

Paper for AARE 1998 Symposium: Educational Pathways: Freeways or Blind Alleys?

'What do you want to do when you leave school?'... Selves, 'social factors' and school sites in a longitudinal perspective

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Introduction

What happens to young people in the course of their secondary school? We now have a good deal of information available on broad patterns of group outcomes of students, analysed against such factors as earlier academic achievement, gender, ethnicity, class, etc (eg (Lamb 1998) (Dwyer 1995), (Teese 1995) (Ainley 1995) (Yates 1996)), but in the 12 to 18 Project¹, Julie McLeod and I set out on a qualitative, longitudinal study of students at four different schools, which aimed to provide a closer picture of the processes in which particular biographies interact with particular forms of schooling. The aims and methodological structure of the study has been discussed in earlier papers at this conference ((Yates and McLeod 1994) (Yates 1997b) (McLeod and Yates 1995)), and in some published articles ((Yates and McLeod 1996) (Yates 1997a)(McLeod and Yates 1997) (McLeod and Yates 1998)). In this current paper I will discuss some features of the study, and some cases from it that offer points of comparison and complementarity with the study of mature-age students discussed by other participants in this symposium (Brew 1998) (Forgasz 1998) (Leder 1998).

Methodological assumptions, issues, questions

We wanted to know more about how an individual subjectivity develops in the course of secondary schooling (or alternative). Put another way, we wanted to know more about how the 'factors' that young people bring to school (both sociological and psychological) are reconstructed through schooling experiences to produce particular outcomes. Like the study of mature age students discussed in the other symposium papers, we assumed that the interaction of school and out of school experience, of public and private, is important in producing the 'pathways' that are depicted in more quantitative data. But as researchers we do not have the luxury of the all-seeing camera of *The Truman Show*². Even if we were tempted to produce such an ongoing surveillance, as researchers who take seriously recent methodological discussions concerning the constructing effects of the research act, we would have then to reflect on what was the status of our research as evidence, as truth - the problem of how far it was producing and shaping the phenomenon it claimed to discover.

In our case, in contrast to the mature age study, we are using a single form of evidence - twice-yearly, lengthy, semi-structured interviews. We do not observe the students in class or out of school, we do not use beepers, we don't supplement our study by broader survey.³ In other words, we are dealing with experiences as reported or seen through the eyes of the students. Secondly, with deference to reactivity issues, we have framed these interviews not as probing confessionals, but as relatively broad and open questions each time, covering the

three areas we are concerned about in this study: views about self, about school, about future.⁴

No study can do everything, and in this case we decided initially we would not during the main course of the study be interviewing teachers or seeking other school evidence about the students; we would be working only with what they chose to give us. This has undoubtedly added to the students' trust in us, and willingness to talk relatively freely. In terms of investigating pathways, it also has some problems, in particular, that at this point we have no 'objective' evidence of student achievement at earlier points of the study. We have not ruled out asking the student permission to get this evidence next year at the end of the study, and we will certainly be seeking contextual evidence about the school outcomes more broadly against which we can set the experiences of the particular individuals in our study. (Note too that although we do not question teachers about the individual students we interview or ask them about those students; we do end up spending quite a lot of time in schools, and do have some more limited 'ethnographic' experience in which we see staffrooms, newsletters and school cultures, and teachers make comments to us about various aspects of the school including, sometimes, about the students in our study.)

On the other hand, having listed all these cautions, our study contributes a methodological dimension not available in many other studies. We have now been talking to these students at some length, twice a year for five years. We selected them on the basis of their attendance at the different schools (which were chosen to provide opportunities for both contrast and comparison), but otherwise without knowing about their particular background or where they would end up. There are 26 main students in this study (though we have also talked to many of their friends in group interviews along the way). By the end of year 11 these include three students who have left school, one who has been in a drug rehabilitation facility, one who has run away from home and her elite school to a distant state, one who, when describing her own interests and ambitions, constantly talks about her disabled sister; another who, five years into the study, talks for the first time about her brother who is spaced out on drugs and her father who was caught up in a scandal and moved jobs and cities as a result, and so on. We would not be able to talk to such students in the same way if we set out to directly select a group with these experiences, or if we had not been pursuing the twice yearly interview since they were much younger. Students in year 11 are more prepared to tell us about the troubles (friends, bullying, with the law, with their studies) they were having in year 7, or year 9, than they were at that time - and we also have on video-tape as well as in our own recollections⁵, transcripts and notes, evidence of what they were saying, and how they presented as these things were happening.

