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Tertiary Education for Disadvantaged Young People

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Tertiary Entrance for Educationally

Disadvantaged Young People

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Abstract

This paper describes work in progress on an innovation for educationally disadvantaged young people who have expressed a desire to change their life situation. The Street Kids Access Tertiary Education (SKATE) program seeks to offer students social, psychological and educational support and encourage their participation in mainstream education, and particularly into higher education. The young people involved in the program have known educational and social disadvantage, and have often experienced life on the streets as well as physical and mental abuse. This paper focuses on the students' perceptions of education and themselves as students and learners. It also focuses on the students' perceptions of the educational opportunities and life options available to them and includes information about the present educational destinations of students.

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“Adolescence is not a time of rebellion, crisis, pathology, and deviance. A far more accurate vision of adolescence is of a time of evaluating, of decision-making, of commitment, or carving out a place in the world.” Santrock, J. Adolescence: An Introduction, 5th Edition, 1993.

## Introduction

Now more than ever, tertiary education is the preferred pathway of many young people in their quest for a satisfying and productive life. Four times as many Year 10 to Year 12 students aspire to university rather than TAFE, with more than half of students aspiring to professional occupations rather than skilled

trades (DEET , July, 1993).

However, the way that schooling has traditionally been organised has locked many young people out of the tertiary sector because of their lack of success at the secondary level (Middleton, 1993). Lack of success here may be attributable to lack of opportunity and inappropriate structures of schooling as well as to personal orientation to schooling and peer group and family circumstances (Willis, 1977; Connell et al 1982; Walker, 1988; McFadden and Walker, forthcoming).

Whatever the reason behind a student's poor performance at secondary school such performance has typically and effectively closed off a range of educational, and therefore, life options (Willis, 1977; Blakers and Nicholson, 1988; Parker et al, April 1993). Illustrative of the effect of early leaving and the failure to perform at the secondary level is the fact that 80% of homeless young people had left school before the end of Year 10, many not even making the transition from primary to secondary school successfully (Burdekin, 1989; Salvation Army, 1989; Leary, 1991; VOAELP, 1992).

Governments have recognised that certain groups in society need to be specifically targeted for equity entry if tertiary education is to be a possible and viable pathway for all (Cobbin and Barlow, 1993; Cobbin, Barlow and Gostelow, 1993).

Those targeted include:

- people from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people
- women in non-traditional areas

- people from non-English speaking backgrounds
  - people with disabilities, and
  - people from rural and isolated areas
- (DEET, May 1993)

But people participating in tertiary preparation courses or bridging programs and involved in equity entry schemes for entry into university are carrying with them much more than merely socio-economic disadvantage and cultural backgrounds foreign to middle class educational institutions. Homeless young people for instance carry with them extremely painful experiences of education and schooling such that the vast majority nominate as a significant barrier to educational participation their previous educational experience and its consequent effect on their expectations of success, their confidence and their self-esteem (Friends from Care, 1992).

#### Background to SKATE Study

In 1992 and 1993 I have been involved in research into the effect of an educational innovation for young people who have experienced educational disadvantage. The students involved in the program have, on the whole, chosen to become involved in the program and do so because they wish to change the circumstances of their lives. The course has as its target group young people whose educational experiences have been disrupted and whose opportunities to pursue an education have been limited by social circumstance, emotional deprivation, criminal behaviour or even sickness. Typically the students in the program meet one or more of the following criteria:

- would have left school around age 13
- would have known homelessness
- would not have had parental support
  
- would have experienced abuse or violence or been involved in crime
- would have been educationally disadvantaged and at risk.

(Bashir, 1992).

Given their personal and social backgrounds I was interested in how the students had actually made a choice to enter this program. What were the factors in their lives that had led to them see education as a way out? Why were they breaking previous patterns of resistance to education and was this break sustained once they were in the program? How did the program affect their perceptions of themselves and their world? What sorts of decisions about their future did they make as a result of being

in the program? The figure below illustrates the conceptual framework of the study.

