

# Connecting Lives and Learning Project

## An Overview 2008

At a time of greater poverty, mobility and cultural diversity (Luke et al., 2003), examples of Australian middle schools working to address the disadvantage experienced by urban fringe students are the exception rather than the rule (McInerney & Smyth, 2004; Smyth & McInerney, 2007). The need for more work in this area is made all the more imperative by early school leaving research identifying the middle years as a key site for reform to improve school retention rates (Holden & Dwyer, 1993; Marks & Fleming, 1999; Smyth & Hattam, 2004; Smyth et al., 2000).

The Connecting Lives and Learning (CLL) project offers a new middle schooling story and problematic from three years of research with ten schools within Adelaide's northern urban fringe. This project is an Australian Research Council linkage between the University of South Australia, the Northern Suburbs State Secondary Principals' Network, the Australian Education Union and the South Australian Government Social Inclusion Unit. The project commenced in late 2004, involving over a thousand students and thirty-two teachers.

The project has been designed to build middle school curriculum and pedagogy using an action research methodology (Noffke & Stevenson, 1995) that works to strike a curricular and pedagogical balance between the:

- inclusive use of the repertoires of literate knowledge and practice that diverse students bring to school; and
- effective learning of knowledge, skills and understandings necessary for success in mainstream institutional terms.

Such a problematic borrows from Moll and colleagues' (1992) 'funds of knowledge' approach (Gonzales et al., 2005), Thomson's (2002) notion of 'virtual schoolbags', and Bourdieu's (1984) theorising of 'cultural capital'. When viewed from the perspective of the participating teachers, such a challenge is understood in terms of questions such as:

- How do we sustain high expectations for student learning and positive relationships?
- How do we understand what is relevant curriculum that engages students in

rigorous learning?

- What is the role of the teacher who is committed to providing rigorous and relevant curriculum?
- How can we make 'safe' curricular and pedagogical use of what students know and can teach us about their lifeworlds and the issues for their communities?
- What are the curriculum and pedagogical implications of taking young people's difficult lives seriously?

The project has attempted to sustain a professional learning community for the teachers and academic researchers through facilitating research roundtable meetings over a two year period (Brennan & White, 2001; Ladwig & White, 1996). In each year, the participating teachers were involved in devising action research project that responded to the challenges outlined above using some of the conceptual resources provided by the project.

In its final year, the CLL project team published its findings and created a professional development website in partnership with the ANSN. The website is for schools and teachers who are grappling with similar middle schooling issues, structured around the project's big ideas, its key problematics, the research methodology used and the various real life teacher stories about pedagogical change.

# Connecting Lives and Learning - Publications

## 2004

Hattam, R. (2004). 'Connecting classrooms to student lifeworlds: imagining the teacher-as-ethnographer', paper presented to Australian Research in Education Conference, Melbourne, December.

## 2005

Brennan, M. (2005). 'Generations of social justice in Australian schools?', paper presented to Australian Research in Education Conference, Parramatta, November.

Hattam, R., Prosser, B. & Brady, K. (2005). 'Unsettling deficit views of students and their communities', paper presented to Australian Research in Education Conference, Parramatta, November.

Lloyd, D. (2005). 'Renewing pedagogies: using futures as a way into students' lifeworlds', paper presented to Australian Research in Education Conference, Parramatta, November.

Sellar, S. & Zipin, L. (2005). 'Post'ibilities for critical pedagogy', paper presented to Australian Research in Education Conference, Parramatta, November.

Zipin, L. (2005). 'The pedagogical challenge: rethinking relevance in the interests of social justice', paper presented to Australian Research in Education Conference, Parramatta, November.

## 2006

Comber, B. & Nixon, H. (2006). 'Teacher identity and pedagogical change', paper presented at the Australian Association for Research in Education Conference, Adelaide, November.

Hattam, R. (2006). 'Easier said than done: Strong Connectedness in the Middle Years', paper presented at the Australian Association for Research in Education Conference, Adelaide, November.

