

Connecting lives and learning

Connecting lives and learning: renewing pedagogy in the middle years



edited by Brenton Prosser, Bill Lucas and Alan Reid



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Foreword

Every fortnight 70 small children leave the confines of Rufford Nursery and Infant School in Bulwell, Nottingham, to walk along the banks of the River Leen. Once the dirtiest river in the county, it is now one of the cleanest and clearest in the country. If the children are very lucky, they might spot one of the otters that have returned to this inland stream, or catch sight of the elusive voles – now on the official vulnerable species list. But this walk is not simply an enjoyable muddy day out; it is the basis of a two-year multi-disciplinary study of ‘my place’.

Rufford head teacher Judy Berry and her staff conceived this curriculum project out of frustration with a nationally funded regeneration project slowly taking shape in the surrounding estate, one of the poorest postcodes outside of London. Judy and her colleagues were angry that an explanation of regeneration inevitably proceeded as if the area was uniformly desperate, had few if any community values or practices, and was comprised of broken families (with dependent, antisocial behaviour and a damaging lack of aspiration for their children). As a long-term resident, Judy knew this to be untrue.

The school’s counter move to the deficit representations of the regeneration initiative was *The Generations Project*. This is a planned sequence of activities that aims to help local children to understand the history of their place, its people and their built and natural environments.

In the first year of the project the children walked the length of the river upstream, through disused cotton mills, dye factories, potteries, locks and lace factories, to the wellspring in Newstead Abbey, former home of the infamous Lord Byron, where they enjoyed a picnic in full Victorian regalia. The second year of the project saw them walking through more industrial areas, then suburbs populated by the city’s Asian peoples, followed by the city itself and ending at the River Trent. Judy is confident that the project will build important foundational, experiential understandings of the histories and contemporary manifestations of the diversity of local labour and leisure activities, patterned by class, gender and race. It will also teach the importance of water as a sustainable natural resource.

The Rufford refusal to go along with simplistic and demonising explanations of their local place, and determination to recognise and value

its distinctive assets, histories and narratives, has much in common with the motivations and the work of researchers in this volume. In particular, the two projects share a:

- ‘sufficient’ view of children living in neighbourhoods made poor
- commitment to teachers as knowledge-producing professionals
- concern for the politics of place in globalising times.

I want to briefly address each of these in turn to show how the projects undertaken by teacher-researchers in this book, like that of Judy and her staff, are not a parochial whimsy, but an important intervention which speaks to much larger national and international concerns.

All Western educational systems are concerned to improve educational outcomes for children and young people who live in neighbourhoods suffering variously from de-industrialisation, rural decline, low levels of income support, and the imposition of marketised public services. However this endeavour is invariably framed in, and by, public policy as a discourse of lack and need. This is a deficit view where children and their families are known for their deficiencies and inadequacies, rather than for their assets and capacities. In this view, the job of public services, and the many professions that work within them, is to address flaws and weaknesses. This approach actively denies opportunity to local residents, not only to say what it is that they think needs to be done in their area, but also to take a meaningful part in the renewal process.

In reality, urban regeneration usually means reducing the proportion of people in the population mix who are living in poverty (Cameron 2003; Taylor 2000) rather than seeking ways to build on community strengths and potentials (Meegan & Mitchell 2001). This common definition of renewal is what I call an insufficient approach to working-class communities – it sees local people as having insufficient resources and therefore capabilities, and on that basis what is offered is insufficient to make meaningful change in their interests. This insufficient ‘deficit thinking’ (Valencia 1997) is also manifest in schooling in particular ways. In urban schools, children from communities such as Rufford are assessed for what they do *not* know rather than what they do know, and all of their interactions with the formal and informal curriculum are predicated on their insufficiency.

Running counter to this prevailing story of shortcomings is a view of children, young people and families as possessing ‘assets’

(McKnight 1995) and ‘funds of knowledge’ (Gonzalez, Moll & Amanti 2005), which might, if recognised, form the basis of a different way of developing communities and designing and delivering key public services such as formal schooling. Educators who take up this contrary line of thought, seek ways to open children’s ‘virtual school bags’ (Thomson 2002), rather than accept the given view, and to use it not only as the basis for connecting to the mandated curriculum, but also to work towards changing what is regarded as important and valuable knowledge.

The search for a pedagogical practice based on a view of children and young people as ‘sufficient’ is not confined to any one country. This South Australian edited collection shows what can be accomplished when teachers in schools and universities work together to make a difference for schools in neighbourhoods and communities that are the object of much government intervention, but are much less often the subjects of, and in, their own reform program.