Figure 1: Conceptual framework of the research

### Methodology and Theoretical Framework of the Study

The methodological approach used in the work is ethnographic and characterised by techniques such as participant observation, formal and informal interview, and by examination of printed sources of information including personal documents and course documentation (Willis, 1977; Walker, 1988; Wexler 1992).

Conceptually, the research is framed around the notions of resistance to schooling (McFadden, 1992; McFadden and Walker, forthcoming) and space and territory in relation to the exercise of power (Foucault, 1988). That is, that those over whom power is exercised, for instance, students at school, exist within a field of possibilities and one of those possibilities is to resist.

Resistance can be reconceptualised as the exercising of individual or collective power to increase the size of the perceived free space that an individual or group occupies or has. Resistance might come in the form of actions to exercise freedom and will be influenced in a dynamic way by the social background, economic capacity, political experience and social situation of the group or individual trying to exercise their freedom or power.

The space which is created by such an exercise of power is a space of freedom. The capacity of an individual then to create such space is bounded by that person's belief system about what is possible in their world, which is in turn influenced by their social group, its cultural practices, and also by societal norms and expectations (McFadden, 1993).

In this paper I wish to use the reflections of the students on their own schooling to illustrate the range of experiences which the students bring to the tertiary entrance program and to point out some of the difficulties which young people in this study face in seeking to reenter mainstream education and in accessing its advantages.

### Views on Schooling and Education

“While students are aware of the educational afterlife in the occupational work world, and in varying degrees acknowledge

interest in attention to the learning of school subjects, I find that their central and defining activity in school is to perform the social interactional labor which enables them to establish at least the image of an identity. In turn, that image I think, then further organises the course of their lives. “ (Wexler, 1992:10)

What images of identity does schooling actually produce for the students in this program? What memories do they have of their own schooling?

The following transcripts and stories illustrate the depth of feeling with which young people remember their schooling experiences and provide insights into both the difficulties that these particular individuals are experiencing in attempting to reenter mainstream education and into their joys at rediscovering lost or forgotten potential. These particular excerpts have been chosen because they represent threads which connect the images of identity and the memories of many of the students.

#### Early Memories

Birk, aged 19, by her own admission, created havoc for her parents when she was younger. From an early age she remembers the family “experiencing problems” and remembers running away in kindergarten. She remembers clearly her first day in kindergarten feeling so proud that she was able to write her first name. In the next breath she relates her feeling of deflation when the girl sitting next to her takes delight in rattling off and then spelling all the words she knows. “And I could only spell my name.”

Spelling looms large in Birk’s schooling and in her identity construction of herself as student and learner. Her “quota” of spelling words in Year 5 communicates to her exactly her capabilities and school becomes too painful to attend, so she chooses not to, or when there, she “wags”.

Birk Like I tried all these scams and they worked. It was rad.

She misses a great deal of secondary schooling but is able to take advantage of Year 13 in Canberra which enables her to “catch up” on her lost schooling. And this is the girl who now reads Celtic fiction voraciously.

M Have you read any Rosemary Sutcliff?

Birk Yeah, I love her stuff, she's rad.

M You'd really enjoy Alan Garner's stuff then, he writes about Welsh myths and legends and stuff like that.

Birk Oh wow (excitedly) that'd be excellent, I could chase him up in the library.

In relation to the effect of the SKATE program on her perception of herself as a student and a learner, Birk says, "I think I've always had the potential but I didn't know it was there and I didn't know how to tap it. I didn't know how to get things to work for me."

Fun and Games

Eleanor attended a Catholic girls' school but stopped attending at age 15. She remembers one teacher in particular and explains

how what started out as a game led to her being labelled by other teachers as a trouble maker and eventually to her feeling that it was better to leave school than try to cope with what was happening to her there as well as at home.

