

Reforming Year 9

Propositions for school policy and practice

Peter Cole

Contents

Introduction	2
Young adolescents and schooling	3
Reforms addressing the needs of adolescents	5
Suggestions for enhancing the schooling experience of Year 9 students. .	8
Conclusion.....	14

Introduction

There is a growing consensus that to function effectively in the information society schooling should provide young people with the capacity and motivation to be:

- a community-builder, with strong social competencies and resilience, a positive valuing of self, and a conscious personal and social values base;
- a team worker with skills in co-operation, communication and negotiation;
- able to find, select, structure and evaluate information; to be intellectually curious and able to find problems;
- a problem-solver, complex thinker, original/creative thinker, critical thinker, intellectual risk-taker, and decision-maker;
- independent of mind, responsible, persevering, self-regulating, reflective, self-evaluating and self-correcting;
- flexible and the able to adapt to change, through knowing how to learn and wanting to continue to learn throughout life.

Schools may not be able to ensure all young people fully embody these attributes and attitudes, they must however see this task as their core purpose. In order to be successful in this endeavour they need in particular to be more responsive to the needs of adolescent learners.

Recent research suggests that students start to have negative attitudes towards schooling in the latter years of primary school and that their dissatisfaction and disengagement with schooling peaks in Year 9. Figure 1 summarises patterns within schooling that indicate that Year 9 is a point of schooling malaise.

Figure 1: Student learning and attitudes to school at Year 9

Research¹ reveals that:

- the growth of student learning in basic skills (literacy and numeracy) flattens markedly, on average, from Year 5 through to Year 8
- student perceptions of self-regulation, reflectiveness, self-correction and depth of learning declines from Years 5-9
- student attitudes to school and engagement in learning decline between Years 5-9 and this decline varies markedly between schools
- student views of the quality of teacher-student relationships decline in Years 8-9
- student satisfaction with learning and school work declines in Years 8-9.

However, whilst there is a great deal written about schooling and adolescents and about ways to improve students learning experiences in the middle years of schooling, the particular features of Year 9 schooling and the ways in which students' schooling experiences at Year 9 could be improved is seldom analysed. To redress this situation, this paper² calls for a general reorientation of schooling in the adolescent

¹ Hill, P., Rowe, K., Holmes-Smith, P and Russell, J. (1996) *The Victorian Quality Schools Project: A study of school and teacher effectiveness*, Report to the Australian Research Council, Vol 1, CEAR, Faculty of Education, University of Melbourne and Hill, P. and Rowe, K. (1998) Modelling student progress in studies of educational effectiveness, *School Effectiveness and School Improvement*, 9(3), pp. 310-333.

² This paper is a write-up of an IARTV Presentation delivered on Wednesday 25th May 2005.

years and particularly focuses on schooling reforms that could be applied to meet the needs of Year 9 students.

In doing this it is understood that to isolate Year 9 and discuss this year of schooling as though it does not have issues that are common to other years is a little foolish. Consequently, the ideas expressed in this paper are a combination of practices that could meet the needs of adolescents in Years 8-10 as well as specific practices designed to make students' experience of Year 9 highly distinguishable from their previous years of schooling and one that they look back on with a great sense of pride and achievement.

Young adolescents and schooling

A great deal has been written about the characteristics and developmental needs of young adolescents. We know that by the time students reach Year 9 they are well into adolescence and are gaining independence from their parents and teachers whilst developing more supportive relationships with their peers³. However students in Year 9 are not unique in terms of their development stage or learning needs. Many Year 9 students share characteristics with students in the years below and above them in school. Year 9 usually corresponds to a phase in early adolescence and students enter and move through this phase over several years. Indeed, the identification of middle years as a distinct phase in schooling arose from concerns that schooling arrangements did not give sufficient attention to the needs of young adolescents.

Reports on the characteristics and developmental needs of young adolescents give the overriding message that they are a very diverse group as the profound physical, social, emotional and intellectual development changes they are going through are not experienced consistently within and between gender groups, nor are they managed equally well. They make many false starts on the transition from dependence to independence and need to be supported through these times of potential and promise, of frustration and uncertainty.

