

## **Researching the construction of middle years teacher identity: A study of graduates**

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### **Abstract**

The educational landscape around middle schooling reform is a contemporary focus of the Australian school education agenda. The University of Queensland Middle Years of Schooling pre-service teacher education program develops specialist teachers for this crucial phase of schooling. This program has become a national leader for middle school teacher education. This paper reports on aspects of a longitudinal study that began with the first cohort of students in the program in 2003. To date 234 students have been involved as participants in the study. The findings demonstrate that students: can articulate what is meant by the term middle years and can identify with a need for a philosophy of middle schooling; are aware that they are part of a reform movement which has swept the nation and which has implications for teaching in schools in the twenty first century; are confident the program is producing highly skilled professional teachers willing to take on the challenges of teaching in the middle years; can say how their training has helped them understand and account for the educational experiences of students in a time of transition; and hold quiet, yet firm beliefs about teaching in the middle years. Furthermore, using a measure of lexical density to analyze the verbs used by respondents, it seems that this quiet confidence has grown in the period from 2003 – 2006.

### **Introduction**

Five years ago, Mitchell et al. (2003) authored an article published in *Teaching Education* describing the development of a unique teacher education program that set out to align school reform and teacher education reform for the middle years of schooling. Five years on, the educational landscape regarding middle schooling<sup>1</sup> reform remains a focus in the Australian school education agenda<sup>2</sup> and the University of Queensland program remains a national leader in middle school teacher education. Academics involved over the life of the program have been influential in charting the national agenda for research into middle schooling and the middle years, with projects focusing on, for example: middle schooling reform (Carrington, 2006; Groundwater

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<sup>1</sup> For the purposes of this paper we use the concept of middle years to refer to students in Grades 6-9 (aged 10-15 years). Middle schooling is used to refer to sets of school practices regarded as relevant to students in these grade levels.

<sup>2</sup> For a state by state analysis of the current situation of middle schooling reform refer to Pendergast (2007).

Smith, Mitchell, & Mockler, 2007; Luke, Elkins, Weir, & et al, 2003); lifelong learning (Pendergast et al, 2005); middle schooling, literacy and numeracy for at-risk students (Luke *ibid* ); generational theory and middle schooling (Bahr & Pendergast, 2007); middle schooling pedagogy (Pendergast & Bahr, 2005).

While the research agenda is gaining momentum around middle schooling, there are some aspects that are yet to be investigated. One area is the clear gap in research relating to the construction of a possibly unique middle years teacher identity as a new space (Pendergast et al, In Press; Whitehead et al, 2007). Questions remain, such as, is there a new construction of teacher that is uniquely middle years? Have middle years teachers blended into pre-existing constructions of teachers? What happens to the identity of the graduates of the middle years program once they are employed in the schooling system? While answering each of these questions is beyond the scope of this paper, the intention is to contribute to creating a better understanding about what the possibilities might be.

Luke et. al. (2003) confirm that the question of teacher identity as connected to teacher training and teacher practice is important in middle schooling and is an arena ripe for research, noting that,

[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).

This paper contributes to knowledge about the construction of middle years teacher identity, reporting on one aspect of a multi-modal longitudinal study investigating the emergence of middle years' teacher identities and their constructions of middle years students in schools, during the period when they were enrolled in the middle years teacher education program that featured in this journal five years ago. This study contributes to an understanding of why participants are interested in the middle years of schooling area and the ways in which the participants conceptualized 'middle years', the impacts on their pre-service practices, and the implications of the program for teacher education reform at regional and national levels. The paper commences with some key information about the program and its philosophical basis.

