
The middle years of schooling in Queensland: A way forward
Discussion Paper prepared for Education Queensland, December 2002

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Table of Contents

Table of Contents	1
Executive Summary	2
Introduction	2
Methodology	3
Relevant Education Queensland policy documents	3
Key findings	3
Recommendations	6
Review of the Literature	9
Introduction	9
Relevant Education Queensland policy documents	9
Summary of key themes from the research literature	10
The Middle Years of Schooling: Background context	10
Contemporary contexts	11
Key issues arising from the research literature	17
A focus for reform	17
Assessment in the middle years	19
Literacy and numeracy in the middle years	20
Effective leadership in the middle years	22
Concluding comment	23
References	25

We will take a new approach to teaching and learning in the middle years of schooling.

Education and Training Reforms for the Future: A White Paper (2002, p.15)

Executive Summary

Introduction

This paper is designed to provoke and scaffold discussion around a number of connected issues related to the education of young people in Years 5 – 9. These school years span the ages 10 – 14. The following general themes guided the development of this paper:

- Recognition of the middle years of schooling as a distinctive and significant area of educational concern
- Development of a cogent conceptual framework in relation to the middle years of schooling
- Raising issues around the alignment of curriculum, pedagogy and assessment in the middle phase of schooling
- Ensuring that issues of diversity, inclusion and equity remain central
- Addressing issues related to literacy and numeracy for early adolescents living in a complex, diverse and rapidly changing world

Broadly, this paper asks what it means to have classrooms peopled by early adolescents at the beginning of the 21st century. What kinds of learning organizations will best meet their needs and the needs of those who work with them? These are very broad questions, but their answers require some highly specific dialogues and conceptual work around early adolescence and the middle years of schooling.

The paper begins a dialogue around these issues by:

- Analyzing international and national trends in the middle years
- Identifying and further exploring a number of key themes drawn from the national and international research literature
- Providing a number of recommendations to scaffold a way forward for the middle years of schooling in Queensland

Methodology

The paper is based on an extensive national and international literature review. The body of work surveyed included:

- Literature and research around the middle years of schooling in the United States and across Australia
- Leadership and school reform research, particularly in the Australian context
- Research focused on early adolescence drawn from cultural and media studies and sociology
- Survey of current practice in the middle years undertaken by Education Queensland

Relevant Education Queensland policy documents

- *Queensland State Education – 2010*
- *Literate Futures: Report of the Literacy Review for Queensland State Schools*
- *Years 1-10 Curriculum Framework for Education Queensland Schools: Policy and Guidelines*
- *Building Success Together*
- *Framework for Students at Educational Risk*
- *Education and training reforms for the future. A white paper*

Key findings

The research indicates that there is active and ongoing reform in the middle years of schooling in Queensland. Much of this reform is driven by concern for early adolescents—their experience of the transition from primary to secondary school; increasing disengagement and alienation, particularly among at risk students; stalled or declining student achievement in the middle years; continuing difficulties with literacy and numeracy in the middle years, particularly for some groups of boys and for students in target groups (NESB students, rural and remote students, students from low-socioeconomic status backgrounds, ATSI students, students with learning difficulties).

The research highlighted a number of key issues significant to the middle years of schooling:

- Early adolescents engage with an increasingly complex, diverse and multimodal world outside the school
- Curriculum, pedagogy and assessment in the middle years are not effectively aligned
- Teacher knowledge and skill in relation to literacy, numeracy and assessment are often limited
- Higher achievement in the middle years may be linked to the implementation of ‘productive pedagogies’
- Middle school efficacy is more strongly linked to the recognition of the middle years as a ‘first principle’ for school ethos and organization rather than to physical relocation to a designated ‘middle school’

- Literacy and numeracy programs, particularly in secondary schools, are uncoordinated and *ad hoc*

The following key themes were identified as important for providing a way forward for the middle years in Queensland:

1. A focus for reform

The first wave of middle years reform in Australia emerged during the 1990s in response to new understandings of early adolescence and recognition of issues around alienation, underachievement and the educational needs of target groups. However, underachievement and alienation remain a concern. The need for a new way forward becomes more pressing as research outlines the complex and changing skills and knowledges necessary for successful participation in civic and social life.

The literature and research indicate an existing capacity across the middle years for supportive environments and pastoral care programs. There is also an established concern for developing learning experiences and contexts appropriate to the needs of early adolescents. However, the research also indicates that social support is necessary, but of itself, not sufficient to achieve improvements in student outcomes. The most recent Queensland-based research strongly suggests that the implementation of ‘productive pedagogies’ across the middle years may contribute to improved student engagement and achievement, particularly for students in at risk groups. Other related international research suggests that the in-depth study of fewer curriculum outcomes contributes to enhanced student achievement and engagement. As a whole, this body of research is indicating that for the middle years to achieve and sustain improved student outcomes, particularly for target groups, there must be a coordinated refocusing and alignment of curriculum, pedagogy and assessment, along with a continued focus on the needs of early adolescents.

There is evidence to suggest that effective reform is linked to the assignment of ‘first principle’ status to the middle years. Given this priority, the middle years becomes a rallying point for whole school and curriculum renewal, for the development and dissemination of innovative programs and practices, for the deployment of new forms of leadership, and for the development of robust teacher professional learning communities.

2. Assessment in the middle years

Assessment has emerged as an area of concern across the middle years of schooling.

The data indicates that knowledge of assessment techniques and their interpretation is highly variable across the middle years. There is a lack of ‘assessment literacy’. This limits the capacity of assessment to inform classroom practice or to provide substantive information about student progress. The

research strongly suggests that there is a pressing need for professional development in the middle years in the area of assessment generally, and in terms of using it to inform classroom practice. There is also a need for teacher moderation for the development of assessment tasks and for their evaluation.

3. Literacy and numeracy in the middle years

Literacy and numeracy remain core concerns, particularly as the student body continues to diversify. At the same time, new technologies and popular culture are increasingly significant and the research suggests that early adolescents have a particular interest and affiliation with both.

Students in Queensland schools are increasingly diverse. As well, many students carry difficulties with basic literacy and numeracy into the middle years of schooling. The research also suggests that students from target groups, particularly boys, are disengaged from classroom literacy activities. However, the research indicates that there is a lack of knowledge around literacy and numeracy teaching across the middle years; that teachers in the middle years are not well equipped to deal with the challenges of diagnostic and remedial work; and, there has been limited attention, particularly in secondary schools, to the development of whole school literacy and numeracy plans.