A second point about our methods, is that although in one sense, we have a single methodology and source of evidence, in other ways we have multiple, 'triangulated' evidence through the repeated interviewing and the passage of time.⁶ Anything a single student says on a particular occasion, to a particular interviewer or survey, must be treated with caution - they might have said something else if they were in a different mood. But if, to relatively open questions, well separated by time, the same themes and images recur, we have a less leading or 'researcher constructed' sense of what might be given emphasis in their own particular biographies. Similarly, we have the opportunity to deliberately revisit certain events and concerns at different times and through different types of questions and lead-in discussions.

Thirdly, as well as the longitudinal perspectives enabled by this study, in each round of interviews, we have the opportunity for a number of cross-sectional comparisons: by school, by gender, by 'class', by 'ethnicity' and so on.

In the next section of the paper I will discuss some findings from the 12 to 18 Project that might be considered against those of the mature age study. (In preparing the paper, and discussing it with one of my fellow presenters, Helen Forgasz, one interesting issue emerged about the different perspectives of the school- or young-person-focussed researcher, and the mature-age researcher. We found that we had been interpreting the apparently straightforward word 'pathways' in somewhat different ways. I had assumed the point of the pathways focus was to look at what was happening in the educational and other experiences to produce current and future outcomes of different types; Helen had assumed that the pathways in the title would refer to current and past education experiences.)

Mathematics, secondary schools and the freeways/blind alleys issue

In a discussion of her own projects on gender, identity and education, Harriet Bjerrum Nielsen (Nielsen 1994) (Nielsen 1996) makes a useful distinction between 'gender identity' (what people say when asked or explicitly considering what it means to them to be a woman or a man, etc) and 'gendered subjectivity' (the gendered values, attitudes, constructions that males and females reveal when talking about general topics such as schooling, or futures, or themselves, whether or not they themselves understand these as gendered). Similarly, in relation to the issue of 'career aspirations' and 'educational pathways', it may be useful to make a distinction between what students say when, on the one hand, directly talking or thinking about the questions 'what do I want to do when I leave school?' and 'what do I expect to be doing in my mid-20s?', and, on the other when talking about other things that we as researchers might say is contributing to where they do end up, regardless of whether they are conscious of that. We might call the first 'pathways identity' and the second 'pathways subjectivity'.

The form of our study deals with both. We do ask directly at some point each year what the students are thinking about in terms of the future. But one point of talking to them over the secondary years about a whole range of things connected with self, home and school, is to try to understand retrospectively what factors were entering into their actual paths through schooling and beyond. In this paper I am focussing on 'pathways subjectivity' issues rather than the specific answers they gave to the question 'what do you want to do when you leave school?'

In the examples from the study which follow, I have focussed on issues relating to mathematics in particular, which was one of the starting points of the mature age students study. My emphasis here is on the types of insights a study like the 12 to 18 Project can contribute. I want first to talk about some types of issues that arise by looking at the study as a whole (for example, at patterns of students evident in a particular year, or between schools), and then to look at some cases, some of the individuals involved, to show some examples of how particular biography meets particular forms of schooling with particular outcomes.

1. Biography and school in the experience of mathematics

Although the 12 to 18 Project is a small-scale study in the number of individuals who are its key focus, its comparative location in four quite different schools, and the ongoing discussions we have with students in those different sites, give an added weight to the mere numbers if we find some similar issues being voiced across students of very different backgrounds in these different locations. In year 7, when we asked students to tell us about the subjects they were doing, and to talk about how they were finding secondary school, we found, in common with a number of other studies, that students widely reported mathematics to be very boring, very occupied with revision of things learnt at primary school, and not as creatively taught as in the final years of primary school. At the same time, when we asked

students the general question 'what do you think this school thinks is important?', the most frequent answers were 'school uniform' but the most common answer which referred to the education itself was 'mathematics'. For example

What do you think this school thinks is important?

Jane: Maths ... Cos like if you don't learn maths, when you're an adult you'd just be pretty hopeless, cos most jobs include maths. [HSPL94a]

Steve: Like, um, maths and all that. All the major subjects, so it helps us get a start in jobs and all that. [TSPP.94a]

Katrina: Well, maths and English, I suppose are the most important subjects, so I suppose they'd think they were the best kind of thing. They should be the most important, I'd say. [HSPM.94a]

Keren: Maths [...] kind of science, maths, social ed and English [...] They sort of think them subjects are the main ones, even though, you know, most people don't like the main subjects. [TSPE.94a] [This is an ex-technical school which has extremely good computing and technical and craft facilities, which the students are enthusiastic about.]⁷

In relation to these year 7 views about mathematics, I want to discuss three issues threading through our study: the issue of school compared with workplace training; the effect of the weight placed on mathematics as the measure of what matters; and how biography and gender shapes how students interact with their schooling experience.

