

# **Pedagogic Transformation within a Middle School Reform Initiative, a case study.**

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## **Abstract.**

*In this article I consider the reform initiative “middle schooling” through an analysis of one school site – Riverside. Initially I will introduce the rationale that highlights why the school embraced such an approach. This will be followed by a comprehensive discussion focused on the notion of “authentic” pedagogic choice and the phases teachers pass through in order to achieve pedagogies that are transformative, and therefore, more conducive to engaging young adolescents. I will be exploring pedagogic choice through a concern for Adolescent Literacies. The research question guiding this study was – “What does authentic literacy pedagogy look like in the middle school?”*

## **Introduction.**

The on-going problematic encountered within the middle school movement is the issue of “how to change pedagogy” and move it in line with the progressivist D/discourses of education. This needs to occur without jeopardising the rigour of ‘deep’ learning (Gee, 1999b, Lingard et al., 2001). Within the context of this discussion there is an attempt to determine the impact of Riverside’s progressivist approach to schooling (case study school), and those social practices that focus on authentic pedagogical practice.

## **Why Riverside adopted the reform initiative – Middle Schooling.**

Middle schooling ‘refers to formal education that is responsive and appropriate to the developmental needs of young adolescents’ (Chadbourne 2001, p. 2). The reform initiative is underpinned by a constructivist approach to curriculum design where the emphasis is on connecting learning to the world of the individual, and helping adolescents to build real solutions, focused on “real” issues linked to the world beyond the classroom (Beane 1991, Newmann et al. 1996, Hargreaves et al. 1996, Bragett, 1997, Queensland State Education 2000a, 2000b). The rationale for such an approach suggests that we want young adolescents to really connect with their learning and that the classrooms

inhabited by these young people are responding to the diverse needs of students. In fact not only do we want them to experience real connections, we also want them to experience something that is really rigorous.

However, both at Riverside and in the wider educational community, there is continual debate revolving around the merits of the initiative and whether or not pedagogy is impacted on. There are factions who act as advocates; there are others who are not convinced, and argue that such a progressivist approach to schooling "lacks clear definition, is only a passing fad, provides a front for less palatable reforms, has not been adequately evaluated, and impacts negatively on teachers' work conditions" (Chadbourne 2001, p. 1). Middle schooling is considered progressivist because it emphasises democratic notions of educational excellence and equity; it encourages the school to act as an agent of socialisation rather than purely a transmitter of knowledge.

The goals of the middle schooling reform initiative within the Australian context have been linked to a desire to stem the tide of alienation and disengagement amongst our young adolescents. Engagement is the quality of being psychologically committed to learning (Newmann 1995). It means being alert and attentive in the classroom and it means approaching learning situations with an enthusiasm that translates into cognitive effort. When speaking with those teachers working with young adolescents during the course of this study, I have been left with a strong sense that engagement is the exception rather than the rule. In fact, many young adolescents are remarkably disengaged during their time at school where they are physically present but psychologically absent (Arnett 2001). In addition, advocates of middle schooling in Australia suggest that teacher pedagogical choices should be constructed so that they are more in-tune with those practices that are representative of pedagogies that are *authentic* (Newmann et al. 1996), or *productive* (Queensland State Education 2000b). Concern for pedagogical choice, which represents those choices teachers make about language, action and semiotics when construing

episodes of teaching, is key to the middle school reform movement. Riverside has begun to deconstruct this notion - *authentic* pedagogical choice – through discussions within their Teaching Teams, Learning Circle forums, and the school policy known as the Hub Curriculum document (Riverside School 1999b).

### **Adopting pedagogies that are authentic.**

Previous research has found that there are no tangible improvements in educational outcomes without the corresponding changes to classroom practices or pedagogy (Bartolome 1998, Beresford 1999, Ladwig 1999). One truism related to the issue of middle school reform is that unless school restructuring is guided by and focused on visions of student achievement and of instruction that is needed to produce that achievement, there is little point in restructuring at all. To assist in the articulation of such a vision it is important to gain an understanding of what “improved pedagogy” may actually be. In developing this concept, it is necessary to draw on those criteria that encompass authentic pedagogy. Riverside policy documents make reference to the need to adopt a more “authentic pedagogy” (Newmann et al. 1995, 1993) as a way of improving what happens in classrooms. They use the term “authentic pedagogy”, making reference to the work of Newmann et al. (1995), rather than the terminology “productive pedagogies” (Luke et al. 2000) used in the New Basics documentation. “Authentic” pedagogy is inextricably linked to Riverside’s restructuring. Authentic pedagogy, according to Newmann et al. (1995) should strive for “quality” and “variability”; should be linked to “student achievement”; and be “equitable”. Newmann and associates suggest that there are four dimensions to achieving authentic pedagogy - higher-order thinking skills (exploration of main ideas of a topic or discipline thoroughly, explore connections and relationships across disciplines), depth of knowledge (extended conversational exchanges, building improved and shared understandings of the topics), connectedness to the world beyond the classroom (synthesise, generalise, explain, hypothesise, produce new meanings and understandings) and sustained and substantive conversation

