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## **Transition experiences of marginalised students: biased or useful?**

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### Abstract

Unprecedented developments in the Australian labour market and youth policy since the 1970s have contributed to making completion of senior secondary education increasingly common, and expected in youth policy. In this changed context, issues to do with educational marginalisation and youth transition need to be re-conceptualised. This paper is based on research carried out at two Senior Colleges in the state of New South Wales in Australia, both aimed specifically at providing re-entry opportunities to complete senior secondary education. Findings are drawn from interviews with students and teachers, observations and documents. This study contributes to challenging conventional policy discourses in relation to the concept of youth transition by focusing on a non-typical cohort of young people. Most of the students had experienced difficulties in their schooling, and many had been absent from education for some months or years before enrolling in a Senior College. The research findings highlight the impact of societal change on marginalised young people in relation to non-linear pathways, choice biography, and the knowledge economy. The paper concludes by exploring the impact of the 'biased' sample of young people on the meaning of these findings.

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### **Introduction**

After the second World War, much of the developed world experienced a period of recovery and economic boom. Wealthy nations invested heavily in education, and secondary education became a mass institution. Low unemployment and high living standards meant most families could afford to let their teenage children enjoy education at least up to completion of junior high school. On leaving school, teenagers found their labour was in high demand, with some employers in Australia offering enticements such as “music while you work” (Watson, 1994, p.383). By 1966, two-thirds of Australian teenagers were in the labour market, and of these only 3 per cent were unemployed, while over 90 per cent were in full-time employment (Jamrozik, 1998).

This period of economic boom and relative stability came to a fairly abrupt end in the early 1970s, following technological change, internationalisation of product markets and the oil crises (Eatwell, 1996). Unemployment, including youth unemployment, rose dramatically across developed countries. A report in 1978 by the OECD suggested that “Youth unemployment of the current magnitude and sustained duration has not been witnessed by member countries since the 1930s” (p.48).

While in the post-war boom period increasing participation in education was associated with low unemployment, in the past few decades the reverse has occurred: young people find refuge from high youth unemployment by staying in education and training longer. OECD research (2001) has shown that completion of upper secondary education tends to reduce the unemployment level and concludes that:

Since completion of upper secondary education has become the norm in most OECD countries, many young people who do not complete this level can expect to have employment problems throughout their working lives. (OECD, 2001, p. 283).

In Australia, this general trend has been confirmed (Lamb, Dwyer & Wyn, 2000), although several studies have also pointed to young people establishing successful lives without completing senior secondary education (Dwyer, 1996; McMillan & Marks, 2003; Taylor, 2002). Nevertheless, OECD and other international literature, national and state policy, and discussion in the media have contributed to the dominant belief that upper secondary education has become compulsory in practice, if not in legislation, as a foundation for a secure adult life. From the late 1980s onwards, Australian education policy actively encouraged young people to stay at school to complete senior secondary education (Years 11 and 12). Since then, retention to Year 12 has increased dramatically, from 35% in 1980 to 75% in 2002 (ABS 2002a; DEET 1993).

Rather than belonging to the mainstream majority, young people who leave school before Year 12 are now perceived as being ‘at risk’ (MCEETYA, 2002). In this changed context, issues to do with educational marginalisation and youth transition need to be re-conceptualised.

In particular, the way policy conceptualises educational transition affects the structures and practices available to young people (for example through imposed reforms and funding) thus enabling some forms of transition and hindering others (Te Riele, 2004a). This is not to suggest that policy is entirely consistent and rational. The (often conflicting) values and beliefs of various stakeholders mean that “policy decisions result from a complicated conjunction of forces” (Vickers, 1995, p.115). As one of those forces, results from research (such as presented here) may contribute to the

cyclical policy process through relating policy assumptions to specific practices and local contexts (Crump, 1993).

## **Background to the research**

This paper is based on research carried out at two Senior Colleges in the state of New South Wales in Australia, referred to as Sapphire Senior College (SSC) and Ruby Senior College (RSC). Findings used in this paper are drawn from interviews with students and staff. Quotes are referred to with pseudonyms.

