)

The feedback offered to students by the teacher participants was consistently supportive in nature. All teachers interacted with their students on an individual basis more frequently than

they addressed their students as a group. Mrs. Kay (Year 4/5/6) demonstrated far less to the whole group than Mr. Linley (Year 8) who addressed his class as a whole the most. Secondary school teachers address their students as a group more frequently than the primary school teachers. While whole group communication can be an efficient way to deliver information to a large number of students, it may be more intimidating for students who need to gain clarity. Communicating individually throughout a class session provides opportunity for teachers to better ensure their students' comprehension and it provides focused individualised assistance. Mr. Linley offered his students the greatest amount of support of all the teachers observed, and almost twice the amount of support than the primary teachers, yet, he rewarded student work behaviour the least. Mrs. Kay provided her students the least amount of support, which reflected the trend of the primary teachers providing their students less support than the secondary teachers, however she rewarded student work behaviours the most. While reinforcing student behaviour provides instant feedback to students, the support offered within the classroom is a vital strategy in assisting students' learning. However, when the amount of support offered becomes too great it can result in protecting students from failure. This over-protection can prevent students developing their own coping strategies and resources to deal with new learning experiences and encounters with failure, which can increase the academic pressures they experience. The secondary school teachers focused on expectations more than the primary school teachers, with Mrs. Wilson (Year 7) and Mrs. Green (Year 8) communicating their expectations to students the most. Mrs. Green, who experienced difficulties making connections with her students, offered the least amount of praise of the five teachers, which highlighted the trend of secondary school teachers offering little praise to their students. While the primary school teachers offered their students abundant praise, they referred to their expectations and standards less. Communicating expectations to students sends a clear message of teacher standards and values, while offering praise reinforces the achievement of these expectations. However, focusing on high or

unrealistic expectations can result in added pressure on students who feel unable to live up to these expectations. Furthermore, students who are not the recipients of teachers' praise may experience increased pressure to meet these expectations.

It is widely known and accepted that rewards such as awards, stars and stickers, additional break time and non-tangible treats are used within the classroom as an incentive to motivate students and boost their performance (Kohn, 1993). During observations within the classroom environment the teacher participants demonstrated extensive use of external rewards with their students: Louise's teacher, Mr. Hannan, hands out stickers to those who were working quietly and one of Heather's past teachers awarded monetary prizes to spend at the local milk bar; Thomas' teacher, Mrs. Kay, awards students with raffle tickets and stickers for working well or for displaying good behaviour:

'Now, who gets a raffle ticket, Jelinda does, Doug does....Tahli, you can get yourself a raffle ticket and Lauren you can get a raffle ticket....I'll have to give Doug a raffle ticket, he's continuing to work well there....Luke, a raffle ticket for you too....This is wonderful, excellent, now I'm going to mark it off and give you a sticker for it....Yep, you can get a raffle ticket for good work....Raffle ticket to Doug, to Bryce get it, but at a later time' (Classroom observation notes, Mrs. Kay, 29.05.03 & 17.07.03)

Mrs. Green, Dean's teacher gives her students 'c' cards, the school based reinforcement and rewards system for positive behaviour, and team points, however also deducts points for disruptive behaviour:

'I just docked a point from Reily's team because he called out...you will lose more points...so be warned....ok, that team and that team earn a point...another point....when you get them all done and corrected I'll give you a 'c' card....' (Classroom observation notes, Mrs. Green, 02.06.03 & 16.06.03)

Kristy's teacher, Mrs. Wilson, explains *'food always works, snakes, lollies, chupa-chups, 'c' cards, 'c' card rewards and things like bookmarks and book vouchers, those sorts of things'* (Interview 37, 02.09.03, p. 5, lines 28-29).

The student participants also discussed rewards. Steven explained that many of his teachers give their students 'c' cards and other rewards such as *'stickers and... small prizes like that and sometimes you get lollies and mini Mars Bars and Cadbury ways and stuff'* (Interview 11, 29.08.03, p. 13, lines 36-37). Steven believes that if all teachers rewarded students with Mars Bars and money, everyone would get their work finished and handed in on time. Heather favours those teachers who hand out rewards however she feels angry when making an effort without receiving recognition explaining *'I'm wasting time being good and not getting rewarded!'* (Interview 1, 07.05.03, p. 26, lines 19-20). Louise and Thomas also support this notion that being unrewarded means wasted time being good. As rewards and punishments are fundamentally similar, a lack of recognition can be seen by adolescents as not simply missing out on a reward but a form of punishment for not producing the desired results (Kohn, 1993). Steven, Dean and Kristy express their irritation that well behaved students are continually overlooked while misbehaving students are rewarded with chocolate bars, movie passes or CD vouchers for improved behaviour. Kohn (1993) supports this notion with the belief that 'rewards punish' as they are controlling and individuals do not reap expected rewards with the effect indistinguishable from punishment and ultimately impacting on a desire to learn (p. 51).

On a daily basis teachers also provide feedback conveying their expectations, values and work ethics to students. Thomas' teacher, Mrs. Kay, provides implicit and explicit feedback to a number of students during a handwriting task:

'Everything you do has to be joined, from now on you join okay, if you do it all the time it will become natural for you....Just check those two for me....It's nice to see

people doing joined letters without me having to remind them, it's great....Joining please....Good to see I don't have to remind people about margins being ruled, it's great...' (Classroom observation notes, Mrs. Kay, 29.05.03).

'Patrick, you know what I'm going to say don't you...No, sentence again please!...It's good and it's the correct size, good girl, well done...and it's your second one...Wow, much better, you are getting better. This is absolutely fantastic, you are almost perfect, I think...When I look at this and when I look back to when you were doing at the start of the year, it is so much better, you're improving...You're joining letters now, well done, fantastic...You still have to try and get them all up to the dotted line...' (Classroom observation notes, Mrs. Kay, 12.06.03).

Implicitly Mrs. Kay is communicating the value she places on neat and accurate handwriting, while explicitly she is making judgements about the standard of that writing. As well, Mrs. Kay is rewarding or punishing the person rather than the work.

Kristy's teacher, Mrs. Wilson, provides implicit and explicit feedback and conveys her expectations to her students during independent work sessions on projects:

'Alrighty, thank you, listen up, looking this way, eyes this way quickly please... I gave you a warning yesterday, come prepared...you really need to start printing out rather than writing...just look up the dictionary, I'm pretty sure that is wrong...I really want to emphasise that I want these posters up on the wall for Thursday...move beyond the thinking stage and onto the doing stage...' (Classroom observation notes, Mrs. Wilson, 03.06.03).

'You know what that means, come on, nick off....You should have finished the work...you shouldn't have to work on this for too long, you should get this finished very quickly....quiet working please because I want to collect all that work by tomorrow and I would hate to keep you in at lunch time to finish it...I'm just finishing off a few c cards...be good and be quick' (Classroom observation notes, Mrs. Wilson, 24.06.03).

Explicitly Mrs. Wilson is communicating her expectations to students to be prepared, work quietly and complete work on time, while implicitly, she is warning them about their failure to meet her expectations and providing rewards as incentive. Furthermore, Mrs. Wilson is making judgements about student understanding.

Mr. Hannan, Heather's teacher, is providing implicit and explicit feedback to a number of students during a writing task, and again during an oral presentation session:

'That's a good point, I'm impressed by the standard of your work, well done....If I see work like this again, you'll be doing it again, do you understand? I won't accept it as rough as that next time. It's just a pass this time okay....Don't push your luck please, we haven't got enough time. You can discuss your ideas another time okay....' (Classroom observation notes, Mr. Hannan, 29.05.03).

'As everybody is aware, projects are now due in...I'll just make it clear to you, you'll lose marks for every day that it is late...it is a major part of this term's assessment....I'm marking your presentations as well as your projects...People who go very first always get a consideration from me...Jessica is also the first person to finish hers....You can use your cue cards to help you but I don't want you to read from them...remember that the more you can adlib the better...Thank you Jessica, very well done....One thing we can say is that Joe got this done early and the information he has used was very detailed....Who has not got their project here?...Well, if you handed it in it will be....Now we have the shyest student in the class to present their work....Other people will be presenting next week. It gives you more time so I'll be judging more tougher. But well done to all those people who presented today....' (Classroom observation notes, Mr. Hannan, 05.06.03).

Implicitly Mr. Hannan is making judgements about the standard of students' writing, while explicitly he is providing advice and suggestions to assist students in their presentations. Mr. Hannan is also rewarding students for their behaviours rather than the quality of their work.

Heather feels annoyed that her teacher, Mr. Hannan, expects more from her than her peers, explaining that her teachers have always expected more from her, academically, and made comments such as: *'this is not work that you are capable of doing'* or *'you can do better; you are so intelligent that you could be a leader...you should be the leader'* (Interview 3, 30.07.03, p. 2, lines 38-39) (Interview 3, 30.07.03, p. 7, lines 45-46). However, Heather admits to feeling good about herself, and the standard of her work, when her teachers offer positive comments. Louise explains that *'the only comment [her teacher] usually makes [about her work] is how do you think you could make it better?'*, while she believes that she has completed excellent work when she receives a comment such as 'well done', two ticks and her teacher's signature on her work (Interview 7, 28.08.03, p. 3, lines 20-21). Receiving stickers on her work or not doesn't seem to bother Louise *'because [my teachers] gives everyone stickers, it's just normal'* (Interview 7, 28.08.03, p. 1, line 44). Adolescents recognise feedback as potentially motivating, enhancing learning and the capacity to undertake tasks, improving reflection and illuminating achievement and progress (Orsmond, Merry & Reiling 2005; Higgins, Hartley & Skelton, 2002). The explicitness of teacher language use has been the focus of much attention in recent years (Kameenui, 1995; Pressley & Woloshyn, 1995; Pressley, Allington, Wharton-MacDonald, Collins-Block & Morrow 2001; Milton, 2005) as it plays a critical role in communicating with adolescents. As rewards are not helpful to the establishment and preservation of positive relationships, schools should focus on developing a learning environment that promotes positive relationships between teachers and students, optimal learning and performance (Kohn, 1993).

The early adolescents in the study generally experienced positive relationships with their teachers who set realistic expectations. Heather and Mr. Hannan demonstrated mutual respect. Heather explains *'he gives you choices [and] he's funny...'* (Interview 1, 07.05.03, p. 16, line 45), while Mr. Hannan says *'Fascinating child...I think the best way to describe her capacity*

is sponge like, she absorbs remarkably quickly...a highly competent reader...she's a bright girl, not obviously keen on school work but obviously good at it...in terms of ability, [she's at] an unusually high level' (Interview 31, 03.09.03, p. 3, lines 13-21). Louise and Thomas feel positive about their relationships with Mrs. Kay, who enjoys their company in her classroom, while Kristy and Mrs. Wilson share a positive bond. Yet some teacher-student relationships appeared strained, particularly between Dean and Mrs. Green. Dean comments about Mrs. Green: *'no one wants to put in any effort [in her class]....she's mean... [and isn't] fair at all'* (Interview 17, 26.08.03, p. 20, line 44) (Interview 17, 26.08.03, p. 23, lines 33-36), while Mrs. Green's perceptions of Dean are: *'Because he's the same age as one of my own children, I've seen him in action at Primary school....he's sort of starting to come out of his shell big time...he doesn't like being spoken to when he's been out of line... [he's] not comfortable being one of the naughty kids which is what he's sort of trying to do at the moment'* (Interview 35, 10.09.03, p. 1, lines 14-34). Steven and Mr. Linley also hold differing views about each other: Steven explains that Mr. Linley *'would have to be one of my favourite teachers, like he's always trying to help, and if you don't get something, he'll try and... [explain] it in a different way and like he doesn't get all crabby'* (Interview 9, 26.05.08, p. 13, lines 44-46); yet Mr. Linley holds a less positive view of Steven, explaining *'He has a tendency to try and make jokes out of a lot of the situations that he's in...if something comes up that catches his attention, that could potentially be funny, he'll try and exploit that situation and make a joke about it... ...he's late everyday to school [and] he tends to hand in work late the majority of the time'* (Interview 36, 02.09.03, p. 1, lines 13-46). The desire for approval is almost universal amongst adolescents. They yearn for acceptance, yet this desire to please should be treated with caution, and teachers need to be aware that awarding praise perpetuates adolescents' dependence on the evaluations of others rather than forming their own judgements.