Furthermore, as students progress through schooling their levels of ability, interest and motivation become more diverse. However, it is generally not until Years 9 or 10 that struggling or disengaged students are made aware that their ability and attitude are failing to meet expectations. They are still pursuing a program that exposes them to the full range of curriculum whilst becoming increasingly aware of their academic and social strengths and 'inadequacies' and their personal likes and dislikes. It is at this stage that many students experience a 'mid-school crisis' and start looking for ways out of their crisis.

A great deal is known about what engages adolescents with schooling and learning and why middle years students disengage or become alienated from schooling and learning.

For example, we know students respond positively to a curriculum that links to and is meaningful in their lives outside as well as inside the classroom, an authentic curriculum. They value opportunities to explore new ideas in depth and to do so in

³ Muuss, R. (1975) *Theories of Adolescence*, New York: Random House, p. 142

cooperative learning situations in which they feel secure and are able to take intellectual risks. They respond well to teachers who know them well and whose teaching is student –focused and built on a sound knowledge of students’ and their needs and expectations.

Conversely, they do not respond well to a curriculum that is competitive and fails to cater for their range of skills, interests and futures. They do not respond well to learning situations in which their views and life experiences are ignored, where opportunities to make decisions about what and how they learn and how their learning is assessed are denied and where they are not valued as individuals. Figure 2 summarises some of the key characteristics of young adolescents in schooling.

Figure 2: Characteristics of young adolescent students

Young adolescent students:

- are ‘intellectually at risk’, because whether they engage with academic learning, or do not, can have lifelong consequences.
- learn what they consider to be useful, and enjoy using skills to solve real-life problems.
- prefer active over passive learning experiences and favour working with their peers during learning activities.
- tend to be moving away from dependence on family to establishing autonomous views and modes of operation.
- derive standards and models of behaviour from their peers and acceptance by the group is central to confidence and wellbeing.
- want significant adults to love and accept them and need frequent affirmation.

It has also been suggested⁴ that the following factors contribute to adolescent students’ disenchantment and disengagement with schooling:

- **Lack of purpose:** In primary school and Years 7 and 8, the majority of students appear to be far more willing to submit to authority figures such as teachers and parents. Consequently, even if the students do not have an intrinsic reason for engaging with their school work, many will do it anyway for extrinsic reasons, that is, because they are told to do it. During Year 9, however, a large proportion of students start disregarding or rebelling against authority figures.
- **Disinterest:** In Years 7-10, students are expected to display interest in an incredibly broad array of subjects. It is therefore understandable that in the majority of subjects, student interest will not match or even approach the level of teacher interest.
- **Irrelevancy:** During the middle years of study, some subjects such as mathematics are typically taught as skills without providing a context, while other subjects such as history are typically taught as content without providing transferable skills. This means that not only will the subject be perceived as not relevant and meaningful; it actually is a lot less relevant and meaningful than it could be.

⁴ Bissett, M. (2005) *Causes of Year 9 Disengagement and Corresponding Strategies*, Unpublished Discussion Paper, Victorian Schools Innovation Commission.

- **Failure:** The middle years are a time when students become highly aware of what they do not know and when many students 'hit the wall' in terms of learning. They are very vulnerable socially and rather than demonstrate that they are not capable they ensure they are not by not making any effort, being disruptive and belittling those who are conscientious.
- **Control:** Young adolescents are not willing to be passive recipients of the education provided to them. Attempting to tightly control their choices and behaviour at this age is very difficult and is of questionable effectiveness as control has an unfortunate affect on motivation - when people feel forced to do something, they eventually come to believe that they are only doing it because have to, even though there may be a number of good reasons for it, some intrinsic.

In addition, there are structural factors that depending on the severity of their impact on students can contribute to student disengagement. These include factors such as:

- school organisational arrangements that makes the development of close teacher-student relationships difficult
- school cultures that are overly competitive and ability focussed rather than cooperative and effort focused
- teaching approaches that a not student centred and promote passivity and the recycling of information rather than developing active engagement, thinking and understanding.

However, to counteract these concerns, there is a growing body of research locally and internationally that has identified the most promising avenues to reform. Some of these reform strategies are practices that have been around for a long time but have not been adopted in a sustained way, others are relatively new practices that are generating high levels of interest and others are 'emerging big ideas' that are still being investigated and refined.

