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Adolescent Literacies, Middle Schooling  
and Pedagogic Choice: Riverside's  
Response to the Challenge

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## Abstract

This study looks at the ways in which middle schooling initiatives (particularly notions such as 'authentic pedagogy') are impacting on teachers' pedagogic choices and practices especially in the area of literacy teaching. There has been no research to date which explores the linkages between curriculum/school reform such as proposed in middle schooling initiatives and choices/practices demonstrated by teachers caught up in this initiative in particular schools. My research attempts to theorise the connection between crucial features of middle school reform, teacher decisions and practices in the classroom and their impact on students' own learning/adolescent literacies. I assume that if the reform is to have continuity and to contribute to higher levels of adolescent engagement and deep learning, it needs to support and facilitate certain kinds of decisions and practices in the school and classroom environments. Where I find evidence of engagement, sustained/substantial conversation across lessons, within lessons and 'deep learning' in transdisciplinary work by students, then it is fair to say that middle schooling is working for students and teachers. Where I find little or no evidence of these things, then it is necessary to apply a critical and constructive reading of reform initiatives. This critical and constructive reading attempts to outline the necessary and sufficient conditions which must be in place in schools if middle schooling is to thrive and to make the difference in young peoples' school lives it claims to make. My research is a contribution to the sustained and substantial conversation that is so necessary to middle schooling reform.

Many previous studies surrounding middle schooling have remained at the level of "description". These commentaries either support or oppose the reform initiative. In making a commitment to move beyond description, generated by participant observation and ethnographic conversations, to also involve extensive D/discourse analysis (Gee, 1999; Bernstein, 1990) of pedagogic practice, this thesis sought to develop an awareness of the notion of *authentic literacy pedagogy* through close analysis of pedagogic choice enacted in three middle school homerooms. A further significance lies in the perspectives that it offers on adolescent literacies.

The data collected raised questions about the "actual" impact of the middle school reform initiative at one school, **Riverside'**, how this approach to schooling for young adolescents impacts on the way that teachers and students construct literacies; and whether or not these constructions are mindful of the range of those "private" and

"public" literacies found in the multiple life-worlds of adolescents (Phelps, 1998). It challenges some "myths" about literacy pedagogic transformation linked to middle schooling, as well as, highlights those factors, both physical and intrinsic, that impact on reform initiatives and change.

Acknowledgement of the need to engage in a theorisation of adolescent literacies that moves beyond the current narrow macro-level D/discourse agenda, which focuses on the "public" school-based literacies, also emerged. This highlights those tensions that exist between the macro, meso and micro educational environments when considering what it means to be "literate" for young adolescents.

The study also highlights those disjunctions and tensions found within the progressivist middle school approach. As a result there are a number of implications that emerge. These are linked to the preparation of pre-service teachers; a concern for the physical/material landscape of middle schools; the establishment of Learning Circles as critical in creating the "ferment of change"; the need to continue theorising the notion - adolescent literacies; the need to link professional learning for teachers to those phases of pedagogic change highlighted as part of the reform process; as well as an acknowledgement of the importance of the need to support the development of more authentic pedagogies.

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