The MYSA Position Paper and pre-service middle years teacher education: Surprisingly serendipitous synergies

Donna Pendergast, Jayne Keogh, Barbara Garrick and Joy Reynolds

Abstract

Since 2007, there has been a flurry of activity at the national level by the Rudd Labor government in Australia to introduce significant changes to education policy for the nation. The redevelopment of the national curriculum is underpinned by questions about the phases/stages of schooling which will support the curriculum, bringing into focus unresolved questions about inclusion of a middle phase/stage in what has historically been a two-phase model. At a national level the Middle Years of Schooling Association has worked to connect the various definitions, explanations and ideas of middle schooling through the Middle Schooling: People, Practices and Places Position Paper (2008). Further, longitudinal research of a middle years teacher training program in an Australian university has sought to understand the concepts of "middle years" and "the middle years of schooling" from the perspective of pre-service teachers about to become middle years teacher specialists. This study has sought to provide much needed research data in the area of middle schooling. This paper looks at data from two cohorts in the teacher training program. An open content analysis was conducted in formulating themes that emerged from the participants' responses to the research questions using a grounded theory approach. This small sample of the overall data set was used to develop and test the usefulness of the categories, enabling a complete analysis of the data from all cohorts to be conducted. Unexpectedly and serendipitously, the data revealed direct parallels between the thinking of the pre-service teachers and the concepts in the MYSA Position Paper (2008). This paper outlines these synergies.
Introduction

Over the last decade, policy associated with middle years school education has been driven largely by isolated state- and territory-based initiatives. More recently, the Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians (MCEETYA 2008:10) identifies one of its eight inter-related action areas as ‘enhancing middle years development’, and provides the following explanation:

"The middle years are an important period of learning, in which knowledge of fundamental disciplines are developed, yet this is also a time when students are at the greatest risk of disengagement from learning. Student motivation and engagement in these years is critical, and can be influenced by tailoring approaches to teaching with learning activities and learning environments that specifically consider the needs of middle years' students."

This recognition of the middle years as a specialised phase of learning appears alongside the identification of early childhood education and senior years of schooling as two of the other action areas (MCEETYA 2008). Currently, the redevelopement of the national curriculum is a hallmark of the Federal Labor Rudd government's 'education revolution' (Australian Labour Party 2007). With a timeline for implementation in 2011, there is a flurry of attention on a range of key priorities, including the question of what phases/stages of schooling will underpin the curriculum model. Each of these places the middle years on the agenda in the schooling sector, with expected concomitant effects in pre-service teacher education.

The two-tiered model of teacher education (primary and secondary) which has traditionally dominated pre-service teacher education may not be the best model for preparing teachers to address the increasingly concerning array of data and reports about disengagement, alienation, declining literacy and numeracy standards and the like, rendered as evidence of the need to focus on the middle years (see for example In the Middle, Schools Council 1993; From alienation to engagement (Australian Curriculum Studies Association 1995)). As Garryc et al (2008:254) note "[T]he literature concerning schooling suggests that education systems, both internationally and here in Australia, are increasingly recognising the need for middle schooling initiatives."

While the schooling sector has been grappling with future models, in 2008 the Middle Years of Schooling Association (MYSa) launched its first national position paper on middle schooling. MYSa frames middle schooling through the interconnected concepts of People, Practices and Places. According to the paper:

"Middle schooling optimizes the learning opportunities of young People in the middle years so that their potential to live and work successfully in contemporary society, today and in the future, is enhanced. Middle schooling features the adoption of interdependent and aligned Practices across the domains of pedagogy, pastoral care, assessment and curriculum; and through organisational initiatives in their learning Place. (MYSa 2008:1)"

This is a unique concept, intended to bring together many of the existing definitions, explanations and ideas about middle schooling. Attention to all three of the interconnected concepts is regarded as critical for middle schooling success.

However, there is currently a gap in our understanding of middle years teacher identity as connected to teacher training and teacher practice, a gap that has been recognized internationally (National Middle School Association 2001) as well as locally, by scholars such as Luke et al (2003) who note:

"[W]hat is needed is medium-duration longitudinal studies of teacher problems, strategies and pathways from various kinds of training into and through the middle years in the schooling sector. This would set the conditions for a much better sense of what really counts as excellent middle years teaching practice. (p. 138)"

The present study takes up this challenge.