Sapphire and Ruby Senior Colleges both evolved from mainstream Year 7 to Year 12 high schools in the mid 1990s, as a result of two incentives. On the one hand, the student population in the schools was dropping, with little prospect of recovery. On the other hand, local educators perceived a need for senior secondary schooling for people whose needs were not met in mainstream schools, including early school leavers, older students and recently arrived migrants and refugees. Sapphire and Ruby Senior Colleges are both situated in relatively disadvantaged areas (ABS, 2002b). However, the population of the Colleges was not socially homogenous. Some students attended private or selective public schools previously, and some came from relatively wealthy families.

These Colleges are both part of the public school system in New South Wales and offer programs for Year 10, 11 and 12. Students have to be 15 years or older to enrol. Ages range from 15 to 60, but most students are aged between 15-19 years. They differ from some of the other Senior Colleges and Collegiates in the state (and around the country) in that a large number of their students are in some ways marginalised from mainstream education. One staff member from each site expressed it this way:

Ourselves and [Ruby Senior College], we're disadvantaged schools, that is our aim, we get a lot of re-entry students coming in. That is a very different thing from being a senior college where you are taking the cream from all the existing schools around you. [Ms Bellamy, SSC]

And from the people I've met at [Sapphire Senior College] their staff are very much like our staff [...] there seem to be very common personalities and attitudes in common between the two places. [Ms Santos, RSC]

This study aimed to contribute to challenging conventional policy discourses in relation to the concept of youth transition by focusing on a non-typical cohort of young people. Most of the students had experienced difficulties in their schooling, and many had been absent from education for some months or years before enrolling in a Senior College.

That does not mean that the student population at these two colleges can be easily stereotyped, or that they all fit one mould. The diversity of students at these Colleges included young people who had been expelled from several schools, recent migrants who had partly completed a university degree in their home country, adults who wanted to gain an education they missed out on when they were younger, young people who had health problems, refugees whose education had been disrupted by war, and students who wanted to study subjects their own school did not offer. The factor which united all students across this wide range of previous educational experiences, is that their needs were not met in mainstream high schools.

## **Findings**

The research findings highlight the impact of societal change on marginalised young people in relation to non-linear pathways, choice biography, and the knowledge economy. These findings

will be presented only briefly here, for a more extensive discussion see Te Riele and Crump (2003) and Te Riele (2004a).

### *Non-linear pathways*

In policy regarding young people the term ‘transition’ has gained great currency. This transition is not just from youth to adulthood, but often refers more specifically to the move from school to work (for example MCEETYA, 2002; OECD, 1998). Research both in Australia (eg. Wyn & White, 1997) and overseas (eg. Maguire et al, 2001) has highlighted the complexities of transition. Policy discourse based on a linear conception of the transition from youth to adulthood fails to recognise the fluidity and complexity of young people’s lives.

Nevertheless, youth policy remains strongly influenced by the idea of linear transition, partly because education continues to be structured in linear, discrete, hierarchical packages. The suggestion in youth and education policy is that linear pathways are ‘better’ (Anthony, 2002; Howard, 1999; Kemp, 1999; Nelson, 2002). An example stems from the terms of reference for the Youth Pathways Action Plan Taskforce, which defined ‘youth at risk’ as:

Those young people who do not, or are not likely to, go *straight* from school to further education and training or full-time employment and those who are not fully engaged with their community. (YPAPT, 1999, p.3, emphasis added)

Not surprisingly, given the ‘second chance’ nature of the Colleges, many Senior College students had experiences that did not follow a linear pattern. While some of the students came to the Senior College directly from another school, this was not necessarily automatic or straightforward – often marked by moves between different schools for negative reasons. The transitions of the early school leavers were by definition characterised by a non-linear pathway, with interruptions ranging from a few months to several decades.

More importantly, the research findings suggest that detours, opportunities to reverse decisions and redefine possibilities, and the option to return to education at a later stage, proved to be more worthwhile than a linear pathway. Gaining valuable life experiences improved people’s maturity and their motivation to study. These findings contradict Australian policy discourses that assume the superiority of a linear status passage between youth and adulthood as well as the construction of adulthood as a stage of arrival.

For example, Richard (19), Simon (29) and Trang (17) all found work after leaving school. Richard left school early in Year 11. He found the local Commonwealth Employment Service no help. With his parents’ help, he found work in a video hire store, and established something of a career there: “I started working there and within, I think, 12 months they promoted me to shift manager which was really good”. However, Richard realised climbing the occupational ladder would require a tertiary qualification, and returned to school at the Senior College to gain the HSC and pursue university study.

