Convers-actions around integrated curriculum

Presented by

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Public schools are under siege today and one of the most likely victims is developmentally-appropriate middle-level education ... especially vulnerable is the concept of curriculum integration (Vars, 2001, p. 7).

Beginning in the early 1900s, the middle schooling movement in America waxed and waned in both popularity and implementation along with progressive education more generally. The same might be said of the movement in Australia although its history is shorter and has not been well documented. Here, the most recent upsurge in interest stemmed from the first Turning Points report (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Education, 1989) and was fuelled by the publication of a series of Australian reports (Barratt, 1998; Cumming & Cormack, 1996; Eyers, Cormack & Barratt, 1992; Schools Council, 1993). However, after a period of optimism as middle schooling gathered momentum, voices of both caution and dissent have begun to appear in both countries. Firstly this paper reviews a range of concerns about middle schooling in America, most of which will be shown to have salience in Australia, to provide a context for a more detailed examination of integrated curriculum as a significant issue in contemporary middle schooling. The remainder of the paper continues convers-actions about curriculum beginning with the construction of the most recent state-mandated curriculum initiative in South Australia, the South Australian Curriculum, Standards and Accountability (SACSA) Framework in 1999/2000. Drawing on interviews with progressive educators I highlight ways in which experienced teachers are able to continue their commitment to middle schooling and integrated curriculum within the parameters of a new curriculum framework. Then I explore a cohort of Bachelor of Education (Upper Primary/Lower Secondary) (B Ed (UP/LS)) students' approaches to integrated curriculum as they contemplate their careers. Using thirteen students' major assignments from a core topic on middle schooling, I summarize the ways in which they conceptualize middle schooling, define and intend to implement integrated curriculum in their classrooms and schools. My main argument is that while the middle school movement and with it integrated curriculum seem to be under siege in these conservative times, there are progressive educators and beginning teachers who are prepared to find spaces to engage in this important problematic in middle schooling.

Convers-action 1: Murmurs of dissent about middle schooling
The middle schooling movement in Australia and America has never enjoyed universal acceptance but there was a period in the 1980s and early 1990s when advocacy for its basic principles was well-received and progressive educators were gradually able to introduce at least some of them into a range of schools (Beane, 1997). Now it is this incremental approach to the implementation of middle schooling that has become a significant concern (Cumming, 1998; Dickinson, 2001). According to Dickinson (2001, p. 4), middle schooling is currently in a ‘stage of arrested development – where the middle school concept has not been
completely implemented’. Schools in America and Australia mostly began with structural and organizational changes such as block-timetabling, the creation of mini-schools and interdisciplinary teaching teams which were designed to facilitate more productive teacher-student relationships and reduce young adolescents’ alienation from schooling. While such reforms might have resulted in more humane learning environments for some students, the curriculum and pedagogy in many schools has remained untouched, a point to which I will subsequently return.

Associated with the piece-meal approach to the implementation of middle schooling principles has been the inadequate preparation and ongoing professional development for teachers and administrators (Dickinson, 2001; Eyers, Cormack & Barratt, 1992). Until very recently there was only one undergraduate teaching degree in Australia that purported to prepare middle school teachers, the B Ed (UP/LS) at Flinders University in South Australia. The vast majority of teachers and administrators, therefore, have had no introduction to middle schooling theory during their training and thus professional development is limited to the promulgation of basic ideas about middle schooling and the developmental needs of young adolescents. Arguably, the absence of a firm grounding in middle schooling has also increased teachers’ vulnerability to a ‘parade of self-serving consultants … entertainers rather than educators’ (Dickinson, 2001, p. 9) who offer, under the guise of professional development, superficial understandings and simple solutions to the complex issues facing contemporary schools. An equally significant issue which is perhaps associated with the neglect of middle schooling in undergraduate and postgraduate degree courses is the dearth of rigorous research that can be deployed by middle school advocates (Dickinson, 2001). Although there is a small but increasing corpus of Australian research (for example Brennan, Sachs & Merritt, 1998; Cormack, 1998; McInerney, Hattam, Smyth & Lawson, 1999; Wallace, Rennie, Malone & Venville, 2001; Whitehead, 2000, 2001), it is not widely disseminated and there are no local equivalents to journals such as the Middle School Journal and Phi Delta Kappan. In essence, an ongoing issue is that neither Australian nor American educators are thoroughly prepared to fully implement the concept of middle schooling.