The research data suggests that rather than developing specific middle years literacy programs, many schools have overlaid approaches from either primary or secondary schooling to the middle years. Students experiencing difficulty with literacy and numeracy in the middle years are often withdrawn from the mainstream classroom for remediation in basic skills. The research suggests that these withdrawal programs are often unconnected to the curricula or pedagogies evident in the mainstream classroom.

4. Effective leadership in the middle years

Leadership and school organization are key aspects of effective middle years reform. Research in the literature and in middle schooling contexts indicates that leadership plays a significant role in whether or not middle schools are effective in achieving improved student outcomes. A number of leadership themes were found to occur in effective middle schools:

- A strong vision of the role of the school
- Dispersal of leadership
- Entrepreneurial approach
- Awareness of external contexts
- Teacher professional learning community

Recommendations

Based on the review of the literature, recent research and the key issues identified above, this Position Paper offers the following recommendations as a way forward for the middle years in Queensland.

Since the first wave of middle years reform took hold in Australia in the 1990s, there have been profound changes in social and economic conditions. Early adolescents are increasingly engaging with highly diverse cultures, technologies and learning styles that shift their needs beyond those encapsulated in earlier reforms.

Recommendation 1: Queensland should move purposefully towards a middle years focus on intellectual demand, connectedness to the world, social support, engagement with diversity, facility with new texts and new technologies across a range of contexts, critical thinking and analytic skills. A new alignment of curriculum, pedagogy and assessment should reflect this emphasis with a focus on in-depth knowledge around fewer outcomes.

The research indicates that sustained reform requires that the middle years become a ‘first principle’ for school organization and classroom practice. There is convincing evidence that establishment and maintenance of ‘first principle’ status is linked to the development of a coherent policy framework.

Recommendation 2: That Education Queensland place priority on the development and dissemination of a Middle Years of Schooling policy.

A lack of ‘assessment literacy’ across the Middle Years has been identified as a priority issue.

Recommendation 3: Education Queensland should encourage and facilitate the development of assessment literacy for teachers in the middle years of schooling. Teachers in the middle years should engage in moderation of student assessment tasks, in terms of development and evaluation, within and across schools.

Limited articulation of curriculum, pedagogy and assessment was noted in the middle years research.

Recommendation 4: Teachers should be encouraged to align pedagogy and assessment practices. Assessment in the middle years should be viewed as an integral part of curriculum planning and classroom practice. Teachers and schools should be encouraged to align social and academic outcomes in the middle years.

There is a system-wide gap in teacher knowledge and skills around the teaching of literacy and numeracy across the middle years. There is a need for diagnostic and

remediation programs that articulate with the pedagogies and curricula of the mainstream classroom.

Recommendation 5: Education Queensland should require all schools to develop and implement Whole School Literacy and Whole School Numeracy Plans that demonstrate a balanced approach to literacy and numeracy teaching across the middle years. These Plans should engage significantly with multiliteracies and focus on meaningful integration of new technologies. Professional development related to literacy and mathematics in the middle years should become a priority for schools and Education Queensland.

There is evidence that schools with strong professional learning communities were in a better position to achieve and sustain improved student outcomes.

Recommendation 6: Schools should be encouraged to actively develop professional learning communities characterized by dialogue around classroom practice and a sense of shared responsibility and affiliation. Teachers should be encouraged and supported to participate in professional development relevant to the middle years. Teachers should be encouraged and supported to pursue further study.

Leadership, particularly, meaningful dispersal of leadership, appears to be a key factor in the efficacy of middle years reform and programs.

Recommendation 7: Professional development for principals and teachers should encourage and facilitate practices associated with leadership dispersal. Career pathways within the middle years of schooling should be available.

The evidence supports the view that effective middle years programs are not the result of structural change. Efficacy *is* linked to the adoption of intellectually demanding curricula, productive pedagogies and aligned assessment and the positioning of middle schooling at the core of organization and ethos. However, the reality is that the ‘middle years’ often span the physical movement of students from primary to secondary school.

Recommendation 8: Schools should be encouraged to form networks or clusters with a focus on the middle years. There should be more fluid movement of staff between primary and secondary middle schooling sites. There should be professional development around the middle years that draws teachers and administrators from both primary and secondary settings.

The evidence supports the importance of ongoing commitment to providing supportive environments in the middle years.

Recommendation 9: There should be maintenance of the focus on care and support for all students, especially those from target groups, within a climate

of high intellectual demand and expectation. Links to external organizations committed to adolescent health and welfare to create a network of in-school and out-of-school support should be encouraged.

The way forward for the middle years outlined in this Position Paper requires teachers with highly developed knowledge and practices relevant to the learning needs of early adolescents. These will include specific knowledge of early adolescents, economic and sociocultural change, new technologies, and specialist skills for teaching literacy, mathematics and science.

Recommendation 10: Education Queensland should work with tertiary institutions to develop and trial innovative pre-service programs to prepare teachers for the challenges of teaching in the middle years of school.

We will take a new approach to teaching and learning in the middle years of schooling.

Education and Training Reforms for the Future: A White Paper (2002, p.15)

Review of the Literature

Introduction

The world is changing rapidly around us. This is not a new observation. Many of the skills and knowledge that we, as adults, learned and practised in school are no longer of relevance. In fact, many of the skills and knowledge we learned and practised only five years ago are out of date as we have each had to come to terms with changing employment conditions, changed social and economic contexts, increasing diversity, a changing international political climate and the impacts of new technologies. The *Queensland State Education—2010* policy document is built around recognition of these ‘forces for change’.

The recent White Paper, *Education and Training Reforms for the Future*, has proposed a “middle phase” of schooling in Queensland public education. This proposal opens a space for rethinking the middle years of schooling and its place in our education system. As identified in research already undertaken by Education Queensland (Jones 2002), the middle phase of schooling is one of great potential. It is here that students can begin to learn the skills and knowledge for:

- Flexible and adaptable life pathways
 - Work in sustainable and flexible knowledge and service-based economies; and
 - Participation in cohesive social communities
- (QSE-2010, p. 10)

And, given the reform agenda evident in the middle years philosophy and across the research literature, this is the phase of schooling where it is possible to innovate and build a new model of teaching and learning that can meet the challenges of the 21st century.

