What matters most when working with young adolescents: The teacher!

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Abstract

THE PAPER TAKES UP the invitation posed by Dinham (2013) to voice concerns about the current superficial and uninformed debate surrounding teaching quality and student performance particularly where it impacts middle-years teaching and learning. Arguing from the perspective of the young adolescent learner, and drawing on the empirical evidence when working with the middle-years learner, the authors of this paper argue that the teacher does matter! The paper highlights the centrality of the teacher to learner success in the adolescent years. The middle-years teacher is not just learner-centred but is adolescent-centred, adolescent-focused and adolescent-driven—someone who puts the middle-years learner at the heart of his or her work. When working with this cohort of learners, the teacher needs to forge a new identity which comes with a clear set of attributes that the teacher must gain to bring about strong improvements in student learning outcomes in this time of uncertainty and rapid change. This requires teaching in new ways which necessitates a review of the teacher’s own professional learning and practice and incorporates evidenced-based learning in their repertoire of pedagogical practice.

Introduction

There is not a day that goes by without some chorus of media commentators, education bureaucrats and policymakers lamenting the ills of the education system (McKew, 2014). Accompanying the cries are claims made about the poor performance of students which is arguably the result of weak teacher pre-service education programs, low performing classroom teachers and inadequate leadership from school principals. Criticism of teachers and educators alike has become a popular past time with many commentators and policymakers who, for whatever reason, seem to delight in undermining the hard work and commitment of teachers and, in the process, diminish the self-esteem of teachers and erode the respect and status of the profession more generally. Therefore, it comes as no surprise that the long awaited report into the Australian Curriculum, released recently by the new coalition government continues this chorus of disparaging commentary (Donnelly & Wiltshire, 2014).
According to Dinham (2013), there have been multiple state and national inquiries into teacher education since the early 1980s. Rather than acknowledging the plethora of research evidence that celebrates the many achievements of teachers and schools, some education commentators choose to manipulate and selectively use data to paint a dire picture of teachers and schools. This situation creates discomfort for educators when it is contrasted with claims made that the teacher is the most important influence on student achievement (Hattie, 2012). It appears that the ‘battering’ ram against teachers, has been aligned in some quarters to Hattie’s work and this is contrary to the intent of his research (Hattie, 2012). Given the spotlight on the ills of the education system, there has been a tendency to point the finger at and blame the teacher for the current shortcomings in the perceived achievement gap. Hence, the quick-fix measures to improve teacher quality such as: bonus pay for expert teachers; shaming schools on the basis of performance in the National Assessment Plan – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) and the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA); literacy tests for graduate teachers; and performance reviews for beginning teachers in their first year, to mention but a few, are hardly well conceived solutions to improve teacher quality. Additionally, the adopted actions do not account, in any way, for the differences in professional knowledge, responsibility and commitment required to teach adolescent learners who, because of differences in age, biology, maturation and disposition, require discrete intellectual, social and emotional support and guidance.

One unique feature of the teaching profession is that most people in the community have been to school and experienced a wide range of teachers and teaching styles. Therefore, there appears to be a prevailing myth that everyone in the community has knowledge of what it takes to be a teacher and how schools and schooling should be conducted (Hong, 2013). It is as if it has become the birthright of everyone to voice uninformed and belittling comment about teachers and the profession. In fact, the continuing devaluing of teachers and the personalisation of the criticism feeds a growing mistrust of teachers which is a major source of concern in this time of curriculum change (Fitzgerald, 2014).

The paper takes up the invitation posed by Dinham (2013) to voice concerns about the current superficial and uninformed debate surrounding teaching quality and student performance. Arguing from the perspective of the young adolescent and drawing on evidence obtained when working with the middle-years learner, the authors argue that the teacher does matter. The research literature tells us so and the Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians (MCEETYA, 2008) identifies eight interconnected priorities to achieve improvements in teaching quality and student learning outcomes (Hayes, Mills, Christie & Lingard, 2006). Amongst the eight priorities—and the focus of in this paper—lies the priority around the middle-years learner, and the priority focusing on quality teaching and learning approaches that are in keeping with this cohort of students aged between 10–15 years.