### **The middle schooling program**

The University of Queensland (hereafter UQ) dedicated middle schooling teacher preparation program under scrutiny in this study is the Bachelor of Education (Middle Years of Schooling) (hereafter the program). The goal of the program is to develop, educate and sustain teachers for the middle years of schooling who can contribute innovatively and creatively to addressing the educational challenges of social, community and technological change (School of Education, 2001). The two-year full time equivalent program prepares pre-service teachers to teach across seven of the eight

mandated Key Learning Areas<sup>3</sup> with specialization in two of these, along with developing their expertise in young adolescent teaching and learning practices, focusing on students in Years 6-9. The program has been in operation since 2002 and is delivered at the UQ Ipswich campus, which is a satellite campus renowned for innovation and a blend of the old and new. The program is currently staffed by eight academics and a number of tutors who are either from other faculties, from the doctoral candidate pool and/or experienced classroom teachers. A range and depth of classroom teaching experience are characteristics of the program. The 2007 cohort of students consists of 84 students across two year levels. To date a total of 234 students have graduated from the program. Apart from the inclusion of graduate entry students in a one year program in 2006, and a change of feeder degrees in the dual degree program in 2007, the program has undergone little conceptual change since its inception in 2002.

The program and its development and continuation have been strongly influenced by four broad developments in the literature, notably:

- teacher education for the middle years of schooling in the twenty first century;
- learning to teach in pre-service teacher education;
- the practicum; and
- induction to the teaching profession.

The paper now provides a brief summary of the key literature and concepts that underpin the philosophy of the program along these four themes, and how they are infused within the program.

*Teacher education for the middle years of schooling in the twenty first century.*

The program has been largely informed by developments in the United States, and, more particularly, by developments in Australia, the most notable being reports such as *In the Middle* (Schools' Council, 1993), *From Alienation to Engagement* (Australian Curriculum Studies Association, hereafter ACSA, 1995), *The National Middle Schooling Project* (1996-1998), the Queensland government's *2010* (2000) document and the new *Action plan for the Middle phase of learning* (Queensland Government, 2003). The literature concerning schooling suggests that education systems, both internationally and here in Australia, are increasingly recognising the need for middle schooling initiatives. However, as a concept, middle schooling has been described as "annoyingly nebulous - it is a slippery concept. There is no single definition, no template, no formula for middle schooling" (Pendergast 2007, p.224).

Middle schooling is consistently constructed as being about rethinking education to meet the needs of young people in a changing world. Pendergast (2007) summarises middle schooling by arguing that it, "is not about implementing a three-tier school structure. It is about a unique philosophy, with concomitant changes in pedagogy, curriculum and assessment. These changes are not about repackaging, but are about a new way of doing" (p. 225). Middle schooling means change for teachers, and this

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<sup>3</sup> English, Mathematics, Science, Studies of Society and the Environment, Technology, Health and Physical Education, The Arts.

challenge has been taken up by the middle years teacher education program which aims to create new teaching for a new millennium.

Within the literature there is strong evidence that those who have completed significant teacher education programs in institutions of higher education are better able to cope within the professional context of school work places and are more confident and successful with students than those who have not completed such programs or have completed shorter training programs (Darling-Hammond, 2000). However, traditional teacher education programs are typically either primary or secondary focused with majors or electives in middle schooling. This raises questions about the adequacy of such teacher education programs that prepare pre-service teachers either for the general nature of primary schooling or for the more specialised concerns of secondary schooling, unlike dedicated middle years programs. Indeed, in the United States this lack of specific preparation for teaching in the middle years of schooling has been a cause for criticism (Jackson & Davis, 2000).

The Carnegie Council in the United States and the National Middle School Association (hereafter NMSA) have argued for specialized teacher preparation programs that have a number of essential elements. These include: collaboration in teacher preparation between schools and university, the latter providing a broad academic background concentrating on planning; teaching and assessment in at least two academic fields; the study of young adolescent needs; the study of middle level philosophy and organizations; and study of a middle level curriculum that is organised around and emphasises interdisciplinary and integrative approaches (NMSA, 2001). These essential elements are also reflected in Jackson & Davis's (2000) study of *Turning Points 2000: Educating Adolescents in the 21st Century*. This raises the question, also of concern to Whitehead et al., (2007) of "how confident can we be that the establishment of dedicated middle years teacher education programs will contribute to new teacher identities among those who work in middle schooling?" (p. 28). This question provides impetus for the present investigation.

