Rethinking the conditions for young people ‘getting a job’

Kids have something to say

Barry Down, John Smyth, Janean Robinson & Peter McInerney
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## Contents

### Part 1: Introduction

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Overview of the research project</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purpose</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student voice</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interview process</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Troubling questions</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The problem of ‘disadvantage’</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The participants, their lives and context</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Industry partners</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Significance of the issue</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Media headlines</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hard times</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Official policy responses</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rethinking the conditions for young people ‘getting a job’</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Key messages</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Structure of the report</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How to read this report</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Part 2: Rethinking the conditions for young people ‘getting a job’

- Understanding the complexity of the labour market
- Building cultural capital
- Developing skills, abilities and capabilities
- Creating hospitable places for learning
- Moving beyond the self-fulfilling prophecy of streaming
- Working with complexities of young lives
- Going beyond menial, piece rate and poorly paid jobs
- Acknowledging the wider context of young lives
- Developing interests and passions
- Confronting class and gender stereotypes
- Engaging with big ideas
- Preparing students for life after school
- Navigating and reading the world
- Attending to lost, confused and meandering students
- Including students with disabilities
- Starting from what is best for young people

Part 3: What can be done?

- Rethinking policy and practice
- Getting organised
- Auditing your school/organisation
- Concluding remarks

References
Introduction
Part 1
Part 1: Introduction

Overview of the research

Purpose

This report draws on empirical evidence from an Australian Research Council (ARC) Linkage Project (LP110100031) entitled ‘Getting a job: identity formation and schooling in communities at disadvantage (Down & Smyth, 2010)—a project which traced the experience of thirty-two high school students over an eighteen-month period in the years 2011-2013. The purpose of the research was to listen to young people’s stories with a view to better understanding the barriers and obstacles to ‘getting a job’ and from their vantage point, identify the educational, policy and practice context that needs to be created and more widely sustained to assist their career aspirations and life chances. As Wyn (2009a) puts it, we need to investigate the ‘disjuncture between educational policies, which continue to frame education within an industrial model (instrumental and vocationalist), and young people’s own requirements—the capacity to be good navigators through new economies, to live well, and to engage with complexity and diversity’ (p. 49).

The underlying proposition of this research is that when young people fail to find a job, then as a society we are all worse off: (a) young people fail to realise their potential and make a meaningful transition to a rewarding adult life; (b) the wider community is deprived of the valuable contribution young people could be making; and (c) society and the economy is unable to access the unique valued contributions that can be made by young people (Smyth & Down, 2005).

Student voice

At the heart of this research lies a deep-rooted belief that complex educational problems can only be properly comprehended by listening to the voices of young people as key informants about their world. This kind of research seeks to illuminate experience from the vantage point of those most directly impacted by institutional, political and economic decisions. Kozol (2005) argues that students know best what goes on in their schools. In his own word, ‘Students were the best data source, pure witness and more reliable in telling the truth of the schools than the others’ (p. 12). The irony is that whilst young people are compelled to stay at school until 17 years of age, we know relatively little about their lives or what works best for them (Smyth & McInerney, 2012; Pope, 2001). Down and Smyth (2012) summarise this kind of voiced research in the following way:

Our purpose is to try and get inside the issue of the vocationalizing of young lives, how young people are thinking about the world of work, how their aspirations are being formed, the way they see themselves as making sense of the prospect of entering the world of work, and the obstacles and impediments, how school is a part of this project, and how in the end, their stories enable the policy context to be radically informed in a different way (p. 211).

Thus gaining access to the stories of young people through ethnographic interviews provides us with a better awareness not only of the complexities, uncertainties and possibilities of young people’s lives but the ways in which their identities are shaped by broader structural, institutional and historical forces beyond their control. As researchers we do not pretend to be neutral nor objective bystanders around the big issues facing young people today. Rather, we choose to take an advocacy position for the least advantaged in society to ensure that all young people are well prepared for success in education, life and careers (see Smyth & McInerney, 2013 for an elaboration of this).
Interview process