The longitudinal study

In 2002, the first cohort of students commenced their study in a unique, specialised pre-service middle years' dual degree teacher education program, the first of its kind (Pendergast 2002). The conceptual foundations of the program have been outlined elsewhere (see for example Mitchell et al 2003; Hunter et al 2004; Keogh et al 2004; Pendergast et al 2007; Garrick et al 2008). To date there have been six cohorts and a total of 276 graduates from the program.

A longitudinal study has been conducted over the life of the program which contributes to an understanding of why participants are interested in the middle years of schooling area; the ways in which the middle years are conceptualised by the research participants; the impact on the student teachers' practice; and the implications of the program for teacher education reform at the regional and national levels. All students had the opportunity to participate, with 276 participating since 2003.

Survey data from two cohorts were selected for the present paper. The cohorts were selected for convenience; one was from the early years of the programs' inception and the other after the program had been in operation for several years. The first group, Cohort 2, included a total of 18 students who graduated from the Bachelor of Education in the Middle Years of Schooling dual degree program BEd (MYS) in 2003. Cohort 6 included 19 students who graduated in the BEd (MYS) in 2008.

Data collection instruments

Participants completed annual surveys and were involved in focus group interviews of approximately a half-hour duration. Almost without exception, the entire population of students participated in the completion of surveys, while smaller numbers participated in the focus group interviews. Data were gathered twice each year. The participants' anonymity was protected with the use of pseudonyms, and students were
able to withdraw from the study at any
time without prejudice. The interview
questions were the same as those for
the survey, and were repeated each year,
with every cohort. They were:

1. What is your understanding of the
   middle years?
2. In what ways do you consider
   yourself to be a developing middle
   years teacher?
3. What is your understanding of a
   young person in the middle years?
4. Please comment on your
   practicum experience and how
   it helped develop your sense of
   yourself as a teacher?

All interviews were transcribed, and
both the survey and interview data
were entered into electronic data banks.

Data analysis
Data were the written responses to
the four survey questions. They were
entered into an electronic data base
and were analysed and compared using
content analysis.

Content analysis
An open content analysis was
conducted in formulating the themes
that emerged from the participants' responses to the research questions, using a grounded theory approach.
Grounded theory methods consist of
systematic, yet flexible guidelines for
collecting and analysing qualitative
data to construct theories 'grounded'
in the data themselves (Charmaz
2006:2). As such, no preconceived
texts about categories or themes were
used to classify the data. Instead,
the data were analysed and themes
developed in an ongoing way from the
actual data. Four researchers worked
on the theme development together,
refining and checking for consistency
and clarity of categories. It was
serendipitous that during this process
a connection was made with the three
concepts used to formulate the MYSA
Position Paper on Middle Schooling
(MYSA 2008)—those of 'people',
'practices' and 'places'. It seemed that
the student respondents' words and
opinions genuinely reflected the values
and beliefs expressed in the position
paper. As a result, the researchers used
these three concepts to frame analysis
of the themes revealed in the data.

All the themes and subthemes
identified in students' responses to
the four research questions during the
analytic process are summarised in
Table 1 (below).

Table 1: Themes for each question, organised under the larger categories: People, practices and place