supportive of student achievement (connect substantive knowledge to public or personal issues). Riverside outlined a commitment to the notion of authentic pedagogy through the following statement found in the Hub Curriculum Document:

Learning needs to *challenge student thinking*, it requires students to not only gather information but also *to analyse* that data and *synthesise it for meaningful application*. Students *need time to think, problem solve, and make decisions*. When a large chunk of *time* is allocated, the *students have ample time to work diligently at a task, get stuck, work through the struggle, and get unstuck*. They have time to *think creatively and critically*. *Infusing high order thinking* into the lessons ensures the *rigour and vigour* necessary for students *to make sense of the world and construct meaning in their own mind*.

(Riverside School 1999a p.16)

The following table, maps the five dimensions of ‘authentic pedagogy’ articulated by Newmann and associates with Riverside’s stated rationale.

**Table 2 Authentic Pedagogies**

<b>Elements of Authentic Pedagogy (Newmann et al.1996)</b>	<b>Dimensions of Authentic Pedagogy at Riverside</b>
<b>Deep Knowledge</b>	<i>Challenge student thinking</i> <i>Analyse and synthesise information</i> <i>Rigour</i>
<b>Substantive and substantial conversations</b>	<i>Time to think</i> <i>Problem solve</i> <i>Decision making</i> <i>Think creatively</i> <i>Critique new knowledge</i>
<b>Higher-order thinking</b>	<i>Infusing high order thinking</i> <i>Vigour</i> <i>Time to explore issues</i> <i>Time to experiment with possible solutions</i> <i>Supported risk taking</i> <i>Learn from mistakes</i>

<b>Elements of Authentic Pedagogy (Newmann et al.1996)</b>	<b>Dimensions of Authentic Pedagogy at Riverside</b>
<b>Connectedness to the world beyond the classroom/Problematic Knowledge</b>	<i>Meaningful applications</i> <i>Make sense of the world</i> <i>Construct meaning in their own mind</i> <i>Cooperative learning/team work</i>