Changes, reforms, priorities

In the early 2000s, curriculum change was introduced through the term ‘knowledge nation’ which was adopted by the then-Labor leader Kim Beazley and became the mantra of the Rudd-Gillard government, the ‘education revolution’. This revolution would have Australia by “2025 in the top 5 school systems in the world” (Ferrari, 2012). The release of the report into the Australian Curriculum questions the achievability of this goal, as indicated in comments such as the Australian curriculum is “not world class”, and does not represent “best practice” (Donnelly & Wiltshire, 2014, p. 204). The report argues for significant changes to the essential curriculum content, less prescription and the development of a curriculum that is more school based, and has a more balanced approach in regard to curriculum development. The changes recommended by the report appear to follow the rhetoric evident in past reviews and potentially have the capacity to exacerbate the work of an already fatigued and fragile teaching profession (Kadar & Loughran, 2010).

For a generation or more, many teachers have responded to new curriculum priorities introduced at state, territory and national level. Additionally they have invested themselves wholeheartedly in the various change agendas only to see their work in most cases undone, and/or incomplete, thereby making the introduced change unsustainable. The middle years are a case in point. The continuing negative discourse surrounding teacher and teaching quality and student performance in this domain.
highlights a climate of low trust (credibility) and as a consequence it becomes increasingly more difficult to implement change, let alone sustain the proposed changes flagged by the review.

For many years now the Australian system of education has tried to improve student performance and achievement outcomes by introducing a range of education changes and curriculum reforms (Hattie, 2012). The introduction of the Wyndham model in the 1960s was the first real post-war education reform. It made a major break from tradition by reconceptualising school education into the comprehensive school model that we have today (Turney, 1983). It replaced the academically selective school model and a curriculum that was to be age-based, organised around core subjects and schooling for all young adolescents. In more recent times, policymakers have introduced reforms such as the introduction of an outcomes-based education during 1990s; the reshaping of and prioritising the early years (Prep to Year 3) and middle years of schooling (young adolescents); national standards for teachers; national accreditation of teacher pre-service education courses; a national framework for teacher development and performance; and, in 2010, the implementation of a standards, subject-based curriculum known as the Australian Curriculum. Coinciding with these education and curriculum changes was the introduction of standardised testing.

First evidence of the changed assessment regimes at the international level was the PISA in 2000, which tested reading, writing and mathematics. Other international tests such as Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMMS) conducted every four years since 1995 and Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) conducted every five years since 2001. Secondly, in 2008 Australia implemented its own home-grown standardised test, NAPLAN, an annual testing of reading, writing and numeracy for students in Years 3, 5, 7 and 9. These changes have facilitated a shift to a more accountability driven education system (Lingard, 2010) and a “command and control” (Caldwell, 2014, p. 1) model of curriculum which seems to value uniformity over diversity. These changes aim to improve accountability of schools and teachers by emphasising the need to improve the quality of teaching, and as a consequence lead to improved learning outcomes for all learners.

Reportedly, despite these changes, reforms and priorities, student performance and achievement improved little, and there was limited tangible improvement in teaching quality when measured by the regime of standardised testing. For example, a close look at the NAPLAN results from 2009 to 2013 show a marginal increase in student performance with more falls than rises in reading, writing and numeracy (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority [ACARA], 2013). Could it be that this high stakes testing regime is the wrong measure of teacher quality? Nonetheless, the release of the report into the Australian Curriculum (Donnelly & Wiltshire, 2014) and the release of the Queensland Education Accord (Department of Education, Training & Employment, 2014) clearly identify the quality of teaching in the classroom and the correlation in improved literacy and numeracy outcomes for all students as central issues. But how improvements will be measured is unclear and highly contentious in this low trust environment.