Relevant Education Queensland policy documents

- *Queensland State Education – 2010*
- *Education and Training Reforms for the Future: A White Paper*
- *Literate Futures: Report of the Literacy Review for Queensland State Schools*
- *Years 1-10 Curriculum Framework for Education Queensland Schools*
- *Building Success Together*
- *Framework for Students at Educational Risk*

Summary of key themes from the research literature

The purpose of this section is to provide an overview of literature and research relevant to developing a position regarding the middle phase of schooling. It includes reference to key issues drawn from the national and international literature and research related to the education of young people in this phase of their schooling.

The Middle Years of Schooling: Background context

The recent White Paper, *Education and Training Reforms for the Future*, tells us in no uncertain terms that young Queenslanders can no longer expect to have successful and rewarding lives without the benefit of a quality education that extends beyond the compulsory years. However, current research is clear: many of the students in our primary and secondary schools are disengaged and achieving below their potential. This tension means that the Queensland Government's commitment to re-engaging young people in their education and achieving 88 % retention by 2010, with Year 12 student achievement in line with international standards, has significant implications for the middle years of schooling.

That students are alienated from schooling is not a particularly new research finding. Much of the reform in the middle years, nationally and internationally, has been a direct response to the recognition that students as young as 10 years old are alienated and disengaged from the learning opportunities presented in classrooms. Students in the compulsory years may well be physically present in classrooms, but too many of them are 'absent' in ways that range from passivity and disinterest through disruptive behaviour and violence through to truancy and early leaving. Disengaged students are more likely to leave school as soon as they complete compulsory education and many do not wait this long. The negative consequences for individuals of early leaving are well known (Batten & Russell 1995).

Australia is not alone in its interest in the middle years. A number of nations, including the United Kingdom, Singapore, New Zealand and the United States are engaged in various reforms around education for early adolescents. Internationally, the middle years are a locus of organizational and curriculum reform. There are a number of key international reports of significance to debates around the middle years of schooling, including *Turning Points: Preparing American Youth for the 21st Century* (Carnegie Council 1989), *Turning Points 2000: Education Adolescents in the 21st Century* (Jackson & Davis 2000) and *This we believe: Developmentally responsive middle level schools* (National Middle Schooling Association 1995). The Carnegie reports, in particular, challenged the prevailing view of adolescents as incapable of complex and analytic thinking, and identified a mismatch between the structures and curriculum of the middle years and the needs of early adolescents. *Turning Points* characterized adolescence as a 'turning point' where young people made choices that impacted significantly on the rest of their lives. The American National Middle Schooling Association (1995) took up this perspective on adolescence as they articulated a framework for middle schools that was responsive to the developmental needs of adolescents. These views, along with the recognition that adolescents are developing sophisticated cognitive and social skills, have been embedded in middle years reform in Australia.

Much of the middle years focus in the United States has been targeted towards ‘at risk’ groups (minority urban communities, lower socioeconomic profile students, poorly performing students) and tended to be overlaid onto other structural reforms such as the junior secondary school. Based on developmental and medical literature around adolescence, reforms were directed at improving retention, self-esteem, dealing with violence and behaviour problems and addressing student alienation. In this sense, middle years reform was often seen as an experiment in the provision of alternative education for at risk students. This is a different orientation than that adopted within the Australian middle schooling context. In Australia, the argument has been that the specific developmental challenges facing early adolescents place them *all* at risk of disengagement and underachievement. Within this broader discourse, there is increased concern for the individuals and groups of students historically at risk in our education system – NESB students, rural and remote students, students from low-socioeconomic status backgrounds, ATSI students, students with learning difficulties.

Contemporary Contexts

Turning Points also marked a renewal of Australian interest in the middle years. From the early 1990s there have been a large number of key reports and studies relevant to the middle years. These include the *Report of the Junior Secondary Review* (Eyers, Cormack & Barratt 1992); *Middle Years of Schooling Discussion Paper* (Schools Council 1992); *In the Middle: Schooling for Adolescents* (Schools Council 1993); *Teachers Working with Young Adolescents* (Queensland Board of Teacher Registration 1996); *From Alienation to Engagement* (Australian Curriculum Studies Association 1996); *The National Middle Schooling Project* (Barratt 1998a); *Extending reform in the middle years of schooling: Challenges and responses* (Cumming 1998); *The Middle Years Literacy Research Project* (Culican, Emmitt & Oakley 2001); *Queensland School Reform Longitudinal Study* (Lingard et al. 2002); *Beyond the Middle: A report about literacy and numeracy development of target groups in the middle years of schooling* (Luke et al. 2002). Ongoing research is being carried out in Victoria by the *Middle Years Research and Development (MYRAD) Project* (Hill & Russell 1999; Department of Education, Employment & Training 2001a, 2001b).

Of these reports, the *Report of the Junior Secondary Review* (Eyers, Cormack & Barratt 1992), *From Alienation to engagement* (Australian Curriculum Studies Association 1996) and *The National Middle Schooling Project* (Barratt 1998a) have arguably been among the most significant in terms of the current state of middle years philosophy in Australia. The *Report of the Junior Secondary Review* noted that young adolescents face a number of ‘developmental tasks’ and argued for three key directions for the middle years: maintaining high attendance, providing a worthwhile curriculum, and providing productive support. *From Alienation to engagement* highlighted the scope of alienation among primary and secondary school students, noting that much of it was ‘hidden’. Further research into student attitudes has identified significant disinterest and alienation among adolescents (Cormack 1991, 1998; Fuller 1998), which has been linked to student under-achievement across the middle years and on into senior secondary. Disengagement makes its presence felt in a number of ways, ranging from poor attendance, suspension, underachievement, passivity through to disruptive behaviour and harassment (Barratt 1998a; Cumming 1998) and, as noted, under-achievement. While not all students are disengaging from

traditional curriculum and pedagogies, many may not be actively engaged and learning to their full potential and it has been argued that issues around underachievement and disengagement are more serious for boysⁱ and students in identified risk categories.

The National Middle Schooling Project's identification of alienation and poor achievement has been influential in discussions around adolescent characteristics and needs, and the identification of signature practises of middle schooling. There has also been a proliferation of anecdotal publication, much of it from classroom teachers identifying lesson formats, unit overviews, resources and approaches. Much of this work has been in response to student disengagement and, connectedly, the transition from primary to secondary school. This has often translated into discourses of pastoral care and supportive environments with curriculum reform focussed on adolescent needs rather than rigorous attention to intellectual demand, real world relevance and recognition of diversity. For instance, traditionally structured secondary schools characteristically operate 'middle years' units, generally across Years 7-9, that focus on pastoral care, remediation and behaviour management as students 'transition' into secondary schooling.