Finally, it needs o be restated that whilst adolescence is a difficult stage of development, it is not the reason for declining attitudes to schooling and learning. The key factor in determining whether or not adolescent students are engaged learners is the quality of the schooling they experience.

Reforms addressing the needs of adolescents

A report written in the early 1980s in the USA⁵ suggested that to be truly in tune with the needs of young adolescents, middle schools should be staffed by teachers who are knowledgeable about and committed to young adolescents and should adopt varied organisation arrangements and instructional strategies. It also indicated that the curriculum should be balanced, include a full exploratory program, and that evaluation procedures should be compatible with the nature of young adolescents. The report listed ten characteristics that became a commonly cited standard for defining a middle school.

⁵ National Middle School Association (NMSA). (1982). *This We Believe*. Columbus, OH:

In the late 1980s another landmark report⁶ concluded that to improve the education of young adolescents schools needed to (1) create small communities for learning, (2) teach a core academic program, (3) ensure success for all students, (4) empower teachers and administrators to make decisions about the experiences of middle grade students, (5) staff middle grade schools with teachers who are expert at teaching young adolescents, (6) improve academic performance through fostering the health and fitness of young adolescents, (7) reengage families in the education of young adolescents, and (8) connect schools with communities.

The sentiments expressed by these previous reports were extended by a further report⁷ issued a decade ago that reconceptualised the early 1980s report and delineated a vision of what developmentally responsive middle schools could be and should be. Figure 3 summarises the conclusions of this report.

Figure 3: Factors contributing to effective middle schools

- To be successful middle schools need
- educators committed to young adolescents;
 - a shared vision of middle level education;
 - high expectations for all students;
 - an adult advocate for every student's academic and personal development;
 - family and community partnerships; and
 - a positive school climate.

This report also concluded that the middle level program components should be built around (1) curriculum that is challenging, integrative, and exploratory; (2) varied teaching and learning approaches; (3) assessment and evaluation that promote learning; (4) flexible organizational structures; (5) programs and policies that foster health, wellness, and safety; and (6) comprehensive guidance and support services.

In relation to the curriculum for young adolescents the point has been made⁸ that the curriculum should be unique and diverse, not just a little more difficult than that in previous years of school or a little less difficult than that in the senior secondary years. It has also been suggested⁹ that the extent to which adolescents engage with the curriculum depends on whether they feel they can meet the academic challenges, see value and purpose in the activities, and feel cared for and safe. In order to build greater engagement with learning it has been suggested that teachers need to (1) give students choices and control over their learning (2) develop lessons that students can relate to meaningful life events, experiences, and questions that are of concern to them; (3) create smaller learning environments and work in teams; and (4) take action

⁶ Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development. (1989). *Turning Points: Preparing American Youth for the 21st Century*. New York: The Carnegie Corporation of New York.

⁷ National Middle School Association (NMSA). (1995). *This We Believe: Developmentally Responsive Middle Level Schools*. Columbus, OH

⁸ Manning, M. Lee. (2000). Child-centered middle schools. A position paper: Association for Childhood Education International. *Childhood Education*, 76(3), 154-159.

⁹ Roeser, R.; Eccles, J.; & Sameroff, A. (2000). School as a context of early adolescents' academic and social-emotional development: A summary of research findings. *Elementary School Journal*, 100(5), pp. 443-471.

to eliminate discrimination practices that may be disenfranchising certain groups of students¹⁰.

Discussions¹¹ of the benefits of having inter-disciplinary teaching teams to work with young adolescents include the observation that teachers working in this way can more easily bond with students and develop rules, rituals, and boundaries that result in students developing a stronger attachment to schooling and a higher commitment to learning.

Relatively recent local research¹² has added new dimensions to the perspectives derived from overseas research. It suggests that as we learn more about the changing nature of work and the changing nature of communities what becomes apparent is that whilst many schooling practices are designed to give our young people the kinds of learning experiences that will best equip them for these changes, many are not.

It has also been suggested that schools have been¹³ constrained in their delivery of effective conditions for learning in the middle years by:

- a curriculum framework that pursues breadth rather than depth of understanding,
- school organisational arrangements that make close teacher-student relationships difficult
- a culture that is competitive and ability focussed rather than cooperative and effort focused
- a drive to complete curriculum tasks as opposed to a drive to promote real understanding and a sense of control over one's learning.