#### *Learning to teach in pre-service teacher education.*

A study of the learning to teach literature confirms there is no single theory of learning to teach. This is because the lived experience of pre-service teachers and teachers is "fraught with ambiguity, ambivalence and contradiction" (Britzman, 1992, p.25). Even though teacher training programs exist in this milieu, it seems they have changed little in thirty years. A possible reason is that individuals often manage contradiction by seeking refuge in the comfort of what is familiar. Another reason is that pre-service teachers also often come to teacher training programs with a well defined idea of what teaching is, what kind of teacher they would like to be and may likely have pre-existing ideas of what their training programs should provide them (see here Britzman, 1986; Calderhead & Robson, 1991; Chan & Khoo, 2007; Hargreaves & Jacka, 1995; Lortie, 1975; Sugrue, 1996, 1997).

The middle years teacher education program that is the focus of this paper accounts for these contradictions by asking pre-service teachers to be intellectually expert about expert practice through the provision of opportunities to be engaged in cutting-edge

practices and pedagogy. Because the practices are new, pre-service teachers have little opportunity of relying upon preconceived ideas of teaching and how to teach. Students in this program are constantly challenged to question their beliefs about learning and teaching through regular opportunities to reflect upon their praxis. The program is also cognisant of the knowledge base that teachers in the twenty-first century require. The literature (e.g. Beane, 2001; Brown, & Saltman, 2005; Comber, 2006; Hayes, Mills, Christie, & Lingard, 2006) extends the traditional knowledge base of content, pedagogy, curriculum and pedagogical content knowledge to include training to teach for social justice, social change, and social responsibility. The teacher education program is tempered with a balance of these forms of knowledge and underlying principles of social justice and integration. In addition, the school-based practicum plays an important part in this and is part of the induction to the teaching profession. It is to this that we now turn.

### *The practicum*

The literature suggests that pre-service teachers value the practicum highly, believing that this is where they learn to teach (e.g. Smith & Lev-Ari, 2005; Wilson & I'Anson, 2006) . Although the practicum can be fraught with difficulty, pre-service teachers often look forward to the 'real world' application of what is discussed at university, and they value the opportunity for the collegial support provided by practising teachers (see here Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999, Groundwater-Smith, Brennan, McFadden & Mitchell, 2001; Mitchell, 1996). However practicum experiences may not always be effective and may be characterised by disconnection. This can be caused when pre-service teachers are isolated from any type of continuous communication with lecturers and other pre-service teachers, constructing their professional selves in relative isolation from the on-campus components of their program (School of Education, 2001). There is also a disjuncture between teacher training programs for the twenty first century and schools struggling to understand this new organisational and occupational structure (Gore, 1995). The middle years teacher education program that is the focus of this paper aims to create effective partnerships between schools and the university in several specific ways, such as through program advisory committees; and through the employment of practising teachers to serve as tutors<sup>4</sup> in the program. This enhances the connection between the program, the students, the academics, and the reality of the classroom. Furthermore, this middle years program further aims to increase the opportunities for a supervising/mentoring relationship in which pre-service teachers are cognitively and effectively challenged and changed by their mentoring experiences. This program blends a range of educational and teaching experiences in a variety of school and non-school settings, culminating in a school-based internship in the final semester. That is to say, students in this program usually complete a primary practicum, a secondary practicum and a practicum within dedicated middle schools or middle school program prior to a final period of internship. The practicum is considered to be an opportunity for learning rather than a performance.

### *Induction to the teaching profession*

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<sup>4</sup> Practicing teachers employed as tutors in the program as given the title MYSTA – Middle Years of Schooling Teacher Associate.