4.3.3.4 Perceptions and Expectations of Peers

Adolescents develop a greater awareness of the wider social environment and look to peers to help establish a sense of community and their place within it. However, while reward systems can be both positive and negative, they do nothing for relationships between peers, being destructive to collaboration and destroying a sense of community (Kohn, 1993). Louise explains that students who achieve at school are often met with derogatory comments such as 'smart aleck' or 'teacher's pet', while Kristy believes peers are jealous and don't like it when others achieve, explaining '*it's just the way kids are*' (Interview 12, 21.05.03, p. 14, line 36). Feedback and rewards can promote the development of competition amongst peers, explicitly pitting individuals against one another and communicating the message that 'everyone else is a potential obstacle to one's own success' (Kohn, 1993, p. 55). Steven and Dean explain that peers tease each other with comments such as 'idiot' or 'full-of-yourself' and spread rumours about the individual who has achieved success. Collective rewards, those involving the collaboration of a group of peers, can produce hostility, be detrimental to the quality of learning experienced and impact on the pressures experienced by individuals. The adolescents in this study identified impact of rewards on peers and peer groups, with the elements of power, competition and rewards, as important.

When peer groups hold great importance in the life of a young adolescent, the notion of power imbalance amongst peers is call for concern. Louise explains some students act differently around those who are successful because of their achievements, while others don't really care. Heather describes competition among her peers, particularly with students who are considered smart: '*[everyone] wants to compare themselves to the smart people and if they think [their work's] better they go, well I'm smarter than the smart people, and if it's lower then they've got an excuse*' (Interview 3, 30.07.03, p. 14, lines 38-40). Competition is one of the most destructive forms of tension amongst peers as it inhibits cooperation, produces anxiety, de-

motivation and a diminished sense of empowerment and responsibility, while collective rewards provide conditions for the development of peer pressure, distrust and stress (Kohn, 1993). Thomas explains competition among peers as *'you kind of feel like I want to beat that kid, or I want to beat that one'* (Interview 5, 12.06.03, p. 15, lines 17-18), while Kristy believes everyone should be proud of their achievements, however she worries about what her peers will think and say if she acknowledges her own accomplishments. When early adolescents have a positive view towards learning, they are most likely to achieve success, while adolescents who are shown to think mostly about how well they are doing, or how well they are doing compared to their peers, they are less likely to achieve (Kohn, 1993). Kristy explains that her peers sometimes compare their work, but try to hide it from each other: *'[they] look at everyone else's [work] and [say] ha, look at mine, like being stupid... [but they] compare [their work]'* (Interview 14, 27.08.03, pp. 17-18, lines 42-2). Louise says *'we don't really talk about [our results and achievements] anymore, we used to though, but now, nah... you just show each other your marks and then yeah that's all you do... If they've done really well you just say well done'* (Interview 8, 23.07.03, p. 15, lines 7-16). However, in Louise's earlier primary years, marks were a central topic of conversation among her peers.

4.3.4 Labelling

During adolescence, the most powerful force for change is the relationships established between an individual and his/her teachers and peers (Hunter, 1972; Lett 1973; McCandless, 1976; Pirozzo, 1983). These relationships may be strongly influenced by the labels teachers and peers place on individuals, which can have a powerful effect on student achievement and behaviour (Pirozzo, 1983). While some adolescents have developed the skills and confidence to successfully deal with such labels, others are caught in a spiral of internalization of negative messages about themselves and others, development of a poor self-image, alienation

from support services, creation of barriers in communication and the breakdown of relationships with adults and peers (Clark, 2002).

Throughout this theme, elements of self-labelling, gifted and talented labels, teacher-student and peer relationships, social grouping and peer labelling, as well as parent and teacher labelling, emerged as integral components of the data as external influences impacting on perceptions and expectations.

4.3.4.1 Perceptions and Expectations of Self

The concept of self, as a powerful force influencing an individual's behaviour and that of others, is supported by the self-fulfilling prophecy (Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968). Rosenthal and Jacobson (1968) discuss the relationship between teacher expectations and student behaviour and achievement, declaring 'one person's prediction of another person's behaviour somehow comes to be realised' (p. 19). The self-fulfilling prophecy can be a powerful form of motivation, which can only be realised when an individual is able to overcome inhibitors by learning to ignore stereotypes, labels and high expectations (Franken, 1982, cited in Taguchi, 2006).

The early adolescents in this study readily use labels to describe and define themselves and their learning. Dean considers himself a quick learner, while Kristy describes herself as '*a standard child*' yet admits '*I'm quite smart, but I'm not boasting or anything*' (Interview 13, 18.06.03, p. 11, line 3) (Interview 12, 21.05.03, p. 8, 22-23). Both Dean and Kristy strongly reject the labels 'disabled', 'slow', 'average', 'struggling' and 'low achiever', the later Kristy describes as '*you're the loser [if] you're the low achiever*' (Interview 13, 18.06.03, p. 11, lines 21-22). Jones (cited in Pirozzo, 1983) reinforces this self-labelling behaviour, explaining adolescents place significant emphasis on self-concept and self-image, with most individuals

perceiving themselves as members of the norm, rejecting negative labels that would place them in a class below their peers. Steven believes he is a high achiever *'because I like to achieve my goals and like I push until I do... I like to do stuff that some people mightn't want to do'* in order to be successful (Interview 10, 26.08.03, p. 6, lines 12-13), while Louise labels herself as 'normal' because she is just like everyone else. Whilst many adolescents identify with positive labels, for some, negative labels can have detrimental and long-lasting effects. Thomas and Louise have experienced learning difficulties throughout their education; consequently, Thomas describes himself as not a good learner and a low achiever, while Louise uses the labels 'disabled' and 'slow' to describe her learning when she is experiencing difficulties, particularly *'in maths...sometimes I just don't know what the problem is'* (Interview 6, 09.05.03, p. 15, lines 18-25). Research (Moulton, Moulton, Housewright & Bailey, 1998; Pirozzo, 1981, 1983) has identified potential psychological, emotional and social implications of adolescents' self-labelling which can affect interaction with teachers and peers and impede development of a strong self-concept and identity.

Of all labels used to describe learning abilities, Heather, Dean and Kristy closely identified with the labels 'gifted', 'talented' and 'bright'. Heather considers herself bright, talented and gifted: *'If you can count climbing trees fast, as a gift...and drawing cartoons...I'm good at calming people down...and maybe bike riding'* (Interview 1, 07.05.03, p. 20, lines 8-36), while Kristy believes she is bright and gifted due to her many talents. Dean believes he's gifted and talented because he can play the drums: *'you know you can do something other people can't, so it's something good about you'* (Interview 16, 23.06.03, p. 5, lines 10-11). All three adolescents partially attribute their self-labelling to reinforcement from teachers, parents and peers. Research (Kerr, Colangelo & Gaeth, 1988; Cross, Coleman & Stewart, 1993; Colangelo & Gaeth, 1998; Manaster, Chan, Watt & Wiehe, 1994; Moulton, Moulton, Housewright & Bailey, 1998) shows significant psychological, emotional and social

implications are a consequence of the labels 'gifted', 'talented' and 'bright'. Heather relished the opportunity to participate in a gifted writer's camp, believing the opportunity arose through her teacher recognising her talents. Colangelo and Gaeth (1998) and Manaster, Chan, Watt and Wiehe (1994) argue personal, academic and social opportunities are seen as positive aspects of the gifted and talented label, including personal growth, higher order learning, superior grades, scholarships, high regard, being listened to, respected and increased self-confidence. However, social implications of stereotypes and labels such as 'nerd', 'know-it-all', 'teacher's pet' or 'snob', and the pressure and expectations of parents and teachers, have been shown to be the greatest negative aspects of the labels 'gifted' and 'talented' (Manaster, Chan, Watt & Wiehe, 1994; Moulton, Moulton, Housewright & Bailey, 1998). Individual perception of such labels, and the positive and negative aspects experienced, can significantly impact the pressures faced by an adolescent labelled 'gifted' or 'talented'.

4.3.4.2 Perceptions and Expectations of School

Relationships between adolescents and their teachers can be a powerful force for change, and have the potential to profoundly influence behaviour and achievement (Pirozzo, 1983). Most of the early adolescents in this study reported experiencing positive relationships with their teachers, with Steven and Louise receiving high levels of support and respect. However, while Dean's teacher, Mrs. Green, expresses an interest in and awareness of her students' lives, Dean believes she treats him considerably better when other adults are around, explaining: *'normally when you're not there she'll be a lot more mean and stuff...if you hadn't have been there she definitely wouldn't have done that...like when you're around she's more nicer and stuff, more smiling and stuff'* (Interview 17, 26.08.03, p. 23, lines 33-38). This has resulted in a dysfunctional relationship between the two. Heather's positive relationship with Mr. Hannan is attributed to his belief she is a fascinating individual who is bright and highly competent with an unusually high ability level. However, although she labelled him as bright, Dean's

relationship with Mrs. Green can be attributed to her current view he is testing the boundaries, while Kristy receives mixed messages from Mrs. Wilson who believes Kristy is experiencing victimisation, who has recently 'come out of her shell' and is causing disruption in class, resulting in a strained relationship. Pirozzo (1983) argues the nature of the relationship between adolescents and their teachers may be strongly influenced by labels and expectations. The teacher plays an important role in the labelling process of adolescents from which resulting teacher-student relationships have the potential to impede or facilitate an individual's success at school and affect the pressures they experience.

An individual's ability to adjust to the significant changes taking place during early adolescence can interfere with their growth and development. Although Heather appears to have a positive self-concept, she has experienced difficulties adjusting to the changes taking place in her life. When she arrived at her current school, Heather was identified by her teachers through communication with past schools as bright and talented, which immediately set her apart from her peers and caused problems establishing her place in the school and developing friendships. Coleman and Stewart (cited in Moulton, Moulton, Housewright & Bailey, 1998) argue that labelling by teachers and school administration can have an even greater impact on an adolescent's self-concept and personal adjustment. Mrs. Wilson and Mr. Linley made strong references to teacher labelling; Mrs. Wilson revealed '*for the high achievers... I always [provide] extended exercises and tasks...because some kids...need that push there, that challenge*' (Interview 37, 02.09.03, p. 8, lines 42-44), while Mr. Linley commented '*I think I have a tendency to concentrate on trying to lift struggling students... I don't think I recognise and extend the higher achievers as much as I should, or as much as I can...I get the feeling sometimes that the more intelligent students um get a bit bored in [my] classroom*' (Interview 36, 02.09.03, p. 3, lines 11-20). As Mrs. Green has known Dean most of his life, her perceptions and expectations are partially based on her preconceived

knowledge of him. She explains *'he's shy and reticent about doing things until he's very, very sure that he can do them'* (Interview 35, 10.09.03, p. 1, lines 16-17). Mrs. Kay's first perceptions of Thomas were *'he's very social and...enjoys competitiveness...he's not an extrovert...he's well and truly an independent kid'* (Interview 32, 18.09.03, p. 1, lines 15-28). Although the teachers recognised some of the characteristics of these early adolescents, due to their preconceived perceptions, some of them failed to identify the most significant strengths of each individual. Pirozzo (1983) believes that the development of inaccurate teacher perceptions of an individual's character can result in low expectations. These low expectations can affect adolescents' school performance and the pressures they experience to achieve.