In conducting this research we adopted a three-phase interview process (Down & Smyth, 2012). By way of summary:

i. An Aspirational Interview Phase—in which we started a conversation with thirty three young people aged between fourteen and seventeen years of age by inviting them to describe what interests them in their lives and what part that will play in their decisions in relation to ‘getting a job’. As we describe it, this phase is ‘around getting to know these young people, seeing how they are positioning themselves, and what resources they are drawing upon in making a pathway for themselves towards developing an identity that includes (or not) the notion of ‘getting a job’’ (p. 211).

ii. A Following-up Developments Interview Phase—in which we picked up the conversation in light of their experiences and identified intervening events and factors impacting on their lives and decision making.

iii. A Life Events and Outcomes Interview—in this final interview we asked these young people ‘to describe where they have arrived at, and to reflect back on the courses of events and their meaning since we began interviewing them over twelve months previously’ (p. 212).

Based on these interviews we developed a narrative portrait of each student around a dominant idea/theme/issue or concern. In pursuing this task we adopt ‘the notion of ‘portraiture’ as a form of textual representation as well as ‘method of documentation, analysis, and narrative development’ (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2005, p. 3; see Smyth et al., 2008 for discussion; also Smyth & McInerney, 2013). We believe this approach allows us to hear the voices of young people in ways that ‘capture both the complexity as well as the aesthetic nature of human experience’ (Smyth et al. 2008, p. 8).

Troubling questions

Drawing on the experiences and narratives of these 32 young people, we wanted to develop a more sophisticated set of understandings about one of the most persistent and protracted problems facing Australia today—youth unemployment. We are in agreement with Albert Einstein when he argued that doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results is unhelpful. We believe that it’s time to generate some new ways of seeing the problem by asking a number of more troubling kinds of questions, like:

- How do young people themselves talk about ‘getting a job’?
- How do young people’s aspirations for the future mirror the realities of school life and the global labor market?
- What social and economic conditions limit possibilities and opportunities for young people?
- How does social class organize the social, cultural and material experiences of young people?
- How can public institutions and communities work creatively with young people to improve the quality of life for youth?
- What types of work do young people find desirable and undesirable? Why?
- What kind of worker identities do employers value and/or devalue?
- What knowledge, skills and values are of most worth? For whom?
- How do young people find the spaces and resources with which to reinvent their identities as future workers and citizens?
- To what extent does the school, its community and the wider educational system support young people in the process of becoming smart workers?
- What kind of education and training is desirable in these new times?
- How can schools, governments and communities work together to create sustainable and rewarding employment and career futures for all young people? (Down & Smyth, 2012, pp. 7-8).

We believe that questions of this kind can assist school communities to create a different set of conservations around vocational education and training because they generate broader social meaning, take students experiences seriously, help them to give meaning to their lives, and enable them to envisage alternative possibilities (Simon, Dippo & Schenke, 1991). That’s what this research is about.
The problem of ‘disadvantage’

Such views become particularly important in the context of ‘disadvantaged’ school communities, by which we mean, those localities and neighbourhoods that have low levels of weekly earnings, low levels of adult workforce participation, low levels of parental education, reduced levels of life expectancy, a greater percentage of single parent families, high levels of welfare dependency and high rates of youth unemployment. In this context, Tony Vinson’s report Dropping off the Edge: The Distribution of Disadvantage in Australia maps the powerful ‘links that exist between such factors as early school leaving, low job skills, long term unemployment, court convictions and eventual imprisonment’ (Vinson, 2007, p. vii). Vinson (2007) candidly describes ‘the enduring story of the disadvantaged consequences of limited education and associated lack of information retrieval and exchange skills, deficient labour market credentials, poor health and disabilities, low individual and family income and engagement in crime’ (p. 96).

The common interest of all industry partners in this research project is to find some new ways of thinking and acting around these complex problems by: (a) increasing the proportion of young people who will lead a satisfying and economically rewarding life; (b) expanding the size of the productive workforce in a country experiencing the effects of an ageing workforce/population; (c) reducing welfare dependency of a section of the community at risk of inter-generational poverty; and (d) enhancing the extent to which young people can contribute more widely and fully as informed citizens. We hope this report can contribute in a modest way to this broader national agenda.