Overall, Australian interest in the middle years of schooling has drawn from the synthesis of two key themes. Firstly, recognition that the transition from the more integrated, student-centred focus of primary schools to a segregated, discipline-centred secondary school was disjointed and problematic for some students. The *New Basics Project Technical Paper* (Education Queensland 2000, p.15) notes that students moving from primary to secondary schooling face:

- Curriculum transition from often integrated primary school curricula to a secondary school system that, in most cases, still consists of a disintegrated 'collection code' (Bernstein 1990) of subject 'boxes' with highly variable levels of integration
- Pedagogical shifts from student-centred teaching in primary schools to subject-centred teaching in junior secondary years
- Discontinuities in personal support, as a result of highly variable emphases on self-development, life-planning, physical and psychological health

As a result, many students struggle with the shift and are increasingly at risk of what has been variously termed the 'middle years slump' and 'Year 8 slump' in student outcomes and engagement. This concern has been taken up particularly in relation to literacy and numeracy. Hill and Russell (1999), for example, claim that there is almost no student growth in reading, writing, speaking and listening in the middle years.

Secondly, renewed interest in the nature of early adolescence and its implications for education. The 1990s saw increasing awareness of the particular needs of early adolescenceⁱⁱ as a distinct phase of life and, as a consequence, a growing interest in educational provision across these years. Here, the work of the Carnegie Corporation was instrumental in acknowledging that early adolescents become increasingly capable of sophisticated and complex thinking. Building on these early understandings and the findings of the Carnegie Corporation research, the developmental characteristics of early adolescents have been generalized across much of the educational literature as follows:

Table 1

Physical needs/characteristics	Intellectual needs/characteristics	Psychological needs/characteristics
Experience irregular growth spurts in physical development Experience fluctuations in basal metabolism causing restlessness and listlessness Have ravenous appetites Mature of varying rates of speed Highly disturbed by body changes	Are highly curious Prefer active over passive learning experiences Relate to real-life problems and situations Are egocentric Experience metacognition	Are often erratic and inconsistent in behaviour Are highly sensitive to criticism Are moody, restless, and self-conscious Are optimistic and hopeful Are searching for identity and acceptance from peers
Social needs/characteristics	Moral and Ethical needs/characteristics	
Are rebellious toward parents and authority figures Are confused and frightened by new school/social settings Are fiercely loyal to peer group values Are often aggressive and argumentative Need frequent affirmation of love from adults	Are idealistic Have strong sense of fairness Are reflective and introspective in thoughts and feelings Confront moral and ethical questions head on Ask large, ambiguous questions about the meaning of life	

(Forte & Shurr 1997, p.17)

The body of literature summarized in Table 1 strongly suggests that early adolescents have developmental, social and cognitive needs that differ from those of students in other phases. These have become axiomatic across the middle yearsⁱⁱⁱ. Barratt (1998a, 1998b) has been particularly influential here, translating these characteristics into a model of adolescent learning needs. Table 2 outlines an overview of the needs of learners in the middle years:

Table 2

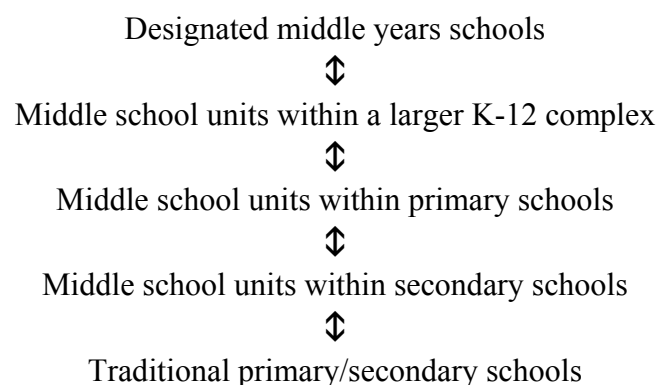
Identity	Exploring how individual and group identities are shaped by social and cultural groups
Relationships	Developing productive and affirming relationships with adults and peers in an environment that respects difference and diversity
Purpose	Having opportunities to negotiate learning that is useful now, as well as in the future
Empowerment	Viewing the world critically and acting independently, cooperatively and responsibly
Success	Having multiple opportunities to learn valued knowledge and skills as well as the opportunity to use talents and expertise that students bring to the learning environment
Rigour	Taking on realistic challenges in an environment characterised by high expectations and constructive and honest feedback
Safety	Learning in a safe, caring and stimulating environment that addresses issues of discrimination and harassment

(Barratt 1998b, p.55)

The middle schooling movement developed in direct response to these core themes, with the recognition that traditional curricula and organization were no longer meeting the educational needs of young adolescents and that this was indeed a distinct phase of schooling. Advocates of middle schooling reform have argued strongly that the dynamism of early adolescents along with the other generic characteristics of adolescence, allows for the development of a distinct and vigorous curriculum in the middle years. Barratt, in particular, has been influential in arguing that learning experiences for early adolescents should neither revisit primary curriculum nor ‘dumb-down’ post compulsory curriculum (1998c). Given this background, a set of identifiable principles of middle schooling can be identified from the Australian research literature^{iv}. These include:

- A shared ethos
- Interdisciplinary teacher teams
- Integrated curriculum
- Seamless transition
- Constructivist approaches to learning
- Larger classes of students sharing a small group of teachers
- A focus on pastoral care
- Flexible use of time and space
- Autonomous or semi-autonomous sub-school organization

Evidence suggests that these signature practises can be found across a range of structural middle schooling models operating across Queensland and Australia (Luke et al. 2002). These range along a continuum from:



The differing structural arrangements have a degree of impact on the range of middle years practises implemented in schools, however, the efficacy of middle school programs does not appear to hinge on structural change. The evidence suggests that efforts to restructure pedagogic and everyday institutional practises, more so than the creation of dedicated middle schools, have worked to assist at risk students to make more successful progress through compulsory schooling (Ames & West, 1999; Roderick & Camburn, 1999; Haycock & Ames 2000). Recent Australian evidence supports this. Data drawn from across Australia indicates that the effectiveness of middle years programs are not contingent on their structural organization *per se*. Regardless of physical structure, the enabling conditions for effective teaching and learning across the middle years can be related to leadership, the establishment of a robust professional learning community, a distinctive ethos or ‘vision’ around the

education of early adolescents, flexibility in timetabling and use of space, collaborative planning and teaching, and integration of curriculum around learner interests and needs. As Luke et al. (2002, p. 98) note, “effective middle years programs view the middle years as a ‘first principle’ for the organization of professional, spatial and temporal, pedagogical and epistemic capacity”. This focus goes beyond structural organization. Once given ‘first principle’ status, the middle years become a rallying point for whole school and curriculum renewal, for innovative programs and practices, for deploying new forms of leadership and for the development of robust teacher professional learning communities.

