POINT AND COUNTERPOINT

Re-viewing the ‘ideology of adolescence’ in middle schooling

Kay Whitehead

In recent times a number of academics including James Beane have been arguing that middle schooling in the United States has entered a period of ‘arrested development’, the reasons for which are seen to be both external and internal to the movement (Beane, 2001; Dickinson, 2001). Regarding the former, primary and secondary education across western countries has increasingly been in the grip of neoconservative politics over the past decade, the result being concerted attacks on progressivism and child-centred pedagogy by politicians, big business and some educators. Basically, it is claimed that child-centred pedagogy has led to a reduction in academic standards in schools, the loss of discipline and the failure to inculcate ‘values’ that prepare students for the workforce. Individual schools and school systems are being required to respond to this so-called crisis by implementing an increasingly narrow and standardised curriculum and accountability mechanisms such as basic skills testing. This has meant a reinvigoration of the 3Rs at the primary level and the competitive academic curriculum in secondary schools. Sandwiched between primary and secondary schooling, many middle schools are under pressure to abandon practices such as integrated curriculum, block timetabling and a broad range of subjects in favour of an ‘academically rigorous’ curriculum of skills and drills (Beane, 1999a, 2001; Williamson & Johnston, 1999). Beane argues that in the United States middle school advocates have not been well-placed to respond to neoconservatism and provides some reasons that arise from within the movement, the most salient of which is an unerring reliance on the concept of adolescence to underpin policy and practice. Such is its centrality to middle schooling that:

- hardly a middle level journal or conference goes by without reiteration of the so-called ‘characteristics of adolescence’, a cornucopia of physical, social and intellectual developments ostensibly describing the age group. (Beane, 2005, p. xiii)

These characteristics are used to justify particular forms of school and classroom organisation, pedagogy and teacher-student relationships. For example, conceptualising students in the middle years as not yet mature, and being a state of flux with regard to physical, social and emotional development gives rise to the ‘need’ for constant guidance and surveillance by adults and structural arrangements such as home rooms and transition programs (Beane, 1999b, 2001). Williamson and Johnston (1999) claim that the movement has developed its own orthodoxy rather than continuing to question its tenets. Furthermore, they would agree with Beane that:

- in limiting their explanation of middle school policy to the characteristics of young adolescence, middle-level reformers have elevated puberty, a moment in human development, to the status of an ideology, which clearly it is not. (Beane, 2005, p. xiii)

Relying on such limited foundations has not only rendered middle school vulnerable to neoconservative education agendas but also contributed to a number of internal problems. Embedded in the discipline of psychology, much of the literature on middle school does not engage with adolescence as a socio-historical and cultural construction. Such analyses show that the concept of adolescence as constructed by Stanley Hall and others a century ago is founded on understandings about urban, white, middle class boys, a criticism that still holds with contemporary constructions. Furthermore, adherence to the explanatory power of adolescence has resulted in many advocates overstating the intensity and universality of its characteristics and virtually ignoring the significance of students’ social locations. Although there is a vast literature about social differences such as class, race, gender and ethnicity in education, little of this work is brought to bear in research into middle schooling (Beane, 1999; 2005; Brown, 2005; Williamson & Johnston, 1999). As a consequence, most middle school advocates have failed to recognise and deal with social injustice, and middle schools in impoverished areas have suffered most at the hands of neoconservatives. Beane argues that in treating adolescence as an ideology the concept of middle schooling has remained detached from ‘any large and compelling social vision that might elevate its sense of purpose, attract more advocates, and help sustain the concept against its critics’ (Beane, 2005, p. xiv). Hence the claim is being made that middle schooling is in a state of arrested development.

Keeping these points in mind, this introduction to Point and Counterpoint reflects on the Australian situation. Then the four articles that follow provide some thought provoking perspectives. Nan Bahr and Donna Pendergast, Jennifer Naylor, Di Russell and Lisa Hunter each challenge some of the current orthodoxies in middle schooling with the view to generating further discussion, research and action.