Simon similarly was proud of his ability to find work after he left school partway through Year 9, as soon as he turned 15: “So I left school, and a week after I left I got a job and I have been working ever since”. Simon worked in a wide variety of jobs, from being a delivery driver to being a sales representative for an engineering company. At age 29 he returned to complete Year 10 at Ruby Senior College – a requirement for gaining employment in the defence forces.

Trang was expelled from school at the end of Year 9, and found a full-time permanent job as a stone mason, in a firm owned by relatives. First hand experience of hard physical labour made him decide to finish school and aim for office work.

Previous research (Dusseldorp Skills Forum, 2004; Lamb, Dwyer & Wyn, 2000) suggests male early school leavers are more likely to find work than their female counterparts, often an apprenticeship or manual labour. This is largely a function of the labour market, although gendered parental and societal expectations are likely to play a role as well.

Nevertheless, several female early school leavers in this study also found employment. For Cathy this had been a condition for leaving school:

I'd gone on from Year 10 to Year 11 and 12 and didn't really want to be there. I was there because mum and dad said 'you can't leave unless you have a job'. So as soon as I got full-time child care work I left. It was three days into Year 12.

Richard, Simon, Trang, Cathy and many of their fellow Senior College students would have resented being judged as having failed to make a transition to effective adult life.

If common definitions of adulthood through full-time employment, independent accommodation and/or having one's own family are applied, then many of the early school leavers had achieved adult status. Their non-linear transitions do not contradict this adult status but do challenge the assumption of adulthood as "the age and stage of arrival, accomplishment and achievement" (Skelton, 2002, p. 107). For example, was Simon no longer an adult when he became a full-time student at Ruby Senior College and moved back in with his father at age 29, after having been in full-time work and living independently since he was 16?

Given these challenges to the assumption of linearity, it is important to ask whether a linear pathway would have been better for these students, as Australian federal government youth policy suggests.

Trang implied that trying the world of work was a good experience, because it made him realise that in comparison school was not so hard after all: it provided him with the motivation to return to study. The importance of such motivation is reinforced by Du Bois-Reymond & Walther (1999, p. 29) who argue that, in the contemporary "information society", a shift is required in relation to both schooling and further qualifications "from being forced to learn to wanting to learn". This is also reflected in Simon's experience:

I have been thinking about this for ten years. I have experimented with education, the TAFE and things like that, thinking about different possibilities. After my last job I realised I had better make a move and do what I really want to do. I needed to experience many different jobs for some reason, just general life experience. Now I have had a fair bit of experience in the work force I really know where I want to go.

When asked why she thought she was doing better at the Senior College than previously, Susan, an early school leaver in her early twenties, answered: "I really believe it is because I left the school system and had a lot of life experience". Ms O'Brien (a teacher from Sapphire Senior College) agreed:

Something a student said to me years ago has stuck with me. There is the traditional idea that school prepares you for life. This person said that life had prepared her for school!

Thus, it is the conventional understanding of transition as involving a linear pathway that fails to match the lives of these people, rather than the other way around.

## *Choice biography*

Besides the assumption in Australian youth and education policy that linear transitions are somehow 'better', another major assumption is that of individual choice – defining 'failed transitions' as largely the person's own fault (Te Riele, 2004a). Beyond the argument above that the transitions of these students were not necessarily failures – we also need to ask whether the students themselves were to blame for the non-linearity of their transitions. Or did external factors and "the actual failures of adults, systems and structures" (Skelton, 2002, p. 109) contribute?

As Thomson et al. (2002, p. 338) argued, "young people may be understood as being particularly vulnerable to the decisions of others" rather than being seen as responsible for their own choices. This applies to decisions and actions by parents. Simon provides an example of negative actions (or non-actions) by a parent:

Family life, home life just wasn't supportive. My parents had separated. My mother really wasn't a very good role model. There was never anything to eat basically, we didn't have proper clothing, anything like that. It was very difficult. I had enough of that. In an environment like that you can't study.

Besides parents, the vulnerability Thomson et al. (2002) refer to also applies to decisions and actions by teachers and schools. The expulsion of some students highlights that the school is an external force with much power over the direction a student's life can take. Perhaps it might be argued that these students could have chosen to be better behaved. However, there was some logic to their behaviour from the point of view of where they were located. For example, Trang had been expelled from his elite Catholic school at the end of Year 12. He put the onus for his negative relationships with staff on the teachers:

They didn't like me and I didn't like them, so I didn't treat them good because they didn't treat me good. So then they asked me to leave.

