Pedagogies to develop autonomy and social responsibility in early adolescent learners persist as an ongoing agenda for schools. This paper reports on one Australian regional secondary college’s pilot program to improve learner engagement in one year 8 class using applied learning principles across the curriculum. In late 2006, participating students in this applied learning initiative were interviewed in small groups, their parents surveyed, and their home group teacher interviewed. Overwhelmingly, student perspectives strongly endorsed the pilot program and were consistent with parent and teacher observations of these same students’ feelings toward engagement within the program. This article details adolescents’ self-reported significant learning, locating them within a wider discourse of secondary school curriculum and current knowledge about early adolescent learners. This article also provides particular reference to the applied learning principles around which the pilot program was conceived and framed.

Introduction
This study investigated the implementation of a unique program that involved a Year 8 class in a regional Australian school. In the Australian state of Victoria, one Catholic school created an applied learning class focused on sports in an attempt to inspire and motivate previously unmotivated students. The program was underpinned by the principles of applied learning as outlined by the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority (2005). The pilot program was premised on research evidence that supports understandings of adolescent learning as well as successful indicators in engaging and motivating young people to meet their educational needs. The objective of this program was to encourage student engagement and student retention. It also sought to build students’ self-regulation skills in their studies at school.

Review of Literature
This literature review centers on literature of middle years’ schooling and its students as well as their engagement at school. The literature review then moves on to the applied learning literature, including a definition of applied learning as well as the theoretical underpinnings of applied learning.
The challenge of providing meaningful schooling in the middle years is well documented as a long-standing problem over the last two decades (Luke et al., 2003; Martin & Marsh, 2006; Munns & Martin, 2005). Research reported by Hill, Holmes-Smith and Rowe (1993) found a decline in middle grades students’ willingness to engage with school subjects compared with younger students. The study reported in this paper investigates attempts to overcome this problem.

Over the past two decades, Australia has incorporated a range of demographic, educational, technological and social influences in the study of middle school student learning. This increased research knowledge has led to a greater understanding of adolescent learning and increased discourse about what constitutes appropriate and optimum learning modes for those in this developmental life stage (Heaven, 2001; Carr-Gregg & Shale, 2002; Steinberg, 2007; Geake, 2009). Research has also been conducted on pedagogies relating to student engagement (Groundwater-Smith, Mitchell & Mockler, 2007), the expansion of mass secondary schooling in the second half of the 20th century (Hannan, 2009), the diversity and changes intrinsic to contemporary family life (Hayes, 2009), and the increasingly publicized international comparisons of schooling outcomes (OECD, 2009). Taken together, these factors place increased demands on schools as learning institutions.

As Luke et al. (2003) comment, this middle years schooling movement should be seen as a systematic and concerted effort to rethink curriculum, pedagogy and institutional structures. In rethinking middle year’s pedagogy, these authors argue that more emphasis now be placed on adolescents as young people negotiate the various developmental stages and how to be a part of society (George & Alexander, 2003). Two contradictory curriculum paradigms have emerged, with many middle school educators committed on the one hand to a developmentally appropriate curriculum with lesson planning based on the needs and interests of the students. Counter to this approach is the standards-based curriculum and the need to meet accountability processes.

The Australian Curriculum Studies Association (2005) suggests that effective middle years school curriculum is learner-centered, collaboratively organized, outcomes-based, flexibly constructed, ethically aware, adequately resourced, strategically linked and community oriented. In the late 1980s the Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development (1989) found that to improve education for early adolescents, schools needed to do several things. These suggestions include developing structures to foster small communities for learning, teaching a core academic program, instigating processes to ensure success for all students and empowering teachers and administrators to make decisions about the experiences of middle grade students. They also include staffing middle years’ schools with teachers who are experts in teaching young adolescents and who are skilled at re-engaging families in the education of young adolescents and connecting schools with communities.

A National Middle School Association (1995) report suggests middle level programs should be built around curriculum that is challenging, integrative and exploratory and has varied teaching and learning strategies. The curriculum should also include assessment and evaluation that promotes learning, flexible organizational structures, and programs and policies that foster health, wellness, safety, comprehensive guidance and support services (National Middle School Association, 1995).