Adolescent-centred, adolescent-focused, adolescent-driven

As a cohort, young adolescents represent the most vulnerable of students, behind early years students. It is during these years that problems surrounding adolescent alienation and disengagement appear (MCEETYA, 2008). They often seem “switched off”, “tuned out” or simply “not achieving” (Cumming & Cormack, 1996, p. 2). Research conducted by Cumming and Cormack (1996) also highlighted that the highest incidence of youth alienation and disengagement occurred in the first year of secondary school (Hill & Rowe, 1996). Chadbourne (2001) asserted that rather than the biological and social factors being the pivotal influencing factor on adolescent achievement, it was more the sense of social alienation, misengagement [sic] and under-achievement causing a disconnection and detachment from the learning and teaching process which increased levels of disengagement and the risk of young adolescents dropping out of school early (Smyth & Hattam, 2004). Others suggest that the results are high levels of adolescent depression with young people engaging in at-risk behaviours such as self harm (Carr-Gregg & Shale, 2002; Withers & Russell, 1998). Reporting on PISA 2012, the Australian Education Union commented that “over 20% of Australian students felt they didn’t belong, weren’t happy, not satisfied at school” (Madden, 2013, par. 6).
The young adolescent years (between the ages of 10–15 years) are the time when students need to experience and have access to a wide range of learning and teaching strategies that exhibit creativity and innovation. One of the assets of the young adolescent amongst many is their ability and capacity to try new things, to experiment, to take risks amidst their enormous growing pains. They tend to be quite aware of the importance of relationships and consequently very conscious of their social engagement, something they profoundly struggle with and which, for many, is a source of much anxiety. Another trait is their feeling of insecurity and uncertainty about their capacity and ability to adapt and succeed in the wider community and world. According to some researchers (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Pendergast & Bahr, 2010; Rumble, 2014), teachers have seen this time as a way-station to wait out and as a consequence adopt a more passive deficit pedagogical approach when working with the young adolescent learner. This is opposed to encouraging a more engaging and empowering pedagogy that builds resilience and personal identity.

For the most part, teachers working with young adolescents tend to focus only on intellect and cognition at the exclusion of the mental (emotional) and wellbeing models (values, beliefs and attitudes), and assume an accompanying curriculum design that has little to do with real world connections. This type of approach is incongruent with research recommendations (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Pendergast & Bahr, 2010; Rumble, 2014). Furthermore, it is unrelated to recommendations made to introduce, in the middle years, different curriculum approaches that bring together the best of teacher-centred and learner-centred methodologies (Pendergast & Bahr, 2010). Why is this important? What matters most is that teachers know their students so that they can customise/personalise and adapt the workings of their pedagogical practice to ensure all students succeed. By adopting a balanced approach to pedagogical practice, the middle-years teacher forges a new identity and develops new ways of working and engaging with this cohort of learners. However, this package mostly denies the students’ interests in favour of prescription, control and compliance (Caldwell, 2014; Hargreaves, 2003).

Current research underlines how learning and teaching is less about controlling and more about learning and teaching in whatever form is appropriate (Kadar & Loughran, 2010). Working with middle-years learners in this new time presumes that young adolescents want to learn, in fact they enjoy learning, and learning how to learn and having a love of learning is much more important to them. Therefore, the function and requirement of the teacher of adolescents has to fundamentally change focus with the teacher embracing the role of teacher as learner; a reflective lifelong learner, who enjoys a shared purpose in the learning journey, and who is creative and innovative in their pedagogical practice.

As teachers come to understand and reflect more about how young adolescents learn and what it means to be an effective adolescent teacher, not just a good teacher, better ways to address the needs of young adolescents as they navigate a world that is in turmoil and trauma will be discerned (Hargreaves, 2003).

To be an effective middle-school teacher requires a comprehensive understanding of the developmental uniqueness of young adolescents. Hence, middle-level schools must be grounded in the diverse characteristics and needs of this age group. For example, the important influence peers have on commitment to learning goals and the impact this peer group has on teenagers’ self-worth cannot be underestimated (Hattie, 2011). This has implications for the way curriculum design, pedagogical practices and assessment strategies and feedback are developed to engage and enhance student learning outcomes.