The literature concerning the transition from pre-service to beginning teacher status suggests that individuals are particularly vulnerable at this time (Sellars, McNally & Rowe, 1998). Beginning teachers are often faced with reduced resources yet substantial teaching loads in their first years of teaching. The literature suggests that beginning teachers require high-quality induction programs, support and encouragement (Fecho, 2000) so that they do not leave the profession at this time. The internship experience offered by the middle years teacher education program helps the gradual transition of pre-service teachers into the profession. The internship is positioned “within a continuum where learning to teach is seen as an ongoing process involving pre-service teacher preparation, induction and mentoring of beginning teachers, and ongoing professional development” (School of Education, 2001, p.20).

While it is useful to understand that this middle years teacher education program and its development and continuation have been strongly influenced by these four broad developments in the literature, we now turn to the longitudinal study to reveal how middle school teacher identity is being constructed.

### **The longitudinal study**

All students enrolled in the program have had the opportunity to participate in this longitudinal study entitled *Creating Teachers for New Schooling Contexts: A Longitudinal Study Involving the Middle Years of Schooling Teacher Education Program*. The study contributes to an understanding of: why participants are interested in the middle years of schooling area; the ways in which the middle years are conceptualized 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. The study has been conducted by university staff since 2003 with a total of 234 students involved as participants in various aspects of the study.

### *Data Collection Instruments*

The study asks volunteers to complete annual surveys and to be involved in focus group interviews of approximately half hour duration. Almost without exception, the entire population of students has participated in the completion of surveys, while smaller numbers have participated in the focus group interviews. The data gathering occurs twice each year. Participants’ anonymity is protected at all times with the use of pseudonyms, and students may withdraw from the study at any time without prejudice. The interview questions are the same as those for the survey and are repeated each year, with each cohort. They are:

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

All interviews are transcribed and both the survey and interview data is entered into electronic data banks.

### *Data Analysis*

A massive reserve of data has now been collected, and new data is regularly entered into the data bank. Initially, after two years of data collection, a content analysis of particular themes was conducted. This resulted in a schema where colours are used to code the different themes. Findings using this data analysis technique have been reported elsewhere (see Hunter et al, 2004; Keogh et al, 2004). In this study, the researchers were interested in comparing responses of pre-service teachers at two different times: at the teacher education programs' inception, and after the program had been in operation for several years.

This study looks at data from the surveys for the years 2003 ( $n=24$ ) and 2006 ( $n=63$ ), being the beginning and the current year of the longitudinal data analyses. This provides a linear comparative base. There were two methods of data analysis. First, colour-coded themes were used to illuminate general impressions and answers to the survey. Second, the data were further examined by investigating the modal constructions (Goatly, 2000, p.87) in the statements made by the students. Christie (2005, p.39) argued that there is a lexical density to the language used when an individual writes, even if only to fill out a survey or form. A survey is a piece of written text and even though writers may hurry to finish the form or by contrast, take care to choose their words carefully, lexical density is evident in the choices made concerning noun, verb, adjectival and adverbial groups. The use of verbs or processes is one of the ways that language builds experiential meaning. Processes refer to 'goings on' in the world or in the imagination. They are expressed or realised in verb groups (Christie, 2005). The relevant processes or verb groups used in a survey are mental processes which express thinking, feeling and sensing. Christie (2005) argues that mental processes are varied with some describing thinking or cognition, and others with sensing, feeling and affect. Such processes include words such as 'believe', 'think', 'understand' and 'anticipate'. There may also be relational or material processes evident. These verb groups express being and action respectively (Christie, 2005). The mood inferred by such processes is often declarative, aiming to inform others of what one thinks and/or feels. Processes are aided in the expression of relationships by the use of modal constructions (Goatly, 2000). Modal constructions concern the resources in language that express judgement about the probability, usuality or likelihood that something might occur, or about the necessity or obligation that something should (perhaps does) occur. For example, Goatly (2000, p.87) argues that in the following sentence: "You are to use a condom for casual sex", the writer is affirming that "You are obliged to..." which is a strong modal construction expressing the strength of obligation. Modal constructions are usually strictly defined as the use of words such as 'usual' and 'probable', but words such as 'are' and 'is' can equally apply as these words too, infer a degree of commitment. Modal construction may be low, medium or high and can be found in attributes and processes. Attributes are what were once termed adjectives and these help describe the degree to which a belief is held in this case.