The adolescents in this study are well aware of their teachers' expectations and subsequent academic placement. Louise is a member of the middle mathematics group who learn different concepts and at faster rates to the students in both the top and bottom groups. Thomas, Steven and Kristy identified that when students are separated into different learning groups, they are taught different things. Rosenthal and Jacobson (1968) first claimed students whose teachers expect great intellectual gains generally achieve such growth and development, while individuals labelled slow learners are commonly taught half as much as those labelled rapid learners. During her individual interview, Mrs. Wilson made reference to the expectations she communicates to her students:

'[I said] my expectation is for you to complete this task satisfactorily because it's S and N in assessment...I expect that you experiment with model...and present your work neatly, appropriately, to word process to draft, negotiate with me and to word process for the final, to polish their writing and do drafts, that's an expectation and to present it in a neat and attractive way and also to present it orally too...my expectation was they read and share within the group...I've already said to them that's part of their assessment...they all have to do it, there's no getting out of it...so expectations, I guess it's reinforcing constantly what they

do, the way they present...so just saying all the time, name handouts, keep it organised, cut and paste, you know title pages, date, that's just everyday stuff to get them into the habit' (Interview 37, 02.09.03, p. 7, lines 12-28).

Throughout classroom observations, the teacher participants made numerous references to expectations. Mrs. Kay began all her teaching sessions by outlining her expectations for the class and communicated expectations while giving feedback to students: *'I expect a lot more detail'* (Classroom observation notes, Mrs. Kay, 17.07.03). Mr. Hannan and Mrs. Green regularly communicated their expectations. Mr. Hannan commented *'what I would like you to do is listen...you should always be having a go at it...'* (Classroom observation notes, Mr. Hannan, 29.05.03), while Mrs. Green said *'I am going to write up a list on the board of everything that needs to be completed...it's up to you to take control...take control of where your learning is going'* (Classroom observation notes, Mrs. Green, 04.08.03). Dunn (cited in Pirozzo, 1983) argues that while teacher expectations can significantly impact an adolescent's academic performance and success, it may also serve as a self-fulfilling prophecy for the teacher.

Louise's teachers have always communicated their students' placements in ability groupings and give them the opportunity to earn their place in a higher group, yet Louise explains that students don't often move groups after their initial placement. Although stereotyping and labelling can have severe academic implications for an individual, research (Hargreaves, 1975; Matza, 1969; Taguchi, 2006) suggests adolescents are capable of and regularly ignore teacher labelling. Before Thomas had been placed in the top maths group by his teachers he recognised his own strengths and high test results and believed his maths skills were advanced. Although Kristy's teacher, Mrs. Wilson, identifies her as a reluctant reader, Kristy enjoys reading out loud in front of her peers: *'I like doing it but I don't like reading'* (Interview 12, 21.05.03, p. 19, line 38). An adolescent's acceptance and compliance with a

label is significantly influenced by the quality of teacher-student relationship, respect held for the labeller and the explicitness and frequency of the labelling (Hargreaves, 1975; Matza, 1969; Taguchi, 2006). In reflection, teacher expectations of an adolescent's learning abilities, growth and development can profoundly impact on an individuals' ability to realise their full learning potential and experience success and achievement.

4.3.4.3 Perceptions and Expectations of Peers

The early adolescents in this study frequently used nicknames and labels among their peer groups, with many participants using labels and/or nicknames to refer to individuals throughout the interviews and during classroom observations. The male adolescents used nicknames or labels more frequently than females, with peer surnames or physical characteristics the most common focus of reference. Dean believes his peers label individuals with names that suit them, explaining '*when they're called it once, it pretty much sticks with them for a little while*' (Interview 16, 23.06.03, p. 2, line 20), while Steven sees labelling as a deliberate attempt to offend someone and belittle their values and beliefs, explaining '*[they do it] just for fun, and if they get a reaction from you, they think oh this is cool, lets keep doing it*' (Interview 10, 26.08.03, p. 5, line 25). Clarke (2002) argues that with significant emphasis on self-concept and self-image during early adolescence, the implications of stereotypes and labelling can be profoundly detrimental to the health and well-being of adolescents. Steven explains his male peers are obsessed with naming individuals in relation to penis size, explaining '*the boys are obsessed with calling other guys pin dicks and stuff...they just call you poof and everything...stuff that offends you, and is sexist*' (Interview 10, 26.08.03, p. 5, lines 10-13). deVoss (2001) confirms that adolescents frequently use labels to describe each other, with some labels relating to learning behaviours while most concentrate on an individual's qualities, characteristics and demonstrated behaviour. Heather has been labelled a tomboy by her peers because she prefers climbing trees and riding her bike to wearing

feminine clothes, playing with dolls and wearing makeup. Although she is comfortable with this label, Heather is confused by how some of her peers use the term: *'I don't care, but for some reason they're using that as an insult...they say 'hi tomboy' but I don't get [if] that's supposed to be insulting, or a compliment, or whatever... [they just]make fun of it'* (Interview 1, 07.05.03, p. 18, line 27-33). deVoss (2001) argues that adolescents are expert name-callers who incorporate name-calling, stereotyping and labelling into their everyday activity so much so that they seem to interact with classmates based on the labels given to classmates. Research (Pirozzo, 1981) shows that labels can profoundly shape an individual's future and influence value systems, through their ability to socially manipulate and control adolescents.

The labelling of others is an important practice in assisting adolescents to establish who they are and their place among peers. Kristy describes the social groupings among her peers: *'you have the popularity group, the perfection group, the cool group and the nerds, the freaks, the smart ones...and yeah teacher's pet, the other group of teacher's pets'* (Interview 13, 18.06.03, p. 2, lines 50-52). Labelling of social groups is a key factor in how individuals shape and are shaped by peer group pecking order, culture and communication, where adolescents are identified by reputation based interests, attitudes, abilities and personal characteristics (Thurlow, 2001a, 2001b). Dean identifies the social groups and labels among his peers:

'toughy, they're like the skinny people, the skinny, weak people who hide behind their friends, and then there's teacher's pets, who will pick fights with people [and] as soon as something starts happening, the teacher sees them and the teacher will favour them...weakies, like they're not necessarily weak, but some people think they are because they don't get into fights or anything, and they're not tough, and then there's nerds, who are people like they're into the stuff that isn't as popular like all the Japanese cartoons...they're all skinny and normally have glasses or whatever but that's more of the stereotype' (Interview 16, 23.06.03, p. 2, lines 4-13).

Steven and Kristy have experienced difficulties with labelling and the formation and shifting of peer groups. Steven is labelled and regularly teased by his peers based on personal characteristics, differences such as his apparent rejection of elements of school culture including fighting and name-calling and by following school rules and expectations. Kristy explains '*I used to be friends with the cool group*' but she was recently excluded when it was determined by her peers that she wasn't cool enough to be a member of their group (Interview 13, 18.06.03, p. 4, line 1). For both early adolescents, these experiences have resulted in emotional turmoil, isolation from peers and increased pressure to conform while their teachers have reported increased absences from school. Research (Isakson & Jarvis, 1999, February) shows that while labelling can be used both positively and negatively, labels among adolescents are primarily provided based on social aspects such as personal characteristics, view points and behaviour rather than academic accomplishments. The development of social groupings and labelling typically emerges during early adolescence when the forming of cliques and labelling of peer groups can lead to tension and isolation as they struggle to locate themselves and others among peers (Thurlow, 2001a).

4.3.5 Doing School: What's Next?

Successfully negotiating the challenges of life involves learning life's rules and how to survive in an environment where great emphasis is placed on competition. Negotiating such challenges can be described as playing life's game. This description extends to education where adolescents should learn how to successfully 'do school'. Doing school involves learning how to cope with day to day events such as taking tests, listening attentively and keeping out of trouble, all of which require conforming to school rules and procedures. Adolescents are required to learn specific skills, strategies and actions in order to be successful at school, however many do so at the expense of learning the content they are taught. Denying individual learning strategies and learning styles in order to conform, and

increased pressure on those who do not play by the rules, are significant disadvantages. Essentially, in learning how to do school, adolescents are preparing themselves for the next level of schooling or phase of learning rather than developing the fundamental skills required to assist them throughout their rest of their lives.

Throughout this theme, elements of future orientations, school-home life balances, feelings of school, support and encouragement, attitudes toward school, fulfilling expectations, the role of school, homework and transitions emerged as integral components of Doing School: What's next?. Along with these were the impact of external influences on perceptions and expectations.

4.3.5.1 Perceptions and Expectations of Self

During early adolescence, young individuals develop ideas, set goals and make plans for their futures. Three of the early adolescents in this study hold positive plans for their futures: Thomas having clear ideas about his career path as an architect, to play AFL football or be a professional motorbike racer; Kristy wanting to follow her greatest passion as *'a singer slash dancer* (Interview 14, 27.08.03, p. 5, line 16); and Steven looking to fulfil his life-long dreams: *'I want to be a chef...I like to research and prepare things and then present them really well'* (Interview 10, 26.08.03, pp. 14-15, line 37-40). Howard and Johnson (2000) suggest that the development of a positive future orientation is often accomplished by fostering resiliency, an optimistic outlook on life and plans about one's future. Howard and Johnson (2000) show that while some adolescents develop a positive future orientation with ease, for others it is a struggle, with many looking toward the rest of their lives with low resiliency, subdued anticipation, increased apprehension and decreased ambition. A significant factor in the development of positive future direction is the expectations adolescents develop and hold for themselves. The early adolescents in this study, whether

clear about their future orientation or not, hold positive and high expectations for their futures, yet many are unsure if their parents support their ideals. Kristy explains her mother frequently comments *'you're not going down the same road that your brother went down'* (Interview 14, 27.08.03, p. 6, line 25), who left school in year ten and remained unemployed for two years before beginning an electrician apprenticeship. Expectations from these adolescents' teachers were often conflicting. Mrs. Kay maintains high expectations for Thomas, while Mr. Hannan has high expectations for Heather, stating *'I set expectations but maybe my expectations aren't high enough because...she doesn't have any difficulty in developing her skills further and further'* (Interview 31, 03.09.03, p. 3, lines 37-41). However, Mr. Linley, Mrs. Kay, Mrs. Wilson and Mrs. Green did not provide similar expectations for the futures of Steven, Louise, Kristy and Dean respectively. Mr. Linley states *'my expectations for [Steven] are the same as anybody else in the class who I think is at a similar capability, at a similar level of understanding'* and Mrs. Green explains *'[Dean] has an expectation that yeah he will do okay at school...it's a difficult one'* (Interview 36, 02.09.03, p. 2, lines 16-17) (Interview 35, 10.09.03, p. 2, line 14). Research (Markow, Fauth & Gravitch, 2001) highlights this difference in expectations, arguing that while students generally hold high expectations for their future, their teachers and parents hold significantly pessimistic views. In order to support adolescents' high expectations, Markow, Fauth and Gravitch (2001) suggest schools and teachers should ensure learning environments provide the support, tools, knowledge and guidance adolescents need to achieve the positive futures they desire.