Convers-action 2: Contesting integrated curriculum

As previously mentioned, curriculum and pedagogy have become significant issues in relation to middle schooling. Here the points of attack are many-sided. Firstly, there have been no changes to the separate-subject curriculum or its instructional delivery pattern in many schools that identify with the middle school movement (Dickinson, 2001; Norton, 2000; Williamson & Johnston, 1999). Indeed, a recent Australian study (Wallace et al, 2001, p. 11) found that ‘much of what happens in secondary schools appears designed to protect subject interests’. For example teacher recruitment, textbooks, subject departments and reporting procedures, to name but a few, are powerful forces that contribute to upholding the status quo in secondary schools (Beane, 1997; Eyers, Cormack & Barratt, 1992; Hargreaves, Earl & Ryan, 1996). Given the hegemony of the separate-subject curriculum, attempts by progressive educators to introduce and
implement some form of curriculum integration have often been strongly resisted (Kysilka, 1998; Wallace et al, 2001; Weilbacher, 2001). Yet, it is also the case that there has been an upsurge of interest in integrated curriculum over the past decade with the publication of books and many articles that offer middle school teachers multifarious definitions, models and strategies for implementation (for example Brennan, Sachs & Merritt, 1998; Fogarty, 1991; Gehrke, 1998; Kysilka, 1998; Murdoch & Homsby, 1997). Notwithstanding the publicity, integrated curriculum remains more popular as a concept than a practice, and it has not only been ‘difficult to develop a consistent theoretical and practical understanding of integration’ (Wallace et al, 2001, p. 11) but there is also insufficient research on its implementation to allay concerns of either progressive or conservative critics. Progressive educators such as James Beane are concerned that the original idea of integrated curriculum as being linked to democratic classrooms and holistic learning theory has been ‘reduced to the matter of correlating content and skill from various subject areas around some theme’ (Beane, 1997, p. x) in contemporary schools. While acknowledging that such thematic approaches have engaged students, some progressive educators in America have cautioned that academic rigor could be being subordinated to developmental appropriateness in attempts to resolve middle years students’ alienation from schooling (Anfara & Waks, 2000a; Dickinson, 2001; Lewis & Norton, 2000). In response, the National Forum to Accelerate Middle-Grades Reform is now advocating ‘a three-tired approach that envisions high performing schools with middle-grades that are academically rigorous, developmentally responsive and socially equitable’ (Norton, 2000, p. 2). While progressive educators continue to support rigorous but holistic and equitable approaches to curriculum and pedagogy, more conservative forces, among them some middle class parents and right wing Christian groups, blame key components of middle schooling such as child-centered pedagogy and integrated curriculum for the reputed decline in academic standards (Beane, 1999a). The conservative agenda includes a return to a narrow separate-subject skills and drills curriculum accompanied by high-stakes accountability measures (Beane 1999a; Vogler, 2003). As Beane (2001, p. xvii) observes ‘Ironically, the very ideas that brought the new middle schooling into ascendance also made them vulnerable to wider forces that were beginning to press on American schools.’ Indeed, in a period of difficult economic and political times it seems that integrated curriculum as a key tenet of middle schooling is being critiqued by progressive educators and attacked by conservative forces. How then are local educators and those about to begin their careers approaching integrated curriculum as a problematic in middle schooling? The next section explores the place of integrated curriculum in the context of the development of South Australia’s state mandated curriculum framework.

Convers-action 3: Consent and dissent around the SACSA Framework
Since the late 1980s the federal government has endeavored to play an active role in education beginning with the development of a national curriculum for public schools. Briefly, the federal and state ministers of education agreed to ten ‘National Goals of Schooling’ in 1989 and in April 1991 the Australian Education Council approved eight key learning areas (KLAs): English, Mathematics, Science,
Health and Physical Education, Society and Environment, Languages other than English, Technology and the Arts, as the basis of the national curriculum. However, the construction of the national curriculum foundered when most of the state governments withdrew their support in 1993 (Kennedy, 1988; Marsh 1994). Notwithstanding this decision, the South Australian Department of Education, Training and Employment (DETE) continued with the 'national curriculum' until the appointment of a new Chief Executive, Geoff Spring, by a conservative state government in 1999. Prior to taking up the position he announced there would be ‘a focus on accountability, curriculum and standards’ under his leadership (Horsell, 1999, p. 3). A curriculum review process was quickly set in train and Spring announced that teachers would soon be provided with clearer policy directions for the management of curriculum, assessment and reporting … These directions will be incorporated into one coherent birth to year 12 document, the SACSA Framework. This framework will include clear descriptions of what is to be taught, the standards against which learners’ progress will be assessed, and accountability expectations (Curriculum SA Issue 1, June 1999, p. 1).