In the 1990s, educational reform in the middle years was focused on new research around the capacities and needs of early adolescents. This movement led to a wealth of rich reforms across these years as schools attempted to create supportive and inclusive environments and find ways of delivering curriculum that were engaging for students and responded to their developmental needs. It is now over ten years later and there is new knowledge about adolescents available to us. Much of this comes from sociology, media and cultural studies and can augment what is already known about educating early adolescents. Beyond developmental and academic needs, the world in which early adolescents live is increasingly characterized by diversity and change and has rapidly moved away from the environment in which traditional primary and secondary curricula were designed.

Demographic change—inter and intrastate migration, rapid urbanization, the ‘marbling’ of poverty across Queensland, increasing racial and cultural diversity. Declining sense of community belonging—decline in community and religious affiliations, the rise of fundamentalism, impact of increasing mobility, increasing fear for personal safety.

Changes in the family unit—decline of monocultural nuclear family, increasing incidence of single parent families and other family forms.

Increasing youth homelessness—often associated with difficult family contexts.

Economic change—systemic un- and underemployment, increasing job change, dismantling of the social welfare system, shift towards information and service economies—what has been termed the ‘knowledge economy’.

Increasing influence of mass media and multimodal texts—changes in knowledge, skills, beliefs and attitudes linked to interactions with new technologies; impact on the ways in which students engage with print literacy; orientation towards multiliteracies.

New technologies—changes in communications, access to information, emergence of new forms of text; increasing integration of new technologies into everyday practises of adolescents.

Sub-cultural identities—new technologies open up opportunities for new and changing identities and practises, opportunities to engage with different cultural forms; emergence of specifically youth-oriented cultures such as skating, graffiti, surfing, gaming and in some areas, gang culture.

Changing sexual mores—increasing awareness and acceptance of homosexuality, awareness of HIV-AIDS and other STDs.

Drug taking—increasing awareness of and access to a range of legal and illegal drugs.

These are the ‘new times’ in which early adolescents are developing learning attitudes and styles, forming identities, and establishing social relationships and networks. The influence of popular culture and new technologies, in particular, is having a

significant impact on the ways in which young people form identity and cultural allegiances and interact with curriculum and pedagogies (Buckingham 1994, 2000; The New London Group 1995). Young adolescents in contemporary Australian society have been brought up on 24 hour television and cable, internet use, non-narrative music video clips, mobile phone technology, computer game interactivity, and visual culture that is increasingly computer generated and manipulated (Cunningham 1998). What are ‘new’ technologies to adults have been largely naturalized into the worlds of adolescents. These changes have two different, but connected outcomes. First, the skill sets and knowledge that young people bring with them to school have changed over the last 10 years. Their background experiences, interactions around technology, and cultural capital do not necessarily match those anticipated by traditional classroom practise and for perhaps the first time in our history, the skills and knowledge of young people are surpassing those of adults in relation to new communications technologies. This has implications for classroom practises and curriculum design.

Second, the emerging worlds of work and civic life in the knowledge economies of the 21st century clearly require different skills and knowledge. The OECD has recognized four ways of dealing with and around knowledge—“know-what”, “know-why”, “know-how” and “know-who”—and suggests that there is increasing demand for the last three rather than the factual knowledge of “know-what” (2000). Where traditional curricula have been weighted towards a “know-what” focus, new social and economic contexts require that students are equipped with the tools to participate successfully in the knowledge economy. Successful work and civic participation now require the ability to deal with:

- New skills and knowledges for dealing constructively with rapid community change
- New forms of cultural and social identity
- The blending and reshaping of cultural traditions
- Exercising new rights and responsibilities of citizenship and civic participation
- Communication across diversity and difference of culture, gender and background

(New Basics Technical Paper 2000, p. 10).

The last ten years created the momentum for what has been termed the ‘first wave’ of middle years reform—the recognition that early adolescents have a range of needs that, for many, were not being met in traditional classrooms and, establishing a way forward in terms of teaching and learning. The first wave of middle years reform was focussed on new research emerging in the early 1990s around adolescent development. The next generation of reform, whatever direction it makes, must be cognizant of the profound changes that have overtaken Australian society over the last decade and the new challenges facing early adolescents.

Key issues arising from the research literature

A number of key issues emerge from the research literature and the context in which middle years reform has taken place up to this point.

1. The first wave of middle years reform in Australia emerged in response to new understandings of early adolescence and recognition of issues around alienation, underachievement and the educational needs of target groups. However, underachievement and alienation remain a concern. The need for a new way forward becomes more pressing as we identify the complex and changing skills and knowledges necessary for successful participation in civic and social life. What does this mean for the direction of educational reform in the middle years?
2. Assessment has emerged as an area of concern across the middle years of schooling. What must be done to improve ‘assessment literacy’?
3. Literacy and numeracy remain core concerns, particularly as the student body continues to diversify. At the same time, new technologies and popular culture are increasingly significant. How can the middle years of schooling in Queensland respond to this challenge?
4. Leadership and school organization are key aspects of effective middle years reform. What are the characteristics of effective leadership and school organization in the middle years?

1. A focus for reform

The most recent research indicates that further middle school reform should now be guided by a positive thesis around the provision of engaging and demanding intellectual activity, as well as socially supportive contexts for learning.

Since Bernstein’s (1971) work, we have been aware that schools operate around three message systems—curriculum, pedagogy and assessment—and that effective reform requires that these systems be aligned. The message systems of school need to also accommodate shifts in how we understand learning. This has implications for the discussion here. The new economic and social context identified in *QSE-2010* requires that all school leavers have base-line mastery of print and electronic media, critical thinking and reflexive skills and lifelong educability. They need to be provided with a schooling experience appropriate to ‘lifelong learning’—for knowing *how* to learn across a number of modes and media and to continue to do so. This should be one of the key foci of middle schooling.