Such an endeavour is not necessarily easy at a time when the very same public policy discourse, which renders entire regions as faulty and inferior, also situates public servants in general, and teachers in particular, as both the problem and the solution. The policy concern to ‘lift the bar and close the gap’ has been accompanied by a search for culprits to blame for poor performance. Hence, in addition to the shortcomings of marginalised children and families, it is the teaching profession that is seen to have failed. The policy remedy is to provide teachers with expert solutions and tighter prescriptions and to monitor their performance.

While this approach has been more heavy-handed in England and in parts of the United States, there is little doubt that the culture of teacher censure, with its accompanying de-professionalising and de-skilling practices, is also manifest in Australia (Smyth et al. 2000). Those represented in this book take a different view. Here, while teachers are seen as integral to redressing inequitable schooling outcomes and unjust practices, it is their individual and collective know-how – that combination of critical capabilities, reflection, skills and knowledge production that constitutes professional expertise – rather than their incapacity that is promoted, supported and (individually and collectively) developed.

The combination of a ‘sufficient’ view of children, families and their communities, and a productive view of teachers as knowledge-producing professionals is especially critical now. At a time when globalisation

is stripping meaning from many local communities, we need a new (g)localism that supports diverse acts of resistance to globalisation and allows young people to stay in their home communities rather than leave them (Gruenewald & Smith 2008). We need an education that helps to materially, socially, and semiotically renew local communities (Sobel 2004). Gruenewald and Smith (2008: xvi) called this a place-based curriculum. They suggested that this requires:

a community-based effort to reconnect the process of education, enculturation, and human development to the well-being of community life.

Place-based or place-conscious education introduces children and youth to the skills and dispositions needed to regenerate and sustain communities.

By connecting students with different people in their local neighbourhoods, teachers and students are folded into everyday lives which are not simply here and now, but are also embedded in now and then 'stretched-out' relations, practices and narratives (Childress 2000; Davies 2000; Massey 1994). Place-based projects are thus inevitably historical and geographical. Foregrounding difference and particularity, community and place are seen as both a relationship to be strengthened, and as a text to be read (Sorenson 2008). They draw on different kinds of knowledge from those which are abstracted and distanced in national curricula and in commercial textbooks.

Place-based and *life-world* projects are also social and cultural. A place-based curriculum forges new social bonds: it offers opportunities for schools to explicitly and critically foster identity work through events and tasks that allow students and their teachers to encounter embedded social practices and agents that they would normally avoid. Eschewing a narrow, insular and potentially inequitable localism (Gruenewald 2003), teachers create opportunities for students to engage with difference(s) and to critically engage with contemporary and popular cultures; and to question the relationship of people and nature, and the histories of oppression of indigenous peoples (Bowers 2005). Students have the space, time and support to stage events and produce texts in which they describe or inscribe themselves, those with whom they are in dialogue, and their mutual place in the world (Smith 2002).

The *Redesigning Pedagogies in The North* (RPiN) project is a fine example of *place-based* and *life-world* affirming curriculum development. Situated in schools that serve some of the poorest postcodes in Australia, it

seeks to build learning experiences that are literally grounded in students' everyday lives. Like the Rufford Nursery and Infant School Generations Project in Nottingham, South Australian university and schoolteacher researchers involved in the RPiN project are committed to doing what they can, where they can, to ensure the rights of children and young people to an education which is not only meaningful and relevant, but which also enhances their life opportunities. Taking time and care to work reflectively through cycles of curriculum development, the teachers who contributed to this volume demonstrate that it is possible to 'do school' differently.

Working counter to dominant and taken-for-granted ways of working, teaching and learning is not only time consuming, but also intellectually and emotionally demanding. In the absence of a policy agenda which recognises and rewards this kind of effort, we readers must acknowledge this dimension of the professional labour of writers in this book and of the children and young people with whom they worked. We must also thank them for holding out the possibility for, and demonstrating the practicality of, combining socially just intentions with ethical pedagogical practices.

Pat Thomson

Nottingham, December 2009

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Preface

It was with great pleasure that we accepted an invitation to edit a book in the social sustainability series co-published by Wakefield Press and the Hawke Research Institute (HRI). It has been a privilege to work and write with colleagues in education who are committed to more sustainable practices for this and future generations. Our collaborative research work has demonstrated that the contribution of educators to social sustainability is much more than just teaching young people how to earn and consume responsibly.