It has been suggested that students in the later middle years of schooling obtain low resilience scores on the Middle Years Resilience Scales (MYRES) due to an increased awareness of their academic abilities and limitations. They are additionally “experiencing profound physiological and emotional changes” (Department of Education and Training, 2006, p. 14). Based on this information, the Department of Education and Training advises that middle grades learning should reflect the integration that occurs in real life tasks as well as recognize the
diversity of learning styles and methods as different learning styles require different teaching methods. It is important that assessment tasks best fit the learning content and context (Victorian Qualifications Authority, 2004).

The theoretical basis of applied learning is constructivist and suggests that adolescent learning is profoundly social and arises out of contextual consideration of real life problems by co-participants. Constructivist theories of learning propose that individuals learn fundamentally by constructing meaning through interacting with and interpreting their environments (Brown, 1998). Meanings are constructed by the learners themselves rather than by their teachers and are anchored in real-life situations and problems. This view contrasts with that which perceives learning as something individuals do and is separate from other activities in a socially-disconnected way (Wenger, 1998). During past years the term *applied* has been used in numerous educational contexts including applied mathematics, applied economics and many others to imply activity related to context (Dalton, 2004).

“Applied learning” takes place when a learner appropriates knowledge and applies the knowledge to a real non-academic, non-theorized problem. The key features of applied learning as explained by Calder (2000) include:

* Students working on what they see as real life problems that are open-ended and require a solution to be generated.
* In trying to define and solve problems, students use academic subject matter to make something happen and are integrating knowledge from a variety of disciplines and sources.
* Applied learning involves changing a situation in ways that go beyond personal, social and academic changes occurring in the students who are engaged in the applied learning. A rule or practice is changed or an action influenced and something has to happen (a tangible outcome produced and seen as such).
* Effective communication is essential to an applied learning task, even though its expression may vary widely to include such disparate activities as designing a brochure, giving an oral presentation, administering a survey and so on; but some communication must take place.
* The success of applied learning is the degree to which it achieves some tangible result for the participating audience or learners rather than a “grade” that represents an assessment of academic merit by an individual teacher.
* In pursuing an applied learning task, students engage with the adult community which has already set the standards of achievement in the same or similar types of projects; they endeavor to understand the strengths and shortcomings of their solutions and, so informed, identify elements and characteristics they will want to incorporate in their own work.

A broader interpretation equates applied learning to “hands on” or practical learning experiences. This approach contextualizes learning in a way which empowers and motivates students, while assisting them to develop key skills and knowledge required for employment, further education, and active participation in their communities (Faulkner, 2001). The Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority, 2005) identifies the following eight key applied learning principles:

* Start from the existential and epistemological positions of the learners. Significant learning occurs when students are able to build on previous knowledge and experience, and what is learned before going to school is fundamental to future learning. Students must understand the learning process and reflect on their own learning to be able to distinguish between accurate and inaccurate information (Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority, 2004b).
• Negotiate the curriculum, as Boomer (1982) argued, as a pedagogic modality for fostering effective learning with young people. Engage in a dialogue with learners about their curriculum. Teachers need to have a clear role in establishing the mode of peer interaction in the classroom and encourage students to take part in making choices and decisions about curriculum tasks and assessment (Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority, 2004a).

• Share knowledge. Recognize the knowledge learners bring to the learning environment.

• Connect with communities and real life experiences.

• Build resilience, confidence, and self worth.

Applied learning approaches also seek to provide a context for learning generic skills needed in the workplace as well as cater to students with different preferred learning styles. Finally, applied learning should provide a meaningful context for learning both theoretical concepts and practical skills (Victorian Qualifications Authority, 2004). This is consistent with the writings of Dalton (2004).

Secondly, and as a result of this, applied learning will involve students in partnerships and connections with organizations and individuals outside of school. These partnerships provide the necessary “out of school” context for students to demonstrate the relevance of what they have learned. Third, and of equal importance, applied learning is concerned with nurturing and working with each student in a holistic manner, taking into account personal strengths, interests, goals, and previous experience. Working with the whole person involves valuing skills and knowledge in students that may not normally be the focus of more traditional school curricula. It also means taking into account differences in preferred learning styles and ways of learning.