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Practices</th>
<th>Place</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. What is your understanding of the middle years?</td>
<td>People: Subthemes: Age/Stage, Grade, Phase</td>
<td>Practices: Signifying practices</td>
<td>Subtheme: Transition from primary to secondary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>People: Adolescent engagement</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. In what ways do you consider yourself to be a developing middle years teacher?</td>
<td>People: Subthemes: Student (people), Self (people)</td>
<td>Practices: Signifying practices</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>People: Sophisticated (containing all 3 elements: student, self, signifying practices)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. What is your understanding of a young person in the middle years?</td>
<td>People: Subthemes: Change/ing, Challenge/ing, Complex (containing all 3 elements)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Please comment on your practicum experience and how it helped develop your sense of yourself as a teacher?</td>
<td>Helped: Subthemes: Students (people), Self (people)</td>
<td>Helped: Signifying practices</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Did not help:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Findings and discussion
Data were analysed using the same
text categories of 'people', 'practices'
and 'place' that had emerged from the
students' responses, and were expressed
in the MYSA Position Paper on Middle
Schooling (MYSA 2008). From this,
subthemes were identified. Those
that emerged within the category
'people' identified in the students'
responses to Question 1 ('What is
your understanding of the middle
years?') included descriptors referring
to subthemes 'age/Stage', 'grade'
levels, 'phase', terminology relating to
'adolescence', 'special', and student 'disengagement'. Similarly, subthemes identified within the category 'practices' for this question included descriptors of 'signifying practices', 'pedagogy', 'official agendas' and 'policy and reform', and the subtheme that emerged from the main category 'place' included 'transition from primary to secondary'.

Responses to Question 1 include statements such as this one by a student in Cohort 2:

'Middle years is a concept of thinking about and delivering schooling to children/students in the years between primary and upper high. It involves a wide range of concepts such as teaching to the students' needs, including cross curricula integration, mixed class age grouping, constructivism etc. (Coded people, practices and places)

and one by a student in Cohort 6:

'Years 5–9 where students need different strategies to learn than in either primary or secondary schooling. A time when changes are happening to these children, both physically and emotionally where they need and deserve special attention. (Coded people, practices and places)

Question 2 ('In what ways do you consider yourself to be a developing middle years teacher?') revealed two main categories. The first category is of 'people' and has two main subthemes, namely those of 'student' when presenting themselves in terms of their relationships with students, and 'self' when foregrounding themselves as someone who is, for example, 'a lifelong learner'. The second category is 'practices' which included responses that referred to them as using middle schooling signifying practices. So for example, one student in Cohort 2 stated:

'I am developing deeper knowledge within the realm of young adolescents and their education. I feel that I am applying this knowledge in a way that is beneficial for teaching practices. (Coded people and practices)

and a student in Cohort 6 noted:

'I am aware of many of the situations that these children are going through and am alert to their needs and requirements. However professional development needs to continue to keep up to pace with changing time. (Coded people)

Responses to Question 3, 'What is your understanding of a young person in the middle years?' were largely subsumed under the label 'people'. Three main subthemes emerged from these responses—those that focussed on the ways in which young people might be viewed as 'changing or subject to change', as 'challenging, challenged or a challenge' and as

'subject to confusion or confusing'.

So, for example, a student in Cohort 2 wrote:

'Someone who is struggling for their independence and individuality yet seeking to fit in with their peers. Someone who is different to their peers — all developing at different rates in all levels of development. (Coded people, all subthemes)

and a student in Cohort 6 stated:

'The adolescent phase of development brings about particular demands, problems and crises related to age. It is a time when young adolescents are experiencing rapid social, emotional and cognitive changes, developing physically and are highly peer-oriented. (Coded people, all subthemes)

Responses to Question 4 regarding the influence of practicum ('Please comment on your practicum experience and how it helped develop your sense of yourself as a teacher?') indicated it could be identified as either helpful or not helpful, and were presented in relation to the practicum's usefulness to themselves or in relation to their students, ('people'), and/or in relation to developing their pedagogic strategies ('practices'). So, for example, one student in Cohort 2 reported practicum to be very helpful when she responded:
The prac (sic) has proven to be the most useful experience in this course so far and incorporating them into my lesson plans and to communicate with the students more effectively. (Coded people and practices)

Despite the complexities of many of the responses, resulting in some having to be subsumed within more than one category, most student responses could categorised within one categorical subtheme. Analysis of the data revealed a range of knowledges and understandings regarding the complexities of middle years students, teachers, teaching in the middle years, and the influence of practicum. Indeed, responses by students in both cohorts showed, to varying degrees, that the categories they describe, and the boundaries between these categories are hazy, revealing tensions. For instance, in response to Question 3 (What is your understanding of a young person in the middle years?) one student in Cohort 6 wrote: "hormonal, curious about themselves and the world around them" (coded people, subtheme student); and another student in the same cohort responded "I don't think I would do this cohort justice by trying to generate a stereotypical description or profile of such a diverse population of young people" (coded people, all subthemes). This revealed differences in understandings within the same cohort.