Newman and Associates (1996) argued that pedagogy was core to improved student achievement. Their research indicated strongly that ‘authentic pedagogy’—pedagogy that enhances quality learning and achievement—has a positive impact on students, particularly when it revolves around intellectual engagement and real world connectedness. Importantly, the positive impact on student outcomes appears to hold true across mainstream and at risk groups. Following up and extending Newman and

Associates' work, the *Queensland Schools Reform Longitudinal Study* (Lingard et al. 2001) found relatively low levels of intellectual demand, connectedness to the world and recognition of diversity across Queensland schools^v. This work has highlighted the need for in-depth study of fewer curriculum outcomes and for a focus on the use of a range of appropriate and 'productive' pedagogies^{vi}.

The findings of the *QSRLS* are informative for reform in the middle years. The findings indicated that the incidence of productive pedagogies in the middle years is relatively low, that the incidence of effective integration is variable, and that assessment is often unlinked to classroom practise. It was apparent that, in the main, the middle years remain subject-centric, with low levels of productive pedagogy and integration and, with low-stakes assessment regimes. These findings were corroborated by the later Luke et al. (2002) study of 'at risk' groups in the middle years.

The literature and research indicate an existing capacity across the middle years for supportive environments and pastoral care programs. However, as Lingard and Mills (2002) note, social support is necessary, but not sufficient to achieve enhanced student outcomes. Based on these recent research reports, there is a pressing need for an increased focus in the middle years on:

- Analytic depth
 - Intellectual challenge and rigour
 - Critical thinking
 - Critical literacy and higher order analysis
 - Dialogue
 - Connection to student's cultural background
 - Knowledge
 - Problem-based learning
 - The worlds of work, citizenship and community life
- (Education Queensland 2000)

The research is indicating that for the middle years to achieve and sustain improved student outcomes, particularly for target groups, there must be a coordinated refocusing of curriculum, pedagogy and assessment. These reforms must engage with the demands of new economies and the background contexts and capabilities of a diverse student body that actively engages with new technologies and popular culture.

The question becomes 'is there an existing model of reform already taking up these issues? In terms of how to inform a vision of reform of middle school practise, Education Queensland's trial of a new model for aligning pedagogy, curriculum and assessment in the *New Basics Project* is informative. With *New Basics*, Education Queensland is prototyping alternatives to current practise. Briefly, this work has attempted to connect curriculum and pedagogy with a cognate model of assessment, and at the same time, create the conditions for enhanced teacher professionalism and learning. The premise of this trial is that curriculum must be futures oriented, actively engage with new technologies and be attuned to the needs of citizens in new economies. Additionally, the project recognizes the importance of teacher professional learning communities. There is insufficient space here to overview the *New Basics Project*, however its approach to learning, to reform across the three message systems and its commitment to the development of professional learning

communities appears well-suited as a model for a new generation of middle years reform that is focused on upping the intellectual ante.

2. Assessment in the middle years

The research noted that assessment techniques and base-line knowledge about assessment tools are highly variable across the middle years. The most recent overview of assessment practises across the middle years of schooling was undertaken by Luke et al. (2002) in their large Commonwealth funded study of literacy and numeracy provision for at risk students. To put it simply, this study found that “attempts at assessment seemed *ad hoc* and inconsistent” (p. 118). Little in the way of coordinated teacher moderation, portfolio-based assessment, test-based assessment, task-based assessment or testing was found in middle years classrooms across Queensland and Australia. There is what Lingard et al. (2001) called a ‘lack of assessment literacy’ across the middle years. Other researchers have identified the lack of assessment capacity across the system. Luke et al. (2002) documented:

- A lack of teacher moderation systems
- The assignment of less experienced and/or incoming teachers to the middle years, which impacts on assessment capacity
- The need for increased teacher ‘assessment literacy’

Essentially, there is insufficient knowledge across much of the sector about assessment—what tools are appropriate, what their use means for students from diverse backgrounds, how to interpret results, and how to use results to inform classroom practise. The *QSRLS* found that much assessment in the middle years was disconnected from the world and intellectually unchallenging, and often distanced from classroom practise.

A number of challenges around the assessment of literacy and numeracy in the middle years can be identified. These have relevance across this phase of schooling:

- To develop models of assessment that provide a balance between the requirements of various stakeholders and statutory authorities and the provision of rich sources of information
- To avoid the *ad hoc* use of assessment instruments designed for other age groups and/or purposes
- To develop models of authentic and outcomes-based assessment that are culturally appropriate to the diverse student body and that are intellectually challenging
- To develop a range of school-based assessment practises that attend to academic and social outcomes
- To develop coherent and useful reporting systems
- To actively align assessment with curriculum and pedagogy to enhance student learning
- To carefully weigh up the appropriateness of high stakes testing in the middle years

The research strongly suggests that there is a pressing need for professional development in the middle years in the area of assessment generally, and in terms of

using it to inform classroom practise. There is also a need for teacher moderation for the development of assessment tasks and for their evaluation.

3. Literacy and Numeracy in the middle years

The Queensland Government has identified a goal of ensuring that 85% of Queensland state school students in Year 5 will reach the national reading benchmarks by 2005. Literacy is on the middle years agenda and has been for some time. Increasing student diversity has meant that teachers in the middle years have found themselves facing students with needs in basic reading instruction as well as second language acquisition. Students across target groups are carrying basic literacy difficulties with them into the middle years. In particular, socioeconomic status is a powerful predictor of school-based literacy achievement (Comber et al. 1998; Kenway 2000). However, the evidence also indicates that boys do not perform as well as girls across all States, all year levels and for all different forms of literacy (Alloway et al. 2002; Marks & Ainley 1997; Masters & Forster 1997). Based on the national literacy testing of Year 9 students, the Australian Council for Educational Research argued that 34% of boys lacked basic literacy skills compared with 26% of girls (1997).

Most upper primary and secondary curricula tend to focus on literature and writing rather than the development of reading skills. Additionally, secondary schools demonstrate limited diagnostic and intervention programs and limited capacity to deal with the needs of ESL students. 1 in 4 Australian students are from a non-English speaking background, yet Australian teachers—primary and secondary—do not receive compulsory pre-service or in-service training in ESL issues (Lo Bianco & Freebody 1997). The same applies for issues around Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander English and literacy needs (Luke, Land, Christie, Kolatsis & Noblett 2002).