The role school structures and processes can play in leading young people away from education has been well-documented in previous research, both in Australia (eg. Dwyer et al., 1998; Trent & Slade, 2001) and internationally (eg. Ball et al, 2000; Fine, 1991). Of course, students' marginalisation by schooling can be "as much a struggle for the schools and teachers as it is for the young people" (Smyth & Hattam, 2001, p. 403). Recognising the ways in which school structures and processes alienate young people from education is not intended as blaming teachers and schools. Schools not only contribute to alienation but also have the potential to contribute to more socially just and inclusive practices (Te Riele, 2004b).

The "doubts and indecisions, changes of mind, vague possibilities" which Ball et al. (2000, p.15) found in interviews with young people in their study of post-16 transition in the UK are also clearly evident in the experiences of these students. Ambivalence and indecision were demonstrated in both jobs and courses started and dropped again, depending on what was available and achievable. Trang had thought going to work would be much better than school, but reversed his decision when he realised how physically demanding his work as a stonemason was. Sophie tried TAFE but did not find it useful and decided that the easiest way to get into university was to return to complete Year 12. Jenny tried a correspondence course to complete Year 10, but found it was not achievable: "especially when you have a husband and a baby to look after at the same time".

Cathy completed a TAFE certificate in child care and after-school care while employed. After some time she made a successful move across to youth work, but after a year the youth centre she worked at had its funding cut, and she lost her job. Cathy was unemployed for six months and returned to

study at Sapphire Senior College because “I just knew I had to get back and do study to get where I wanted to go”.

Thomson et al. suggested that “the passage of a middle-class child can be eased in the ‘slipstream’ of their parents’ status and achievements” (2002, p. 338). This can be seen in Trang’s experience. He found work as a stone mason because the firm was owned by relatives. While this was not a middle class job, it nevertheless formed a valuable entry into employment which may have been hard to find without his family connections, given Trang had not even completed Year 9 and had been expelled from school.

The ‘slipstream’ benefit for Richard was highlighted through the job at a video store he eventually obtained after leaving school, because his parents were frequent customers there. These examples foreground a sense of the important relationship between structure and agency: of choice within limits.

The research findings highlighted that the transition of Senior College students was affected largely by external factors, many of which were outside their control. In particular, as teenagers they were vulnerable to the decisions and action of adults around them – parents as well as teachers and employers. Moreover, the variation in the transition experiences of different Senior College students demonstrated the impact of social and material resources on the structures of opportunity and risk which they had come across, and on their ability to negotiate these. Thus, not only were the non-linear transitions of many of the Senior College students not negative, but the shape of their transition (whether positive or negative) was determined not so much by their individual rational choices, but rather by what was available and achievable given the particular structures of opportunity and risk they faced.

Within the context of contemporary ‘risk society’ (Beck, 1992) Richard, for example, was able to exercise individual choice and agency in constructing his own biography, as he was supported by a set of requisite social and material resources and opportunities. In contrast, for Simon and Cathy the construction of their own biographies was more coercion than choice. To use Beck’s work (1992, p.135), the word ‘decisions’ may have been “too grandiose” given that their options were limited, and they had to face the risks of trying to find their way in the world of work with little or no assistance from their parents. The variety of transitions followed by the students in this study highlights the role played by external forces, and by chance, opportunity and available resources, which influenced possible choices.

### *Knowledge economy*

The belief that Australia is becoming a so-called knowledge economy has been widely adopted in Australian government and opposition policy (ALP 2001; Commonwealth of Australia, 2001; DETYA, 2000; MCEETYA 2000). Australian government policy in relation to post-compulsory education suggests that the types of jobs in the knowledge economy have changed, so that senior secondary education (and more) is needed to provide the prerequisite skills and knowledge for these new jobs. This suggestion has been challenged in a wide range of educational and economic research (Ball, 1999; Du Bois-Reymond and Walther, 1999; Kenyon and Wooden, 1995; Spierings, 1999; Wolf, 2002). For example, Wooden and VandenHeuvel (1999, p.52) argue that:

... skills acquisition as a solution to long-term unemployment will serve simply to delay the entry of these young people into the full-time labour market but will not provide them with employment commensurate with their skills

Nevertheless, the concept of the knowledge economy has been used in Australian policy to emphasise the need for individuals (rather than for governments or society as a whole) to invest

more in 'knowledge', mainly through gaining more and higher educational qualifications (Te Riele and Crump, 2003). Australian Commonwealth government policy now considers early school leaving as unacceptable in the light of high youth unemployment and changing, global, socio-economic forces.