Responses also varied between the two cohorts. Data for the two cohorts were analysed and compared in terms of the frequency of coding allocations for each theme. One focus of interest was the ability of each cohort to provide responses that revealed the full range of different themes. When comparing response variations for Cohort 2 compared to Cohort 6, it seems that 90% of students in Cohort 2 provided an answer which resulted in the theme of 'People' for Question 1, while only a little over 60% of students in Cohort 6 did so (see Figure 1 below).

As well as comparing the ability of each cohort to provide responses that revealed the different category labels, the sophistication of the responses to the questions for each cohort was compared. For each question the percentage of students was calculated for combined answers of 0, 1, 2 or 3 labels (Figure 2 below). The darker the column is, the more sophisticated the responses.

For example, in Question 2 (In what ways do you consider yourself to be a developing middle years teacher?), a higher percentage of students from Cohort 2 were able to identify two (32.2%) or three (12.9%) themes (total 45.1%). For the same question, only just over 26% of Cohort 6 provided answers that resulted in two or more themes. However, none in Cohort 6 was able to provide an answer to Question 2, whereas approximately 12% of Cohort 2 provided an answer for that question.

As is evident from analysis of the data, both cohorts showed an overall range and variety of understandings, knowledge and values about the middle years of schooling. Despite some differences in the ways the two cohorts expressed and presented these in their responses to the four main questions, it can be argued that the use of the four concepts that emerged from the MYSA Position Paper (MYSA 2008) serve as useful framing device for analysis, further revealing the complexities relating to the middle years of schooling.

**Summary and conclusion**

The data provide insight into the gap in understandings of teacher training and practice recognised...
both internationally and locally as a concern in the literature. They support the themes derived from the MYSA Position Paper to show that the interconnected concepts of 'people', 'practices' and 'places' have merit. The data also imply that teacher training programs such as the one described here account for the tensions that exist around the complexities regarding middle years students, teachers, teaching in the middle years, and the role of practicum. Both the first and second student cohorts involved in this longitudinal study provided answers which show a rich variation across definitions and explanations of middle schooling. There is also variation within the different cohorts. These serendipitously mirror MYSA's attempt to bring together many of these definitions, explanations, conundrums and ideas about middle schooling. Such attempts to interconnect all three concepts continue to be crucial for the success of middle schooling.

The middle schooling initiatives described in this paper are those of a transformative teacher training program that provides an evidence base of the experiences of pre-service teachers and their program of study. The data provide a medium duration longitudinal study of teacher problems, strategies and pathways from a training program in middle schooling. It is hoped that this data will go some way to building a greater understanding of middle years teacher training and the concepts of the middle years.

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**Information for Contributors**
One of the highlights of my involvement with MYSA is the publication of the Australian Journal of Middle Schooling. As part of the Publication Committee I am privileged to meet and speak with many of the great middle years educators who share their work, in the form of journal articles, with others who are passionate about teaching in the middle years.

In this edition, we are once again very proud to present to you the work of two school teams who were highly commended in our MYSA Team Awards which were announced at our International Conference in May.

The refereed articles range from looking at the creative arts and boys education by Laura Scholes and Mike Nagel, working collaboratively by Raymond Brown, teaching gifted students in the middle years by Susie Garvis, to the synergy of the MYSA Position Paper and pre-service middle years teacher education by Donna Pendergast, Jayne Keogh, Barbara Garrick and Joy Reynolds. These articles provide a great selection of reading and professional development for you.

This edition also includes many articles by teachers and leaders who are willing to share the incredible work they do every day in their classrooms and schools.

On behalf of MYSA, thank you to all contributors in this edition and we always look forward to receiving submissions for future editions. A special thank you to the AJMS Sub-committee for their generosity of time and energy in the editing, refereeing and publication process of this edition.

I hope you enjoy the second edition for 2009 and wish you a safe, restful and well-deserved summer holiday.

Judy Barbe
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