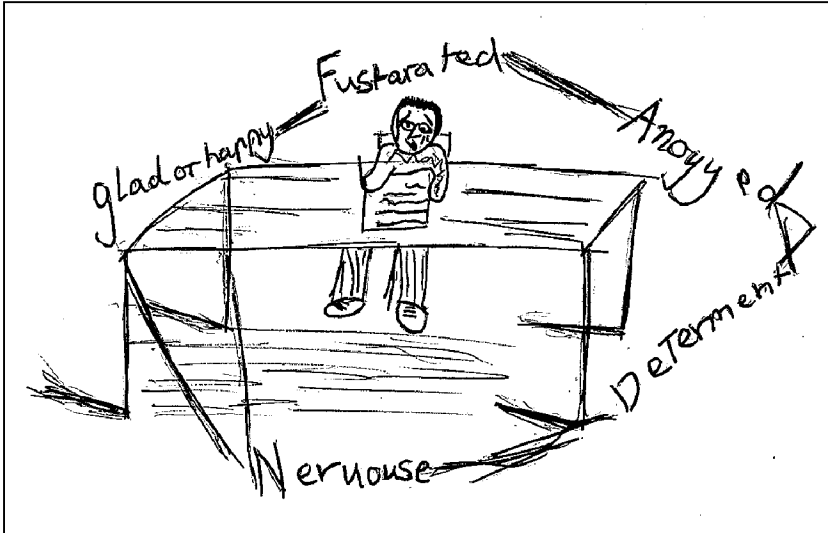
Developing a healthy school-home life balance is considered an essential prerequisite for successful negotiation of adolescence and the transition into adulthood. For some, the creation of this sense of balance can be quite challenging, with demands from school, home and the community significantly impacting an adolescent's daily life and creating barriers to the development of equilibrium. The early adolescents in this study were clear about their sense

of school-home life balance, with Steven, Louise and Dean believing they experience a healthy equilibrium between the two, enjoying their participation in community activities; Steven explains *'I try and contribute like with band and um the soccer and then um like the school production and like sometimes it's Rock Eisteddfod...last year we did a play...and this year it's the circus, so yeah I'm involved in that'* (Interview 9, 26.05.03, p. 12, lines 42-46). Heather, Kristy and Thomas feel frustrated, overwhelmed and confused by the various demands on their time; Heather explains *'school's invading too much of my time...they already take up six or so hours of my day...why do they have to give us homework, it's our time, the only time we get to ourselves'* (Interview 2, 05.06.03, p. 6, lines 28-30). Participating and helping out within the community has been shown to assist students achieve at school, with those involved in community activities enjoying greater success and academic results (Markow & Scheer, 2002). Although they enjoy working, Steven, Dean and Kristy highlight the impact their employment has on time to complete homework tasks and time for themselves. Kristy explains *'I [used to go] to the movies maybe twice a week, three times a week [and] I haven't been for a month...I can't stand it...[it cuts into my] personal time'* (Interview 12, 21.05.03, p. 7, lines 45-48). Markow and Scheer (2002) argue that some community based activities can greatly impinge on an adolescent's school success, with working for pay and hanging out with friends the main inhibitors. Both Steven and Kristy's teachers voiced concern over their tardiness and absences from school, describing this behaviour as significantly impacting on their adjustment, learning and success at school. Mr. Linley explains Steven's *'experienced a lot of absences from my class'* (Interview 36, 02.09.03, p. 1, lines 41-42), while Mrs. Wilson clarifies *'in recent times...she's been away for a period of two to three weeks'* (Interview 37, 02.09.03, p. 2, lines 29-30). Markow and Scheer (2002) argue that some elements of an adolescent's home life can also impact on the development of a healthy school-home life balance, with the quality, dynamics and habits from home, such as eating and sleeping patterns, affecting academic performance and

behaviour at school. In failing to develop a sense of balance in their school-home lives, adolescents face the possibility of experiencing increased stress, ultimately impacting on the pressures they experience to achieve at school.

Most of the adolescents in this study report positive feelings associated with school; however, a common thread in their discussion was also some negative feelings toward school and learning at some stage during their education. Dean explains '*[I feel] frustrated, mainly because I don't like having to do hard work*' (Interview 16, 23.06.03, p. 1, lines 40-41), while Kristy says '*sometimes someone might say something that I was going to say, but I say it in a different way, and I feel like an idiot...and you get really embarrassed*' (Interview 12, 21.05.06, p. 16, lines 36-40). Their feelings also include stress, loneliness, anxiety, strain, worry, concern and nervousness, some of which can be described as self-imposed, with each adolescent using a variety of strategies and developing coping mechanisms to deal with such negative feelings. During the initial group interview, the early adolescents had the opportunity to reflect on their feelings associated with trying to be successful at school. While Thomas indicated he feels determined and happy, the negative feelings depicted in his description, clearly outweighed any positive feelings he associated with trying to do well at school (see Figure 4.2). Markow and Scheer (2002) show that feeling happy and content at school along with the experience of success with school work can significantly impact upon academic achievement and earning high grades.

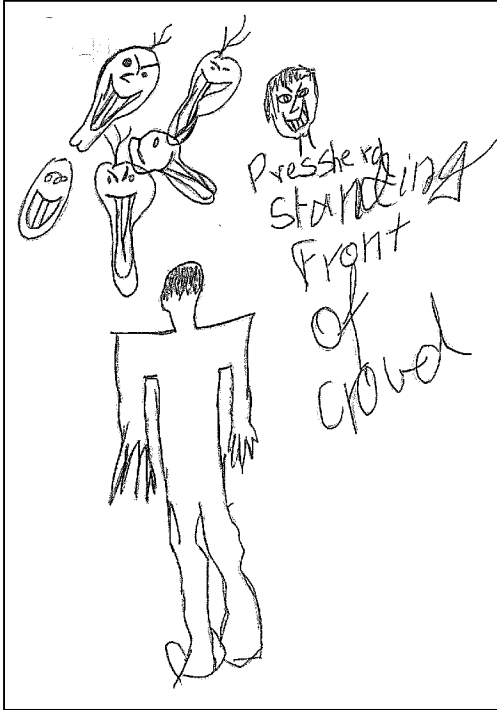
Figure 4.2: Thomas' Feelings Associated with trying to be Successful at School



(Interview 18, 17.03.03, Illustration - Thomas)

The early adolescents in this study raised concerns with experiencing and feeling pressure when trying to do well and be successful at school. During a group interview, Thomas illustrated his feelings of pressure which also depicts how he sees others around him (see Figure 4.3). While the adolescents openly discussed their experiences with pressure, most concerning was that Kristy and Louise describe this pressure as so severe they have considered dropping out of school. Kristy explains *'I reckon friends will pull out [of school]...people say oh I'll drop out [at] year 10 and quit school...I feel like doing it too'* (Interview 12, 21.05.03, pp. 15-16, lines 41-8). In support of Kristy's feelings and experience, Markow and Scheer (2002) argue that negative experiences and feelings related to learning and school can be a significant obstruction to students' success and result in adolescents dropping out of school. Although many of the early adolescents' experiences and feelings were described as self-imposed in response to situations beyond their control, these feelings influenced negative perceptions and expectations of self.

Figure 4.3: Reflective Drawing of the Pressures Experienced by Thomas at School



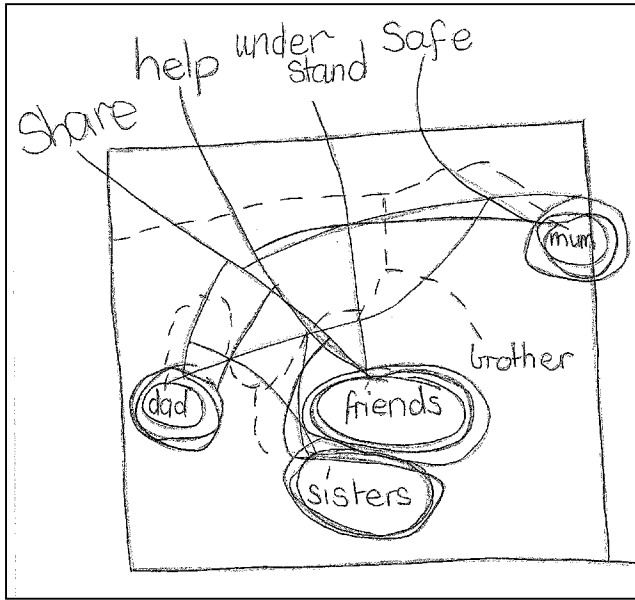
(Interview 22, 29.08.03, Illustration - Thomas)

It is interesting to note the views of participants when they were invited to compare urban and rural schools. Thomas believes urban schools would be *'boring... [and] there would be more concrete around everywhere... [kids would be] more likely to take the bus...or walk to school...it would just be different'* (Interview 5, 12.06.03, p. 5, lines 27-29), while Louise feels schools would be *'strict...the school rules [would be different]... maybe there might not be enough room outside because the city's crowded... [and] less things to do in the playground...kids might get bored and start fighting...'* (Interview 28.08.03, p. 8, lines 17-36). In comparison, Heather believes students are friendly in rural schools where teachers get to know their students better *'because there are not so many kids in the class, so they have more time'* (Interview 2, 05.06.03, p. 16, line 18). Roscigno and Crowley (2001, June) highlights that it is often believed that rural adolescents are disadvantaged *'in regard to school resources'* and *'exhibit lower levels of educational achievement and a higher likelihood of dropping out of high school'* than their urban counterparts (p. 1).

4.3.5.2 Perceptions and Expectations of Parents

All the adolescents felt they received abundant parental support with their education. Although it frustrates her at times, Heather's father always asks how school is going and wants to discuss school activities and experiences: *'whenever he picks me up on the Friday, he says how's school, and if every kid in the world screamed every time they heard that, the world would be a noisy place!'* (Interview 1, 07.05.03, p. 12, lines 36-38). Kristy's parents are supportive and assist with learning activities yet always check whether she has completed set tasks, while Thomas' parents help him interpret difficult tasks and provide hints to assist him. However, Thomas explains they sometimes resort to bribing him to complete the tasks he doesn't want to do: *'they sort of bribe me, [and say] if you do this, you can do that, like, if you do all your homework tonight, you can go on the Internet or something'* (Interview 4, 14.05.03, p. 7, lines 19-20). Markow and Martin (2005) argue that during this time of potential unrest and stress, the relationship between adolescents and their parents is an important source of support and considered influential in ensuring positive school outcomes. During the final group interview, the early adolescents were invited to illustrate their support structures. Each one revealed a network of people they trust, who make them feel safe and who they can go to for help and assistance. Louise identified a particularly strong and wide support network, indicating the links between the people who provide support in her life (see figure 4.4). The intensity and level of parental support provided to an adolescent during the crucial Middle Years of schooling can have a significant impact on the pressures they experience, with those receiving little or extremely high levels of support potentially experiencing greater pressure to achieve at school. Markow and Scheer (2002) and Markow and Martin (2005) show that parents with a positive parent-child relationship provide important support to the learning and development of an individual.

Figure 4.4: Louise's Life-Line of Support Structures



(Interview 22, 29.08.03, Illustration - Louise)

Many parents take their child-rearing responsibilities very seriously and readily identify the challenges and competition their children will encounter throughout their lives. They want the absolute best for their children and in doing so expect the best from their child's education and schooling. The early adolescents in this study experienced varying parental attitudes toward school, however a common factor was the emphasis on the importance of a good education. Dean's mother places a strong value on education, often using examples of the low education levels and subsequent circumstances of friends and family to reinforce her belief that Dean must put in at school if he is to reap the rewards later on in life: *'every day mum will say have you got any homework and [then says] you'll do that [if] you want to be more than a whoever'* (Interview 15, 27.05.03, p. 5, lines 35-37). Kristy explains her parents *'warn me that if I want to be good at something when I'm older I have to get through [school] properly, I can't muck around'* (Interview 12, 21.05.03, p. 6, lines 44-45). Interestingly, both Kristy and Dean's teachers believe these early adolescents experience pressure through their parents' attitudes toward school and education: Kristy's teacher, Mrs. Wilson, feels it stems from her mother and father being older parents *'I got the impression [they are] very*

apprehensive about schooling and the context of schooling...they're very concerned' (Interview 37, 02.09.03, p. 2, lines 15-30), while Dean's teacher, Mrs. Green, feels this pressure is due to comparisons with his older siblings.

Not only can parental attitudes toward school and education be seen as a pressure on adolescents, parental involvement in the education process can have significant impact on an adolescent's perceptions of their parent's expectations and subsequent pressure. Steven explains that his parents encourage and support him to make the most of his education and continually emphasise the importance of doing well at school. However, Steven's teacher, Mr. Linley, expects that Steven's *'parents would be... putting some pressure on him to extend himself and to study harder and to shine and perform better at school'* (Interview 36, 02.09.03, p. 1, line 28) (Interview 36, 02.09.03, p. 2, lines 18-20). As parental expectations increase, so too do the demands on schools to provide the best educational opportunities for the children in their care. Grose (2006) argues that as these pressures on schools increase, teachers and principals should make choices about where to focus their energy, which requires a process of prioritising, potentially impacting the welfare and support of students.