### **Phases of Pedagogical Transformation.**

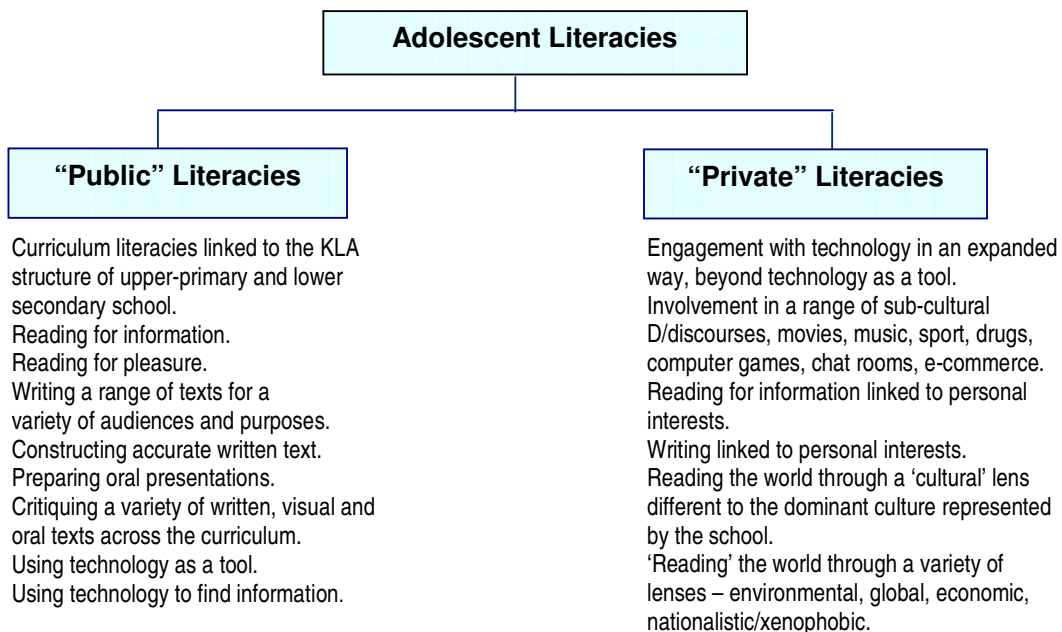
Postman and Weingartner (1987) suggest that there can be no significant impact on pedagogic choice unless there is at the center a change in attitude and focus by teachers. In the context of Riverside this involves a recontextualisation (Bernstein 1990) of pedagogic choices linked to the schools ideology (Delores et al.1996) underpinning their chosen model of middle school. I contend, however, that change has to be accompanied by a series of stages or phases through which individual teachers progress. Evans (1993) argues that there are five dimensions of change: initially it is acceptance of the type of reform (*Acceptance*), then it is the staff's willingness and capacity to adopt and adapt (*Adoption/Adaption*), followed by the strength of the school as an organisation (*Critical Mass*), together with internal and external support (*Internal/External Support*) and appropriate professional development (Australian National Schools Network 2001) (*Professional Learning Opportunities*). I acknowledge these five dimensions of change – acceptance, adoption/adaption, critical mass, internal/external support and professional learning opportunities – however I suggest that there is a need for a more fine-grained analysis linked to pedagogic transformation. In stating such I present a five-phase change process – maintenance, awareness, exploration, transition and transformation – highlighting those key indicators that enable teachers and others to monitor and support movement towards pedagogies that are more authentic over time. Figure 1 presents a continuum focused on pedagogic change moving towards pedagogies that are more authentic, and therefore more in tune with Riverside's approach to the middle years of

schooling. I have paid particular attention to the area of English teaching within the secondary program.

The initial phase found on the continuum is that of *Maintenance*. It is within this phase that teachers maintain subject boundaries resulting from their knowledge of, and beliefs about their discipline area (Gee-Newsome 1999). Another factor is a teachers understanding of the subject matter structure – how they teach the subject, or more specifically the content-specific orientations linked to the teaching of the discipline. There are particular ways to teach science, or mathematics or English. The second phase on the continuum is *Awareness*. It is within this phase that teachers recognise that there are problems in their chosen pedagogies, but link student disengagement to broad social, economic, or technological changes rather than curriculum, pedagogic or assessment choices. A second consideration within this phase is an awareness of the limiting nature of focusing only on the “public” or school-based literacies. A question that needs to be asked of this phase is – *Should role relationships and subject domains define curriculum or should curriculum and pedagogy be more aligned to the needs of the adolescent?*

Below is an articulation of my notion of “Adolescent Literacies”.

**Figure 1**



The third phase – *exploration* – is where new ideas and reform initiatives begin to impact on the dialogic partnerships forming through the creation of teaching teams and learning circles. It is within this stage that debates take place focused on what *authentic* or *productive pedagogies* “look like”. It is also within this phase that a greater acknowledgement of the place of both the “public” and “private” literacies of young adolescents occurs.

The fourth phase is referred to as *transition*. In this phase teachers are developing a school consensus focused on the need to engage in pedagogic change. There is a re-framing of school goals focused on improved learning for young adolescents. Within this phase there is a commitment to the notion of *adolescent literacies*.

The final phase, *transformation*, involves teachers in continual refinement and reconceptualisation of the expanded vision of pedagogic decision making based on a re-alignment between pedagogy, curriculum and assessment linked to the chosen model of middle schooling. It is within this phase that we see *adolescent literacies* as being inclusive of a combination of the “public” and “private” literacies of the adolescent. It is through “deep” understanding of the key motifs of transdisciplinary/interdisciplinary curriculum, authentic assessment and authentic pedagogy that teachers at Riverside begin to connect with the D/discourse of middle schooling.