If schools are to thrive in working effectively to meet the needs of young adolescent learners, they have to be developmentally responsive to the diverse learning needs, interests, capacities and characteristics of the middle-years learners. It is this concept that is at the heart of the middle-years philosophy. The middle-years teacher specialises in this single phase of development: early adolescence. Therefore, the middle-school teacher is a specialist in adolescence. The teacher in working with the middle-years learner is not just about being learner-centred, but rather adolescent-centred, adolescent-focused and adolescent-driven (Rumble, 2014). Hence, the middle-years learner whose needs are different from younger and older students receives differentiated instruction. Affirming this difference empowers young adolescents, who are in a process of transforming themselves, with a sense of their own identity.
Quality teaching and the young adolescent learner

The middle years of schooling initiative is seen as an innovation stemming from a “coalition of diverse reformers”, promising fundamental changes in “school organisation, curriculum, instruction and student outcomes” (Cuban, 1992, p. 230). In Queensland, innovation is seen as the catalyst to reshape and rebuild school organisational structures, curriculum, pedagogy, ultimately changing the way teachers work with young adolescents (Queensland College of Teachers, 2006). Other educationalists suggest that “innovation is an activity that utilises knowledge” (Commonwealth of Australia, 2003, p. 15); “is a process by which ideas are transformed” (Commonwealth of Australia, 2003, p. 9); “is one dimension of teacher professionalism” (Cumming & Owen, 2001, p. 1); and, according to Robinson (2011), “is an original idea that is valued” (p. 226).

The creative and innovative teacher is often described as passionate—an attribute so often named presupposes a love of learning and for learning, and a love of teaching (Killen, 2009). The passionate teacher brings a contagious energy to the learning environment by propelling the subject, not the teacher, into the centre of the learning process, enabling students to draw from this energy for their own learning and life (Marsh, 2008). A recent study (Rumble, 2014) provided insights into young adolescents concerning their perceptions of what makes an effective middle-school teacher. The study pointed to a set of distinctive attributes which the middle-years teacher must possess if student learning outcomes are to strongly improve. These distinctive attributes are identified here:

- A caring attitude that nurtures a sense of community and wellbeing built around core beliefs, values and attitudes.
- A sense of efficacy, commitment to, and confident and competent in working with young adolescents.
- Role modelling the best of what it means to be masculine and to be feminine, inspiring young adolescents to be their best selves.
- Being creative and innovative, effective at learning and implementing new ways of working and teaching/coaching students in new ways of doing and being.
- Building skills of resilience in students in a time of uncertainty and rapid change.
- Making learning interesting, engaging and relevant—developing a wide repertoire of pedagogical practice.
- Building relationships of mutual respect.
- Being an expert communicator with parents.
- Providing evidence-based teaching and learning around young adolescence.
- Valuing democracy and consensus.
- Being interested and conversant in young adolescent life worlds.
- Being supportive and celebrating/applauding student diversity.
- Demonstrating a sense of social justice and equity.
- Demonstrating expert knowledge of young adolescence.

Therefore, the notion of a quality teacher in the middle years with her/his own unique set of attributes is shedding new light on the importance of the centrality of the teacher when working with this cohort of young adolescent learners. So much so, that it is questioning the default position that the attributes of the teacher are generic to the profession and not usually differentiated across sectors.

The emerging middle-years teacher, with its dual identity of being in between primary and secondary school is striving to forge its own new and unique identity, an identity which is quite different from the traditional primary and secondary school. The middle-years period is bridging a traditional cultural divide in education (Braggett, 1997; Bryer & Main, 2005; Chadbourne, 2001; Pendergast, 2005; Skilbeck & Connell, 2004). Young people who are already experiencing the challenges of adolescence are also required to deal simultaneously with the discontinuities and anxieties associated with moving from a primary school culture and adapting to a different secondary school culture (Braggett, 1997; Eyers, Cormack & Barratt, 1992; Hargreaves, Earl & Ryan, 1996; Pendergast & Bahr, 2010; Skilbeck & Connell, 2004). To further bridge this cultural divide, the literature recommends teachers work much more collaboratively and in teams, with transdisciplinary approaches to curriculum design, in small learning communities within a dedicated middle-level school or sub-school structure (Bahr & Pendergast, 2007; Beane, 1991, 1996; Barratt, 1998; Chadbourne, 2001, 2002; Cumming, 1998; Pendergast & Bahr, 2010; Prosser, 2006). This recommendation is in contrast to traditional views which locate the teacher in one sector. The lack of role differentiation points to...
some specific challenges for the middle-school teacher as she tries to attune herself to young adolescent needs and characteristics. Hargreaves (2003) argues, “teachers must learn to teach in ways they have not been taught” (p. 16). Therefore, he/she needs to regularly engage in professional learning and quality teaching for all young adolescent learners. Teaching in new ways requires teachers to review their own professional learning and incorporate evidence-based learning into their repertoire of pedagogical practice.