Finally, applied learning acknowledges that part of the transition from school to work is a process which seeks to treat young people as responsible, autonomous adults, and that moving students out of the classroom to learn also means helping them make a shift to becoming more independent and responsible for their own learning. This means applied learning needs to be student-centered and applied learning goals and outcomes need to be negotiated with students and other stakeholders.

Blake (2006) identified rapid growth in the use of applied learning in Australian secondary schools as a means to engage young people in a more active and integrated approach to learning. It is a distinctly flexible and student centered approach that emphasizes the important role of experience in learning. As this approach is new in Australia, longer term studies have not been conducted measuring its success.

In recent years, the development of new technologies has provided access to enormous amounts of data on the educational outcomes and student achievement internationally (OECD, 2009), nationally and locally. This has provided policy makers with a much clearer picture of the impact of education systems and programs on school retention rates. The Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (2007) collection of OnTrack Data has provided a detailed picture of the outcomes for post-compulsory school completers and early school leavers. This research carried out by The Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood Development specifically investigated students who are in Years 11 and 12 and followed them through their career path after leaving school. This comprehensive data can assist in the identification of factors that influence a student’s likely participation in post-compulsory education and many of the factors that contribute to early school leaving. This information, available online and on CD-ROM, can be broken down to highlight the performance or lack thereof for individual schools.

The growth and interest in applied learning programs in recent years can be linked to the introduction and successful roll out of the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL).
This certificate, a secondary school qualification introduced in the Australian state of Victoria in 2002, engages senior students in a combination of work-based learning, service-learning and project-based learning. It aims to provide the skills, knowledge and attitudes to make informed choices regarding pathways to work and further education (Blake & Gallagher, 2009). The OnTrack data (Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2007) has highlighted the success of applied learning programs for potentially at-risk students who have gone on to complete a secondary qualification and participate further in ongoing employment, education or training. These researched outcomes for post-compulsory students enrolled in applied programs have encouraged schools to revisit their middle years programs and address issues of engagement that have the potential to impact students’ capacity and desire to continue with education or training.

The Research Context
This study centers around a Year 8 applied learning class from a school situated in central Victoria with a student population of approximately 1600 students from years 7 – 12, across two campuses. The research was conducted at the junior campus (Years 7 – 9) where year level cohorts are approximately 300. The school enrollment is drawn predominately from the low socio-economic sector of the regional city. The background of the students is mainly Anglo-Celtic, a mix of regional, city, and rural students. As reported by Tadich, Deed, Campbell and Prain (2007), teachers at the school perceived that many students at this year level were underperforming scholastically and were disengaged. This, in part, lead to the introduction of the program. In early 2005, interested staff members at the school were invited to join the Applied Learning Team. This team was formed to support staff in the applied learning areas of the college, primarily in the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning and Vocational Education and Training (VCAL & VET). Its aim was to promote the adoption of applied learning pedagogies in the middle years to more effectively address the school’s challenges with student disengagement and the perceived lack of interest among some of its middle years’ students. The researchers created a pilot homeroom group with an emphasis on sport, health, recreation, and the environment using the principles of applied learning. The pilot program’s aim was to increase student engagement through the exploration and application of applied learning.

The pilot homeroom attempted to remain consistent with the middle school principles already adopted by the school, including class changes per day and increased blocks of time for classroom teaching. The professional development offered to the staff member in preparation for the pilot was minimal, with limited time release and planning opportunities being offered to participating staff. The original aim was to focus on one key project each term with students having the opportunity to choose their own project in the latter part of the year. The first opportunity was a partnership with a local primary school in which the students assisted with their “Blue Earth Programme”. This physical activity programme encourages healthy choices and promotes physical activity. The selection of projects was based on opportunity and ease of access to the community partner. The curriculum was adjusted to meet the desired outcomes.

The creation of this pilot program was determined as a result of a study conducted across north central regional Victorian Catholic schools that involved the school in this study. Blanksby (2001) identified students at risk as not only those with low numeracy and literacy skills but those who were not engaged in the curriculum. The data from this study led Blanksby to conclude that the passive nature of the delivery of curriculum and school programs contributed to the disengagement of middle years’ students, adding to the risk of student’s disengagement from their secondary schooling.