Others¹⁴ commenting on the factors that are necessary in order to sustain student engagement with schooling have suggested that young people need a sense of control, bonding and meaning. That is, student motivation to learn is tempered by the degree to which students' feel in control of their learning (i.e. they want to exert significant input to rules and procedures, to help establish learning goals and tasks and to decide how to work); feel competent (i.e. they want to be involved in investigating and responding to issues of survival and quality of life, in solving real problems and in creating real products); and feel connected with others (i.e. learning needs to be cooperative and collaborative and there needs to be peer support, community linkages and mutual respect).

The teaching and learning and other school practices advocated in overseas and local research projects as being central to an effective middle years program provide a sound foundation upon which to advance more specific suggestions about ways to

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Erb, T. (1997). Thirty years of attempting to fathom teaming: Battling potholes and hairpin curves along the way. In Thomas S. Dickinson & Thomas O. Erb (Eds.). *We gain more than we give: Teaming in middle schools*. Columbus, OH: National Middle School Association.

¹² Russell, J. with Mackay, A. and Jane, G. (2003). *Messages from MYRAD: Improving the middle years of schooling*, IARTV, Melbourne.

¹³ Centre for Applied Educational Research (2001). *Middle Years Research and Development Project Final Report*, Faculty of Education, University of Melbourne, p. 6. Note that in Victoria the Victorian Essential Learning Standards (VELS) have been developed to respond to this particular dilemma.

¹⁴ Phillips, N. (1990) Wellness During Childhood/Adolescent Development. *Prevention Forum*, 10(4), July, and Walker, D. and Kelly, M. (2002) *The Art and Craft of Motivating Students* at <http://7-12educators.about.com/library/weekly/aa082400a.htm>

make young peoples' schooling experience at Year 9 more challenging, engaging and rewarding.

Our knowledge of schools, of students and of how learning takes place also indicates that to effectively meet the needs of all Year 9 (and other) students teachers need to believe that:

- all students can learn, although they are unlikely to do so at the same pace and in the same way
- schools can make a difference to students' learning outcomes, regardless of who the students are and what their social circumstances are
- student effort and desire to learn will produce learning improvement and success
- assessment and monitoring is essential to guide teaching and learning
- failure is not an option for teachers, students or schools¹⁵.

Suggestions for enhancing the schooling experience of Year 9 students.

Whilst the suggestions below refer to arrangements that schools and teachers are advised to make in order to best cater for the needs of Year 9 students, many of the suggestions equally apply to those other year levels within the school catering for young adolescents. Furthermore, whilst most of the suggestions are not new and can be found in schools around the state, it appears that only a few schools have implemented what could be described as a comprehensive set of arrangements specifically designed to respond to the needs of Year 9 students.

Unfortunately there is no blueprint for Year 9 reform that can be applied to all school situations. Each school has its own history, culture and set of characteristics and each school will need to find its own reform pathway. The list of practices below is derived from research literature¹⁶ and reformist school practice and provides some signposts to the most promising approaches for transforming Year 9 in particular and the middle years of schooling in general. For convenience the suggestions have been categorised under six foci for reform: schooling structures, teaching-learning practices, Year 9 location, adult and community connections, leadership and responsibility and youth oriented events.

Suggestion 1: Provide structures and procedures that deliver timetable flexibility and enable a strong bond to be developed between staff and students.

It is clear that neither the standard model of primary schooling, which is particularly effective in the early years, nor the standard model of secondary schooling, which is effective for average and above average students in the senior years, works well in the middle years.

¹⁵ Suggett, D. (2005) *Closing the loop: Curriculum, pedagogy, assessment and reporting*, Department Of Education and Training, Victoria, pp. 3-4.

¹⁶ For example: National Research Council and Institute of Medicine. (2004). *Engaging schools: Fostering high school students' motivation to learn*. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press. Available: www.nap.edu/books/0309084350/html/

Our knowledge of middle years' students indicates that teaching and learning should be personalised to the maximum extent possible. By reducing the number of teachers with whom students interact on a regular basis, and having a stable team of teachers working with a consistent group of students, higher levels of rapport, trust and learning can be achieved and the potential for consistency between teachers enhanced. Each student should also have a single teacher who can act as both mentor and role model and as their main point of reference within the school.