The initial stages of this review and key decisions about the scope and structure of the SACSA Framework and the accountability requirements were not open to external scrutiny or the product of widespread community consultation. Instead, they were the province of a small group of DETE administrators who also successfully proposed that the birth to year 12 continuum be sub-divided into four bands: early years (birth to year 2), primary years (year 3-5), middle years (year 6-10) and senior years (year 11-12). South Australian primary schools contain years 1-7 and secondary schools years 8-12, but no physical reorganization of schools was envisaged to accompany the new curriculum framework. Such radical change would have been extremely costly in a period when funding for education was severely curtailed and the new policies were being justified on the basis of ‘increasing public confidence in education through explicit and defensible standards’ (Curriculum SA Issue 1, June 1999, p. 1) and giving the government ‘value for money’ (South Australian Department of Education, Training and Employment, 1999, p. 18). Spring’s appointment and the increasing centralization of authority that marked the early stages of the SACSA Framework indicate that conservative forces currently hold sway in politics and education in South Australia. Nevertheless, policy makers were well aware that the SACSA Framework could not be constructed and implemented without at least a semblance of involvement of members of the education community. The following discussion will show that progressive educators experienced mixed success in arguing that middle school theory and practices such as integrated curriculum should underpin the new framework.

Notwithstanding the conservative context of the SACSA Framework, the introduction of the 'middle years' band was welcomed by progressive advocates of middle schooling. In fact, as far back as 1992 the Report of the Junior Secondary Review (Eyers, Cormack and Barratt, 1992) had recommended that middle schooling in South Australia encompass these year levels. Interviews conducted
with four very experienced teachers in the middle years band canvassed their opinions about the potential of the Framework to support the middle school movement. Crystal, for example, stated that the middle years band upheld ‘the middle years of schooling as a formal and discrete phase of schooling ... the Department has recognized that this middle schooling movement is not a fad and it won’t go away.’ Jill and Sue agreed wholeheartedly. Sue argued that the existence of the middle years band ‘is useful for us because it ... legitimizes middle schooling. Instead of us saying middle schooling is useful ... we can now say SACSA is saying this is the way we will teach young adolescents.’ Mary also acknowledged that the framework would be a credible reference ‘for schools who want to set up a middle school system or methodology.’ In effect the existence of the middle years band has the potential to institutionalize and strengthen the middle schooling movement in South Australia.

Another important decision by the curriculum review group that had the potential to be a fillip for middle schooling and integrated curriculum in particular, was the one to introduce five Essential Learnings (identities, thinking, interdependence, futures and communications) into the SACSA Framework. Once the review process was underway, many committees were established by DETE, among them reference groups for each of the bands of schooling, to advise on the structure and organization of the curriculum. Along with their early years colleagues, the middle years band reference group, to which Crystal belonged, argued time and again that in order to support integrated curriculum as a key component of middle schooling, the SACSA Framework should be constructed around the Essential Learnings rather than the aforementioned KLAs. In this case, however, progressive educators were unable to win the tug-of-war between the separate-subject and integrated curriculum. The curriculum review group acknowledged that ‘many’ held to this view but ‘it was concluded that this proposal would constitute too radical a shift to take in one step’ (Curriculum SA, Issue 5, March 2000, p. 3). The decision was taken to organize both the curriculum and the accountability measures according to the eight KLAs. Progressive educators including the team of university academics who subsequently won the tender to write the curriculum component of the Framework were thus locked into the separate-subject curriculum. While the curriculum review group had refused the opportunity to preside over the construction of a truly innovative curriculum, the documentation that now constitutes the SACSA Framework contains sufficient flexibility to enact some forms of integration.

Convers-action 4: Finding spaces for integrated curriculum in the middle years band

Given that the successful tenderers were allocated very short timelines to write an introduction for each of the four bands, an outline of the curriculum and outcomes for eight KLAs in each band, plus indicate how the Essential Learnings and a set of work-related Key Competencies would be interwoven into each KLA, some inconsistencies and gaps might be expected in the documents. However,