Across the wider region within which this school is located, the four most-cited responses for early school leaving are “I wanted to earn money”; “I wanted to get a job”; “I was no longer
interested in school work”; and, “I wanted an apprenticeship or traineeship” (Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2007). The data suggests that 2007 early school leavers would have stayed in school: if they could have studied part time while working; if they had experienced more success in their school work; if school was a more adult learning environment; and if school had helped to get workplace experience (Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2007).

Schools have been continually challenged to engage students in the twenty-first century using a twentieth century schooling model. Innovations in some schools are often grounded in earlier work in this area. In the late 1980s and 1990s, the regional secondary school participating in this study had implemented a successful program for their disengaged, predominantly male, students in the middle years. The success of the program was such that it became clear to some within the school that it was a curriculum problem and not a discipline problem (Blanksby, 2001). With the support of the school, the SELT (Student Enterprise Learning Teams) program was created. The SELT team tendered for projects within the school and the community. In the evaluation of the program, respondents were realistic but positive, citing positive outcomes for students in the program and spin-off effects for these students in such areas as personal wellbeing, self-esteem, a growing sense of responsibility, development of organizational skills, and incidental learning of academic skills. The only negative aspect reported was that the program was limited to such a small group of students (Blanksby, 2001).

In 2003, the school involved in this study replaced the SELT program with a Year 9 Agriculture Studies homeroom. Some students were selected by staff and others were given the opportunity to apply for a place in the new program. There remained a gap in the curriculum for students who needed an alternative at a Year 8 level. An informal survey was conducted with a number of Year 7 students who were academically challenged and experiencing a whole range of learning difficulties and engagement issues to identify areas of interest that could form the basis for a themed homeroom. The areas of sport, recreation and the environment were identified by students as key areas of interest and a staff member volunteered to be the home group teacher for the class. The home group teacher adopted a range of integrated projects that students worked on throughout the year. After the successful implementation of a Year 9 applied learning class that focused on agriculture, the school believed an extension of applied learning principles should be undertaken at the Year 8 level and that as a small innovation in this direction, one Year 8 class would try this new approach.

In late 2005, Year 7 students were invited to join a pilot Year 8 “applied learning” class for the following year. This class was one of 10 Year 8 classes in the school. As part of the selection process, interested students with parental endorsement were required to complete an application form, which required them to outline why they wanted to be included in this program. This process of encouraging student choice and commitment was a deliberate strategy chosen to gain student commitment over the year. Additionally, students were required to get a recommendation from their Year 7 homeroom teacher. Appraisal of the applications was based on a desire to have a group that would be able to work together effectively. The Year 8 class teacher who assumed co-ordination for the pilot program stated: “We went through all the applications and looked at the social make up, both academically and behaviorally and tried to get a real range.” However, he also stated that there were seven students who were automatically selected due to a weakness in English, specifically reading comprehension. Two other students were allowed into the class because of poor school attendance, in one case, school refusal throughout Year 7. The class teacher reported that the class was “a pretty lively bunch and pretty energetic.” This teacher taught the students English, humanities and physical education during the year and also served as their homeroom teacher each morning.
Methodology
This research was part of an Australian Research Council Grant on student self-regulation in the middle years and as such provided an opportunity to evaluate the Year 8 sport program. At the end of the first year in 2006 when this research was undertaken, there were 28 students involved in the class. 20 of the 28 students agreed to participate in the study and had consent forms signed by a parent or caretaker.

A case study method in the manner described by Stake (1995) was used at the school site to study an instance of applied learning in one class. Case study data has the advantage of being strong in reality, and illuminating the contextually unique features of the research site (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2000).

For data collection, a mixed method approach was used with the students completing an individual questionnaire. Students were then interviewed in focus groups. This allowed for the students to reflect upon their experience privately, and then share their thoughts in small groups of five or six students. This gave the researchers the opportunity to compare the content of the individual responses with the tenor and comments from the group process. The teacher was also interviewed as part of the data collection process.