For the last decade or more the majority of state and national reports and policy statements to do with middle schooling in Australia have upheld the concept of adolescence as central to their discussions, taking its cue from the Turning Points report, the first of the Junior Secondary Review (Eyers, Cormack & Barratt, 1992, P.1) in South Australia, argued that ‘the prime consideration in this education for young adolescents shall be an understanding of the developmental characteristics of these young people and their consequent educational and personal needs’. Thereafter, a host of reports including the first national report, In the Middle (Schools Australia, 1995) commenced with the obligatory discussion of the nature of adolescence, often citing the Junior Secondary Review as an authoritative text, and then proceeded with other issues that were pertinent to the time and place of the report, as well as its sponsorship. For example, in 1999 Planning for Middle Schooling in Western Australia (Jackson, 1999) came at the behest of the non-government school sector. It addressed adolescence, curriculum and pedagogical issues, and also included a chapter on infrastructure and the financial implications of the adoption of middle schooling. Whereas reports in the early 1990s were not overly concerned with the assessment of student learning, more recent documents reflect the influence of neoconservative agendas in their focus on standards and assessment practices. In 1993 In the Middle devoted a chapter to social justice in education but this issue has all but disappeared from recent reports; the past decade has seen a retreat in both policy and practice from attempting to address the educational needs of socially and economically disadvantaged groups to a focus on literacy and numeracy outcomes. This shift can be seen in Beyond the Middle: A report about literacy and numeracy development of target group students in the middle years of schooling (Luke et al., 2003). While this report focused principally on literacy and numeracy strategies, it departs significantly from its predecessors in that it does not take the concept of adolescence for granted. It suggests the need for further research and more complex theorising about students and practices in the middle years. To this end, the first contribution to this issue of Point and Counterpoint sheds new light on students in the middle years. In ‘Adolescence as a cohort concept for the millennium’ Nan Bahr and Donna Pendergast review the concept of adolescence and, importantly, use a broad range of literature in their theorisation about the shared experiences and attributes of ‘millennial generation adolescents’. Unlike previous generations, communications technologies such as internet and text messages are normalised in the lives of millennial adolescents, a reflection of lifestyle, media consumption and network use. Bahr and Pendergast argue that ‘adolescence’ should continue to be an important reference point for discussion but that it should be reconfigured in the context of the new millennium. Thus in this article millennial adolescents are not constructed as dangerous and unstable and in need of constant guidance and surveillance. Instead they are engaged, future oriented and globally connected. They are life-long learners. Such a positive conceptualisation of students bodes well for the middle schooling movement in Australia as Bahr and Pendergast attest in their discussion of teaching and learning.

If the Australian middle school movement is to disrupt the ideology of adolescence it must do so not only in commissioned reports and policy statements but in a range of other sites. Two appropriate places to begin are in pre-service teacher education and teacher professional development. As far as teacher education is concerned, since the early 1990s there have been various calls for specialised middle years programs that focus on the characteristics and needs of adolescents (Eyers,
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Cormack & Barratt, 1992; Fry, 1994; Schools Council, 1993) but until 2001 Flinders University was the only institution engaged in the preparation of middle years teachers. However, a recent survey found that ten universities now provide dedicated middle years programs (Pendergast, 2005). Given their recent establishment, there is very little research about their focus and efficacy, but at least three of the programs are not hidebound by the ideology of adolescence (Pendergast et al., under review). The emergence of these middle years teacher education programs is an important indication that the movement is not in a state of arrested development. Instead, the influx of specialist teachers has the potential to increase its momentum. Furthermore, several universities have demonstrated further support by offering postgraduate courses and targeted professional development in middle schooling. The second article in this issue of Point and Counterpoint introduces one such program at the University of the Sunshine Coast. In 'Adjusting the gaze: Towards generative ‘middle phase’ professional learning' Jennifer Naylor provides an overview of Scaffolding Action in the Middle Years (SaMY), explains its theoretical framework and demonstrates ways in which teachers and administrators are encouraged to review their understandings of middle years. SaMY is underpinned by a broad commitment to social justice in middle schooling. To this end the program enables participants to critically analyse ‘adolescence’ as a historical and sociological construct using the work of academics such as Nancy Lesko and Johanna Wyn and Rob White. Furthermore, it is intended that participants reconstruct their understandings of middle years students and their practices to address social differences such as class, race, gender and ethnicity, at the same time disrupting the ideology of adolescence.

While the introduction of new programs in teacher education and professional development have great potential to increase the momentum of the middle schooling movement in Australia, the interface between research and practice is equally important. To date middle school educators have not been well-served by research that is specific to this country. Here and there it is possible to find articles and chapters on specific aspects of middle schooling such as integrated curriculum, authentic assessment and transition (e.g. Williams, Jonsson & Peters, 1999; Whitehead, 2005; Yates, 1999), but most published work has consisted of case studies describing the implementation of middle schooling in individual schools (e.g. Coote & Williams, 1996; McNernney, Hattam, Smyth & Lawson, 1999). There have been few regular forums for the promulgation of research except for the Australian Curriculum Studies Association conferences and Curriculum Perspectives, of course. Of particular interest to this issue of Point and Counterpoint is one in 1994 where Anne Gates addressed social justice and adolescence together: Successful middle years education requires not only an understanding of the characteristics of adolescence but a critical understanding of how socioeconomic status shapes and constructs experience and meaning for young people and influences education outcomes. It is important for teachers to acknowledge that adolescence is not class-neutral, but delivers through its various mediums different messages to different adolescent groupings. Teachers need to understand how this functions and how the experience of youth culture differs for students from low socio-economic backgrounds. Any attempt to identify desired learning outcomes and develop curriculum without first addressing such questions, well might fail to deliver a middle school education among impoverished and minority youth. (Gates, 1994, p. 49)

Then in a 1998 Point and Counterpoint Phil Cormack (1998) problematised the concept of adolescence and called for understandings about students that embrace social difference and diversity in the interests of socially just middle schooling. Now, in the context of more conservative political times Point and Counterpoint 2006 continues in this vein.