As parental expectations rise, so do the perceptions of early adolescents who accurately perceive their parents' expectations for them to do extremely well at school. The early adolescents in this study were highly aware of their parents' expectations for their education, with Thomas, Louise and Heather experiencing negative feelings associated with fulfilling these expectations. Thomas feels nervous and worried that he won't do well enough: *'I don't want to let down my parents and myself'* (Interview 4, 14.05.03, p. 15, line 48). He also feels his parents *'would be pretty annoyed [and ask] did you really try [your best]'* (Interview 4, 14.05.03, p. 16, line 6). Louise worries about taking schoolwork home because she doesn't want to disappoint her mother if it is not the standard she expects. It is expected that she

completes her homework each afternoon: *'I have to study for at least fifteen minutes [then] if I get all my homework done I can watch TV'* (Interview 7, 28.08.03, pp. 12-13, lines 41-8). Heather feels cornered when her parents ask about her results, explaining *'you can't lie because it's your parents, they can tell, they can read your mind'* and always know when she's lying (Interview 3, 30.07.03, p. 5, lines 2-3). To ensure parental expectations are met, many of the adolescents say they go to great lengths to hide school work from their parents, going so far as to stockpile work in their school bag, tub or locker and even permanently disposing of work. Heather and Dean both choose to not tell their parents when they receive a bad mark, while if their results are good they will show their parents their schoolwork, although Heather explains *'you'll [then] have to go through the whole praisey thing'* (Interview 3, 30.07.03, p. 5, lines 4-5).

Mr. Earl, principal at Heather, Thomas and Louise's school, believes the high expectations parents hold for their children, particularly in his school's rural environment, can be attributed to the achievements of parents themselves and the greater profile of education in today's society. While it can be said many early adolescents believe their parents are highly focused on results and achievements, Dean believes parents are well aware of the pressures on early adolescents and deliberately refrain from making negative remarks about their child's schoolwork in fear of them going insane, meaning getting depressed, giving up or even dropping out of school, stating *'my parents want me not to end up like that'* (Interview 16, 23.06.03, p. 12, lines 13-14). McNamara's study on adolescents (2000) shows that during the transition from childhood to adulthood, early adolescents encounter a range of stressful events where an individual's perceptions, immediate response and coping strategies can impact significantly on the pressure experienced in these situations. Of the many potential stressors in the life of an adolescent, Frydenberg (1997) argues that conflict with parents over

schoolwork, achievement and expectations can have a strong, negative impact on an adolescent's health and well-being.

4.3.5.3 Perceptions and Expectations of School

Mr. Earl attributes the increasing pressures on schools and teachers today, to the expectations of the Victorian Department of Education to implement new teaching and learning initiatives, keep abreast of current pedagogy and continually gather data through formal and informal testing. Dockett (cited in NSW Department of Education and Training, 2002) shows that in recent years, pressures on schools in the United States to increase productivity and achieve outcomes have seen some schools banning recess as it was seen as a waste of time. In an Australian context, some Victorian schools have responded to increased pressures by adjusting their timetables to provide a less crowded curriculum with shorter, more frequent break times between classes. Louise's teacher, Mrs. Kay, is concerned by the increasing class sizes she has taught in recent years places increased pressure on her to provide adequate attention and support to each of her students: *'Oh time, time...I could spend, and would love to be able to spend, the time that's needed to be with those kids but we just can't, I've got 29 other kids that [need my attention] and in some way I've got to be there to educate...that's hard'* (Interview 32, 18.09.03, p. 15, lines 31-33). Mr. Linley believes pressures on teachers has been increased through a reduction in face to face class time with students, restricting the contact and interaction between teacher and student and the ability to provide adequate individual assistance to students. Mrs. Green expresses disillusionment with the tough new privacy laws that restricted her from learning about a stressful event in the life of one of her students, ultimately preventing her from providing adequate support to the student in their time of need: *'since the privacy laws have come in the admin and the coordinators they can't tell us those sorts of things...I was just this girl's teacher and I didn't know, but the other kids in the class knew...so I was the big bad wolf because I'd turned to her and said look just pull*

yourself together...I didn't know, and the other kids went oh you're awful' (Interview 35, 10.09.03, p. 11, lines 23-28). Howard and Johnson (2000) argue that while school is an important environment within which early adolescents are provided opportunity and support to develop resiliency promoting skills and attitudes, the role of school is continually put under pressure by the ever changing demands of parents, government and society in general. In order to meet the changing needs of adolescents, Dowson, Ross, Donovan, Richards and Johnson (2005), Anderman and Midgley (1996), March, Anderman, Maehr and Midgley (1999), Mansfield (2001, December), Kaplan and Owings (2000), January and Ryan and Patrick (2001, Summer) suggests that schools should develop effective middle-school curricula, which takes into consideration school structures, environments and cultures that can have a negative impact on student motivation and leading to a decline in student engagement and achievement at school.

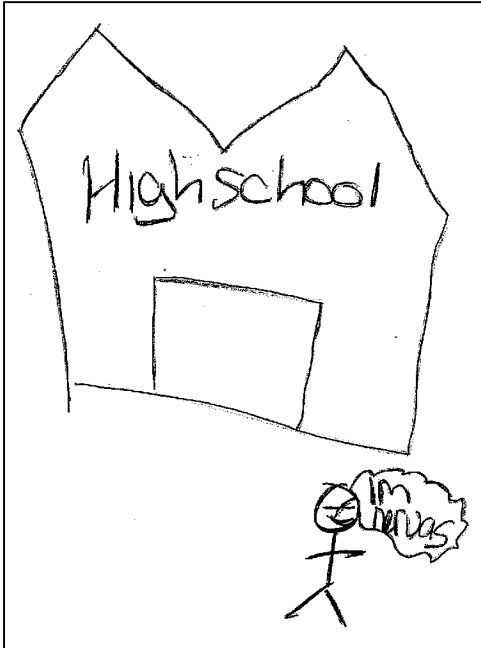
Simply mentioning the word homework was met with groans of disapproval from many of the early adolescents in this study. Heather wasn't keen to discuss homework saying *'it's my time for school at school...they already take up about six hours of our day! Why can't they just leave us alone'* (Interview 1, 07.05.03, p. 13, lines 39-40). Kristy explained *'the homework is terrible, [we get] too much, way too much...when we came to school, first day back, we got eight assignments'* (Interview 12, 21.05.03, pp. 10-11, lines 50-3). Kristy adds that homework cuts into her social life, impacting on the time she has to spend with her family and the time she has to herself: *'I don't get time to spend with my family...I feel chained to my room the whole time doing homework, I get to see them, say to eat tea...and then I'm back in my room [studying]'* (Interview 12, 21.05.03, p. 11, lines 18-21). Increasing parent and community expectations about the quality of learning experiences and the competing forces in adolescent lives have raised concerns about the amount of homework students are expected to complete outside of school time (State of Queensland Department of Education and the Arts, 2004).

Furthermore, research (State of Queensland Department of Education and the Arts, 2004) shows that excessive homework can place increased stress on an adolescent's life outside school, negatively impacting upon academic achievement. The early adolescents in this study weren't the only ones to communicate a strong view toward homework. Mr. Hannan believes that homework should be implemented within a flexible regime that promotes regularity and commitment: *'the school, to its great credit...is flexible...it requires and expects us to set homework but it's not to an extent that it's a fixed regime of homework, and I support that'* (Interview 31, 03.09.03, p. 17, lines 2-4). Mrs. Kay also supports her school's informal expectations on homework explaining *'at the school there are no formal expectations [however] in my grade I have an expectation that they complete two sheets of homework per week'* (Interview 32, 18.09.03, p. 16, lines 28-29). While the Victorian government guidelines state that Middle Years students should be completing independent homework tasks, coordinated across the curriculum to avoid unreasonable workloads, building as students progress from year five to nine (Cook & Halliday, 2007, March 19), Mrs. Wilson expresses concern about the Middle Years homework program implemented at her school. She explains *'there's a homework program that's common to all teachers and staff that we've set up... [however] some [staff] felt it was too much homework across the board, when you compound it with all the subjects'* (Interview 37, 02.09.03, p. 11, lines 30-31). Cooper (2001, April) argues that although the potential benefits of homework such as improving retention and understanding of knowledge, increasing learning outcomes and attitudes toward school are well known, schools should acknowledge the limitations and negative impacts of homework. Cooper (2001, April), Cooper and Valentine (2001), Smith (2000) and Warton (2001) argue that these limitations include students being excluded from the homework process and not engaging students in meaningful learning experiences, while the negative impacts include increased boredom with school and the development of social inequities. Essentially, homework can be beneficial for student learning, however to ensure a positive impact and a

reduction in the stress experienced, homework should be responsive to the age and developmental needs of students (State of Queensland Department of Education and the Arts, 2004).

The perceptions and expectations of students in transitions from primary to secondary school, and from early secondary school into VCE at years 11 and 12, prompted discussions. While Thomas clearly articulates his feelings about impending transition to secondary school (see Figure 4.5), he says he feels nervous *'cause I'm the oldest, I won't know anybody there, and I don't know where to go...I reckon there will be more work...I will get a lot more homework than I do now [and the teachers will be] stricter [but] probably the same, apart from the angriness'* (Interview 4, 14.05.03, pp. 15-16, lines 8-25). Heather believes secondary school *'will be, like, different from primary school, because you move around in the classes and your lockers are out in the hallway, and I think you have to bring your own padlock, unless you want people snooping in your locker, and it would be different because the subjects [will] be harder'* (Interview 2, 05.06.03, p. 7, lines 13-16). Louise believes secondary school will be more of a challenge: *'[there will be] harder work and like in the high years at high school, you'll be encouraged to...tell them or study what you're going to be when you grow up'* (Interview 6, 09.05.03, p. 11, lines 2-3).

Figure 4.5: Thomas' Feelings towards his Transition to Secondary School



(Interview 22, 29.08.03, Illustration - Thomas)

For those students who successfully negotiate the Middle Years of schooling and remain in school for years 11 and 12, VCE can provide new and exciting challenges, yet for some the prospect can be overwhelming. Although he has two older brothers, Dean doesn't really know what happens in VCE, but he predicts it will involve the opportunity to study different subjects, and students will be given *'a lot of home work... [and] lots of tests at the end of Year 12'* (Interview 15, 27.05.03, p. 13, lines 6-11). Kristy believes that her future years in secondary school will be dramatically different to the time she has already experienced there. She believes it will be *'terribly hard, really, really, really, really hard'* (Interview 12, 21.05.03, p. 15, line 2), explaining *'everyone that I know that's in VCE, they say I've been studying till like midnight and everything, and I'm thinking oh my god, I so don't want to do VCE but I want to get the job I want...but I don't want to go through VCE to get it'* (Interview 12, 21.05.03, p. 15, lines 8-10). She believes that some of her friends will pull out of school as they are already talking about dropping out of school in year ten, which makes Kristy wonder if she too will want to drop out. The early adolescents in this study generally felt supported by their teachers in the transition through the Middle Years of Schooling toward their years in

VCE. Although some of their teachers regularly commented about what school will be like in the years to come, they showed little consideration for the impact such comments could have on students who do not feel prepared. Mrs. Green expects her students to think about their futures and to consider the potential impact of the educational choices they make today:

'next year you need to select elective and then in the next year you have to do work experience...it's up to you to take control...you've got to start thinking about that stuff...what you want to get out of life over the next few years...I want you to take control of where your learning is going, what's at the end of all this...the next ten years are not so far away...you need to start thinking about those sorts of things because it's what you do now and in year 9, 10 and 11 that set the scene for your future' (Classroom observation notes, Mrs. Green, 04.08.03).