In November 2006, three student focus group interviews were conducted as part of the data collection process. There were six students in each group with a total of 18 students being interviewed by two researchers. These focus group interviews went for approximately 20 minutes each. In the focus group interviews the students were asked how 8S was similar and different from their Year 7 experience and what benefits they perceived from being in 8S. The students were asked what skills they had developed the most over the year and what was the worst thing about being in the class. They were also asked about their friendship groups and if they think being in 8S will assist in Year 9. The questions were open ended, so other questions were asked and topics covered depending on student responses.

Prior to the focus groups, as an additional investigative activity designed to help focus the discussions with the small groups, all 20 students who participated in the study completed a questionnaire regarding their experiences in the class throughout the past year. Students appeared eager to write about their experiences. The questionnaire had 12 questions, all of which were open ended, allowing for the students to record their experiences.

The questionnaire asked how the students were placed in 8S and what they perceive 8S to be about. They were also asked how being in 8S was similar and different from Year 7 (with the focus groups drawing out these responses more). The students were asked to identify the best thing about being in the class, what they most enjoyed, and the worst thing about being in the class. The students were invited to talk about their own skill development as well as what they learned about themselves as learners.

The class homeroom teacher was also interviewed as part of the data collection process. Interview questions were open ended and included asking him to outline the 8S program, his overall impressions, and the composition of the class, as well as the learning achievements by the students in the class. They were asked to compare the 8S program with other teaching commitments of other Year 8 groups and what the main professional reward of working in the program was. The class teacher was asked about the main professional challenges and how 8S could be improved. The study was limited in its case study nature; larger studies involving more schools should be done to confirm results.

As with any study, it was important to analyze the data gathered in a systematic and continuous manner (Burns, 1994). Data was examined and themes explored through the use of categories related to the research questions. Once the categories were assigned, the analysis
relied heavily on description rather than inference. Analysis of student responses informed the results and discussion and has been described below.

**Results**

In reporting the results of this research, we have not distinguished between the individual questionnaires completed by the students and observations offered in the focus groups. The researchers found a strong concordance between the substance of students’ individual written statements and their statements in focus groups.

Those involved in the planning sought to maintain a level of flexibility and to encourage other teachers involved in teaching in the homeroom to adopt similar pedagogical principles. A range of factors meant that the outcomes and experiences of students varied enormously between subjects and teachers. These included no scheduled planning time, limited opportunities for professional development as well as teachers being allocated to the pilot study and not necessarily choosing to be involved.

The results have been organized into central themes that emerged during analysis. These include:

- Student evaluation of their Year 8 experience compared to their Year 7 experience
- The aspect they most enjoyed
- The worst aspect of the class
- Students’ sense of self as learners
- Students’ personal learning from the applied learning class
- Students’ using their skills in Year 9

These themes are described in detail below.

**Student Evaluations of Their Year 8 Experience Compared to Their Mainstream Year 7 Experience**

The students were asked how their Year 8 experience was similar to their Year 7 experience. Most (14) students identified similar subject studies to those they had completed in the previous year, in Year 7, with one student stating that both classes have the “same amount of students, [and] the same amount of work, [and we] still have to do spelling and other things”.

Students in the class were also asked to identify the differences between their Year 8 class and their Year 7 experiences. Most participants (16) reported that the class was “more hands on” (a common description of the program) and that there was more sport throughout the year. One student commented that “it made learning a lot easier and more enjoyable by relating our work [to] things we love to do” meaning that the learning in class was related to sport. Another student stated, “We did more games, organized things, did more out of school.” Interestingly, another student stated, “We did the work still, but it was heaps more fun and a more hands on way of doing it. [It] made it a lot more interesting.” These representative comments suggest that the students enjoyed the applied learning aspect of the class.

Consistently, the students reported that they enjoyed the applied learning aspects of the program. As one male student put it, “We don’t just like sitting down, writing out stuff. We learn more if we are active and doing things.” Another put it like this:

“It’s better than just sitting there from basically working from a book and then getting in trouble for mucking around. Better than just all the bookwork you get something out of it, enjoy your school a bit more.”

When asked about the rationale of the class, all students identified the pilot program as possessing an explicit connection to applied learning, sports, and hands-on learning. One student
wrote, “Our class is a class related to sport and the learning is done in a more hands on way, which can make learning a lot easier.” A second student stated, “It is based around sport and instead of writing stuff out, we will go and do things then write about it.” The class teacher supported student comments about applied learning: “Some of the weaker kids have tuned back into school and seem to be enjoying themselves.”