Notwithstanding these examples of Australian research, there has been a heavy reliance on North American literature, state and national reports and perhaps popular texts produced by publishers such as Hawker Brownlow Education (e.g. Bragg, 1997) or few regular forums for the promulgation of research except for the Australian Curriculum Studies Association conferences and Curriculum Perspectives. This situation is now changing and is likely to do so more rapidly with journals such as the Primary and Middle Years Educator and the Australian Journal of Middle Schooling providing dedicated forums to report middle years research and practice. The new teacher education programs are focusing academics' attention on middle school teaching and generating postgraduate students. In addition, middle school teachers have been increasingly engaged in research since the late 1990s (Whitehead, 2001). This is the case in the United States, Australia has its share of self-servicing consultants... entertainers rather than educators' (Dickinson, 2001, p. 9) who are peddling simplistic answers for complex problems in middle schooling.

Together, this introduction and the following four articles that comprise Point and Counterpoint demonstrate that middle schooling in Australia is not in a state of arrested development, and that there are plenty of discursive spaces in which the ideology of adolescence is being disrupted. Perhaps, however, we should be skeptical about deploying the modernist trope of progress and momentum with regard to middle schooling. Not only is Australian primary, secondary and tertiary education in the grip of neoconservative politics but, whatever the era, middle schooling challenges the dominant forms of education, namely primary and secondary schooling. Conceptualising middle schooling as a site of contestation and thus a productive space for critical reflection and action might go some way towards ensuring that the movement does not become trapped by particular orthodoxies. Furthermore, Luke et al.'s report (2003) reminds us that if we are genuinely interested in the education of Indigenous girls in impoverished rural locations (for example) as much as urban middle class young people, then there is no room for complacency among middle school educators. Rather, an explicit commitment to social justice middle schooling is not only provocative and stimulating of thought and action, but also provides Bean's 'large and compelling social vision' for the movement.
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Notwithstanding these examples of Australian research, there has been a heavy reliance on North American literature, state and national reports and perhaps popular texts produced by publishers such as Hawker Brownlow Education (e.g. Braggett, 1997) to inform middle years teachers. This situation is now changing and it is likely to do so more rapidly with journals such as the Primary and Middle Years Educator and the Australian Journal of Middle Schooling providing dedicated forums to report middle years research and practice. The new teacher education programs are focusing academics' attention on middle schooling research and generating postgraduate students. In addition, middle school teachers have been increasingly engaged in research since the late 1990s (Whitehead, 2001). On this note, the third article in Point and Counterpoint by Dr Russell is informed by her PhD research and her experience as Principal of Flinders View Primary School in Port Augusta, South Australia. In ‘Using technology to affirm Aboriginal identity in the middle years’ Russell engages explicitly with race as a category of social difference in describing a group of Aboriginal girls’ participation in a Mix Web Design competition which they were enabled to address racism. This article also demonstrates that social and economic goods are not shared equally among the millennial generation. Indigenous girls in impoverished rural communities can not count on access to current communications technologies at all, and although they might share some of the characteristics of adolescence with others of the same age, Russell shows that experiences of racism are of greater import to these young people both personally and educationally. In this article research and practice combine to disrupt the ideology of adolescence.

The fourth article, ‘Transition in social space as curriculum: Recreating what can be in the middle years’ by Isahunter, provocatively re-views some of the sites at which middle years educators learn about young people and introduces a range of questions to re-focus discussion and practices pertaining to the transition from primary to secondary school. Transition was an early theme in Australian reports but ‘has since been subordinated in research on middle schooling’ (Luke et al., 2003, p. 27). Like Rhy and Pendergast, Isahunter identifies different thinking about ongoing issues in middle schooling and deploys research and theorising from outside the middle schooling literature. Such rethinking about transition is long overdue for despite research to the contrary (Yates, 1999), most of the literature on transition is firmly embedded in the ideology of adolescence and thus it is portrayed as a traumatic period in students’ lives and education (e.g. Braggett, 1997; Fyres, Cormack & Barratt, 1992). Isahunter shares Naylor’s and Russell’s focus on students’ social locations in the interests of socially just middle schooling, but is circumspect about too heavy an emphasis on identity politics. This article also offers a timely warning that the burgeoning interest in the interface between research and practice as indicated by middle years conferences and workshops for teachers will not necessarily disrupt the ideology of adolescence. As is the case in the United States, Australia has its share of ‘self-serving consultants... entertainers rather than educators’ (Dixon, 2001, p. 9) who are peddling simplistic answers for complex problems in middle schooling.