A focus on a team structure also provides benefits in terms of shared planning and collegiate support and increases the options available for curriculum delivery and for addressing student discipline and welfare matters. Team structures also offer increased opportunities for teacher initiative, development and leadership and the interaction with a smaller group of students enables teachers to be more informed about student learning needs. Timetabling arrangements that enable teams to exercise greater autonomy over the way they wish to engage in the learning process also enhance the possibility that conventional approaches will be supplanted by more innovative grouping arrangements.

The ability to deliver schooling on a more personalised scale is the most important reform ingredient, as it is a precondition for so many other practices of benefit to young adolescents such as team teaching, knowing students well, knowing and engaging with parents, effective student management, interdisciplinary studies, program spontaneity, and community based learning. However, regrettably, it is also one of the solutions most overlooked by schools as teachers are reluctant to confine their teaching to a particular sub-group of students within the school and consequently perpetuate student and teacher alienation.

Figure 4 provides some strategies for improving structural arrangements and processes.

Figure 4: Structural improvement strategies

Structures and procedures could be improved by schools adopting:

- a teacher allotment policy within the school that results in a team of teachers with a range of teaching and extra-curricular skills and interests working exclusively or for extended periods of time with the Year 9 student cohort.
- the practice of the Year 9 teaching team working cooperatively to plan and deliver Year 9 curriculum programs and learning experiences – giving due recognition to the diverse learning, social and emotional needs of young adolescents.
- the practice of designating an area or identifying classrooms within the school as the Year 9 area and whenever possible giving priority to timetabling Year 9 classes within this area.

Suggestion 2: Provide classroom organisation and teaching and learning practices that are responsive to the diverse learning, social and emotional needs of young adolescents.

Too often it is assumed that intellectual, personal and social learning will be developed through passive involvement in an academic curriculum. As adolescents tend to vary in their development so markedly, activities should be developed to expose them to a wide range of intellectual, emotional and role experiences and to

actively engage them in co-constructing learning and reflecting on the process of learning itself.

Students should be identified as an active agent in their own learning and be provided with all necessary coaching and peer support to see the purpose of specific learning activities and achieve agreed essential learning outcomes. Students should be encouraged to accept increasing responsibility for their own learning, including the establishment of short and long term learning goals.

Providing greater choice and responsibility for how students undertake and demonstrate their learning can increase engagement and reduce the feeling that school is merely routine and dull. Students and teachers alike should be encouraged to try things out, take risks and learn from the experience.

A feature of teaching and learning activity should be practical activity linked to significant and valued concepts, principles and theories that are relevant to later learning and life. Involving students in practical activities related to real life problems appears to make their learning more relevant and challenging; especially when it is linked to generating products of real value that are exhibited to a range of audiences for feedback.

Teachers should adopt a variety of teaching methods to avoid the predictable and routine, and should demonstrate flexibility in adapting the curriculum to the specific needs of their students.

Although the question of what the essential learnings for young people are will always be present in a reformist agenda, the growing consensus around the attitudes and attributes that will be needed to function effectively in the information society helps to define essential learning. In addition to foundational and cultural studies, students will need to be able to problem-solve and exercise intellectual and moral judgement. They will need to be creative, innovative and resilient and have highly developed inter-personal skills. Curriculum programs must be developed to enable all students to master essential areas of knowledge and develop necessary personal competences and values.

The curriculum should enable students to investigate issues that are meaningful to them, in ways that require them to use and build on existing knowledge and skills. An essential part of the formal and informal curriculum will be instruction in thinking, learning and problem-solving strategies and exposure to ways of working that build personal and group competencies.

Figure 5 provides some strategies for improving classroom organisation and teaching and learning practices.

Figure 5: Classroom improvements

Classroom organisation and teaching and learning practices could be improved by schools:

- establishing timetabling and classroom conditions that give students with an inadequate mastery of basic literacy and numeracy skills every opportunity to build mastery of these fundamental learning skills.