Mr. Earl believes transition programs should provide opportunities for students to develop a true sense of what secondary school will be like without diminishing the excitement and anticipation it provides: *'I don't want transition programs to have kids so comfortable with high school that the wow factor of going to high school disappears'* (Interview 29, 07.02.03, p. 3, lines 1-2). While his school is involved in the Department of Education and Training's Innovations and Excellent Program to improve the transition experiences of early adolescents in the region, Mr. Earl shares the feelings of past students who have successfully made the transition to secondary school: *'too often kids have come back to me...to tell me that they're bored, to tell me that oh we're just doing tests, we're just doing rules...it's easy, we did all that in grade 5'* (Interview 29, 07.02.03, p. 3, lines 9-13). In assisting their students to prepare for the transitions they face, Mr. Hannan and Mrs. Kay make a point of discussing the experiences their students may go through to give their students a realistic expectation of what life will be like during the next phase of their education. In preparing their students for the potential challenges and significant changes facing early adolescents, these teachers are ensuring students are best equipped to successfully negotiate the transition from primary to secondary school and from secondary school through to years 11 and 12.

4.4 Summary of Chapter

Chapter four begins by identifying the data presentation and modes of analysis used in this study. The six adolescents in the Collective Case are introduced briefly to provide an insight into the *Complex Lives* of each individual. Pertinent issues relating to each participant are explored. Literature is used to support and highlight the relevance of each of the themes connecting the experiences of the participants to existing research in the field. The data is then examined in terms of the various themes that emerged and their relationship to academic pressure.

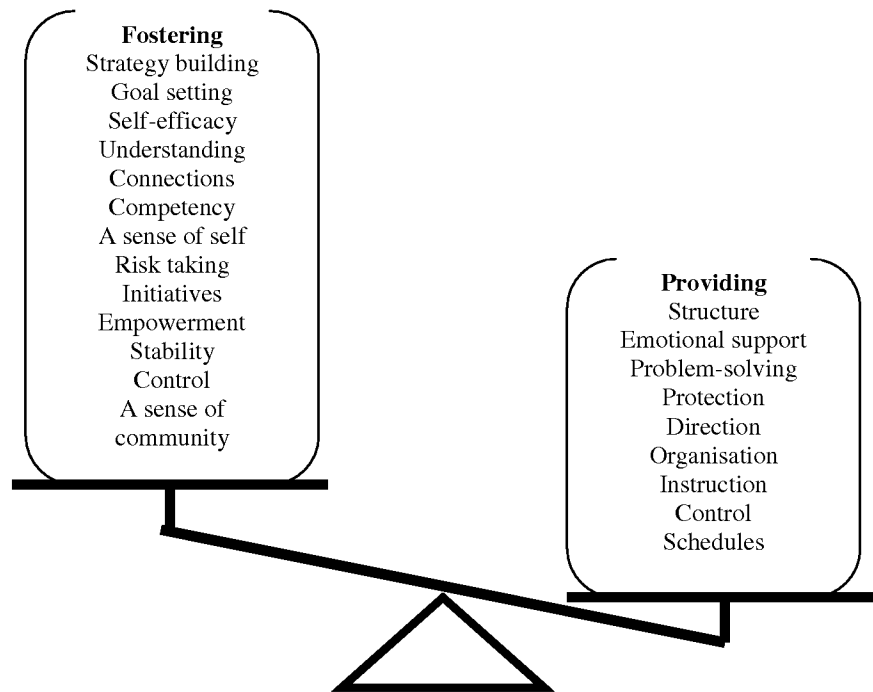
Chapter 5 Discussion and Conclusion

5.1 Overview

As this research journey concludes, some unexpected outcomes were discovered, and greater understandings generated, concerning the pressures Middle Years (years 5 to 8) students experience to achieve academically in rural Victoria. The analysis revealed the existence of academic pressure in the form of unrealistic expectations placed by the early adolescents themselves and by their teachers, parents and peers. There was also evidence of peer pressure to conform to non-academic pursuits, bullying, having future pathways streamed for them, and having their lives over-protected and over-scheduled.

During the Middle Years early adolescents are often searching for greater independence while still requiring security and support from those around them. The research highlighted the tension between supporting students through fostering their capacity to become strategic learners, alongside the support that protects them from life's challenges, directs their choices and organises their lives (see Figure 5.1). To equip learners with the ability to handle academic pressures now and in the future, a greater focus needs to be paid toward fostering resilience and problem-solving strategies throughout schooling.

Figure 5.1: Diagram of the Nature of Optimal Support for Adolescents



Having explored the rich, complex lives of the six early adolescents in the Collective case study, four central themes emerged:

- Over-scheduled-hurried Lives,
- The Nature of Feedback: Intrinsic and Extrinsic Rewards,
- Labelling, and
- Doing School: What's Next?

This chapter will draw together, discuss and make recommendations around these central themes. It will also bring to a close this research journey. Although the study highlighted a wide range of issues that impact upon the stress adolescents' experience to achieve academically, only the issues considered to have the greatest potential impact will be discussed. For instance, it was anticipated that education within a rural environment would have some impact on the pressures these adolescents experienced. However, the rural component proved less influential than expected. These adolescents had readily available access to infrastructure, resources and social opportunities. This contradicts research by

Cooledge, Barrons, Cline, Geller, Keeney, Meier and Paul (1995) who found that rural adolescents had vastly different environments to urban adolescents. Had the participants been secured from remote environments, the outcomes may have differed considerably.

5.2 Over-scheduled-hurried Lives

Early adolescents in the twenty-first century have access to increased information, technological advances, faster paced lives, and a myriad of other unique circumstances. Yet many are not equipped to deal with these demands. Malone (2006) describes the concept of risk as ‘directly bound to the modern experience of living in uncertain and changing times’ (p. 3). Early adolescents with limited physical and social resources will be unable to cope with the challenges of these times. Building skills and fostering strategies that develop confidence, self-esteem and self-efficacy is vital.

Over-scheduled lives of adolescents both at home and at school leave little time to discover what is needed to develop a strong sense of resilience. Over-scheduling also contributes to some early adolescents experiencing difficulties creating a healthy school-life balance which is essential in reducing the pressures they experience. Influences that contribute to the pace and overly controlled lives of these adolescents are often self imposed and/or are the result of the perceptions and expectations of parents, teachers and peers. Factors such as a crowded curriculum, extensive homework, employment, social and sporting commitments and family responsibilities, among others, contribute to the pressures experienced.

Many schools have recognised the impact of academic pressures on students and adopted strategies to move forward in assisting students to cope with pressure including participation in research studies, setting realistic goals, establishing teacher-student mentoring programs and focusing on the establishment and development of strong and positive teacher-student

relationships. However, there is a need to go further than merely supporting students. Schools need to address their own unrealistic expectations of student performance and re-examine how they perpetuate the educational race. As well, it is recommended that schools develop parent education programs that help families balance the demands on time.

Excessive homework is an example of how schooling invades adolescents' lives with time-filling tasks. Homework is currently a contentious issue in education (Cooper, 2006; Cooper, Robinson & Patall, 2006, Spring; Kohn, 2006; Bennett & Kalish, 2006) and while the Victorian government has set in place guidelines that specify the amount of homework students should be completing, some parent groups are leading the charge that their children are too overloaded with homework. Kohn (2006) argues that there is no evidence of academic benefit from homework in primary school while benefits in secondary school are minimal. While some schools are developing homework policies to ensure students are not inundated with copious amounts of work, others simply leave homework distribution up to individual classroom teachers. It is recommended that schools revisit existing homework policies and evaluate the purpose and benefits of homework.

Fostering resiliency and encouraging and supporting early adolescents to develop these skills will enable them to overcome the negative effects of risk (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005, April). Students need to take ownership of their own learning by providing opportunity for decision making, teaching planning and organisational skills, allowing students time to negotiate projects and curriculum and delegating class and whole school student responsibilities. By improving and providing greater opportunities for early adolescents to develop coping strategies throughout the Middle Years, they will be better equipped to deal with the pressures they experience.

The early adolescents in this study were provided varying degrees of encouragement to experiment and develop independence.

5.3 The Nature of Feedback: Intrinsic and Extrinsic Rewards

The nature of the feedback these early adolescents received on a daily basis revealed an excess of extrinsic rewards such as stickers and stars, prizes and generalized comments such as ‘You can do better!’ and ‘Not your best effort’. The literature reveals the negative implications of extrinsic motivation emphasising its competitive nature and highlighting the stress involved in living up to the expectations of others. The classroom environment also supported external rewards such as star charts, times-tables competitions and displays of the *best* students’ work. These can lead to further pressure on students to perform fast and competitively. Even though research shows rewards can lead to students learning solely for extrinsic reasons, teachers continue to use rewards and incentives with early adolescents.

New Learning theorists such as Kalantzis and Cope (2001) draw attention to the need for adolescents to be self-directed autonomous learners who design, manage and navigate their own learning within the context of the curriculum. While research (Kalantzis & Cope, 2001) acknowledges that feedback can provide early adolescents the opportunity to develop a strong sense of belonging and identity, and sets realistic expectations of self, the study highlighted that some of the early adolescents are not provided these opportunities. It is recommended to foster independent, autonomous learning, teachers need to provide opportunity for students to control and make informed choices about what they want to learn, in order to meet their individual needs. Teachers also need to address the way in which they provide feedback to their students to ensure they are communicating realistic expectations and promoting the development of identity and belonging.

Feedback is a strong avenue where values are perpetuated. The research revealed that the early adolescents' teachers valued the speed that work is completed, conveying that fast is best; they value the timely completion of work, communicating that students must finish work and meet deadlines, and they valued the presentation of work, the aesthetics or the secretarial role above the authorial role. Observations highlighted the high frequency of teacher references to expectations. The primary teachers tended to offer feedback through the use of praise and encouragement while the secondary school teachers tended to focus on providing help and assistance to students. It is recommended that teachers address the nature of their daily feedback, critically reflecting on the values they are perpetuating through their teaching and learning environment and what this is conveying to their students about learning.

5.4 Labelling

Stereotyping and streaming is an established practice of school life. These practices were confirmed yet the extent to which labelling and streaming were employed was even greater than anticipated. The literature highlights the powerful impact of labelling on adolescents' sense of selves, their identity and image, on their relationships, on feelings of inclusion and exclusion, and the powerful effect labels can have on achievement.

We often become the labels we are given by others. Teachers need to build and foster a classroom culture that will assist in alleviating some peer labelling and peer victimization. The culture needs to legitimise the worth of every individual in the classroom. Yet teachers themselves play a role in labelling students. Teachers stereotype through their ability groupings, labelling the 'bright' students, the 'average' students and the 'slow' learners. Explicit and implicit labelling can significantly impact upon students' achievement, behaviour, self-image, communication and subsequent school experience. To help reduce the pressures experienced by students as a result of labelling, professional learning needs to focus

on educating teachers to become aware of their stereotyping practices. Competitive individualism and its impact on students could be minimised through targeted professional learning. Teachers can learn to recognise their role in fueling competition and they can implement approaches to reduce academic competitiveness within the classroom such as individual goal setting, students learning at their own pace. A whole school approach towards creating supportive learning environments where a team of students and teachers are working together to support each other is welcomed.

5.5 Doing School: What's Next?

The development of a healthy attitude toward school and education is directly related to early adolescents' sense of belonging at school and ideas of self are heavily influenced by their family members' views of school and established home-school relationships.

The Cooledge et al. (1995) study identified a gap in what rural schools teach through the curriculum at the Middle Years level and what early adolescents need to learn. To ensure success in the education of rural adolescents, young individuals need to be exposed to quality life skills classes, adviser-advisee programs, networks and community resources, and increased parent involvement (Cooledge et al, 1995).

As the family home environment of support and encouragement is the primary place of education for individuals until they reach school age, home is the ideal place to establish and promote the development of skills such as cooperation, mutual support and accountability. Furthermore, individualism could be promoted through celebrating intelligence, education, experience, employment, attitudes, beliefs, opinions and values and morals, ethics and religion rather than achievement, results and outcomes (Fincher, 2002, March).