Prosser, B. (2006). 'Beyond Deficit Views: engaging students with ADHD', paper presented at the Australian Association for Research in Education Conference,

*Adelaide, November.*

*Prosser, B. (2006). "Emotion, identity, imagery and hope as resources for teachers' work", paper presented at the Australian Association for Research in Education Conference, Adelaide, November.*

*Prosser, B. (2006). "Reinvigorating the Middle Years: a review of middle schooling", paper presented at the Australian Association for Research in Education Conference, Adelaide, November.*

*Sellar, S. & Cormack, P. (2006). "(Re)conceptualising Middle Years Pedagogy", paper presented at the Australian Association for Research in Education Conference, Adelaide, November.*

*Zipin, L., Brennan, M. & Sellar, S. (2006). "Making social justice problematic: Exploring an educational aporia", paper presented at the Australian Association for Research in Education Conference, Adelaide, November*

## Connecting Lives and Learning - Partners

The Australian Research Council funded 'Connecting Lives & Learning' project which was previously known as the RPiN project is a collaboration between the *Centre for Studies in Literacy, Policy and Learning Cultures* and the following:

Australian Research Council

Northern Adelaide State Secondary Principals' Network

Australian Education Union (SA Branch)

South Australian Government Social Inclusion Unit

The project also acknowledges the support of the South Australian Department of Education and Children's Services.

This three year project is made possible through an Australian Research Council Linkage Grant (LP0454869) entitled 'Reinvigorating middle years pedagogy in urban fringe secondary schools'.

# Connecting Lives and Learning - People

## UniSA Research Team

This project invites teachers to work collaboratively with university researchers from a broad range of professional and academic backgrounds. Their joint purpose is to discuss the theoretical and practical implications of developing new pedagogical practice within middle schooling.

### Chief Investigators

Associate Professor Robert Hattam brings extensive experience to this project in the area of managing interdisciplinary educational research projects. Previously a secondary school teacher, co-ordinator and curriculum adviser, his academic work has focused on the areas of critical theory, social justice and school reform.

Associate Professor Phillip Cormack has an impressive record of research in the fields of literacy, disadvantage and adolescent education. After many years working as a teacher, curriculum developer and educational manager, he now combines his academic work with consultancy in English teaching and public schooling.

Professor Barbara Comber is an international leader in literacy education and research, as well as an ex-English and literacy teacher. Her reputation as a public speaker and commitment to working with the teaching profession has had a sustained impact on quality literacy education in Australia for many years.

Professor Marie Brennan is Dean of Education at the University of SA and has vast experience in improving curriculum and school reform. After many years as a departmental researcher, policy analyst and senior manager, she is well known for her ability to make pedagogy accessible to teachers and the community.

Dr Lew Zipin has an extensive knowledge of critical sociology, policy analysis, cultural studies and curriculum theory. A doctoral graduate of the University of Wisconsin, he brings an international perspective on curriculum to the project, as well as a reputation for successfully mentoring research students.

Dr David Lloyd has a background in science education, futures study and adolescent psychological development. Previously a secondary school teacher and middle school co-ordinator, his academic work and curriculum expertise is vital for the often under-theorised area of science in middle schooling.

Professor Alan Reid is a national leader in curriculum development and has worked closely with both DEST and DECS in high level curriculum reviews. Over two decades as a teacher, co-ordinator and deputy principal in country schools, he made substantial contributions to Australian Studies and History curricula.

Associate Professor Helen Nixon is well known for her research into new literacies, popular culture and ICTs. She brings to the project experience in ethnographic studies and investigations of young people's engagements with ICTs and popular culture. She has published widely for English/literacy teachers and researchers.

## Key Investigators

Mr Andrew Bills has a Research Fellow position within the project. Currently completing his EdD, Andrew brings extensive secondary schooling work involving the development and management of socially just schooling programs to the project. As the SA Networker for the Australian National Schools Network (ANSN), his work offers connections with other interested stakeholders nationally.

Ms Pippa Milroy is the research associate supporting this project. Currently a secondary teacher, she has worked in curriculum and pedagogy project previously at Monash University.

Mr Bill Lucas is a senior lecturer in the School of Education at the University of SA. He specialises in the development of pedagogy for middle schooling and is a key member of collaborative university/department middle schooling consultative committees.

Dr Faye McCallum is a program director in the School of Education at the University of SA. She specialises in research into 'children at risk' and child advocacy, but also has extensive experience in teacher education, particularly mentoring and practicum.

Dr Kathy Paige specialises in primary and middle schooling with a focus on integrating science, maths and environment curriculum. She brings to the project over seventeen years of teaching experience in city and country schools, as well as experience as a departmental curriculum officer.

Dr Brenton Prosser is a lecturer in Middle Years schooling and until recently was responsible for managing the RPIN project. Previously a secondary teacher, media adviser, parliamentary researcher and youth worker with 'children with challenging behaviours', his doctorate was the first to consult children with ADHD about their schooling experiences.