- adopting student grouping arrangements within classes and between classes that enables teachers to better target the specific learning needs of sub-groups of students whilst optimising the overall conditions for promoting student learning.
- planning and delivering curriculum in a more integrated fashion and enhancing understanding of key concepts.
- presenting stimulating and authentic tasks that require complex thought and allow sufficient time for students to fully engage with the task presented.
- adopting approaches specifically designed to enable students to exercise responsibility, develop decision-making skills, engage with their community and experience work situations.
- engaging in direct teaching about thinking and learning and developing students' meta-cognition skills
- providing programs, either within or beyond the school, that have been specifically designed to meet the needs of students exhibiting extreme learning, social or emotional needs that are impeding their progress in 'regular' school.
- supporting students to share in determining the directions of their learning, conceiving learning as primarily a cooperative rather than an individualistic or competitive endeavour
- promoting a classroom culture of constructive, supportive relationships, where teachers model the targeted learning values, strategies, skills and attributes.
- basing the majority of the Year 9 curriculum on a few key themes (e.g. as per the New Basics Framework).
- organising the learning day into a few broad areas of focus (e.g. core skills, personal challenges, group projects).
- incorporating into the school week a number of special focus mornings or days.
- devoting one or more weeks within the term to a specific theme, focus or activity.
- regularly acknowledging and celebrating students' contributions to the school (eg. good school citizen award), student effort (e.g. diligence award) and student achievements, including contributions and achievements to and within the broader community.
- devising and issuing certificates of student accomplishment.
- providing early, quick and effective intervention programs for those students not able to sustain engagement and improvement.

Suggestion 3: Provide a distinct physical environment dedicated to Year 9.

As Year 9 students are in a 'developmental transition', their schooling should be developmentally appropriate, not just a little more difficult than that in previous years of school or a little less difficult than that in the following years. Year 9 should be an experience that students are looking forward to and one that they look back on as being something very special. Establishing a dedicated location for Year 9 schooling assists in making the experience 'unique' or in breaking the pattern of the previous years' experience. It also assists in building students' attachment to school and in generating a sense of belonging.

Figure 6 provides some strategies for establishing a dedicated Year 9 teaching environment.

Figure 6: Improving the learning environment

Schools could provide Year 9 students with their own learning environment by:

- identifying a distinct physical location within the existing school facilities for Year 9, constructing a separate but co-located Year 9 learning centre or establishing a purpose built Year 9 campus away from the mainstream school.
- supporting students to decorate or landscape their learning areas.
- relocating students to a city or rural camp, or to an interstate or overseas location for up to a term and developing a program that fully engages the students with the learning opportunities presented by this new location.

Suggestion 4: Provide learning opportunities that support students to engage with adults from their community and provide practical support to their community

One feature of present day life for adolescents appears to be their general segregation from adults other than teachers and family members. Students learn from interacting with adults and adult support is generally a prerequisite requirement underpinning students' willingness to take on new challenges and responsibilities.

Figure 7 provides some strategies for engaging students with their communities.

Figure 7: Improving engagement with the community

Schools could enhance community linkages by:

- establishing joint initiatives with community agencies (e.g. local government and welfare groups) and assisting students to become involved in community based projects.
- assisting students to conduct social research and engage in problem-solving tasks and present research findings on matters of interest and importance to them and their community¹⁷.
- making community volunteering by students a component of the (assessed) curriculum.
- supporting students to be involved in youth action programs and youth development programs sponsored by community service groups (e.g. the VYDP that links students with police, the CFA and other community agencies/services and supports them to perform work within the community).
- establishing a philanthropic trust managed by students and supported by student fundraising efforts and dedicated to assisting with the funding of worthy projects within the local community.
- organising an adult advocacy or mentoring program that results in matching a student with an adult advocate from the school community (e.g. a teacher, support staff person or administrator).
- organising an adult mentoring program that results in students being matched with an appropriate adult within the community who is willing to engage with and offer advice to the student and to assist him/her expand his/her networks within the community.

¹⁷ One vehicle for this is provided by the City Centre which is located in Melbourne's central business district and offers a five day action learning program for Years 9-10 students. Ref: Education Foundation and the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority (2005) *City Centre: the city as classroom*.