### **Findings**

At the first level of content analysis, there are four key findings for both the 2003 and 2006 cohorts; namely, that pre-service teachers involved in the program:

- can articulate what is meant by the term middle years and can identify with a need for a philosophy of middle schooling (students can articulate this philosophy);
- are aware that they are part of a reform movement in the middle years of schooling which has swept the nation and which has implications for teaching in schools in the twenty first century;
- are aware that the program is producing highly skilled professional teachers willing to take on the challenges of teaching in the middle years;
- can say how their training has helped them understand and account for the educational experiences of students in a time of transition; and
- hold quiet, yet firm beliefs about teaching in the middle years. Furthermore, it seems that this quiet confidence has grown in the period from 2003 – 2006.

Examples of actual data that demonstrate these findings are now presented. Students in the program are able to define what is meant by the term middle years and are able to articulate the need for a philosophy of middle schooling. Students in the year 2003 typically defined middle years and their philosophy of middle schooling as:

They are adolescents who specifically need a curriculum tailored to suit their needs, such as realizing they are developing and changing and may not fully understand why. They need a curriculum that is real world, and relates to their interests and ensure that it keeps them interested in the school institution as well (Student A, 2003).

When it comes down to it, they are just like everyone else in this world. Except that they are just beginning their realizations, while everyone else is half way through theirs. They are in the early stages of forming an identity while everyone else has a foundation ground (Student B, 2003).

They know that they are not only facing some changes based on the type of school-based instruction they are receiving (eg. more from primary style spoon feeding to more secondary style teacher as facilitator) but are also undergoing several changes, issues, questions and problems within themselves based on biological changes that are occurring at this time (Student C, 2003).

The philosophy of middle schooling that the students articulate here is one of change (Bahr & Pendergast, 2007) to a curriculum 'tailored to suit their needs', 'more from primary style spoon feeding to more secondary style teacher as facilitator' (Student A, 2003). This suggests curriculum and pedagogy for the middle years rather than a particular kind of school structure (Chadbourne, 2001; Queensland Government, 2003).

By 2006 the pre-service teacher research participants seemed to be able to more clearly articulate a definition of the middle years program and a philosophy of middle schooling than those of the previous group. Students observed that middle years was a time of transition:

...students in the middle of developing physically, emotionally and academically from little children to upper youth-almost adult... and their academic needs, emotional needs and their changing physicality -experiencing changes both

physically and emotionally. They often become less engaged with learning during this time. Many students are trying to feel their way into adulthood by testing boundaries, questioning authority and simply questioning many things and wanting to be allowed and encouraged to form their own ideas, opinions and identities (Student 1, May 2006).

These pre-service teachers suggested that middle years has a definition, and that it is more about philosophy than structural concerns:

[I]t's an age between Gr 6-10ish. The big questions of adolescence: Who am I? What am I doing here? Struggle with social issues and growing up (Student 2, May, 2006)

[I]t's someone who is under pressure from family, friends and society to choose a path whilst confronting the natural changes that occur physically and mentally. Require direction whether it comes from family, friends, society. Transitional stage from primary to secondary education and includes that time in one's life where identity suffers major overhauls (Student 4, May 2006).

[I]t is a period when students are particularly vulnerable. They are going through a time of great physical, emotional and intellectual upheaval. The one stand-out feature of students in the middle years is that they are all unique individuals with the common goal of finding and establishing their own identity (Student 7, May, 2006).