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1 This research was undertaken as part of a grant funded by Flinders University. Pseudonyms have been provided for all teachers.
there is much that also supports middle school theory and practices. For example, the four page introduction to the middle years band entitled ‘Learners and Learning in the Middle Years’ mentions, but does not define, curriculum integration three times. Firstly, teachers are required to integrate the Essential Learnings ‘with concepts and processes across the whole curriculum, including all of the Learning Areas’, and ‘integrate the Essential Learnings into learning tasks in ways which are appropriate to their students and contexts’ (Department of Education, Training and Employment, 2000, p. 5). Secondly, the learning environment should ‘support learners to be directly involved in negotiation and decision-making in all aspects of an integrated curriculum.’ And thirdly, learning and assessment in the middle years should ‘use multi-dimensional and integrated tasks’ (Department of Education, Training and Employment, 2000, p. 8). How each of these might be achieved in the context of a separate-subject curriculum is left to teachers’ discretion, but the introduction certainly supports those who intend to pursue integrated curriculum within the parameters of the SACSA Framework.

The aforementioned interviewees expressed qualified support for the SACSA Framework’s capacity to facilitate integrated curriculum and other components of middle schooling. Sue reflected: ‘all of the emphasis from my reading is that it is student-centered, not subject-centered or learning area centered and so I guess that fits with what we’re aiming for in middle schooling which is student centered, outcome based, emphasis on relationships, constructivist theory ... and negotiation with students.’ However, she and Crystal are sceptical about the Essential Learnings’ capacity to impact on the KLAs. Sue is concerned that secondary teachers ‘will just look at their learning area ... and ignore the Essential Learnings.’ Crystal also pointed out the much of the professional development which accompanies the Framework is organized along subject lines. Sue and Jill expressed their reservations about some secondary teachers’ willingness and capacity to focus their programming and planning on students’ needs rather than subject content, and to use methodologies which are consistent with the Framework’s recommendations. Notwithstanding the content of the SACSA documents and the efforts of progressive educators to uphold middle schooling theory and practice, the infrastructure and culture of most schools continues to ensure the hegemony of the separate-subject curriculum. Furthermore, it should be reiterated that conservative forces drove the curriculum review process and their concerns related as much to accountability as to curriculum in South Australian schools. The possible impact of the accountability component on integrated curriculum and pedagogy, however, remains uncertain.

Teachers in South Australian schools have now been working with the SACSA Framework for about two years and so far the accountability components have not been fully explained or implemented. Prior to the introduction of the new Framework, basic skills tests in literacy and numeracy at years 3 and 5 had already been imposed on South Australian public school students. These have now been extended into the middle years band at year 7 and the possibility of basic skills testing at year 9 is currently being considered. Thus far basic skills tests have not become high stakes accountability instruments. Rather they are used with more
authentic assessment practices to gauge students’ learning. However, the Framework included another layer of accountability measures, which is ‘Standards’, to be aligned with year 2, 4, 6 and so on until year 12.

Curriculum standards will identify core aspects of what learners can be expected to know, understand and do as a result of participation in the curriculum designed for each band. Standards will be clearly connected to the curriculum and will incorporate specific outcomes related to both the Essential Learnings and learning areas [KLAs]. The curriculum standards will be clear and simple, measurable and manageable’ (South Australian Department of Education, Training and Employment, 1999, p. 6).

The original intent was that schools would be required to report annually on the Standards to the central authorities but to date the precise form of such reporting has not been revealed. While the interviewees agree that teachers and schools should be accountable, they expressed concerns about the possible impact of the accountability dimension, especially if the Standards are rigidly applied. Meanwhile, progressive educators are taking full advantage of the hiatus to focus on teaching, learning and assessing in pedagogically appropriate ways rather than reporting to head office. Sue and Crystal in particular have been proactive in working with colleagues in their schools to further the implementation of student-centered practices such as integrated curriculum as well as seeking opportunities for professional development that enhance their knowledge and understanding of middle schooling. In their hands at least, middle schooling in South Australia is not in a state of arrested development.

In sum, the development of the SACSA Framework has taken place during a period of political conservatism but it is not entirely inimical to the concept of middle schooling. It could be that it will lead to the institutionalization of the middle years as a discrete stage of schooling in South Australia, thereby legitimating the ongoing efforts of progressive educators on behalf of young adolescent students over the last decade or so. While the hegemony of the separate-subject curriculum has been maintained in the Framework, it being too radical a step to introduce the Essential Learnings as the core curriculum, this section of the paper has demonstrated that there is sufficient flexibility for progressive educators to continue their commitment to student-centered curriculum and pedagogy. Indeed, the introduction to the middle years band promotes integrated curriculum and leaves ample room for teachers and students to negotiate meaningful learning experiences. Although the accountability dimension is not yet fully realized, it is likely that progressive educators will hold to the ideals of middle schooling even if they have to make some accommodations to the realities of this period of conservative restoration. However, the aforementioned interviewees are very experienced teachers with sound understandings of middle school principles who are well used to picking their path through the myriad of changes in education over the past decade or so. What about those who are about to begin their careers, possibly in South Australian schools? The next section will focus on the ways in which B Ed (UP/LS)
students at Flinders University in South Australia intend to approach middle schooling and integrated curriculum.