Suggestion 5: Provide opportunities for students to experience adult-like roles of leadership and responsibility.

Young adolescents need to operate in environments where they are given guided independence – and are allowed to assume adult-like roles and responsibilities. Such experiences can be provided within the school or within programs operating in the local community.

Figure 8 provides some strategies for promoting student leadership and responsibility.

Figure 8: Improving students' opportunities for adopting adult-like roles

Student leadership and responsibility could be promoted by schools:

- establishing and training students to meet the role requirements for positions such as school ambassadors, lunch-time sport coordinators, student mentors, student counsellors, student tutors, sports coaches, safety investigators, social activities coordinator, and so on.
- encouraging students to initiate their own service-oriented projects (e.g. reading or providing services to or company for needy elderly people, doing voluntary work for a welfare services agency).
- engaging students in the decision-making processes of the classroom and school
- supporting students to run school assemblies and school events (e.g. the school social or fundraising events) requiring presentation and organisational skills and commitment.

Suggestion 6: Provide opportunities for students to participate in special events or programs that are of substantial interest and/or challenge to them.

Schooling from Year 4-9 can appear undifferentiated from year to year in many students' minds. Each year rolls into the next year with little to distinguish what was done last year with what is being experienced this year. This can be partly explained by the findings of a mathematics study¹⁸ that revealed that in Year 1 75% of the work is new and 25% is repetition, in Year 2, 40% of work is new and 60 % repetition and this pattern is continued through the middle years to Year 9 where the majority of work is repetitious. (The same study also revealed a brake in this pattern of repetition between Years 9 and 10 when at Year 10 a large proportion of new work was introduced.)

Student disinterest can be partly addressed by bringing into the learning program events that young adolescents will get excited about or that open up new horizons for them (e.g. speakers who are young people's heroes or youth culture icons or events that provide them with a physical challenge or enable them to learn and demonstrate skills valued by their peers).

Figure 9 provides some examples of appropriate 'special events'.

¹⁸ Hill, P. (1999) Study by Dr Miraca Gross, Professor of Gifted Education at the University of New South Wales cited by Professor Peter Hill in an unpublished speech to MYRAD participants at an in-service day, The University of Melbourne, 22 October.

Figure 9: Improving youth focused events

Student engagement could be advanced by schools:

- sponsoring a range of events and programs such as the Duke of Edinburgh Award, Adventure Camps, Work Shadowing, Mini enterprise activities, the teaching of circus skills; music and drama performances, inter-school sports and debating, and so on.
- providing students with opportunities to be involved with projects that enable them to work with or develop computer software and film or multi-media products.
- organising or participating in events where individuals (e.g. singers, musicians and television, radio or sporting personalities, the Young Australian of the Year, etc.) who are significant within youth and popular culture are in attendance.
- engaging experts (e.g. an artist in residence, a choir leader, a skilled crafts-person, a landscaper, a builder or a gardener) from the community to work with students on special projects that enable students to engage in practical activities and/or skill development and that result in the production of a valued service or product.
- providing students with the opportunity to engage in a learning challenge that requires intensive effort and support (e.g. mastering the basics of a second language or the fundamentals of playing an instrument or repairing a piece of equipment).

Conclusion

This paper has provided a broad overview of a range of initiatives that schools are taking in order to address the particular needs of Year 9 students. Whilst nearly 100% of students make the transition from Year 9 to Year 10, there is still a fairly broad agreement that Year 9 presents as a problem year for many students. It is a year when students' self confidence and motivation is often undermined and when too many start to really doubt the value of continuing with their schooling. However, this pattern can be changed and schools are increasingly willing to rethink the way their Year 9 programs are structured, how they should be staffed and where they should be located.

In order to generate new approaches to schooling at Year 9 schools need to consider and debate the following questions:

1. What **organisational steps** could the school take to make the Year 9 program more engaging for students?
2. What **curriculum design steps** could the school take to make the Year 9 program more engaging for students?
3. What **classroom practices** could teachers adopt to make the Year 9 program more engaging for students?
4. What **community linkages** could the school build to make the Year 9 program more engaging for students?
5. What **special events** could the school initiate to make the Year 9 program more engaging for students?

The suggestions outlined in this paper are provided as a contribution to this discussion.