In this context, it is not surprising that several Senior College students considered the HSC as necessary for gaining employment as well as for gaining access to further study. Jasmine, a teenager early school leaver, had returned to school because, as she asserted, "nowadays everyone asks for the HSC". Similar to senior secondary school students in a UK study, Jasmine perceived qualifications as a "paper currency that can be exchanged for work opportunities" (Killeen et al, 1999, p. 112). Some Senior College teachers argued that qualifications were necessary because employers used them as a screening tool. For example, Shirley said:

We have so many of them coming back saying 'I haven't got the HSC so I cannot get work'. I think it is a culling tool. You've got a bigger mass of people trying to get over this hurdle so you raise the bar and say 'no HSC then we drop you out of the cull'.

Jasmine also, incorrectly, thought that the HSC was a fundamental requirement for anyone wanting to access university. She argued that "you have to get your HSC to go to University. I wanted to do Year 12 again because if you wanted to go to work and then later you wanted to go to uni, you still need to have the HSC". In contrast, Sophie, another teenage early school leaver, recognised there were alternative pathways to university, but remarked:

I figured that if I get the marks that I want to get into uni by doing the HSC then I do not have to go through all those different things to try to get into uni eventually. That just wastes too much time, and I had already wasted a year anyway, I did not want to waste any more.

While mature-age entry into university, and alternative pathways without the HSC, exist, Jasmine's and Sophie's comments highlights the dominant position of the HSC as a 'gate-keeping' credential, both for jobs (or at least 'worthwhile' jobs) and for further study.

Some students and teachers argued that while gaining a HSC was necessary, it was not sufficient in itself. They concurred with a European research finding that "although education and training are increasingly necessary they no longer guarantee employment opportunities" (EGRIS, 2001, p. 104). Richard asserted:

There is definitely a social division and it is increasing. You wonder how long the government is going to be able to uphold benefits. So you have just got to get ahead. Qualifications on paper make such a difference. [...A university degree is] certainly much more advantage than a trade or Year 10, or even the HSC.

Richard understood that the value of his own educational credentials depended on the quantity and quality of the credentials of others in the labour market, who he competed with for jobs. His decision to return to education and gain further qualifications reflects a "strategic attitude" to learning in order to enhance future opportunities (Du Bois-Reymond and Walther, 1999, p. 27).

On the other hand, some students and teachers expressed doubts about the push for young people to complete senior secondary education, often because they perceived other possible pathways. Susan, an early leaver now in her early twenties, planned on gaining entry to university as a mature age student after completing Year 11 at the Senior College. Teachers, especially from Sapphire Senior College, suggested they frequently assisted students to "fast track" into university. However, teachers such as Ms Simpson noted the paradox of assisting students on this pathway:

According to our school records, that shows we have had another leaver, but if that leaver is getting somewhere that they want to go, more quickly, we have achieved the desired effect. They did not need an HSC for where they wanted to go.

Ms Fitzgerald explained, teachers like herself were suspicious of the government's motives in encouraging retention to Year 12:

They're trying to take people off the unemployment figures. I do not think they have any concern much for the education of students.

Another teacher, Ms Bellamy, argued that "it is the perception rather than the reality" that the HSC was necessary because "that is what they keep on getting told by everyone".

Certainly not all students and teachers interviewed in this study passively accepted policy rhetoric in relation to the knowledge economy. None of them rejected the value of education, both personally and to obtain relevant qualifications, whether through senior secondary education, higher education or alternative pathways. However, many perceived qualifications not so much as providing the skills and knowledge considered necessary in government policy, but rather as a 'screen' used by employers and society at large to rank and sort people. This research cannot make any claims about the accuracy of this perception. More important, however, is that this perception (whether accurate or not) influenced several students in their decision to gain further school credentials. Moreover, they perceived qualifications not to be the only value obtained in getting 'an education'. As such, they echoed Wolf's (2002) complaint that policy preoccupation with the benefits of education for economic growth has led to a narrowed vision of the purposes of education.