**Figure 2 Overview of phases of pedagogic transformation.**

<b>Maintenance</b>	<b>Awareness</b>	<b>Exploration</b>	<b>Transition</b>	<b>Transformation</b>
<p><i>In this phase teachers assume maintenance of the old system. The key learning areas retain their boundaries. Teachers remain specialists within subject areas and maintain content-specific orientations to the teaching of English</i></p>	<p><i>In this phase teachers recognise that focusing on “public” school-based literacies are important, but, perhaps limiting.</i></p>	<p><i>In this phase teachers promote new ideas focused on changing pedagogies inclusive to both the “public” and “private” literacies of young adolescents. This is where debate focuses on appropriate and productive pedagogies.</i></p>	<p><i>In this phase teachers are developing a school consensus focused on pedagogic change. There is a re-framing of school goals linked to improved learning for adolescents. There is a commitment to the notion “adolescent literacies” being inclusive of the “public” and “private” literacies of young adolescents. There is a commitment to adjust pedagogies to make them more ‘authentic’ or ‘productive’.</i></p>	<p><i>In this phase teachers are involved in continual refinement and re-conceptualisation of more authentic literacy pedagogy supporting an expanded vision of adolescent literacies inclusive of the “public” and “private” literacies of young adolescents. There is a commitment to ‘authentic’ pedagogies and an ability to articulate a notion of ‘authentic’ pedagogies</i></p>
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Teaching the mechanics of English: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Spelling</li> <li>• Reading</li> <li>• Comprehension</li> <li>• Grammar.</li> </ul> </li> <li>2. Teaching text-types.</li> <li>3. Focus on limited text structures.</li> <li>4. Academic Essay structure – beginning, middle and end.</li> <li>5. Behaviour management motivates pedagogic “choice”.</li> <li>6. Pedagogic “choice” is reflective of the teacher as “authority” during</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Pedagogical “choices” focused on the teaching of literacy are linked to a reduced version of what it means to be literate – reading, writing, spelling, handwriting, grammar.</li> <li>2. Unsure of the pedagogical implications of a more expanded vision of literacy.</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Awareness of the need to develop substantive and sustained conversations across a range of literacies – aural, oral text-based, hypertext, multi-modal – but unsure of the implications.</li> <li>2. Beginning to experiment with an expanded “repertoire of practices” that are linked to an expanded vision of adolescent literacies.</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>3. Beginnings of those substantive and sustained conversations across a range of literacies.</li> <li>4. Pedagogic “choice” focuses on social support.</li> <li>5. Pedagogy reflects the teachers intellectual confidence when considering an expanded vision of adolescent literacies.</li> <li>6. Pedagogic “choice” encourages higher-order thinking</li> <li>7. Pedagogic “choice” encourages the construction of</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>8. Sustained and substantive conversations focused on a range of literacies expanding and engaging in a communicative process.</li> <li>9. Depth of Knowledge about those academic/curriculum literacies that move beyond “basic skills”.</li> <li>10. Connected to the world beyond the classroom incorporating those cultural/critical literacies as well as multi-modal texts.</li> <li>11. Higher-order thinking skills applied to an expanded vision of</li> </ol>

Maintenance	Awareness	Exploration	Transition	Transformation
<p>the knowledge-building component of the task.</p> <p>7. Teacher possesses the knowledge.</p>			<p>knowledge rather than knowledge as "truth".</p>	<p>adolescent literacies.</p> <p>12. Problematic Knowledge linked to a range of literacies</p>

**Conclusion.**

In developing a continuum linked to pedagogic transformation I am contending that wholesale connectedness to the reform initiative of middle schooling espoused by Riverside occurs over time with appropriate support. In Riverside’s case this support occurred at the micro-level of “teaching teams” and “classroom teacher” and was inclusive of professional conversations focused on pedagogic choices. The question that was being debated within these forums was - *What does authentic literacy pedagogy look like in the middle school and are authentic literacy practices constructed for adolescents within such a setting?*

The pedagogic realities within the middle school homerooms at Riverside continue to reflect the on-going tensions between the management of behaviour, the control over the knowledge to be taught and the counter hegemonic focused on ‘social support’ and concern for the individual. This research suggests that teachers need to be supported along the continuum of pedagogic transformation in order to orientate their pedagogic choices towards those that are considered more authentic. The continuum focuses on the pace of literacy pedagogical transformation that occurs during the development, implementation and maintenance of a middle school reform initiative. This study also suggests that pedagogical transformation occurs over a period of time with teachers traversing a number of phases and that without the appropriate levels of support that

movement will be considerably restricted, rendering the middle schooling reform initiative less effective.

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