Adolescents' home environment should be places in which they can have their own space within familiar surroundings and feel they belong. Noller and Patton (1990) conclude that the ideal family environment for adolescents is 'a place where communication is positive and effective, where the adolescents receive strong support from parents, feel free to express their feelings and opinions appropriately, and to discuss issues, raise conflicts, negotiate about plans and make decisions with a growing sense of their own competence' (p. 57).

Family plays a significant role in providing conditions for adolescents to develop resilience, autonomy, a sense of agency and belonging. To achieve this, an adolescent's home environment should include love and attachment, material and emotional support, consistent parenting practices including positive expectations and models of resiliency and creating positive links with school (Howard & Johnson, 2001). Family is considered an important context for the development of attitudes and behaviour through early adolescence, while parents' values influence and help shape adolescent beliefs about education, work and social relationships (Toumbourou & Gregg, 2001, Winter).

Support offered to early adolescents can have markedly different outcomes, depending on the type offered and the degree to which families promote the development of resilience. Fergus and Zimmerman (2005, April) identify three common models of resilience, namely compensatory, involving a direct effect of a promotive factor such as adult monitoring on an outcome, protective, where assets or resources such as parental support reduce the risk factor or moderate a negative outcome, and challenge, which embodies the idea that exposure to moderate levels of risk expose enough of the risk factor for early adolescents to learn how to overcome it.

While government-lead initiatives go a long way to meeting the needs of education, as new issues are identified the needs of education continually evolve. Each school has its own unique set of educational needs in order to achieve the best possible outcomes. Therefore government initiatives and programs should be flexible in their implementation and adaptability to fulfil the individual goals and priorities of each school. Initiatives should be dynamic and continually evolving to meet emerging needs, while government funding needs to ensure the most beneficial outcomes are achieved from all initiatives and programs. Collaborating and sharing knowledge should be a strong focus for all projects, whether government-lead or other, with needs identified by schools to drive further research and initiatives. The need for schools to keep abreast of current research and teaching/learning initiatives is imperative. Realistically, however, schools are already operating under inflated workloads. It may be possible for staff or a small committee group, in a rotating role, to share the responsibility of reading, identifying and reporting on current research and initiatives that relate specifically to their school's needs.

As schools are now preparing students during the early years of secondary school for years 11 and 12, high expectations and the pressure on adolescents to perform are increasing. As a result, competitive individualism, described as private combat for personal reward, is becoming a growing phenomenon which often results in increased pressure (Palmer, 1999). There is also greater competition for places in parent-selected academically-orientated schools with highly scaled subjects, which has further promoted competitive individualism.

Families should be helped to recognise when protecting their children can become over-protective. Schools can develop programs to provide information, strategies, structures and partnerships to families in order to promote the support of early adolescents, helping them develop strategic thinking and active problem-solving skills.

Keeping up to date with information and issues pertaining to their adolescents and their education is a challenge for many families. While some families remain informed and heavily involved, others continue to feel isolated from their adolescent's school community; this can increase the pressure on students to maintain the line of communication between the school and their families. Schools could work towards strengthening and improving their role in developing this important partnership by re-addressing their communication processes, and identifying successful and unsuccessful practices, with a view to improving those procedures. School-based committees could be charged with developing and maintaining positive communication with families to provide information concerning how they can become involved in their child's education in purposeful ways. Family members should also be encouraged to contribute to teacher knowledge and understanding by communicating and informing them about the specific needs of their children.

Classroom based research provides another avenue for the identification of school needs and the development of programs and initiatives that directly address these needs. This more grounded approach to research can have significant benefits to the students involved: being listened to by someone who is genuinely interested in their lives and meeting their needs, and the development of a greater sense of well-being, which can result in reduced pressure. Yet, as there is currently no real incentive for teachers to complete such informal or formal study or professional learning, incentives need to be introduced. To allow such research to occur, teachers need to be encouraged and supported by principals, colleagues, parents, families and the wider school community who would directly benefit from such research.

Many of the initiatives implemented at a school level are directed at addressing educational needs as identified by government and government funded research. As many of these

initiatives are mandated, schools should adjust their professional learning, program and curriculum decisions to meet those government-identified needs which directly limit a school's ability to fulfil its own needs. Furthermore, few government initiatives allow individual school interpretation and opportunity to apply relevant programs to identified needs.

Barratt, Cormack, Evers and Withers (1992) identified and reinforced the need to reform Middle Years education and highlighted the significant difference between primary and secondary schools. Primary schools predominantly focus on the individual, while secondary schools chiefly focus on the curriculum. While these differences amount to two distinct cultures of schooling, they are connected through the journey taken by early adolescents. Primary and secondary schools should find a way to work collaboratively together to establish agreed common goals and build bridges and community links between the two education sectors for the greater benefit of the adolescents they teach; and in doing so, adequately address the issue of pressure to achieve at school (Hargreaves & Earl, 1990).

To provide optimum learning environments for early adolescents in both primary and secondary schools, the Middle Years could be approached by all schools as a separate education sector; an approach that is already being implemented within a few Victorian schools. Some primary schools are working toward an integrated approach, trialing specialist teaching roles within teaching teams and giving Middle Years students the opportunity to participate in subjects of interest and choice; while a number of Victorian secondary schools have trialed a collaborative Year 7 approach where students are allocated a small number of classrooms within which the majority of classes are taught by small generalist style teaching teams. It is recommended that all primary and secondary schools approach the Middle Years as a new education sector, where teams could plan and teach together using a generalist

approach utilising their individual skills to provide a specialist element with the primary focus the social well-being of students. Primary students could rotate classrooms for specialist sessions and secondary students could remain primarily in one 'home' room while a small group of teachers move from room to room.

A whole school ethos focused on making collaborative decisions about student welfare and well-being that directly meets the needs of early adolescents is welcomed. Student welfare initiatives should focus on the needs and experiences of students, provide ongoing support and consistently permeate learning environments, the whole school environment and the wider school community, in order to reinforce the importance of supporting early adolescents and addressing the topic of school pressure.

The effectiveness of transition programs vary greatly between schools, with some providing little opportunity for communication and information exchange between teachers, and minimal involvement or active participation of students. Transition programs between primary and secondary schools can be improved through a collaborative approach; one way to achieve this would be an ongoing approach where teachers meet with small groups of students throughout year 6, beginning at the start of the school year, to discuss their fears and expectations and answer their questions with the goal of using this information to inform and prepare individuals for the transition into secondary school.

Schools could work to develop a whole school learning environment that promotes a strong sense of community and shows early adolescents they are not alone but are supported in their journey of learning. Schools can implement buddy and peer mentoring programs within individual classes and through the whole school that utilise student skills and promote the

development of positive relationships that provide increased support and reduce pressure on students.

To ensure ongoing quality support for students, the transfer of information within and between schools should be improved to ensure accurate communication of student needs. This could be achieved by ensuring the transfer of student information between schools, grades and teachers is ethically implemented.

In order to be successful at school, early adolescents have to learn the cultural rules and how to play the school game which can increase pressure on those unwilling or unable to conform. Although learning *how to do school* prepares and inducts early adolescents into the next phase of their learning, through this process they can be denied the opportunity to develop the fundamental strategies required to assist them throughout their lives.

The role of a teacher is extremely diverse. As educators, it could be said teachers play the roles of facilitator, collaborator, curriculum developer, team member, community builder, educational leader, information producer, instructional designer, trainer, student, silent partner, team coordinator, advisor, monitoring and assessment specialist, and role model. However, teachers are not only educators, and within their classrooms they play many other roles, with each requiring a new set of skills and time commitment learning how to fulfil student needs.

Currently the professional learning of teachers is primarily directed by government initiatives and, essentially, the availability of such professional learning programs. However, as schools and teachers are in the best position to identify their greatest professional needs, some responsibility should be given to these bodies to undertake professional learning that best

caters for the requirements of their school, from a bottom-up rather than top-down approach. This could be achieved by allocating professional learning funds to the three areas of government initiatives and programs, school priorities and individual teacher needs. Another possibility would be a whole school approach to professional learning where teachers share their knowledge and expertise among colleagues to address issues central to school and the individual teacher. Prioritizing professional learning will ensure the implementation of proactive and constructive strategies for supporting students and ultimately reducing the pressure they experience. The needs of schools should lead and guide education initiatives.

A carefully planned integrated approach to teaching and learning, utilising teaching teams and integrated authentic projects, help to create a sense of integration, security and stability (Braggett, Morris & Day, 1999). Such an approach would also provide opportunity for the development of strong teacher-student relationships where teachers would know their students better, placing teachers in a better position to identify and assist students to better manage academic pressure.

Due to ever-increasing demands on time, teachers are finding it more and more difficult to get to know and build a strong relationship with their students. While privacy laws have been created to protect the rights of students and their families, the limited information teachers now receive can prevent them from developing adequate knowledge and understanding and therefore providing the right type of support to those in greatest need. Passing information from one teacher to the next is an important step in ensuring the emerging needs of each student are met, and that they are well supported in developing the skills and strategies they need to build a strong sense of resilience with the ability to bounce back from adversity (Kordich Hall & Pearson, 2003, November). While some schools simply pass hard-copy student files between teachers and leave it up to their own discretion, others are developing

electronic technology-based files, that highlight essential information of which teachers should be aware of that can be accessed easily and make the transfer of information a time-efficient process. It is recommended that current privacy laws be revisited, in order to find ways teachers can support students and meet their immediate needs, while maintaining the privacy of individuals and their families.

5.6 Recommendations for Further Research

It is suggested that further research on this topic focus on the impact and long-term effects of academic pressure in the later years of education. Further investigation into support structures required by individuals throughout their schooling would also be welcomed.

5.7 Summary of Chapter

This chapter discusses the wider implications and recommendations needed to address the issue of academic pressure on early adolescents. It explores the nature of support provided to early adolescents and argues for greater emphasis to be placed on fostering the skills and knowledge within the adolescent to develop resilience and better cope with these pressures. To achieve this, it is recommended that a united collaborative approach be undertaken between teachers, families and the school community to support students in meeting their immediate and emerging needs. The chapter concluded with suggestions for further research.

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Appendix A: Department of Education and Training Research Approval Letter

Appendix B: RMIT Human Research Ethics Committee Research Approval Letter

Appendix C: RMIT Human Research Ethics Committee Consent Form

Appendix D: Plain Language Statement – Student Participant & Parent/Guardian

Ms Adele Demarte
99 McIlwraith Street
Princes Hill
Victoria 3054

Dear

My name is Adele Demarte and I am a postgraduate student at RMIT University. I am currently completing a research project, developed from my own experiences and interests in the education and welfare of students 10-15 years old within rural and remote Victoria, Australia.

This research project is being undertaken as part of a Masters of Research (Education) degree. I am studying within the Faculty of Education, Language and Community Services, Department of School and Early Childhood Education.

The title of my research project is *Understanding the pressure on students to achieve academically during the Middle Years of Schooling in rural and remote Victoria, Australia*.

The project focuses on exploring the student support structures in place within primary and secondary schools in rural and remote Victoria. It will explore the strategies implemented by teachers of grades 5 and 6 and years 7, 8 and 9, to support their students in reference to the academic pressures they experience. The project will also identify support structures prescribed by students experiencing pressure to achieve academically.

It will look at the pressures placed on students to achieve academically during grades 5 and 6 and years 7, 8 and 9 and the origins of such pressure. The project will also compare the pressures identified by students with those identified by schools and teachers of these grade/year levels.

I would like to invite you to become involved in this research project, as I believe that it will benefit you as a participant and your participation will also help improve the education and support of other students within the wider community of rural and remote students.

The following details what would be expected of you, if you choose to participate in this research project:

- Participation in a small focus group study with three other individuals.
- Participation in three to four group interviews with the other members of your focus group for approximately thirty to forty-five minutes each.
- Participation in three to four individual interviews for approximately thirty to forty-five minutes each.
- All interviews will be held at times and places convenient for and mutually accepted by both the participants and the researcher.
- All interviews will be audio taped but participants will not be identified.