As co-researchers in a research institute committed to pursuing social sustainability, it is our belief that sustainability will only be achieved through an interdisciplinary effort. This is not a new idea. Those familiar with the development of historical discourses of social sustainability will recognise this commitment to interdisciplinarity through concepts such as the triple bottom line, or more recently in Australia, mutual considerations of economics, science, technology, environmental systems, social sciences, climate change and wellbeing. Further, the growing emphasis on cross-institutional and interdisciplinary research to secure funding in increasingly competitive grants processes has added to the impetus and interest in social sustainability research. Hence, one of our hopes for this book is that, through its documentation of research by educators, it will provide new insights for social sustainability debate and will foster new conceptual developments, both within and across disciplines.

However, as career educators and researchers, we also see in our everyday practice the embodiment of many of the core principles of social sustainability. For instance, in the use of what educationalists would call 'transdisciplinary' or 'integrative' approaches in the classroom, teaching can embody efforts to develop solutions to complex real life challenges, rather than dictate old answers from the established disciplines. Inherently a holistic view of knowledge production and learning, such approaches stress that the issues facing this and future generations will not fit neatly into key learning areas or traditional school subjects. Rather, our students should learn to draw on whatever knowledge, from whatever sources, that will support a relevant response to the issues they identify. The aim of this book is to portray social sustainability in praxis by providing a number of case studies of teachers who are working with students in lower

socio-economic communities and seeking to respond to the challenges faced by those communities.

Each of these case studies is drawn from the findings of an Australian Research Council (ARC) industry linkage research project (LP0454869) that ran between 2005 and 2007 in Adelaide's northern urban fringe. This project, entitled *Redesigning Pedagogies in the North* (RPiN), was the result of collaboration between the Centre for Studies in Literacy, Policy and Learning Cultures (LPLC) at the University of South Australia (UniSA), the Northern Adelaide State Secondary Principals Network (NASSPN), the Australian Education Union (AEU) SA Branch and the South Australian state government's Social Inclusion Unit (SIU). The RPiN project involved over 1,000 participants and relied on a research team that included researchers from UniSA* and 31 teacher-researchers from the 10 NASSPN schools.†

Using the public title *Connecting Lives and Learning*, the aim of the RPiN project was to develop a university–school professional learning community that collaboratively built knowledge and practice around engaging middle years learners. The fact that each chapter is co-authored by a teacher-researcher and one or more of the university-based researchers, is a tangible demonstration of the strength of the partnership.

As a project set in a region of recognised socio-economic challenge, RPiN also focused on contesting deficit assumptions about students and their communities, as well as contributing to regional capacity building. More specifically, the project aimed to support teacher research around the following questions:

- How do teachers understand, design and talk about their middle years pedagogy in the light of current practice, its history and their location?
- What happens when teachers design curriculum and/or pedagogy by connecting with young people's life-worlds?
- What is sustainable in these new pedagogies?

* The editors wish to acknowledge the contribution of the following UniSA researchers to the conceptual development and implementation of the RPiN project: Assoc. Prof. Robert Hattam (project director); Prof. Marie Brennan; Prof. Barbara Comber; Assoc. Prof. Phillip Cormack; Dr David Lloyd; Mr Bill Lucas; Dr Faye McCallum; Assoc. Prof. Helen Nixon; Dr Kathy Paige; Dr Brenton Prosser; Prof. Alan Reid; Dr Sam Sellar; Dr John Walsh; and Dr Lew Zipin.

† The contributions to this edited collection are solely the views of the authors.

- How can we educate and resource future generations to face the significant challenges that inequity produces in their lives?

The focus on learning, connectedness, equity and the future in these questions demonstrates a clear emphasis on social sustainability, which is borne out in each of the chapters that follow. As the authors present their ongoing efforts to encourage social sustainability in their schools and classrooms by grappling with these questions, their discoveries converge on three major themes:

What were the effects on students?

Each of the case studies highlights a process and its outcomes aimed at enhancing the capabilities of young people to build communities that are more socially just and sustainable.

What were the effects on teachers?

In each case study there are examples of how teachers changed their orientation to pedagogy, which not only made their projects possible, but also contributed to building more sustainable pedagogical practices for the future.

What were the effects on communities?

To a greater or lesser extent, each of the case studies contributed to making current communities more sustainable (including those communities beyond the geographical boundaries of the communities studied).

As the reader considers the responses to these questions documented in each chapter, it is important not to forget what Thomson (2002) called the ‘thisness’ of each school, teacher, year level and class. To do so would overlook the specificity of the complex and challenging contexts in which each of the teachers work.