### **Implications of a biased sample**

The findings reported above drew on research carried in two unusual settings – Senior Colleges aimed at providing 'second chance' opportunities for gaining Year 10 and Year 12 qualifications. Therefore, the young people interviewed may be considered atypical, since they all changed institutions part way through secondary schooling and many were early school leavers.

This paper not only outlines some findings from research with students in two Senior Colleges, but also asks a more fundamental question about the usefulness of research on such a biased 'sample'. Two arguments will be put: first, that the usefulness of these findings is due to, rather than despite, the bias in the population; and second, that any bias should not be exaggerated. The second argument is not meant to contradict the first, but rather to place boundaries on the extent of bias in any subgroup of young people.

#### *Bias is useful*

The specific position of the Senior College students in education, and in society, is helpful in highlighting some of the flaws in policy assumptions of linearity, choice and knowledge economy. The specific nature of these research sites contributes to the significance of the research study. Students at these Senior Colleges were doing exactly what Australian government policy advocates, that is – to invest in their education. However, for various reasons they needed a 'second chance' in order to be able to do this.

A focus on such a marginalised group is consistent with critical ethnography, the research methodology used for this study (see Carspecken, 1996). Critical ethnography stems from critical-sociological research which focused on "treating the viewpoints of subordinated people seriously" (Quantz, 1992, p. 451). However, critical-sociological treatment of 'subordinated people' has been

critiqued for romanticising their views, attributing insights and purity of motives not obvious in the actions and words of their subject (see Walker, 1986). On the other hand, some critical-sociological research with early school leavers seems to demand overt criticism of schooling and penetration of hegemonic social relations from their participants (Smyth and Hattam, 2001, pp. 410-411). Thus, the researchers treated condescendingly any participants who did not share their view of schooling.

To avoid these pitfalls when engaged in research with marginalised or disempowered groups, critical ethnographers do not make assumptions “about how that disempowerment is represented in cultural forms, how participants respond to their positioning, that they recognise their response as anything other than individual choice, or even that they agree they are disempowered” (Quantz, 1992, p. 468). The two Senior Colleges in this research were established specifically to cater for students on the margins of mainstream schooling, and teachers tended to perceive the students as marginalised.

Despite a growing interest in early school leaving “neither the cause nor the solution is fully understood” (Piper and Piper, 1998, p. 32). The decisions and experiences of young people in moving or returning to study at a Senior College have had very little attention, and are thus even less well understood.

Gauging the views of the students - the young people described as marginalised by their teachers and ‘at risk’ in educational policy – thus forms an important contribution to recognising the usefulness of bias. To find out whether these young people perceive their transition experiences as making them marginalised or at-risk it is helpful to talk with the young people themselves. This is particularly the case when the voices of this group of young people are rarely heard (Smyth and Hattam, 2001). As O’Loughlin argues “schools are not neutral places but, rather, sites that privilege certain voices and discourses” (1995, p. 111). A biased sample, which emphasises “peripheral voices” (Hanafin & Lynch, 2002, p.35), forms a healthy antidote to such privileged (even hegemonic) discourses about schooling and youth. As Weis & Fine (1993, p.2) put it, this helps us to move “beyond silenced voices”.

The advantages of a research approach informed by critical ethnography are “its ability to study outliers” (Anderson, 1989, p. 257) and potential “to inform progressive school reform and energise imaginative alternatives and responses to fixed and disabling readings of the social world” (Pignatelli, 1998, p. 403). Besides a positive impact on school and policy reform, such biased research can also help to counter the “impoverishment of academic analysis” Lynch & O’Neill (1994, in Hanafin & Lynch, 2002, p. 38) lament. Thus, the findings of this research study are useful because of, rather than despite, the bias in the population.

### *Bias – what bias?*

Despite the arguments above, the extent of bias among the young people included in this, or any, research study should not be exaggerated. The issues discussed in this paper do not affect merely a small, problematic minority. A quarter of the age cohort in Australia continues to leave secondary education without completing Year 12. This means every year the group of people without senior secondary qualifications continues to grow, constituting a significant number of people.

The Senior College students should not be dismissed as atypical and ‘at risk’. Research among people in their early twenties in the UK (Bynner et al. 1997) suggests that transition difficulties may be the experience of the mainstream rather than of a minority: only 30 per cent were, in their own perceptions, ‘getting on’, while another 30 per cent were ‘getting by’ and 40 percent were ‘getting nowhere’. Thus, a focus on a minority of ‘at risk’ youth is likely to misrepresent the lives of most young people.