School and workplace training (and Ellen, Mick and George):

In Keren's comments quoted above there is the sharp distinction being drawn between the technical and vocational subjects on the one hand and 'maths and English' on the other (even though at this particular school there was considerable use of integrated projects drawing on different subject areas - for example, the students were planning a trip around Australia, for English, social education, mathematics). Keren and other students from this school not only say they don't like maths and English as much as the technical subjects, but simultaneously indicate where they perceive this as positioning them in relation to school: that school (in their perception) does not value what they value.

We hear clear echoes of this perceived divergence about what matters to students compared with what school represents and values in our most recent round of interviews, five years later. Here, (out of six students) one student, Ellen, has left school and is doing a TAFE pre-apprenticeship course; another, Mick, has started a training course while at school and is hoping to leave soon to work and continue that full-time, and a third, George, indicates he will leave as soon as he can find a training opportunity. What the students who have left say is that they are getting excellent assessments in their training and workplace, and they like that work, which they also find easier than school. In these cases, the broad experience of training in the workplace is set against the broad accumulated experiences of being in school. Students who in year 11 have entered these alternative locations have entered programs that in some respects are more rigid than the school program (in terms of hours of attendance; assessments), but the experience of being treated as an adult, of making new friendships, and of leaving behind older unhappy friendship relationships, or an institution in which they have a history of unhappy experiences, leads them to give a very positive gloss to the whole program. In comparison, perhaps one issue that the mature age study might also note is what positive experiences are part of this new learning environment; what accumulated old positionings of self are the mature age students leaving behind.

The burden of mathematics (Angela)

The issue that it is mathematics accomplishment that is the most important thing in school is an incentive for some students to focus on that, but for others it acts as an enormous burden which adds to the pressures they feel and which can be counter-productive to their continuing:

Throughout the interviews, Angela has been very unhappy with herself, and with her parents. Her father is a doctor and her mother was a nurse. She sees her parents own relationship as unhappy, with her father working most weekends. She feels pressured by her father to become a doctor which she definitely does not want to do but feels powerless to resist. When we asked students in year 9 for their 'memory of a time when they were unhappy', her memory is of a time when her father attempted to explain a mathematics problem to her. She could not follow his explanation, but did not let him know that, but just went away and cried. She complains of the snobbery of the school, and of 'bitchiness' among the girls. In year 10 she continues to tell of her unhappiness and her struggles to keep up with mathematics, as well as her anger and unhappiness about the way her parents restrict her. She is seeing the school counsellor and in our first round of interviews in year 11 had discussed with the counsellor whether she should come to our interview (she herself had taken the decision to come). When we went for our last round of interviews, she was no longer at the school. Mid-year she had run away from both school and family to a distant state. She is now attending a state school, living with a family friend, and is feeling much happier.

School, pathways and gendered biography (Leeanne)

At the same school as Angela, there is a less dramatic example of a girl, Leanne, whose pathway is being shaped by interactions of school and her broader gendered experience and formation. In this case she is generally very happy at school, and has held positions of responsibility. She also has an active and very happy social life. However, in year 9 and 10 she mentioned that she was struggling with mathematics, and had a poor teacher, who she had been reassigned to. She knew with this teacher her chance to do well enough to continue with the mathematics subjects she needed to keep the options she desired would be slim, but she was not willing to raise the issue with the teacher, with the school or with her parents. Of the teacher, she said

I just find, I've had the same teacher twice in a row, and I'm finding him really hard to understand and um, he's the sort of person who could get a little bit offended if I went and asked for... 'cos I can't. I know I've asked for help from him before and I just can't understand it. Like last year it was all right, 'cause I had all my knowledge from Year 7, but this year... yeah, this year it's a lot harder and it's like really hard to ask, asking for someone else's help, 'cos he might get a bit offended, so I'm struggling a bit in that.

(year 9 girl, Domain Private Cli.96b, my italics)

Here, the burden of being a good, middle-class woman, of meeting social expectations to be considerate of others' feelings, was working against her taking the action she needed to take at that point to improve her success in mathematics and her career possibilities.

2.

Qualitative versus quantitative pictures of what schools accomplish

One of the most recorded types of information we have about educational institutions, schools in particular, is their retention rates, normally measured as numbers in the final year expressed as a percentage of those who entered in first year. This is a considerably misleading picture of what happens to individual students in those schools. Here are three examples from our study. In the first, a high school with an academic reputation, the figures show a retention rate of around 100%. But, as the Pupil Welfare Co-ordinator mentioned to us, this hides the fact that a lot of students drop out 'and the school does not do very well by them'. Because the school has long waiting lists, other students immediately come in to take their place.