The Most Enjoyed Aspect of the Applied Learning Class

The students had varied applied learning opportunities throughout the year in this class. For example, they were able to go to a local Catholic primary school and be involved in cross-age tutoring with school beginners on a once-a-week basis for a term (10 weeks) to tutor the younger students in physical education and general fitness skills as part of a Blue Earth program. Another activity was when they organized a triathlon for other students in the school, and another arm of the program was when they became involved as active planners and helper-attendants during whole school campus sporting events, specifically the annual swimming carnival, the school cross-country event, and the athletics carnivals.

While these were special events, teachers working with this group also sought to incorporate applied learning activities into the year 8 group’s daily and weekly program. However, the novel shared-responsibility activities proved to be the most enjoyed by students. Consistently, students reported these to be the cross-age tutoring at the local primary school, organizing the triathlon and being able to do extra sport and other associated activities. Nine of the 20 students (45%) who completed the questionnaire indicated that the triathlon and the primary school visits were the best part of the school year. One student referring to the school cross tutoring visits spoke for other students’ judgments of the program by simply stating, “I gained a lot from that experience.” There were 11 students (55%) who indicated they most enjoyed the sport and other activities associated with sport throughout the year. One student stated she mostly enjoyed “all the extra sport activities that we get to participate in and run and having people around you who love sports too.” This validates previous research (Australian Curriculum Studies Association, 2005) that suggests effective middle years school curriculum is learner centered and strategically linked as well as community oriented.

The students were asked what they did not enjoy about being in the class. All except five of the students indicated they enjoyed all aspects of the class. Of these five students, two thought that some of the teachers who taught their class group did not approach the class as an applied learning class, while one student did not enjoy the homework and another did not feel that much sport was taught. This program would benefit from all teachers engaging in the nature of this applied learning class.

The Worst Aspect of the Applied Learning Class

The students were asked to consider the worst thing about being in the applied learning class during the year. There were two key themes that emerged from the responses. The students felt the pressure of being in the first Year 8 applied learning class at the school. They felt that there was a great deal of pressure to succeed so that the program could continue. It was also reported that some of the students in the class made learning difficult and ruined some experiences for others. One student reported, “Some of the other students make it difficult to learn sometimes by being naughty, rude, etc.” Although this suggests the program was perhaps not entirely successful there were only a small number of comments and they shouldn’t take away from its success.

Students’ Sense of Self as Learners

The students were asked to record one important thing they have learned about themselves as a learner from being in the applied learning class. The answers were varied although six students (30%) felt that as a result of being in the applied learning sport class they were more confident in themselves. One student recorded that s/he learned “how to become more independent and self reliant.” Another stated, “I have learned how to put a lot more effort into class work and
assignments and to listen more to teachers.” Another student stated: “I learned that I work a lot better when things are done with applied learning rather than text work. It makes me want to come to school and is heaps better.” Because of the group focus of many of the activities, one female student observed of herself, “I think I work better in groups, [as I] like how to work with different people.” This same student went on to observe that she benefited from working in teams, which helped in applied problem solving tasks by exposing her to a wider range of ideas.

Comments from the class teacher supported student statements. Comments included: “All the little applied tasks we have given them along the way, they have really got into” and “They were really keen to be involved with the sports day and help out and run those.” The class teacher also commented that the students were “rapt” with the triathlon.

**Students’ Key Personal Learning from the Applied Learning Program**

Students were asked to reflect on what skills they had most developed while in Year 8. A number of students mentioned the confidence-building aspect of their personal learning. One male student in a focus group volunteered that a major point for him had been not to be “afraid to say something.” In another group, another male student commented similarly that he likes “speaking up and not getting embarrassed or that”. Another male student commented that, for him, the applied learning experience had an effect that he had “learned not to be shy.... and all that sort of thing.” A fourth male student provided a more elaborative answer to this question about the perceived benefit of being in the applied learning class, as the following dialogue indicates:

**Male Student 2:** We get like more confidence and stuff, like because you talk to all different age groups, like older kids and younger kids.