### A wide repertoire of practice

A commitment to evidenced-based practice requires the teacher to have a deep level of currency around the research knowledge in the field. In a pedagogical sense, this means an awareness of those strategies that will be productive in meeting the needs and goals of the learner as well as what modifications are needed for learners with diverse needs (Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005). According to the Queensland Studies Authority (QSA, 2008), pedagogical practices are defined as developing curriculum intent to provide multiple opportunities for students to engage in intellectually challenging and real world learning experiences. For the teacher working with young adolescents, learning and teaching methods used to generate new ways of disseminating and using new knowledge are transforming the approaches to learning and therefore to teaching. Lovat (2003) believes that any change, like the middle-years reform, must go hand-in-hand with pedagogical reform. According to the National [Australian] Professional Standards for Teachers (Australian Institute for Teaching & School Leadership, 2011), there is a clear expectation that teachers “know the content and how to teach it” and have an understanding of the “principles of inclusion and strategies for differentiating teaching to meet the specific learning needs of students across the full range of abilities” (p. 5) that take account of particular contexts to ensure improved learning and teaching outcomes. The research (Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005; Hattie, 2012; Tomkins, Campbell, Green & Smith, 2015) suggests that teacher knowledge and how to teach, matters. Therefore, investment in strong teacher professional development and education, along with standards of practice will ensure improved quality teaching which in turn will improve achievement levels for all learners.

Pendergast, Whitehead, De Jong, Newhouse-Maiden and Bahr (2007) argue that one of the main barriers to effective and successful education reform in the middle years is the lack of a wide repertoire of teaching strategies to engage students and that ultimately improve student learning outcomes. Jackson and Davis (2000) found that student performance improved as a result of substantial changes in the teachers' repertoire of pedagogical practices. Building on the Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development (1989) report *Turning Points: Preparing American Youth for the 21st Century*, Jackson and Davis (2000) stated that the purpose of “middle grades” education is for every student “to think creatively, to identify and solve meaningful problems, to communicate, work well with others, develop a base of factual knowledge and skills as the essential foundation for higher order capacities” (pp. 10–11). The implication for the teacher of young adolescents, therefore, is to create effective learning environments conducive to new ways of teaching and learning.

As Rowe (2002) identifies, “effective schools are only effective to the extent that they have effective teachers” (p. 9). An effective middle-years teacher needs to be innovative and creative and to possess a wide repertoire of teaching strategies (Commonwealth of Australia, 2003; Cumming & Owen, 2001; Hayes et al., 2006; Jackson & Davis, 2000; Lingard et al., 2001; Pendergast & Bahr, 2010; Rumble, 2014; Smyth, McInerney & Hattam, 2003).

The focus on quality teaching in the classroom has been a driving force behind the middle-years reform as student performance developed patterns of decline, with a corresponding trend in the decline of student achievement and engagement (Barratt, 1998; Chadbourne, 2001; Lingard et al., 2001; Carrington, 2002, 2006; Education Queensland, 2005; Pendergast et al., 2005). In Queensland, Lingard et al. (2001) reported relatively low levels of intellectual challenge, connectedness and recognition of difference in classrooms across Queensland schools. Some educationalists (Education Queensland, 2005) contribute this pattern of declining performance to the change from subject-centred pedagogy to a learner-centred pedagogy. However, according to Lingard et al. (2001), high quality teaching and learning is grounded in a pedagogy that values high order thinking and connects with students’ backgrounds and worlds beyond the classroom; and is conducted in learning environments that recognise
and value difference (Hayes et al., 2006; Lingard et al., 2001). Hence, Lingard et al. (2001) recommend a range of productive pedagogies, assessment and performance to arrest this decline in student performance.