Boys, but not all boys, demonstrate a general lack of interest in print-based reading and writing activities, do not see a real purpose and relevance in school-based reading and writing tasks, have less successful strategies for navigating traditional classroom literacy activities and are easily distracted, disruptive and difficult to motivate in relation to these tasks (Alloway et al. 2002). Boys are, however, more likely to be engaged by literate practises that are graphic and electronic, or multimodal, and are more willing to take part in ‘public’ literacy events (drama, public speaking etc) or in literacies that are futures-oriented and/or directly relevant to their real lives^{vii}. Recent research around urban American youth has demonstrated the power of popular culture texts, music and media to influence identity development and learning (Moje, Young, Readance & Moore 2000). There is a growing body of work showing that children and early adolescents have a real interest and competence in new media.

Questions around the impact of new technologies and popular culture are highly relevant for literacy in the middle years. Importantly, adolescents’ consumption of new technologies and popular culture is not passive. Many actively create and broadcast their own online zines, music, interactive sites, video clips and animations. Given the requirements of the knowledge economy outlined in this Position Paper, these interests and skills should be capitalized upon in middle years curricula and classroom pedagogies. On the other hand, the impact of new technologies and popular

culture raises serious equity issues for our public schools. Many students do not have access to new technologies outside school. For these students, school becomes the primary source of access, skills and knowledge around new technologies and popular culture.

Many teachers in the middle years, particularly those with secondary training are not well equipped to deal with these instructional demands. Much of the literacy intervention evident across the middle years remains based on remediation of basic skills in small group withdrawal programs. Many of these have limited articulation with mainstream curricula or pedagogy. It appears that schools with a well-developed whole school policy around literacy are more able to create and sustain bridges between remediation and mainstream programs, as well as being more likely to develop innovative remediation programs (Luke et al. 2002).

Literate Futures (2000a) identifies a number of issues related to literacy in the middle years, including:

- Misrecognition and inability to deal with cultural and linguistic diversity and its implications for literacy achievement and pedagogy
- Lack of whole school literacy coordination
- Limited diagnostic capacity
- Limited attention to ‘literacy across the curriculum’

Secondary schools, in particular, appear unlikely to have a coordinated whole school literacy plan in place at this time (Luke et al. 2002). And, rather than developing specific middle years literacy programs, many schools have overlaid approaches from either primary or secondary schooling to the middle years. Without clear directions for literacy there is little opportunity for tailoring programs to fit the requirements of effective middle school programs.

The need to address literacy and numeracy in this phase becomes more urgent if we accept that the middle years are virtually free from additional learning in these areas (Hill & Russell 1999). Teachers in the middle years need the skills to respond to the increasing linguistic and cultural diversity of the student body and the rapidly expanding literacies required for successful participation in civic life, leisure and employment.

How can the middle years most effectively respond to these challenges? Part of the answer is to accept the need for higher levels of intellectual demand outlined by the *QSRLS*, along with the meaningful integration of new technologies into classroom pedagogies. In terms of literacy, the skills and knowledge needed to produce and deal with these texts are increasingly referred to as ‘multiliteracies’ (Cope & Kalantzis 2000). A multiliteracies agenda is actively critical, requiring analysis and the development of a metalanguage around various forms of text. Systematic incorporation of a multiliteracies perspective within a balanced literacy program would contribute to the greater intellectual demand and real world relevance identified as important for improved student achievement. In addition, its focus on multimodal as well as print texts, hands-on learning and connectedness to the world outside the classroom may well be effective in re-engaging many at risk students.

There are also clear indications that students’ mathematics and numeracy skills do not improve significantly in the middle years and may, in fact, decline (Hill & Russell

1999). Numeracy is the ability to use mathematics effectively to solve everyday demands at home, school or the workplace. Like literacy, numeracy becomes the concern of all teachers. However, as is the case with literacy, teachers are often ill prepared to deal with numeracy and mathematics or to provide remediation for struggling students. Students who are having difficulty are often withdrawn to small group work that sits outside the curriculum and pedagogy of the mainstream class. Many teachers do not have the specific mathematics training and knowledge necessary to facilitate the development of mathematical concepts over time (Luke et al. 2002). Luke et al. argue the need for pre- and in-service support for teachers and schools to develop effective intervention programs and stronger conceptual and pedagogical knowledge in the area of numeracy and mathematics.

It is evident that issues around literacy and numeracy must remain central to the middle years, particularly in relation to students in the various target groups. However, it is also clear that it is inappropriate to develop untheorized lists of ‘teacher tips’ as a solution to the issues. Attention to systemic and sustained development of teacher knowledge and skills in literacy and numeracy, linked to larger planning models and policy is required. Essential to upgrading and extending teacher repertoires and knowledge must be the pre-service preparation of teachers with a specialization in the middle years (Carrington et al. 2002; Lingard, Martino, Mills 2002).

4. Effective leadership in the middle years

Lingard, Hayes, Mills and Christie (2003) argue that ‘productive leadership’ in schools establishes the enabling conditions for educational reform. ‘Productive leadership’

- Sets key enabling conditions to allow the development of ‘professional learning communities’, including deprivatization of classroom practise
- Has a clear school vision and philosophy
- Has a clear understanding of local community and context
- Establishes a focus on pedagogy; recognition of effective pedagogy
- Establishes and sustains curriculum and pedagogy discussions
- Creates strong and positive ‘emotional economies’
- Provides support and incentive for innovation
- Creates dispersal of leadership – centre out, rather than top down
- Looks for synergies with outside agencies/groups

This work, along with the Luke et al. (2002) study, provides some relevant information for leadership in the middle years. The information indicates that leadership plays a significant role in whether or not middle schools are effective in achieving improved student outcomes. A number of leadership themes were found to occur in effective middle schools:

A strong vision of the role of the school

This ‘vision’ may differ from school to school. In some schools this vision may involve the nature of the school-community link or religious affiliation, while in others it relates to the implementation of a key program or teaching strategies.

Regardless of the range of visions, each is clearly articulated, developed and shared with staff and community.

Dispersal of leadership

The sharing or stretching of leadership across the school establishes the enabling trust and mutualism required for effective professional learning communities. Leadership dispersal may, for example, be shown in the capacity of staff to demonstrate leadership in terms of program development and innovation. Shared leadership enables many of the organizational structures that underwrite some of the signature practises of middle schooling—teaching teams, collaborative planning and the deprivatization of practise. It is also this aspect of leadership that works to build professional learning communities and a collective and collaborative sense of responsibility for the learning of all students.

Entrepreneurial approach

Effective middle years leaders understand and act upon the need to create and sustain links between the school and the wider community, including networks or clusters of other schools. They actively promote the school's positive image and role in the community through a variety of strategies.