**Interviewer:** Tell me more about that?

**Male Student 2:** We did sport with the primary school kids and they were like Preps and One’s and then we did like a sports carnival, we helped with running the carnival and they were all the older kids, like Year 9’s and stuff.

**Male Student 2:** Like different learning, not just like written stuff.

Consistently, the organizational aspect of the Year 8 applied activities was referred to as “like organizing stuff” and “learning as a group.” As one student stated, “Yeah, the skills, like the confidence and the organization and stuff” was a typical response from these students.

**Using Their Skills in Year 9**

The students were asked if they thought that being in an applied learning class in Year 8 will help them in Year 9 and why or why not. All students who participated in the study reported their experience throughout the year will benefit them moving into Year 9. They consistently re-iterated that the skills they had most developed were in the areas of organization, skills and improvement in confidence.

Although some students recorded more than one response to this question, eight students reported they felt they had increased confidence due to being in the applied learning class. Eight students also reported increased skills from their yearlong participation in the class. These skills were both sport related and non-sport related. Five students reported improved organization skills and four students reported increased knowledge with one student recording an improved skill set in the areas of writing and creativity. With no opportunity to follow these students in their later school years, it is unknown if the students continued to have these skills.

**Conclusions and Implications**

The responses from the students were strongly positive, indicating high levels of satisfaction with the program. Students demonstrated a very clear understanding of the process and requirements
to gain selection into the applied learning class. Some students commented on several of the applied learning specific tasks as being a highlight during the year. They noted that relating the curriculum and assessment tasks in an applied way was positive and it was both valuable and meaningful to their learning. This led to a higher level of student engagement and satisfaction. One outcome of the program seems to have been that students appear to have acquired a language for their learning and were beginning to better self regulate their learning in the classroom.

Data from teachers suggested that most students in this pilot Year 8 group did demonstrate some encouraging self-regulatory skills in the classroom. Teachers confided that there were several behaviorally challenging students in the earlier Year 7 groups. These students were then placed into this applied learning class. As seen by their teachers, these students too were reported as “engaged learners” in this pilot program, having shown pleasing improvements in self confidence, learning autonomy and behavioral self-regulation. Such qualities, as reported by the students, seem to be a function of their own increased motivation related to their participation in the rolling series of applied learning agendas over the year, pivotal experiences to this applied learning program. This study itself is part of a wider research enterprise (Campbell et al., 2009) which explored junior secondary students’ perceptions on their engagement with schooling. The findings from this study are supported by well-researched learning paradigms in the Australian context relating to student engagement (Baird, 1999; Green, 1999; Reid, Green & English, 2002).

This school provided novelty in the applied learning tasks for this year 8 group; it invited students to challenge themselves to achieve these applied learning tasks. Additionally, the school provided strategic forms of support to students from their teachers in the context of a public scrutiny much wider than what normally occurs in the classroom. Thus, learning self-management skills and organizing themselves as part of a group on these challenging and novel school tasks which required very practical working solutions placed students in a co-operative learning, group risk-taking context. As one student put it, “I think being the first class to go in the primary school was a bit of pressure on us to make it good, because the teacher kept saying to us that you guys have to perform, because we won’t keep it going next year.”

Therefore, the experience generated an unanticipated but valued risk for students in the group, the risk that they might not continue, and that it was in their power for these students to have an influence on the outcomes of the program. Some may say skeptically, this is just another “Hawthorne effect.” But effective educators realize that creating Hawthorne effects with each new cohort of adolescents in their school is tantamount to successful relationship building with the young people in their school, and are critically mediated through the tasks which school requires of the young.

The second implication points to the critical importance of establishing sound teaching and learning practices in the early secondary school years. It is important in adolescence that strong neural learning pathways are laid down for later learning. Thus we as educators need to get it right, and this is one powerful body of research knowledge that underscores the “middle years in schooling” discourse of the last two decades.

This pilot program explicitly used an applied learning philosophy with one group of students, and as such there is a lot educators can learn from this. This class was considered successful, even though it was a small cohort. An addendum is that in 2007 two Year 8 applied learning classes were running with students similarly reporting an engagement with their learning, thus indicating the continuing success of this program.

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