Eleanor Well actually I was normally very quiet but there was this one teacher, she had a few problems and she used to pick on girls, not me but other ones and, I don't know I just started, like we used to have sort of slanging matches with each other.

M Can you remember how you felt when that started?

Eleanor Well for me that became a game. It was just fun!

M So in terms of it being fun, can you say more about that? About the game aspect of it, how did it develop?

Eleanor Um, well I guess the fun bit was (pause). It just always happened that I would be sent out of the classroom and I guess like the class found it very amusing. There was a few of us and so I guess it was sort of like that situation where the class would ...

M Egg you on.

Eleanor Yeah. And I'd come out with a lot of smart arse responses to questions and stuff like that...

Sarah, on the other hand remembers education and games of a different kind and makes a connection between the social life of schooling and her socialising outside of school.

Sarah Oh well it was really um, it was a very fun time of my life. I did enjoy it a lot.

M From what time to what time?

Sarah It was probably from the last couple of years of high school until I was about 20. Um, so it was basically the period of when I was just drinking alcohol and smoking hash and um ... well it was lots of fun, it was pretty mad, there was lots of music. We used to go out and see bands like all the time, it was a very wild like time.

### Being Disrupted and Disruptive

Jeremy relates his memory of being disruptive at school. His problems at home with his father he says led to him being anxious and confused at school. His teachers at school though were not able to reconcile his change of behaviour with any deeper problems. Jeremy left home at 13.

Jeremy ... you know I was a disruptive kid at school. It's not that I lacked intelligence, I was like amazingly gifted and put into special classes up until 4th class and like that's when my parents' relationship started to deteriorate ... I was trying so hard to get someone's attention to say look my dad's doing these things to all of us ...

M Can you remember that?

Jeremy Oh, shit yeah (laughs) ...

M When you talked before about school and you said it was a frustrating experience because you, through your behaviour, were trying to tell people that something was wrong ...

Jeremy Mmmm.

M ... what do you think got in the way of people

Jeremy [breaking in] Peoples' ignorance and their lack of understanding about how to recognise problems, um that are going outside of the school grounds. Now a kid is disruptive at school but the kid is disruptive at school because there's something happening to make the kid do that. The only way I knew how to

get attention was to be disruptive or rude or arrogant or obnoxious and all, create havoc and that was the only way ...

M And you were trying to tell people something?

Jeremy That's the way how I knew how to get attention and it became such a problem at school that my grades were going downhill on everything.

#### Control and Self-determination

Rose left school during Year 9 after a history of conflict with both teachers and her parents. She always found herself in a position of not wanting to "tow the line" with authority figures. In discussing the difference between SKATE and school she says:

Rose They (schools) try to control you more.

M And that's different to here?

Rose Well it's really up to you here. If you don't turn up then nobody's going to come at you with a stick or something ... that's good because you're not pressured into anything which would cause you to rebel against that and, you know, it's up to your own motivation and if you're motivated enough to do it then it comes back to your determination of wanting to do it.

#### Implications for Theory and Practice

Many young people who have experienced homelessness and who wish to return to education do so with a background of experience which militates against their attempts to reenter the mainstream. "Only the most resilient and resourceful successfully continue their education away from their family and support networks" (VOAELP, 1992:10). Their lifestyle is one of transience, poverty and often crime, ongoing health problems and is influenced by a past which encourages living for today rather than any long term focus (VOAELP, 1992).

Schools are often seen by these young people as being unable to cope with their circumstances and unresponsive to their needs. Schools are also seen as part of the process of marginalisation rather than part of the answer to their problems (O'Connor, 1988).

When these young people do seek to access institutions, including universities, which society holds up as being part of the democratic right of all to access regardless of background or



circumstance, then educational providers need to be aware of their previous educational experiences and ongoing needs.