Nevertheless, such a focus is evident in Australian policy, as demonstrated in a recent suggestion by the Australian Ministerial Council for Employment, Education, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA – comprised of the relevant state and federal ministers) that ‘the majority of young people are doing well’ and policy merely needs to target the small number of young people who are ‘at risk, disconnected or in vulnerable circumstances’ (MCEETYA 2002: no page).

The focus on identifying groups of young people who are ‘at risk’ sets up a ‘false distinction’ (Dwyer and Wyn 2001: 154) between the mainstream and a ‘problematic’ minority, which denies the possibility of common concerns across all or most youth, and of problems in the mainstream and strengths in the minority (Swadener and Lubeck 1995, Cieslik and Pollock 2002). Such normalising discourse merely serves to reinforce unwarranted assumptions and social exclusion of those falling outside the definition of normality (Maguire et al, 2001). Early school leavers and marginalised young people share many of the same concerns and experiences with other young people. In particular, risk and insecurity have become a crucial feature of modern society, affecting everyone to some degree (Beck, 1992; Dwyer and Wyn, 2001; Furlong and Cartmel, 1997).

Bourdieu (1990: 28) critiques a ‘classificatory mode of functioning of academic and political thought’ by pointing out that ‘the logic of the classificatory label is very exactly that of racism, which stigmatizes its victims by imprisoning them in a negative essence’.

Emphasising the distinctiveness of the Senior College students reinforces such stigmatisation. Following in the tradition set in Australia by *Making the Difference* (Connell et al., 1982), this research project focused on “the lived experience of young people” (Arnot, 2002, p.349), which brought out complex and vivid insights. The lived experience of every real young person is unique – classificatory labels, whether positive or negative, are unlikely to neatly fit the specific circumstances of individual young people. Therefore, research projects which include a variety of young people, rather than pretending to represent ‘typical’ youth, can together provide insights in the mosaic of young people’s experiences in contemporary Australia.

## Conclusion

The research findings from this study are not only valid, because/despite of any bias, but are also important, because they suggest that mainstream policy and educational institutions have yet to accept the implications of changes to society and respond appropriately.

The assumptions inherent in policy discourses around transition, to do with linearity, individual choice and the knowledge economy, create an image of an ‘ideal’ transition which few people actually experience but which nevertheless informs debate and drives youth and education policy. The findings from this research – in relation to the benefits of a detour from education for certain students, the limits placed on individual choice, the insecurity which is characteristic of risk society, and the high value the Senior College students placed on education – suggest that such policy is misconceived and too poorly aligned to be relevant to the lives of many young people.

As risk and insecurity are becoming characteristic of modern society, it is likely increasing numbers of young people will experience more complex transitions through education and employment. The implication for educational policy is that the conceptualisation of the transition from youth to adulthood needs to be revised to allow for alternatives which match the variety of possible and existing transition experiences – in order for policy intent and practice at all levels to strategically touch and impact on young people’s lives.

Furthermore, future developments in Australian education policy need to recognise that there continue to be young people who leave school without completing senior secondary education,

often for valid reasons or due to factors outside their control. This group is significant, making up approximately one in four teenagers in Australia, and they are adversely affected by contemporary labour market conditions and policy decisions.

Complex and insecure transitions also mean mainstream schooling needs to adapt to facilitate re-entry, for example through more flexible timetabling, appropriate curriculum and facilities, and respectful treatment. Moreover, more integrated and cohesive support needs to be provided to young people, while in school and after leaving, through collaboration with other educational institutions, welfare agencies and the local community.

This means that, while there is much individual schools can do, systemic changes also are needed. As Ms Bellamy from Sapphire Senior College commented, enabling more people to complete Year 12 requires broader reform to “accommodate folk that fit outside the norm”. A report by Strategic Partners (2001, p.93) explained:

Sustainable change within the system involves change beyond the single local site or initiative. It may include extension of an approach or model across multiple sites, significant expansion of the range of services incorporated within a given model, and can include the structuring of programmatic support services and structures at the school cluster, district, regional, state or national level.

Local struggles and changes contribute to social reform because they highlight what is possible (Crump, 1995). Learning from the experience of the Senior College students thus may contribute to achievable change to reduce marginalisation and improve inclusion in senior secondary education.

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