If a reader approaches this book looking for ‘gold standard’ research and revolutionary pedagogical redesign, then she or he may be disappointed. The book does not pretend to offer a formula for complex teaching situations. Rather it seeks to record and analyse – warts and all – the struggles of a number of teachers at very different points in their careers, researching aspects of their practice as they design and implement approaches to teaching that connect to students’ life-worlds. Using an action-research model, the teacher-researchers, supported by their university-based colleagues, devised questions about what they found perplexing in their practice, systematically researched these questions,

reflected on what they discovered and then devised a new series of questions. In short, the authors of this book do not purport to present the answers; just honestly share the experiences of their journeys and their questions.

It is our hope that as these authors document their critical reflections on their attempts to foster more socially sustainable schooling practices in their classrooms, it may offer inspiration to other educators as they think about their professional practices.

Acknowledgements

There are a number of people and groups we would like to acknowledge and thank for their part in the RPiN project and in the development of this book. They are:

- the 31 teacher researchers who participated in the RPiN project
- the 10 NASSPN principals and their school communities for their generosity in releasing the teachers so that they could be involved in the project
- the industry linkage partners – NASSPN, the AEU (SA Branch) and the South Australian Social Inclusion Unit – whose funding and commitment made this project possible
- our colleagues in the RPiN research team whose collaborative sharing of ideas contributed to the conceptual development and implementation of the project. Each of the UniSA researchers were involved in supporting all of the teacher-researchers at different points during the three-year project
- Associate Professor Robert Hattam, who as project director, oversaw every stage of the project's development and completion. Without him neither the project nor this book would have been possible
- the project support team of Andrew Bills, Kathy Brady and Pippa Milroy, as well as Sarah Rose and the research support team in the Centre for Literacy, Policy and Learning Cultures
- the editors who contributed to preparing the book for publication (Katie Maher and Paul Wallace)
- the publishers, Wakefield Press and the Hawke Research Institute, whose vision in creating this social sustainability series made the book possible. More specifically, we would like to thank Associate Professor Gerry Bloustien who coordinates the social sustainability series and Stephanie Johnston at Wakefield Press for their patience and support through the publishing process
- the Australian Curriculum Studies Association (ACSA) for its willingness to support the publication and distribution of the book.

Finally, we wish to acknowledge the researchers, based in the schools and in UniSA, who volunteered the time and made the effort to contribute a chapter to this book. With ever increasing workloads in both schools and universities, their willingness to contribute cannot be underestimated.

Brenton Prosser, Bill Lucas and Alan Reid

Mawson Lakes, January 2010

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Acronyms

ABS	Australian Bureau of Statistics
ACDE	Australian Council of Deans of Education
ACER	Australian Council for Educational Research
ACSA	Australian Curriculum Studies Association
AEU	Australian Education Union
ARC	Australian Research Council
CDROM	compact disc read only memory
CEO	chief executive officer
COAG	Council of Australian Governments
CSIRO	Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation
DECS	South Australian Department of Education and Children's Services
DETE	South Australian Department of Education, Training and Employment
HRI	Hawke Research Institute, UniSA
ICT	information and communication technologies
IT	information technology
LaN test	literacy and numeracy test
LPLC	Centre for Studies in Literacy, Policy and Learning Cultures, UniSA
MCEETYA	Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs
MI	multiple intelligences
NASSPN	North Adelaide Secondary Schools Principals' Network
NEP	negotiated education plan
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PETA	Primary English Teaching Association
PD	professional development
R-12	Reception to Year 12
RPiN	<i>Redesigning Pedagogies in the North</i>
SACE	South Australian Certificate of Education
SACSA	South Australian Curriculum Standards and Account- ability Framework

SES	socio-economic status
SIU	Social Inclusion Unit, South Australia
SOSE	Studies of Society and Environment
SML	Student Managed Learning
SSABSA	Senior Secondary Assessment Board of South Australia
STS	Science, Technology and Society
TAFE	Training and Further Education
TSoF	Technology School of the Future
UniSA	University of South Australia

Key terms

Category	the index of disadvantage used for South Australian schools. Schools are funded according to seven categories (Category 1 being the most disadvantaged). This formula takes into consideration the ethnic and social diversity of the student population, the socio-economics of the postcode, and the general complexities of a site
middle school	the school structure organised around the middle years
middle schooling	the philosophy and practices that are associated with teaching in the middle years
middle years	the years of schooling between Years 6 and 10, which equates to the ages of 10–15
the North	the geographic region of Adelaide that was the focus of RPiN, located north of Gepps Cross and bounded by Para West, Salisbury East and Gawler North
rustbelt	a term used to describe communities who experience a significant economic downturn usually associated with the decline of manufacturing industry
School Card	School Card is a South Australian government measurement of poverty, where families receive a range of concessions on school costs

Introduction

Connecting lives and learning: mapping the territory



Brenton Prosser

As educators, we know that there are persistent problems with engaging adolescent students. We recognise the link between the middle years and later school retention. We are concerned by the differential schooling outcomes due to socio-economic status. Yet, how often do the challenges translate into pedagogical innovation and school reform?