Middle years encompasses that age group who are experiencing an important transformative phase in their life from child to adult. They seek guidance from mentors, while at the same time crave freedom to explore their own identity. Confused, bored, some looking for an understanding ear of where life is taking them, hormonal (Student 9, 2006).

Middle years to me are the years that are important to students because of the "conflict" of academia and personal, developmental growth. Their (sic) young and they need understanding (Student 10, May 2006).

Comments later in the year by the same cohort show an even more definite understanding of the term middle years. One standout comment (see below) reflects Pendergast's (2005) view that the definition of middle years is fluid and open to interpretation, but that it generally means the age group between 10 and 14:

The middle years is a contested term. It can range from grades 4-9 to 6-9. There are many characteristics I would use to describe a young person in the middle years- enthusiastic, curious, (hyper) active, hormonal, potentially disengaged, thirsty for knowledge, at-risk (Student 13, October 2006).

These pre-service teachers are aware that they are part of the reform movement in the middle years of schooling which has swept the nation and which has implications for teaching in schools in the twenty first century. As the comments above attest, the motivation for reform in the middle years is due to the "conflict of academia and

personal, developmental growth” (Student 10, May 2006) and that students in the middle years are often “confused, bored, [with] some looking for an understanding ear of where life is taking them” (Student 9, 2006). Bahr & Pendergast (2007) argue that this is the reason for “ the growing momentum and willingness to invest in middle schooling as a possible solution to disengagement and underachievement of young adolescents” (p. 210). Pre-service teachers made the following comments in 2003:

Schools are important institutions to educate children/students and give them a place where they can develop their social and interactive skills. In schools the curriculum can also be catered to individual students’ needs as everyone is unique and deserves to be in a system that caters for such diversity. Try and ensure that education can be as enjoyable as possible. I believe that smaller classes would allow the teacher more of an opportunity to give personal attention to all students including catering the curriculum to each individuals needs (Student A, 2003).

Furthermore, schools need to be more flexible. Instead of having classes of students, just have individuals – I realize it’s not that simple, but it makes me wonder where people’s motivations are (Student B, 2003).

Provide a safer and more supportive environment for all students. Focus more on levels of improvement rather than on competitive terms. Engage in a more realistic approach for encouraging students to consider wider philosophical/spiritual conceptions and understandings (Student D, 2003).

If funds were no object, I would allow all students an opportunity to experience middle school in terms of progressing at their own pace, pastoral care and understanding, a relevant topical and dynamic curriculum that provides students with the skills necessary to be life long learners, I would also ensure greater access to technology and other resources such as experts from the community (Student E, 2003).

Again, in 2006, the pre-service teachers seemed more confident to say that middle schooling is more about techniques of pedagogy, curriculum and assessment than about structure. Students commented:

[Middle schooling] precipitates a certain customised teaching and learning paradigm that sits alongside the traditional schooling approach; increased collaborative/co-operative teaching and learning; being part of a community (school & teachers); proving to myself that I can in fact be a useful educator; learning from others (Student 6, May 2006).

I want students to think: “I can relate to this” (Student 9, May 2006).

These comments talk of ideas, concepts and teaching styles rather than structures. By October 2006 students were arguing that middle years is about negotiation:

Facilitating more beneficial learning experiences (Student 1, October 2006).

Providing skills, not just knowledge, in contextual circumstances (Student 5, October 2006).

Middle years means negotiation of student personal interests and responsibilities to allow students to progress through a difficult stage of life (Student 8, October 2006).

Students are aware that the program is producing highly skilled professionals who are willing to take on the challenges of teaching in the middle years. Students can say how their training has helped them understand and account for the educational experiences of students in a time of transition. The literature concerning middle schooling suggests that education systems in Australia and internationally are recognising the need for middle schooling initiatives in schools (e.g. Clark & Clark, 1993). Further, the literature also suggests that those students who have completed significant teacher education programs in institutions of higher education are well able to cope with the professional context of school work places and are confident and successful with students (Darling-Hammond, 2000). The following comments show this confidence and a desire to be successful in the newer contexts of schooling.