The productive pedagogies framework form the basis of signature practices of middle schooling and embrace a learner-centred focus, that is adolescent driven with an emphasis on integrated and constructivist teaching and learning; creative and critical thinking; problem solving; cooperative and collaborative learning (Beane, 1991; Carrington, 2006; Chadbourn, 2001; Lingard et al., 2001; Pendergast et al., 2005). However, creating such conditions to optimise learning has some way to go before it is achieved. The research literature (Hayes et al., 2006; Carrington, 2006) reveals limited use of productive pedagogies in classrooms, with continued low levels of engaging students in stimulating intellectual activities, a curriculum design that is not aligned with young adolescent life worlds and with little recognition of difference. Furthermore, as writers explore student responses to learning, motivation and engagement (Pendergast et al., 2005; Pendergast & Bahr, 2010; Groundwater-Smith, Mitchell & Mockler, 2007) it becomes clear that students want an element of choice and independence in pursuing their own learning. It goes to the heart of one of the most important attributes a middle-years teacher can have, and that is accountability. Middle-years learners are looking for more hands-on real world problem solving activities that are engaging and intellectually challenging (Luke et al., 2002; Pendergast et al., 2005). Therefore, students are expecting much more involvement in and partnering with the teacher in the learning process than ever before. However, these ways of working with young adolescents are not widespread in the middle-years classroom, and the implications of this seriously constrain the construction of quality teaching and learning that is necessary to lift student engagement and achievement. Moreover, in an environment where there is clear evidence of continued decline in young adolescents’ achievement, the need to improve pedagogies and curriculum design in this cohort of schooling has never been more urgent.

The way forward

Those committed teachers who work with young adolescents know how easily these young people can become alienated, disengaged, disenfranchised and even drop out of school early or becoming school refusers. However, the evidence is in; teachers continually demonstrate that disengagement of this type can be turned around and they can and do make a difference (Darling-Hammond, 2000). What is needed in schools is a clear focus on the developmental needs of the middle-years learner by providing positive experiences in adolescence, rather than on adopting the deficit, negative ideologies of young people. The challenge is to draw on their ‘virtual schoolbags’ to reconceptualise, reculture and reinvigorate the young adolescent’s experience of learning which engages students and promotes a growth model (Dweck, 2006) where effort and hard work is valued. Such philosophy and action empowers students to be their best selves.

The evidence provided here draws attention to the centrality of the teacher in meeting the academic, personal, social and achievement needs of young adolescents (MCEETYA, 2008). What is clear from the research when working with young adolescents is if teaching practices do not change, schools run the risk of becoming “irrelevant, especially among young adolescents” (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2001, p. 25). Barratt (1998), Dinham (2013), Hargreaves (2003), Hargreaves and Shirley (2009), Lingard et al. (2001), and Pendergast (2005) warn that the short-sightedness of government policy towards school reform and adopting a cheap, quick fix, standardised, competitive, compliant test-based accountability places teachers at risk of becoming casualties of change rather than change-makers. If teachers of young adolescents are to be better prepared in these new times, policymakers will need to re-engineer the teacher as a well-qualified, well-resourced and committed teaching professional (Caldwell & Harris, 2008; Cumming & Owen, 2001; Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005; Dinham, 2013). However, addressing these aspects of teachers’ work is made more difficult in this climate of criticism and mistrust.

The paper has taken up the invitation by Dinham (2013) to voice concern about the misinformation and intimidatory commentary surrounding teachers’ work. It has pointed to the critical evidence around quality teaching when working with the young adolescent cohort. The empirical evidence is unequivocal: the teacher does matter when working with young adolescents. If teacher quality in the classroom is to improve, it is critical that learning and teaching practice and policy be informed by the
evidence to ensure sustained improvement in student learning outcomes over time (Sim, Wyatt-Smith & Dempster, 2002). Teachers, particularly in this cohort, need to be given the professional freedom to create the conditions in which young people can thrive and grow creatively, thereby developing their talents and personal passions, allowing the teacher to face the future with the young people with whom they have formed a learning commitment. Therefore, formulating and implementing education policies that nurture high-trust learning environments will serve to inspire the teacher to believe in themselves and value their performance, and in so doing help young people make something of their future.

References