There is continued resistance to education in the particular program under study (McFadden, 1993; St Francis Welfare Committee 1993). It is possible that the young people involved are trying

to tell us what it is that they see as dangerous to them in their world; that they are expressing their own personal power over their lives, often in destructive and violent ways, to claw back some of the power that is exercised over them by others. One reason why they continue to resist the offer which education makes is that they are trying to create space for themselves and express their own personal identity.

What is usually seen as the resistance to authority of many of these young people can actually be viewed as a creative response to traumatic and oppressive life experiences (Willis, 1990). It is also quite often, a cry for help and support (White, 1990). As well, young people tend to associate with others in groups who share common interests and life situations, and these groups, even though they are often seen to be part of the individual's resistance to authority, are rather, more part of the individual's search for and production of identity and their need to belong (Wexler, 1992).

## Conclusion

Many young people who attempt to return to the educational mainstream identify a range of problems in their struggle to complete successfully a program such as the SKATE course. Foremost in the struggle is the battle they must wage against their own previous experience of education, but as well they have to contend with:

- lack of stable accommodation
- lack of adequate income and resources
- a clash of their own lifestyles and cultures with the lifestyles and cultures of students in other university programs
- the perceived lack of relevance of the educational program
- the stigma of their previous experience of homelessness.

(Friends from Care, 1992)

However, as O'Connor (1988) stated, "Provided with an educational environment respectful of young people and sensitive to the lifestyle difficulties of homeless youth, many young people will choose to continue with their education" (p98).

The SKATE program is attempting to provide a supportive and responsive educational environment for the young people within it. Staff on the program liaise with welfare and support agencies to organise AUSTUDY, housing and counselling if needed. As well, the program attempts to follow-up many who leave the course early and has been successful in placing in suitable employment a number of students who have found the program inappropriate.

Perhaps most importantly, students who make it to the end of the program find their life options expanded and are in a better position to make choices which they see might lead to a more productive and satisfying life.

A fitting conclusion to this paper is to have one of the students themselves summarise the program's achievements.

Luke Well it's giving those who didn't have the opportunity in the first place a chance. And given like the type of people we're getting in and the amount of people we are getting in, we've got a really high success rate. I mean it doesn't look that way at first, when at first 45 people enrol and then 15 are turning up at the end for classes. I mean in the first 45 we had

a couple of ex gaol people, we had just people that were forced to do it, we had people that just weren't ready to do it, people that had to leave, people that moved (...) The SKATE course doesn't only help academically it also helps with accommodation, with just getting people back into society.

M Mmmm.

Luke I mean if someone's gone through a devastating experience or whatever, if I mean just the fact that they're in a class with a lot of other people. Getting to do that everyday might be a big step. Or just getting them in from sitting around watching television all day to making the effort to get up in the morning and go out and do something, they might turn around and decide not to do the course and get a job, but I mean at least it's given them that first step.

M Mmmm.

Luke So, um, you can't really look at the educational aspects as being the whole success rate. If you look at the whole thing as in, where are these people coming from, what were they doing before they got to the course, and now, what they're doing after, or during the course.

What the students are doing now

As of early 1993 the young people in the study (all of whom are not referred to in this paper) were engaged in the following courses or activities:

Luke, 18 Bachelor of Music Education  
Birk, 19 Veterinary Nurse  
Frances, 18 Looking for employment  
Jackie, 21 Welfare Studies course, Introduction and Stage 1 at TAFE  
Eleanor, 25 Bachelor of Welfare Studies  
Chris, 23 Looking for employment  
Mick, 19 Diploma in Library Practice at TAFE  
Jeremy, 21 Bachelor of Nursing  
Kate, 19 Bachelor of Nursing  
George, 18 Tutoring in computing skills, HELP Program  
Sarah, 28 Bachelor of Visual Arts  
Rose, 19 Bachelor of Visual Arts

Pseudonyms have been used to protect the identities of the young people involved in the study.

Key to transcripts

[ ] Background information

(...) Material edited out

\_\_\_ Transcription from different section of the interview follows

\* From field notes

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