Students in 2003 said of their training that:

Rather than specialist I am more a generalist teacher. I think we are given a better opportunity to cater to students holistically rather than just academically (Student E, November 2003).

From my prac. experience I was able to see and experience a school beginning to integrate middle school practices. This has helped me to begin to see first hand the problems and benefits. I am still 'developing' my ideas, but feel I am a little way along the path (Student F, November 2003).

I feel that I am able to integrate and teach all the necessary subjects required and have a good (very) understanding of the issues surrounding students of a ms age (Student D, 2003).

Understanding how school affects the lives of students I am still increasing my levels of teacher efficacy. I am negotiating the relationships and their nature with middle school students. I'm not completely confident in my role as a teacher (Student F, 2003).

Students in 2006 observed:

I feel well grounded in theories and practices of MYS, but still need experience in their implementation (Student 11, May 2006).

In many ways I feel I am continually developing and will continue to throughout my professional life. I believe that my pedagogy, behaviour management techniques and assessment will need to be adapted, updated and reflected upon to cater for the needs of ALL students (Student 12, May 2006).

I try to implement integrated curriculum where possible, group work, negotiated assessment, social, and emotional learning, multiple intelligences (Student 14, May 2006).

I will always be developing as I will always be dealing with different individual needs. I will continually be developing in areas of behaviour management, pedagogy, lesson planning, unit planning (Student 17, May 2006).

Some experiences of practicum supported the learning undertaken at university level with comments such as:

I found my practicum an extremely valuable experience and was lucky to get an insight in how a true middle school and a traditional high school operate. These have really helped to teach me and consolidate skills to make me a reflective teacher (Student 12, May 2006).

Prac helped me to realise that teaching is what I want to do. It helped me to become confident that I can teach & I have the ability to be in control of my own class. I was able to be independent on my internship, but still having support really helped me to develop in so many ways (Student 7, October 2006).

However, other students felt the disjuncture described in the literature between schools and university. Students commented that:

I am nearing completion of an education degree in the middle years of schooling. I am not very experienced as a teacher yet (Student 13, May 2006).

I do not feel my last prac/internship placement gave me the supportive and encouraging environment to develop myself as a teacher to the extent it could. However, now I know the type of teacher I cannot be (Student 11, May 2006)!

The paper now seeks to show how students in the program have come to define themselves, first as students undertaking academic study in the area of middle schooling, and, secondly, how this understanding is tempered by the practicum.

### ***A quiet confidence***

Pre-service teachers in both cohorts were able to articulate a definition of middle schooling and could show how their experiences within the program had prepared them for their future work as teachers in the middle years. More particularly, the participants in 2006 expressed a quiet confidence about their abilities. This was expressed through the lexical density of their discussions in the survey. The following tables show that students included words such as 'would', 'are', 'believe' and 'want' to express 'goings on' in their thinking. These are relational and material verbs which express being and action respectively (Christie, 2005). The mood inferred by such processes is often declarative, aiming to inform others of what one thinks and/or feels. Table I: *The use of processes to express declarative statements* shows this. These processes or verb groups are then aided in the expression of relationships by the use of modality. Table II: *The use of modal constructions in verb groups when talking of their own understandings of middle schooling* shows high modality in use compared with, and tempered by, the

statements made in Table III: *The use of modal constructions in verb groups when talking of their growing experience as a teacher of the middle years*. The academic and formal study tempered by the practicum experience suggest that pre-service teachers are ready to take on the challenges ahead of them.

The following tables are structured to show the manner in which a statement can be divided into a theme or the main thought involved in the statement, the verbs which express the strength of conviction and obligation to enact the thought and the rheme which explains that obligation further.