More often than not, efforts to address these problems are nullified with ‘we tried that before and it didn’t work’ or ‘the problem is too big to change’. Alternatively, we may hear teachers explain that time constraints or the demands of the senior years are reasons for not moving beyond ‘chalk and talk’ teaching styles to more inclusive and engaging practices. These observations are confirmed when one considers the area that has most recently been the subject of school reform efforts, namely the middle years of schooling.

According to the *Beyond the Middle* (Luke et al. 2003) report, the middle years reform effort is both unfinished and exhausted, with the engagement of students and the pursuit of academic rigour relying on the efforts of individual teachers. Meanwhile, as a profession, we continue to grapple with the changing realities of teaching. With most of the current cohort of Australian teachers trained pre-Internet (and many pre-computer) the challenge of new technologies and digital culture is immense. Where schools were once the major locale for young people to learn about their world and the worlds of others, this is increasingly not the case. As new generations of technologies make the distinction between ‘virtual’ and ‘actual’ lives less relevant to our middle years students

(Carrington 2006), teachers are caught trying to find ways to connect the offline world of the school with the online existence of the student. As we plan for jobs that have not yet been imagined, ponder literacies that do not yet exist, and prepare citizens for an increasingly global world, we find ourselves in a situation where there is a 'greater generational cleavage between teachers and students today than ever before' (Hayes, Mills, Christie & Lingard 2006: 11).

There are also persistent economic, environmental and social inequities that present significant challenges to the educational attainment of students, to the viability of communities and to sustaining alternative pedagogies. The socio-economic status of students still remains a major factor in differential achievement at school while deficit stereotypes and the intensification of social need in struggling communities cannot be left at the classroom door. Supporting social sustainability is a key responsibility of all teachers. Yet, with ever-growing demands on teachers' work, the development of more socially sustainable pedagogical practices, so that learning can occur, remains ever elusive.

For those teaching in poor, urban-fringe communities, socially sustainable practice is a daily challenge that has an immediate visible impact on the lives of students and the community. So significant are the demands of these challenges, it is perhaps not surprising to see rapid teacher turnover and an under-representation of experienced teaching professionals in lower socio-economic school communities. In turn, this presents questions of quality and equity in service provision.

In the light of these (at times overwhelming) challenges, perhaps it is understandable that we often hear Australian teachers say that the problem is too big, progress is too slow, and practical responses too hard to sustain.

Yet, both the current generation of (soon-to-retire) teachers and the next generation of teachers to follow are faced with choices. Do we say it is all too hard and continue as we have, or do we respond to the challenges by attempting more sustainable and innovative pedagogical practices? Do we accept the inevitability of inequity, exclusion and failure, or do we seek better opportunities and futures for our students and their communities? Do we locate the challenge in some deficit quality of the student rather than in our pedagogy, and in so doing condemn our best pedagogical efforts (and ultimately our role as teachers) to irrelevance?

It is a response to these questions that this book documents. Acutely aware of the challenges that stifle innovation and social sustainability in the middle years of schooling, the teacher-researchers in this book tried it anyway. With the support of the *Redesigning Pedagogies in the North* (RPiN) project, these teachers worked on the premise that if we are to address the crisis of relevance and inequity in schooling, then teachers need to learn more about students and their communities through research and critical reflection. Hence, their work not only contributes to debate about education and social sustainability, but also to our understanding of the role of teachers as researchers into their own practice, an area that has been largely neglected in previous renditions of middle years reform (Cumming 1993; Luke et al. 2003; Main & Bryer 2007; Pendergast & Bahr 2005).