Awareness of external contexts

Effective middle years leaders are aware of the changing political, technological, economic, social and cultural changes taking place. They are also aware of how these are linked to policy agendas and reform, and how their local uptake affects the workings of schools.

Teacher professional learning community

Effective middle school leaders facilitate and participate in strong teacher professional learning communities that scaffold and encourage a focus on affiliation, teacher and student learning and a sense of responsibility for the learning of all students.

These findings are consistent with the leadership and school reform literature and may provide a model for effective leadership practises in the middle years.

Concluding comment

The key themes arising from the literature and recent research have highlighted the need for increased attention to 'assessment literacy' and to the forms of assessment used across the middle years. These findings have another implication: given the evidence concerning the link between improved student performance and a curriculum focus on increased intellectual depth around fewer outcomes, any imposition of high stakes assessment in the middle years needs careful consideration.

There is strong evidence that engagement and improved outcomes are linked, on one hand to an effective alignment of curriculum, productive pedagogy and assessment, and on the other, to increased intellectual demand and real world connectedness. This has implications for a renewed focus on pedagogy in the middle years as well as the manner in which the key learning areas are coordinated and assessed. While the development of appropriate curriculum, including curriculum integration, has been

identified as central to middle years reform since the 1990s, these concerns must now be positioned within a stronger focus on alignment of the message systems.

Literacy and numeracy remain core concerns for all teachers and the need for enhanced knowledge and skills in these areas was strongly argued. It was also noted that the needs of students have moved beyond traditional print based literacies. There is now a pressing need to incorporate a multiliteracies perspective into literacy teaching across all curriculum areas. Finally, models of leadership that effectively share leadership roles and strong teacher professional learning communities are identified as central to the efficacy of middle years programs.

The middle years of schooling in Queensland is poised to move towards a new generation of reform. Building on earlier reform, a way forward can be clearly outlined:

- Adoption of the middle years of schooling as a ‘first principle’ for system and school allocations of physical resources, staffing and timetabling
- The implications of the changed contexts of young adolescents’ lives along with identification of the suite of knowledge and skills required for participation in knowledge economies and lifelong learning
- The importance of productive pedagogy linked to both a focused, intellectually challenging and relevant curriculum, and authentic assessment;
- The role of effective leadership in the middle years and the importance of teacher professional learning communities
- A need for renewal of teacher knowledge around literacy and mathematics and science.

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ⁱⁱ For more information on boys and alienation, see Hill (1995).

ⁱⁱ The term ‘adolescence’ had its beginnings in the work of Hall in the early 20th century. Drawing from the work of Freud and Jung, Hall (1904) argued that the transition from childhood to adulthood required the resolution of distinct issues around sexuality and identity as well as intellectual and moral development (Luke et al. 2002). The adolescent was framed as an incomplete adult who required appropriate guidance and support. Establishing developmental boundaries between young people and adults also enabled constitutional, legal, and social role differentiation (Kett, 1977) in an industrial society. Hall’s work has continued to heavily influence contemporary understandings of adolescence. The latter part of the 20th century saw the boundary of adolescence moved incrementally lower in response to what was perceived to be the earlier maturation of post-industrial children, with the subsequent differentiation of adolescence into ‘early adolescence’ and ‘adolescence’

ⁱⁱⁱ The Woodlands Group have noted the different models of early adolescence operating, with varying degrees of clarity and overlap, in the educational literature. Each of these discourses makes sets of normative claims about adolescents many of which do not cater for diversity or individual difference.

Age/stage	Focus on cognition: a view of adolescents as incomplete adults; developmental theory; teacher as complete adult
Pathologization	Focus on behaviour: a sense of biological determinism where adolescents are driven by out of control hormones; remediation and medication feature; teacher as scientist
Reproduction	Focus on ideology: adolescence framed around resistance theory; focus on institutional structures; teacher as 'revolutionary' and ideology analyst
Postmodern	Focus on identity: a sense of unruly youth—alienation, disengagement, disruptive behaviour; discourses of psychotherapy; teacher as therapist

(Woodlands Group August 2002)

^{iv} Barratt (1998) outlined a set of essential components of middle schooling.

Learner-centred	Coherent curriculum is focused on the identified needs, interests and concerns of students, and with an emphasis on self-directed and co-constructed learning
Collaboratively organized	Powerful pedagogy is employed by teams of teachers who know and understand their teachers very well, and who challenge and extend them in supportive environments
Outcomes-based	Progress and achievement are recorded continuously in relation to explicit statements of what each student is expected to know and be able to do
Flexibly constructed	Arrangements are responsive to local needs and circumstances, and reflect creative uses of time, space and other resources
Ethically aware	Justice, care, respect and a concern for the needs of others are reflected in everyday practice of students, teachers and administrators
Community-oriented	Parents, together with representatives from a diverse range of groups, institutions and organizations beyond the school, are involved in productive partnerships
Adequately resourced	Experienced teachers and support staff, supported by ongoing professional development, high quality facilities, technology, equipment and materials, constitute essential requirements
Strategically linked	A discrete phase of schooling is implemented as a stage within a Prep to Year 12 continuum and connected to the early and senior years

^v For more information regarding the Queensland School Reform Longitudinal Study (QSRLS), refer to Lingard, B., Ladwig, J., Luke, A., Mills, M., Hayes, D. & Gore, J. (2001). *Queensland School Reform Longitudinal Study: Final report*. Brisbane: Education Queensland.

^{vi} The QSRLS identified the following 'productive pedagogies'. For more detailed information, see *The Queensland School Reform Longitudinal Study* (Education Queensland, 2002)

Intellectual quality

1. higher order thinking
2. deep knowledge
3. deep understanding
4. substantive conversation
5. knowledge as problematic
6. metalanguage

Connectedness

7. knowledge integration
8. background knowledge
9. connectedness to the world
10. problem-based curriculum

Supportive classroom environment

11. student direction
12. social support
13. academic engagement
14. explicit quality performance criteria
15. self-regulation

Engagement with and valuing of

16. cultural knowledges
17. inclusivity
18. narrative
19. group identity
20. active citizenship

^{vii} An important caveat here: A number of researchers warn against the danger of generalizing a set of characteristics and behaviours to boys. It is important not to fall into the trap of believing that all boys and all girls act in identical ways that can then be identified. See, for example, Sukhnandan et al. 2000; Connell 1996, 2000, Mills 2000).