- Maintaining an informal journal throughout the length of the research period to document events, conversations, feelings and other information relating to the project, that cannot be observed by the researcher.

You may withdraw from the research project at any time at which any unprocessed data may also be withdrawn.

As you are under 18 years of age, I am required by law to obtain your parent/guardian's permission for your participation in this research project. Please discuss your participation with them and then both you and your parent/guardian sign the attached consent form.

For further information about this research study please don't hesitate to contact me on (03) 9387-4796 or my senior supervisor, Dr. Gloria Latham on (03) 9925-7848.

Yours sincerely,

Adele Demarte

Any complaints about your participation in this project may be directed to the Secretary, RMIT Human Research Ethics Committee, University Secretariat, RMIT, GPO Box 2476V, Melbourne, 3001. The telephone number is (03) 9925 1745.

Appendix E: Plain Language Statement – Principal/Teacher Participant

Ms Adele Demarte
99 McIlwraith Street
Princes Hill
Victoria 3054

Dear

My name is Adele Demarte and I am a postgraduate student at RMIT University. I am currently completing a research project, developed from my own experiences and interests in the education and welfare of students 10-15 years old within rural and remote Victoria, Australia.

This research project is being undertaken as part of a Masters of Research (Education) degree. I am studying within the Faculty of Education, Language and Community Services, Department of School and Early Childhood Education.

The title of my research project is *Understanding the pressure on students to achieve academically during the Middle Years of Schooling in rural and remote Victoria, Australia*.

The project focuses on exploring the student support structures in place within primary and secondary schools in rural and remote Victoria. It will explore the strategies implemented by teachers of grades 5 and 6 and years 7, 8 and 9, to support their students in reference to the academic pressures they experience. The project will also identify support structures prescribed by students experiencing pressure to achieve academically.

It will look at the pressures placed on students to achieve academically during grades 5 and 6 and years 7, 8 and 9 and the origins of such pressure. The project will also compare the pressures identified by students with those identified by schools and teachers of these grade/year levels.

I would like to invite you to become involved in this research project, as I believe that it will benefit you as a participant and your participation will also help improve the education and support of other students within the wider community of rural and remote students.

The following details what would be expected of you, if you choose to participate in this research project:

- Participation in a focus group with the school Principal and Teacher participating in this project.
- Participation in four to five individual interviews for approximately thirty to forty-five minutes each.
- All interviews will be held at times and places convenient for and mutually accepted by both the participants and the researcher.
- All interviews will be audio taped but participants will not be identified.

- Maintaining an informal journal throughout the length of the research period to document events, conversations, feelings and other information relating to the project, that cannot be observed by the researcher.

I would also request access to school policy documents relating to classroom practice in order to establish a context in which the teaching practices and approaches, observed and discussed, have been applied within the school.

You may withdraw from the research project at any time at which any unprocessed data may also be withdrawn.

For further information about this research study please don't hesitate to contact me on (03) 9387-4796 or my senior supervisor, Dr. Gloria Latham on (03) 9925-7848.

Yours sincerely,

Adele Demarte

<p>Any complaints about your participation in this project may be directed to the Secretary, RMIT Human Research Ethics Committee, University Secretariat, RMIT, GPO Box 2476V, Melbourne, 3001. The telephone number is (03) 9925 1745.</p>
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Appendix F: Summary of Infrastructure of the Primary and Secondary School Townships

	Primary School Township 'Smaller township'	Secondary School Township 'Major urban centre'
Population	Approximately 500	Approximately 5000
Employment	<p>Unemployment rates have decreased significantly over the past seven years. The unemployment rate for the December quarter 2006 was 6.2%, the lowest figure in over a decade. This compared with the Victorian average rate of 5.0%.</p> <p>The primary industry areas of employment include Retail Trade, Manufacturing and Health and Community Services.</p>	<p>Lowest rate of unemployment in the Gippsland region at just over 4%, beating the state average of unemployment.</p> <p>The primary industry areas of employment include Retail, Health and Community Services, Agriculture, Forestry and Fishing, Construction and Manufacturing.</p>
Income	The average taxable income was \$39,877 in 2004 compared to the Victorian average of \$42,093.	The average taxable income was \$32, 950 in 2003. Income figures are lower than the state average, yet still healthy, while wage rates are affordable.
Dominant Industry Sectors	The dominant industry sectors based upon Industry establishments include Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries, Property and Business Services, Construction and Retail Trade.	The dominant industry sectors based upon Industry establishments include Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries, Construction, Property and Business Services, Retail Trade and Manufacturing.
Professional Services/Businesses	Two Automotive Service and Repair businesses. Australia Post Shop. Butchery. General Store. Hotel. Milk Bar and Café. Hairdresser.	An extensive range of professional services and businesses including: Arts, Craft and Antiques, Audio visual, Automotive Service and Repairs, Clothing and Fashion, Computer, Food and Liquor, Hair and Beauty, Extensive retail stores and IT and Communications.
Medical/Doctor Facilities	Infant Welfare Centre.	Hospital, Hospice Care, Medical Group, Health and Fitness Centre, Pharmacy and Health Service.
Emergency Services	Country Fire Station. Facilities available at nearby major urban centre approximately 20km away.	Urban Fire Brigade, State Emergency Service and Police.
Education	Preschool. State Primary school with approximately 160 students.	State Secondary school with approximately 650 students. State Primary School with approximately 560 students. State specialist school with approximately 70 students. Two non-government schools, one primary and one secondary.
Accommodation	No accommodation services available.	Accommodation services for rental, purchase, land and farming. Currently 7 Real Estate agents in township. Hotel and Motel.
Entertainment	Monthly exhibitions of contemporary art and crafts and public music and performance events.	Local theatre, visiting musicians, local bands and a cinema complex.

Arts	<p>Memorial Hall with a stage.</p> <p>Independent artist-run initiative. Gallery and studios in painting, printmaking, ceramics, photography and sculpture. Exhibitions of contemporary art and crafts are displayed in the large gallery and foyer/retail outlet. Art classes are offered in the various specialist studios.</p>	<p>Vibrant Arts community. Numerous shops, galleries and museums devoted to local arts and crafts.</p> <p>Garden and lifestyle expo each year as well as Daffodil, Camellia and Rose shows annually.</p>
Services	<p>Country Women's Association Park including a playground, BBQ, shelter, tables and chairs.</p> <p>Transfer station (garbage disposal and recycling) located nearby.</p> <p>Anglican/Uniting Cooperating Parish.</p>	<p>Town hosts a broad range of services and facilities for visitors including shops, cafes and a cinema complex.</p> <p>Civic parks and gardens, Library and eight churches.</p> <p>Centrelink office and two employment agencies.</p>
Recreation	<p>Minimal sporting facilities including a cricket and football ground, bowls pitch. Indoor Basketball stadium.</p> <p>Playground, BBQ, change rooms, public toilets, meeting room, pavilion, and function room facilities.</p> <p>Two asphalt tennis courts open to general public with public toilets.</p> <p>Caravan park and camping ground.</p>	<p>Swimming pool, leisure and aquatic centre.</p> <p>Rail trail – walking, cycling, horse riding.</p> <p>Extensive sporting facilities catering for a wide range of activities.</p> <p>Numerous parks and gardens.</p> <p>Caravan park and camping ground.</p>
Service Clubs and Town Associations	<p>Historical Society and Museum.</p> <p>Community Association.</p>	<p>Fifteen service clubs and town associations are in operation.</p>
Sporting and Hobby Groups	<p>Tennis, Football and Netball, Cricket, Bowls Clubs.</p> <p>Friends of the National Park group.</p>	<p>Numerous sporting and hobby groups. Senior Citizens Centre.</p>

Appendix G: Member Checking Transcripts Cover Letter

Monday 7th March, 2005

Dear

I hope this finds you well and looking forward to the school holiday break in a few short weeks.

It's now been over a year since you participated in my research project where I observed you in your classroom and interviewed you in relation to the pressures on students to achieve academically.

I am currently writing my thesis and am now required to complete a 'member checking' process. This involves sending the transcript of our interview to you, to be read through and confirmed that what you said was correctly interpreted and to give you the opportunity to exclude any information from the transcript that you wish not to be included.

It would be greatly appreciated if you could read through the document, cross out any information to be excluded, then return the document to me with a quick note or email confirming the accuracy of the interpretation.

It would be greatly appreciated if you could complete this task by the beginning of second term.

I have included a stamped, self-addressed envelope for the return of the transcript and confirmation note. If you wish to email the confirmation to me, my email address is adele@rahna.com.

I thank you once again for your valuable contribution to my study and in advance for your assistance with this task.

Kind regards,

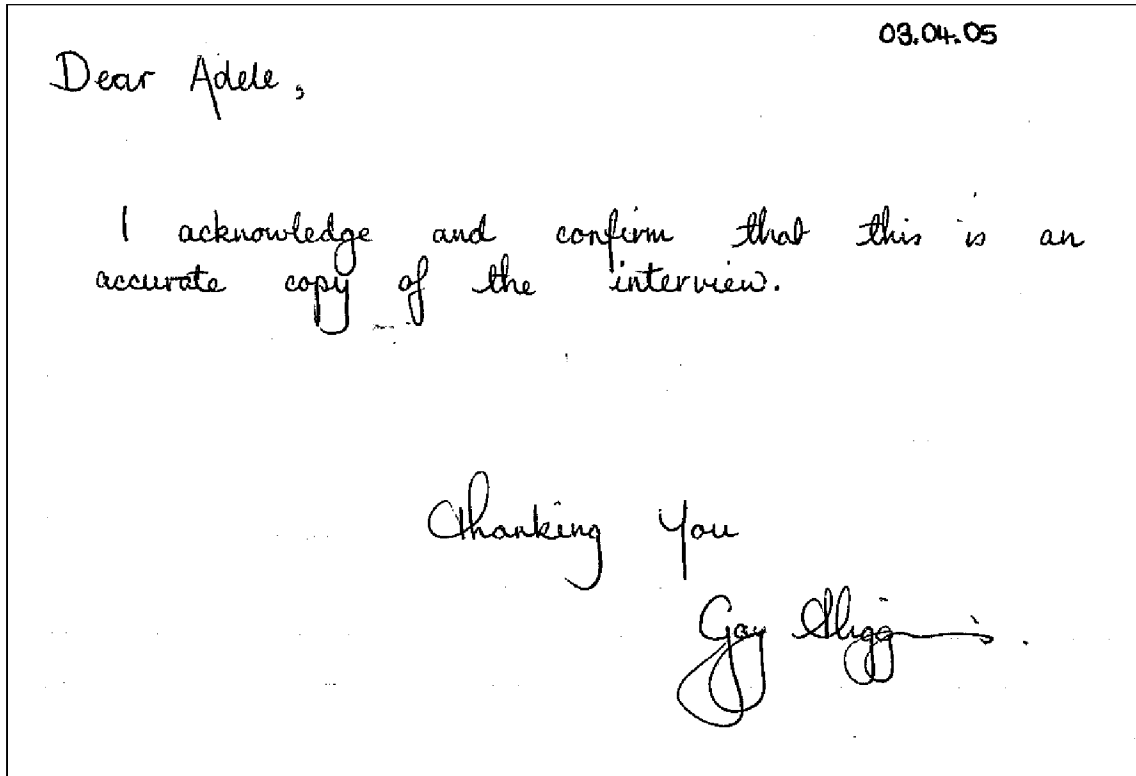
Adele Demarte

Contact Details

Address: 32 Larnook Crescent, Mooroolbark, Victoria 3138
Home: (03) 9726 - 0649
Mobile: 0411 11 29 81
Email: adele@rahna.com

Appendix H: Member Checking Reply Letter Example from Participant

In the Member Checking phase of the research process the interview transcripts were validated by student and teacher participants as accurate and any minor adjustments were noted and corrected. Below is an example of one teacher participant who verified the accuracy of the transcripts.



Appendix I: External Auditor's Report