RPiN & social sustainability

The RPiN project understood ‘social sustainability’ to be:

a positive condition within communities, and a process within communities that can achieve that condition. (McKenzie 2004: 23)

This includes:

- equity of access to key services (including health, education, transport, housing and recreation)
- equity between generations, meaning that future generations will not be disadvantaged by the activities of the current generation
- a system of cultural relations in which the positive aspects of disparate cultures are valued and protected, and in which cultural integration is supported and promoted when it is desired by individuals and groups
- the widespread political participation of citizens not only in electoral procedures, but also in other areas of political activity, particularly at a local level
- a system for transmitting awareness of social sustainability from one generation to the next
- a sense of community responsibility for maintaining that system of transmission
- mechanisms for a community to collectively identify its strengths and needs
- mechanisms for a community to fulfil its own needs where possible through community action

- mechanisms for political advocacy to meet needs that cannot be met by community action. (McKenzie 2004: 13–4)

In the chapters that follow, there are examples of the pursuit of each of these aspects of social sustainability within school communities. As such, the case studies position themselves within the wider ‘glocal’ and interdisciplinary efforts for social sustainability.*

While, by definition, sustainability is an interdisciplinary concept, different disciplines and fields of practice have approached its implications in different ways. Within education, some explain that the damaging assumptions of the modern capitalist west have been embodied in a hidden curriculum in our schooling systems. This view argues that our schools have practices that reproduce unsustainability. For instance, the competitive academic curriculum (Connell 1993) that handles the lifelong distribution of material resources encourages attitudes of competition and consumption. Thus, students in the senior years, rather than learning how to live in harmony and learn collaboratively, are taught only what they need to learn to maximise what they can earn. As this pressure to compete pushes down from the senior years of schooling, it also stifles the potential for engaged and life-connected learning in the earlier years.

Accepting this view, the central premise of the RPiN project was that such practices are neither equitable nor sustainable. The persistent problems with significant numbers of students experiencing disengagement and poor levels of retention in post-compulsory schooling bear this out (Hattam 2005; Smyth, McInerney & Hattam 2003). Further, so rapidly are the affinities, identities and literacies of our young people changing, that even the lives of traditionally successful students increasingly diverge from the traditional practices of schooling in such a way that it presents schooling practices with a crisis of relevance (Knobel & Lankshear 2003). Added to this is the growing complexity of contemporary schooling (Hattam & Prosser 2008; Hattam & Zipin 2009), which needs to be responsive to changing demography, such as:

- increasing levels of social and cultural complexity at a time when governments have shifted concern from the social to community (Rose 1996)

* In the development of the following argument around social sustainability, I would like to acknowledge the important contribution of my RPiN colleagues Alan Reid and David Lloyd.

- a significant collapse of the full-time youth labour market and a normalising of precarious employment (Pocock 2003; Pusey 1998)
- a substantial number of families and youth living in difficult financial circumstances and a concentration of the new poor living on the urban periphery of most cities (Bauman 1998)
- the re-emergence and/or unleashing of deficit views of disenfranchised communities, refugees, and indigenous people (Luke 1997)
- the influence of media culture on the identity formation of young people (Sefton-Green 1998)
- the recent changes in economics, which have been popularly labelled a global financial crisis.

Unfortunately, the traditional secondary school curriculum has struggled to shift in response to these challenges and is now more than ever unrelated to the lived experiences of the citizens it is supposed to serve.

In response, the RPiN ‘methodo-logic’ (Hattam et al. 2009: 304) made an argument that students enter schooling with diverse ‘cultural capital’ (Bourdieu 1984) due largely to their differing cultural backgrounds, and often this difference is defined in deficit ways by those with the power in schools. This view aligns with the concept of social capital in sustainability theory, where social capital is an asset that allows people to maintain coherence in their lives and overcome change, but that some social capital is valued more than others. This perspective need not assume a solely financial or exchange value for accumulating capital, rather, as explored by Zipin (2009), this capital could also take on an asset or use value. To give this theoretical orientation a practical face, the RPiN project drew on a model of pedagogical development that incorporates the ‘funds of knowledge’ (Gonzalez, Moll & Amanti 2005; Moll, Amanti, Neff & Gonzalez 1992) from students’ lives while valuing the diversity of different cultures (Delpit 1993) in a context of the middle years of schooling (Prosser 2008). As such, the RPiN project sought to advance the complex and vexed notion of ‘pedagogical justice’ (Hattam & Zipin 2009).