In our study, one of our focus students, Pete, is in this category. His older brothers had all dropped out around the end of year 10, he lives with his father who is on a pension, he has a teenage sister who has just had a baby, whom he adores, and Pete himself simply does not return to school to start year 11. Because of this (ie that he left between years rather than mid-year) there is no school record of his outcome. He was a quiet boy, not a trouble-maker, and, although the Welfare Co-ordinator had predicted from the beginning that he would drop out of school around this time⁸, the seemingly inevitable happened. This phenomenon, seemingly not an uncommon one, has no impact in this town on the public belief that this particular school is a very good one, in contrast to the second school I will discuss, which is seen as a less desirable one. Here the fact that the school pays a lot of attention to the public appearance and behaviour of students, and the fact that it is seen to have a lot of students completing year 12, over-rides attention to what happens to the overall range of students who enter that school in year 7.

The second school, in the same town, is an amalgamated school built on schools that were previously technical schools. Its intake has some overlap in terms of SES with the first school, but has a higher proportion of poorer students, and students from the poorest suburb. Its retention rates are much lower than the first school. Here, with at least three of the students in our study, students themselves have reported (not necessarily in the way I am describing it) examples of the enormous work the school does to keep them in the system and find them appropriate courses. Ellen, dropped out of school at the beginning of year 11, following a major fight within her friendship group. The school made considerable efforts to resolve this, using a counsellor, and to get her to return; but also, when this proved unsuccessful, have (along with her parents) facilitated her entry to a TAFE course instead. Another student, Mick, would have dropped out rather than beginning year 11, but the school managed to set up an industry training course, one day per week that he could do in conjunction with school. He wants to leave as soon as possible, and is unlikely to 'complete' school, but what the statistics do not show is that without the work of this school he would have left school earlier, and be in a worse job or unemployed and with little training possibility.

The third school is a large private school with a very good reputation. To many, it embodies the educational 'freeway': it draws students from elite families, gets many good results, has a statistically good retention rate, and produces many of the people now in powerful positions in society. At this school too we started with six key students after interviewing all students in a year 7 class. By year 11, two of these students are doing the 'International Baccalaureate, a certificate which, if they pass, will slot them into high TER equivalent scores⁹; two students are undertaking the VCE; and two students have left the school. These latter two students (one of whom was Angela, mentioned above) were very unhappy and repeatedly through interviews talked about aspects of both home and school that interactively added to their turning away from school. For them, the school which represented the 'freeway' for so many, very much functioned as a blind alley.

Concluding Comments:

This paper has discussed some of the methodological possibilities as well as limitations of a qualitative, longitudinal study in researching young people's progress through their secondary years of schooling. The project is not completed, and one focus of key interest to this symposium - how the aspirations of young people develop, change, and are realized or modified or constrained - awaits a systematic analysis of our tapes and transcripts overall; when we revisit what was being said at particular points as well as later reflections on these. In this paper, I have drawn out only some much more limited examples of 'findings' in progress that deserve further attention both in the context of our project as a whole, and against other types of studies.

One issue here has been the meaning given to mathematics by students from the start of secondary schooling: it, above all, is taken by many students as a marker of accomplishment, and of what 'school knowledge' is valued, and this can contribute to a negative shaping of students' own self-perceptions. From a 'pathways' perspective, does it matter if students at the beginning of secondary school, of widely different backgrounds and in very different forms of school all see English and Maths as 'the main things' that schooling is concerned about? If this is the case even in a school which (in its publicity, in its spending, and in the comments made by teachers) overtly prides itself on its technology emphasis, what would be necessary for students to have a different perception of what 'school thinks is important'?

A second issue that these summarized cases depict is that the meaning of an educational experience is not simply a function of what is offered by the teacher or the institution, but is interactively built in conjunction with other events and meanings in students' lives, including the pressures and values they bring from their family background and the identity and relationships they build in their history with a particular educational institution. Some of the positive examples we are already encountering with the first students who leave school 'before completion' raise policy issues about the desirability of forcing students to remain in school when this is simply an ongoing frustration to them, rather than offering readier opportunities for them to re-enter education or training in different environments, where they may have the opportunity to be a different person. What type of person the institution 'constructs you as' is one that is equally important for investigating positive and negative experiences of mature age students who return to study.

A third issue that my brief examples raise is the value of balancing research that is designed to produce understandings of common patterns with research that is designed to understand particular experiences and 'anomalies' within the patterns. To some extent this is a traditional quantitative/qualitative debate, but it is not simply that. Much qualitative research too (and one hope of our own project) is designed to produce further (though different) information about general patterns (for example, why this school has a high completion/success rate compared with that school; why working class kids don't do as well as middle-class kids). But schools themselves need to look too at a students like Pete or Angela or indeed Leanne and what is happening to them in an environment that for many other students seems to be working well.

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