The participants, their lives and context

This research was carried out in a rapidly growing outer metropolitan region we have called Bountiful Bay. Like similar regions around the country, Bountiful Bay is struggling with problems of school retention and participation, student engagement and youth unemployment (Smyth, Angus, Down & McInerney, 2008). This may seem to be somewhat incongruent in a resource rich region with a strong economic foundation based on tourism, agriculture, fishing, mining, steel fabrication, chemical production and a large number of manufacturing and service industries. In many respects Bountiful Bay reflects the widening social inequalities characteristic of Australian society in which affluence and plenty exist amidst pockets of poverty with intergenerational unemployment, ill health and family stress.

The 32 young people who participated in the study comprised 14 males and 18 females ranging in age from 14 to 19 years. They included a range of ethnic backgrounds including 2 Indigenous, 1 Sudanese, 1 Portuguese, 5 English and 1 El Salvadorian student. The majority of students came from low socioeconomic backgrounds. 8 of the 32 students first interviewed in 2011 now attend university, 4 of which had attended private schools. 6 of the 13 year 12 students in 2013 aspired to university (4 students from private schools, 2 from public schools). 7 students planned to study at TAFE (some of which may lead to university) and/or pre-apprenticeships. With one exception they were all public school students. Most university bound students came from middle-class and or well-educated families and attended private schools. What has eventuated here reinforces the process of segregation occurring in schools with wealthier students moving to private schools and more prestigious government schools. Public high schools in the region have placed a lot of emphasis on streaming students into VET pathways with an almost exclusive focus on competency based certificates and employability skills.

The gendered dimension of employment and career preferences are clearly evident among the participants with a high proportion of girls choosing the ‘caring’ professions such as nursing, teaching, childcare, and health promotion. Other careers identified included fashion design, sports events, performing arts, clinical psychology, environmental science and travel. Many boys opted for the trades, among them panel beating, electrical, plumbing and carpentry and joinery. Some boys nominated fall back positions, mostly working in family businesses or gaining employment with minimal training (e.g., scaffolding).

Of the 32 students interviewed in 2011, half were engaged in part-time work or had recent experience of part-time work. Most of the jobs were in supermarkets, delis and fast food outlets (e.g., KFC, Hungry Jack’s and McDonald’s). Others included babysitting and library shelving. Some were looking for work and at least one did voluntary work in the community. Hours of work ranged from 4 to 40 hours. Some had long shifts on weekends. A few spoke of the difficulties of balancing school commitments, sport and work. Some had cut back in Year 12 to focus on study. However, others still committed long hours to work, family businesses and sport. Most appreciated the cash but said they did not want to do that kind of work for the rest of their lives.
Notwithstanding the benefits, part-time employment cuts into study time and can further disadvantage kids who are already struggling to cope with school.

Only a few of the students’ parents have undertaken higher education studies although some had brothers/sisters attending university or have graduated. We don’t have complete details of the parents/careers occupations but many father’s, it seems, have working class jobs (e.g., mechanics, builders, and roof tilers) and mothers (if they have paid work), are involved in family businesses, nursing, retail and caring for others. There are a few middle class parents with jobs in teaching, IT, real estate and business management. Some families are doing it tough with family members on a disability pension. We also heard from students whose fathers are unemployed or underemployed. Almost universally, students said their parents were very supportive of their education and career aspirations. They talked up the value of education and wanted their kids to take advantage of opportunities they missed out on themselves. Parents did a good deal of the legwork in checking out career information and seeking apprenticeships for their children. In some cases, they eased students’ financial burdens during their TAFE courses by providing accommodation, paying fees and living allowances.

Industry partners
As noted in the acknowledgements, this project was funded and supported by the Australian Research Council (ARC) and 17 Industry Partners among them: 3 local government authorities—the City of Rockingham, Town of Kwinana and South West Group; 7 public and 2 private secondary schools; the Western Australian Department of Education; Bridging the Gap Inc.; Challenger Institute of Technology; and 2 universities—Murdoch University and Federation University. We believe working alongside a range of industry partners in the ways we have opens up opportunities for a shared understanding of the issue under investigation and importantly, how school communities can respond in a more coherent way to the needs and aspirations of all young people.