In essence, the logic of the RPiN project was that young people from diverse social backgrounds enter schooling with differing degrees of cultural capital, and that increasingly the gap between students’ lived

experience and the standards of schooling is understood as a deficit in the student and/or their family. With the funds of knowledge concept we have a counterfoil to cultural capital. While cultural capital embodies a series of codes that can be taught to enable access to power, funds of knowledge uses an understanding of how families generate, obtain and distribute knowledge as a resource for making community assets pedagogically viable for student engagement (Gonzalez & Moll 2002: 278). Pat Thomson gave these ideas practical utility in the teaching context through the metaphor of the 'virtual schoolbag'.

Developed through Thomson's (2002) work in schools in Adelaide's northern urban fringe, the 'virtual schoolbag' is a concept built on the premise that all children come to school not only with their conventional schoolbags, but also with virtual schoolbags full of various familial, cultural and linguistic resources. However, because of the preferences in schools for certain sorts of knowledge, only some students have the opportunity to use what is in these schoolbags, leaving the knowledge, experiences and skill of many students invisible and unused in school. The contents of this schoolbag or funds of knowledge (only some of which count as cultural capital in the school setting) can be used as a resource to help teachers to identify stronger connections between students' lives and learning. In adopting this metaphor, the RPiN project seeks to foster examples of young people contributing to sustainable communities in the future and to regional capacity building in the present, and of teachers designing pedagogies that can be used to encourage sustainable pedagogical practices more generally.

The virtual schoolbag metaphor provokes teachers to ask how we can encourage students to unclip these bags, and then how we may be able to use what is hidden inside them to connect their lives with their learning. It was this challenge that was central to the *Turn around pedagogies* project (Comber & Kamler 2005), which demonstrated how teacher research into the lives of students can turn around deficit views of students and their communities. The *Turn around pedagogies* project demonstrated that teachers could experience a *turn around* in how they saw the student, by *turning to* informed research into diversity and *turning away* from deficit thinking, which could result in pedagogies that made notable differences in student literacy achievement. While the *Turn around pedagogies* project focused on literacy in the primary and middle years, its insights formed

an important generative source for the RPiN project, which sought to encourage teachers to identify positive metaphors that emphasise the potential of students and to design pedagogies that could reconnect the students to the broader curriculum.

As the RPiN project unfolded, the ‘virtual schoolbags’ and ‘turn around pedagogies’ metaphors resonated with the teacher-researchers and, in part, it is their responses to these metaphors that are documented in this book. However, before proceeding to these accounts, it is important to set the broader context of the communities within which these teacher-researchers work.

Adelaide’s northern urban fringe

The region of Adelaide north of Gepps Cross, or ‘The North’, was developed as a manufacturing hub and a pillar of the South Australian economy during the 1950s. However, as the recession of the early 1990s hit the manufacturing sector hardest in South Australia and Victoria (Megalogenis 2006; Peel 1995), it had devastating effects on income and employment in Adelaide’s north. This area now includes suburbs that are listed among the most socio-economically disadvantaged in the nation, state and city (City of Playford 2006; Elliott, Sandeman & Winchester 2005), while School Card use (the government school measure of poverty) is around 10% higher than the state average (Centre for Labour Research 2002). The area is also known for its struggle with long-term youth underemployment and intergenerational unemployment (Office of Employment 2003), as well as a reduction in traditional career pathways due in part to the dramatic decline of the manufacturing industry (Thomson 2002). The rate of early school leaving is higher than the state average in this region and the retention rate to the final year of secondary school year is approximately eight percent lower than the state average (ABS 2005; ACER 2000). These urban-fringe communities have not fared well in the face of these dramatic recent economic and technological changes, and one of the main purposes of the RPiN project was to support the regional capacity building and sustainability of these communities. As noted by Hattam and Zipin (2009), schools in these northern suburbs are at the frontline of struggle to meet the challenges of significant and demographic change, often in difficult policy, media and practical contexts.

The research team selected Adelaide's northern urban fringe as the location for this research, not only because of its position as one of the most socio-economically disadvantaged regions in the nation, but also due to the strong links that already existed between schools in this region and the University of South Australia. This relationship made us aware of the challenges faced by these schools, especially in relation to teacher workload, teacher burnout, teacher retention and the greater amount of responsibility these schools take in early career teacher professional development. The relationship also made us aware of the enthusiasm of these schools to embrace innovation aimed at addressing issues of student disengagement, poor academic success and low levels of student retention.