Convers-action 5: Contemplating integrated curriculum in the context of a career in middle schooling

The B Ed(UP/LS) is a four year degree that focuses on the preparation of teachers for the last two years of elementary and the first three years of secondary schooling. There is a very strong commitment to the separate-subject curriculum with the first and second year of the degree being largely devoted to general studies in two of the KLAs and then four corresponding curriculum studies topics in subsequent years. The compulsory core topic on middle schooling in fourth year is the only dedicated study of the movement although some lecturers choose to incorporate aspects of middle schooling in their topics. In the ‘Middle Years of Schooling’ students complete three assignments, the major essay requiring them to take a stance on the purposes of education and explicate the principles that underpin their approach to middle schooling. They must address curriculum and refer to the SACSA Framework as part of the essay. In 2003 sixty students were enrolled in the topic and thirteen of them volunteered to provide an unnamed clean copy of their essay for analysis as part of my research into middle schooling and integrated curriculum.

As might be expected, these future teachers represented themselves as enthusiastic about the concept of middle schooling. Eleven students identified as liberal progressive educators. The remaining two students took up a more radical socially critical position as future middle school teachers but one of them clearly did not understand the stance (Kemmis, Cole & Suggett, 1983). While some demonstrated only superficial understandings others had clearly conceptualized a holistic approach to middle schooling in their classrooms and schools. Pupils were characterized as young adolescents and middle schooling was promoted as learner-centered, committed to constructivism and the development of close student-teacher relationships. In their discussions of the key components of middle schooling, the students’ perspectives resembled those of the aforementioned interviewees. Both groups argued passionately for the middle years as a discrete stage of schooling.

Although students adopted similar stances with regard to the middle schooling movement, their invocations of the SACSA Framework varied considerably. Four students adopted the Framework’s statements on equity, maybe as a result of conversations in workshops, and three referred to its emphasis on constructivism as supporting their understandings about children’s learning. Two students identified the Framework as the source of Standards and learning outcomes for the KLAs. It should be pointed out that in this core topic there is very little discussion of individual KLAs. Instead, the students are expected to develop their understandings of middle schooling per se. To this end, eleven students made specific references to the middle years band introduction, using it to describe the developmental and social characteristics of young adolescents and discuss curriculum, in particular the integration of the Essential Learnings. Although students were required to acknowledge the SACSA Framework in their essays,
none of them used it extensively or as the basis for their discussions. Instead they deployed it in much the same manner as the aforementioned interviewees, that is as a legitimating device for ideas developed elsewhere.

On the question of curriculum, students were not specifically required to explicate integrated curriculum but it had been the subject of a lecture and workshop during the semester. Given that so much of the B Ed(UP/LS) degree is focused on the separate-subject curriculum and at least some of the students are beginning to identify as subject specialists, the concept of integrated curriculum is confronting and the relative merits of both approaches were debated keenly. Although all thirteen students proposed some form of integrated curriculum as a feature of middle schooling some were clearly less committed than others, the opinions expressed in workshops and subsequently in their essays reflecting the ongoing tensions in schools generally.