Table I: The use of processes to express declarative statements.

<b>Student thinking (theme)</b>	<b>Student declares through the use of processes/verb groups</b>	<b>Continues their thinking often expressing attributes of relationship or action. (rheme)</b>
Middle years to me	<i>are</i>	the years that are important to students because of the “conflict” of academia and personal, developmental growth (Student 10, October 2006).
The middle years	<i>is</i>	a <i>contested</i> term (Student 13, October 2006).
There are many characteristics I	<i>would use</i>	to describe a young person in the middle years-enthusiastic, curious, (hyper) active, hormonal, potentially disengaged, thirsty for knowledge, at risk (Student 13, October 2006).
I	<i>would allow</i>	all students an opportunity to experience middle school in terms of progressing at their own pace....(Student 2006)
Proving to myself that I	<i>can</i>	in fact be a useful educator (Student 9, May 2006).

These processes express a keenness to enact middle schooling principles.

Table II: The use of modal constructions in verb groups when talking of their own understandings of middle schooling.

<b>Student thinking (theme)</b>	<b>High modality in the use of processes.</b>	<b>Expressing</b>	<b>High modality in the use of adjectives (rheme)</b>	<b>Expressing</b>
I	<i>would allow</i>	Verb expresses a strong degree of certainty.		
The middle years	<i>is</i>	Verb expresses certainty in thought (mental	a <i>contested</i> term	attribute <i>contested</i> expresses certainty, that the

		process)		term is uncertain
There are many characteristics I	<i>would use</i>	Verb group expresses degree of certainty	to describe a young person in the middle years- <i>enthusiastic, curious, (hyper) active, hormonal, potentially disengaged, thirsty for knowledge, at risk</i> (Student 13, October 2006).	Attributes are chosen to express a certainty of conviction and mental process. eg. <i>enthusiastic</i>

The keenness students express in Tables I and II is then tempered by the practicum.

Table III: the use of modal constructions in verb groups when talking of their growing experience as a teacher of the middle years.

<b>Student thinking (theme)</b>	<b>Medium modality in the use of processes.</b>	<b>Expressing</b>	<b>High modality in the use of adjectives (rheme)</b>	<b>Expressing</b>
In many ways I	am continually developing <i>and will</i> continue to	Verb groups express degree of usuality and probability	throughout my <i>professional</i> life(Student 12, May 2006).	attribute <i>professional</i> infers probability and the usuality of growing into a profession.
I	try to implement-	Verb <i>try</i> expresses uncertainty in action, but a certainty of theory	integrated curriculum where possible, group work, negotiated assessment, social, and emotional learning, multiple intelligences (Student 14, May 2006).	<i>where possible</i> form part of the attributes in the rest of the sentence which express caution and selection. These express a degree of probability.
I	am nearing completion	Verb groups express confidence within a	of an education degree in the middle years of schooling.	The completion of these sentences suggests confidence in the program that

I	am not very experienced	degree of usuality or probability as one becomes a teacher	as a teacher yet (Student 13, May 2006).	will grow with teaching.
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### Summary and Conclusion

Pre-service teachers involved in the longitudinal study described here affirm the findings from the literature in three key ways. These research participants can articulate what is meant by the term ‘middle years’ and can identify with a need for, and can articulate a philosophy of middle schooling. They are aware that they are part of a reform movement in the middle years of schooling which has swept the nation and which has implications for teaching in schools in the twenty first century. Participants are aware that the program is producing highly skilled professional pre-service teachers willing to take on the challenges of teaching in the middle years. They can say how their training has helped them understand and account for the educational experiences of students in a time of transition. Finally, they express a ‘quiet confidence’ in their training and practicum experiences. Each of these elements contributes to defining what might well be argued to be a unique middle year’s teacher identity, typified by these characteristics. Further research utilizing the longitudinal data sets and adding the new dimension of surveying graduates from the program are underway.

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