Together, this introduction and the following four articles that comprise Point and Counterpoint demonstrate that middle schooling in Australia is not in a state of arrested development, and that there are plenty of discursive spaces in which the ideology of adolescence is being disrupted. Perhaps, however, we should be skeptical about deploying the modernist trope of progress and momentum with regard to middle schooling. Not only is Australian primary, secondary and tertiary education in the grip of neoconservative politics but, whatever the era, middle schooling challenges the dominant forms of education, namely primary and secondary schooling. Conceptualising middle schooling as a site of contestation and thus a productive space for critical reflection and action might go some way towards ensuring that the movement does not become trapped by particular orthodoxies. Furthermore, Luke et al.’s report (2003) reminds us that if we are genuinely interested in the education of Indigenous girls in impoverished rural locations (for example) as much as urban middle class young people, then there is no room for complacency among middle school educators. Rather, an explicit commitment to socially just middle schooling is not only provocative and stimulating of thought and action, but also provides Beane’s ‘large and compelling social vision’ for the movement.
Adolescence: A useful concept for this millennium

Nan Bahr and Donna Pendergast

In recent times, contemporary argument has challenged the relevance of 'adolescence' as a term to describe and inform about the attributes of young people who have not yet attained adulthood (e.g. Letendre, 2000). Arguments draw in part on the growing evidence that adulthood is a nebulous concept and a contestable 'achievement' for many who may be deemed adult by virtue of their age (Cameron, 2004; Letfrancois, 1976). The hallmarks of adulthood are unclear and if independence from parents and contribution to society are key, as attested by the early researchers into adolescence (Hall, 1904), then a clear transition point out of the stage is increasingly uncertain. Many people live with their parents well into their third and sometimes fourth decade without assuming full financial and domestic responsibilities. Are they adult? Are they adolescents?

The interests of some people, called 'kindness' or 'adolescents' by some researchers (Cameron, 2004) seem to match almost exactly those in their teens, ranging from fashion sense, recreational pastimes, and music interests. Although they often have more money, due to part-time employment, they tend to focus their general spending on the same types of items as those still at school. Indeed these people are often still studying full time well into their twenties. There are increasing societal expectations for tertiary qualifications at a person's entry point to their working career. As a result it takes some people (psychologists for example) at least six years of full time tertiary study before ground level entry to the profession. That makes them about 24 years old before they can start to earn, start to save, and start to think about funding their own lives apart from their parents. Yet these people are sexually mature, hopefully morally mature, and certainly physically mature. On many of the measures established to define adolescence since the turn of the 20th century (Hall, 1904), they are not adult:

1. Adolescents are not yet fully independent of their parents and family sanctions (Schafer, 2001).
2. They are not yet cognitively complete (Giedd, 1999).
3. They have not yet developed a range of mature interpersonal relationships (Graber, Brooks-Gunn & Petersen, 1996).
4. They have not completed their personal construction of identity (e.g. Marcia, 1980; Swanson, Beale Spencer & Petersen, 1998; Selman, 1980).
5. They are still 'in-betweeners', or somehow unfinished as adults.

The deficit view of adolescence is the nub of the problem, and has unfortunately persisted since Hall first employed the term in his seminal works on adolescence as a field of scientific psychological research (Hall, 1904). In their efforts to categorise adolescence as fully distinct from adulthood in forms richer than simple age boundaries, Hall's followers, and others (Erikson, 1963; Freud, 1968; Inhelder & Piaget, 1958; McCandless, 1970; for a review see Steinberg & Lerner, 2004) proposed theoretical frameworks for the development of cognitive, physical, social, and emotional capacities. In these, adolescents were portrayed as tumultuous individuals helplessly battling against inevitable conflicts of progression from childhood to adulthood (Hall, 1904). The path was seen to be linear, development across the dimensions was assumed correlated and resolution of the conflicts, or completeness, marked the passage to adulthood in the early twenties. Adolescents were cast as unfinished, unrefined, and plagued by confusions, erratic physical development, undefined societal roles, and uncertain societal contribution. The term became an insult. A special stage of life was a torment to be survived. Passage from adolescence was celebrated with elaborate 'coming of age' parties.

In reaction against this deficit model of adolescence, some researchers have explored the possible impact of curbing the term from research vocabulary (Pendergast & Bahr, 2005). Some university course materials use 'young people' or other unambiguous...