Between them, the thirteen students canvassed a range of possibilities for constructing integrated curriculum in the middle years of schooling. In common with another cohort of B Ed students in New Zealand, six students ‘appeared to perceive integration simply as a tool used by teachers for planning and teaching’ (Thornley & Graham, 2001, p. 34). Most of these students intend to use a thematic approach to integrated curriculum. In the main they implied that it is the teachers’ prerogative to derive the themes from their own judgments of young adolescents’ interests and then plan learning experiences in each of the contributing KLAs. The most common justifications for using this model of integrated curriculum were that it engages young adolescents, makes learning more relevant and highlights the relationships between KLAs. Most of these students saw the need for multidisciplinary teaching teams and block timetabling, with one also suggesting ‘mixed faculty offices’, to facilitate integrated curriculum. Two students were explicit that a separate-subject approach was required to learn basic skills and content, and most of the others implied this in other sections of their essays. James Beane’s aforementioned criticisms of the current directions of integrated curriculum in America could well be applied to these students’ essays in that it is not embedded in a holistic approach to learning. Aside from these six students, two more outlined an incremental approach to implementing integrated curriculum in their schools, beginning with the thematic approach determined by teachers, gradually involving young adolescents in the planning process and finally adopting James Beane’s model in which the topics to be studied are negotiated with young adolescents and based on their personal and social issues. In proposing an incremental approach both students argued the need to gradually educate teachers and parents about the benefits of a fully integrated curriculum. The remaining five students advocated learner-centered integrated curriculum in which issues or themes are identified by young adolescents and their teachers in a collaborative process. All of these students argued that negotiation with young adolescents is the beginning point for integration, with three of them maintaining a separate-subject approach to planning and implementation, and two using the Beane model. Integrated curriculum that begins with student negotiation was seen to be consistent with constructivism and learner-centered pedagogy. Furthermore, these students
variously justified it as developmentally appropriate, relevant and empowering for young adolescents as learners. It was also seen to foster democratic classrooms and social justice. While there were differences in emphases across the continuum from students who perceived integrated curriculum as a planning tool to those who are committed to the Beane model as a vehicle for social justice and holistic learning, all invoked some discourses of progressivism in their discussions of curriculum in middle schooling. Some of them intend to be passionate advocates for integrated curriculum in the context of middle schooling.

The B Ed (UP/LS) students could not be expected to display the same depth of understanding as the experienced interviewees about the tensions surrounding integrated curriculum and the middle schooling movement, but most attempted to portray both as problematic. The majority of students were aware that middle schooling is rarely fully implemented and that the use of integrated curriculum is often confined to the early years of secondary schooling. Their concerns about integrated curriculum related to the practical realities of planning as well as resistance from parents and teachers who advocate the separate-subject curriculum. Besides foreshadowing the need to communicate effectively with parents, several students argued that professional development is required to equip teachers with the knowledge, skills and understandings to ensure the successful implementation of integrated curriculum. Finally, some of the students displayed their own self-interest by advocating the employment of qualified middle school teachers to provide the necessary impetus for advancing the middle school movement. Given the current demand for qualified middle school teachers in Australia, it could be that this cohort will be given opportunities to accomplish their intentions.

Convers-actions – current and future

This paper has confirmed that middle schooling is under challenge today in Australia as well as America. Yet it is also the case that experienced teachers are finding constructive spaces for continuing their commitment to the movement and beginning teachers are envisaging their careers along similar lines. Schools that fully embrace middle schooling theory and practice are relatively uncommon, there being significant resistance to changes to curriculum and pedagogy in particular. The separate-subject curriculum remains hegemonic although progressive educators during the construction of the SACSA Framework contested it. Notwithstanding the conservative politics that initiated the development of this curriculum framework, this paper has argued that there is potential for middle schooling to be institutionalized in South Australia.

Opportunities continue to exist for the enactment of integrated curriculum and progressive educators, both experienced and novice, are willing to take up the challenge. Yet it could also be that middle schooling and integrated curriculum’s vulnerability will be exposed afresh if/when the accountability measures are fully implemented. In America it was the results of high stakes standardized testing that brought the issue of academic rigor to the fore and led progressive educators to the renewed vision for middle schooling to be academically rigorous, developmentally responsive and socially equitable (Beane 1999a; Dickinson,
In response, some educators have taken up the challenge of resolving tensions between academic rigor and developmental appropriateness in recent issues of the Middle School Journal (Anfara & Waks, 2000a, 2000b; Vars, 2001; Vogler 2003) but Anne Lewis (2000) argues that on the matter of social equity there has been little progress, especially in disadvantaged schools. Indeed, it is in these schools that high stakes testing has had its most negative impact, resulting in the abandonment of integrated curriculum and the implementation of a very narrow basic skills approach to students’ learning. It seems that in these schools academic rigor has been separated from developmental appropriateness and social equity, perhaps even hijacked by the aforementioned conservative forces. Given the focus on accountability measures in Australian schools in the context of recent initiatives such as the SACSA Framework, the American vision and subsequent experience might be a useful reference point for our conversations. Developmental appropriateness underpinned the conversations of the experienced and novice teachers whose perspectives have been represented in this paper but both groups were mostly silent on the matters of academic rigor and social equity. Therein lays the challenge for us as progressive educators, to incorporate academic rigor, developmental appropriateness and social equity as interlocking and equally important concepts in our visions for middle schooling in Australia.

Reference List