RPiN project design

The RPiN leadership team decided that a research project that allowed time and support for teachers' professional development would be an important contribution to our partner school communities, not least because we believed that teachers are best positioned to develop curriculum, enact pedagogy and make sense of the challenges in their schools, classrooms and communities. However, we were also conscious of research that shows that teachers and teaching are the most important factors in student success (ACDE 2003; Comber & Kamler 2005), and for this reason we decided that collaboration with teachers would be central to unsettling the deficit views that can be a barrier to student success. Thus, we supported teachers to work with the students as ethnographers in their lives. This approach was decided on partly due to the limited time that teachers had to contribute to the project given their other teaching duties, but mostly because we believed that viewing students as experts on their own lives was an important starting point for challenging deficit views. Thus, from the outset, the RPiN project involved university researchers supporting teachers as they explored the life-worlds and local communities of their students with their students. The method that was used by teacher researchers could be best described as an 'action-research' cycle (Cochran-Smith & Lytle 1999; Kemmis & McTaggart 1988; McNiff, Lomax & Whitehead 1996; Webb 2000).

Although some teachers had to withdraw from the project due to redeployment or new parenthood, when the project finished, more teacher-researchers were involved than when it had commenced. Early

in the project we held bi-monthly meetings with teachers to explore generative ways of thinking about the resources young people brought to school. Between these meetings, we met with smaller groups of teachers around themes that they had found to be useful in thinking about how to connect students' lives to learning. Many of the teachers were enthusiastic to learn about students' lives and to use new concepts to inform their curriculum. While many teachers found virtual schoolbags to be a useful concept, some teachers understandably found it difficult to know how to begin to unpack the complex schoolbags of their students. To assist them, the university research team designed a survey that would allow young people to tell their teachers more about their lives and learning. This survey contributed to the action-research design, as did the insights that were gained about the students' attitudes to school and learning (Prosser et al. 2008).

Later in the first year our focus shifted to supporting teachers to develop a first cycle of research projects. In small groups, the teacher and university researchers came together to discuss research approaches, analyse data, explore readings and reflect on the problems that emerged through the teacher inquiry process. This process was built around two main tasks: firstly to design a curriculum unit that used student life-worlds as a resource for learning, and secondly to use action research to collect data about the pedagogical changes that had been made and their effect on student learning. Templates for curriculum planning and resources detailing the principles of action research were produced to give structure to these two tasks. Teachers completed their research projects in the third term of school and devoted the last term to writing up their results and preparing a presentation for an end of year conference. Also during the last term, a university research assistant visited each school to interview the teacher-researchers and selected students about the teaching and research experience.

The above process was repeated in the second year, but with two major differences. Firstly, teachers were grouped according to the school sites in which they worked. Schools were then paired with three university co-researchers. This enabled more strategic support and more detailed consideration of the school context, while the relationships from the interest-based groups of the previous year could be continued through the bi-monthly meetings. Secondly, greater emphasis was placed on

providing support for a more systematic collection of data and analysis, as well as exploration of the pedagogical changes that were occurring in classrooms. This re-emphasis on pedagogy not only aligned with one of the key objectives of the project, but also emerged out of our analysis of what we had discovered in the first year of the project, as is discussed below.

In the final year, there was a shift in focus as the teacher-researchers did not conduct a third research cycle, instead becoming involved in the production of web-based and other resources derived from their projects. Time was also devoted to teacher-researchers conducting seminars in the participating schools to report back to their colleagues on their inquiry, pedagogy and connecting students' lives and learning.

Learning about pedagogy & connecting lives with learning

A key theme in recent middle years literature (Carrington 2006; Luke et al. 2003; Pendergast & Bahr 2005; Prosser 2008) is the importance of adopting alternative pedagogical resources to engage students, pursue intellectual demand and improve student learning. However, one of the findings in the first year of the project was that most of the teacher-researchers were unaccustomed to (or uncomfortable with) the concept of pedagogy (Comber & Nixon 2009; Sellar 2009). Initially, teacher-researchers were unwilling to use the term to talk about their teaching practice. While resistance to the term decreased as it became more familiar, the initial round of research reports from the teacher-researchers mainly focused on drawing resources from students' virtual schoolbags to uncover new teaching content and whether work completion had increased (as a sign of student engagement). For many teachers, 'connecting lives to learning' was mostly about what the students did, how well they behaved, and whether they attended lessons (Comber & Nixon 2009). Little consideration was given to what the teacher was doing in the classroom beyond the importance of forming strong teacher-student relationships. In our early interviews, pedagogy and good relationships were almost synonymous in the minds of the teacher-researchers (Comber & Nixon 2009; Sellar 2009) who saw them as the precursor to learning and what was required to encourage students to behave and complete work. However, mindful of Lingard's (2007) observation that supportive relationships by committed teachers do not always result in pedagogies that support