Significance of the issue
Media headlines
We only have to look at media headlines to realise that young people today face an increasingly volatile and precarious labour market compounded by the Global Financial Crisis of 2008 and the pursuit of free market policies. By way of example:

- AMWU attacks Chevron’s plan to employ foreign welders (The Australian, 7 August, 2014)
- Toughing it out in Rockingham – WA’s unemployment youth capital (Sunday Times, 25 May, 2014)
- Youth unemployed triple since GFC (The Age, 14 April, 2014)
- Youth unemployed need tough love, says Tony Abbott (The Australian, 17 April, 2014)
- Denying help to young jobseekers would be harsh (The Australian, 15 May, 2014)
- More than 100, 000 young unemployed to go without benefits (The Age, 21 May, 2014)
- Apprentice fall-off fuels skills fears (The Western Australian, 30 May, 2014)
- 30 per cent of university graduates to be out of work after finishing degree (The Age, 4 June, 2014)
- Jobseekers must change to find work (The Weekend Australian, 31-1st June, 2014)
- Decline in jobless as people give up looking for work (The Australian, 7 September, 2012).
- Job fears for kids at poorer schools (The Australian, 2 October, 2012)
- Where are the boom jobs? (Sound Telegraph, 20 June, 2012)
- Drug slur aimed at jobless (Sound Telegraph, 6 June, 2012)
- Tradie shortfall to worsen (The West Australian, 26 March, 2012)
- Young jobseekers missing out in boom (The West Australian, 30 January, 2012)

Hard times
Recent data in Australia shows that 15.9% (up nearly 3% on 2008 figures) of 17-year-olds were not fully engaged in full-time work or part-time education. These young people have been marginalised to part-time work (6.4%), unemployment (4.7%) or withdrawal from the labour market (4.8%). This marginalisation is even more pronounced among older teenagers with more than 25% of those aged 18 not being fully engaged. For 18–19 year olds the figure was 29.1% and for 19-year-olds 27.8% (Foundation for Young Australians 2010, p. 6).

Locally, Australian Bureau of Statistics data for Bountiful Bay confirm that significant numbers of young people are not receiving the benefits of education and training
and/or employment. In Bountiful Bay 37.3% (and up to 43.7% in some suburbs) of 15–19-year-olds are not attending any educational institution. In neighbouring areas the figure is 44.3% (and increases to 58% in some suburbs) (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2006, p. 17).

These figures are hardly surprising when considered alongside a range of disturbing statistics around apparent retention rates in government (state/public) high schools where official statistics show that up to 40% of young people are making the active choice not to complete secondary education (Western Australian Department of Education 2010). It is widely acknowledged that failure to complete year 12 represents a significant and intractable problem, and is an issue in need of urgent attention (Smyth et al. 2008).

Furthermore, Bountiful Bay youth have been especially hard hit by the Global Financial Crisis of 2008 and ‘bear the brunt of hard times’ (Gibson 2009, p. 5). Reporting on a recent survey of steel fabrication companies in Bountiful Bay, Dobson (2011) notes that the number of employees working more than 10 hours per week had dropped by 20% in 2011 compared to the peak boom years in 2007 and 2008. As well, the number of apprentices dropped by 66% from the peak in 2007 and 2008, with 59% of businesses not expecting to increase employee, apprentice or trainee numbers in the next 12 months (p. 7). These figures appear to support an International Labour Organisation warning that the world’s richest nations face a shortfall of 40 million jobs by the end of 2011 (Wright 2011, p. 17).

Despite claims of a national skills shortage largely related to an overheated mining sector where it is predicted an extra 170,000 workers will be required (Yeates 2011, p. 29) and reports of 10,000 new jobs in the West Trade Coast region, which includes Bountiful Bay (Weekend Courier 2011, p. 8), the promise seems to ring hollow for many young people in the region. The paradox, according to the South West Group, a Voluntary Regional Organisation of Local Councils, is that the region will continue to face significant challenges in ‘attracting and retaining a suitable workforce’ (South West Group 2009, p. 6).

**Official policy responses**

A great deal has been written internationally (e.g., OECD, 1989; 1994) and nationally (e.g., Schools Commission, 1987; Rudd, 2008) about the relationship between national economic growth, productivity and the development of human capital. The message is clear that schools must be put to work and more closely aligned to the shifting imperatives of the global market. ‘If we are to be competitive we need a skilled workforce that is able to drive productivity, says the Business Council of Australia’ (2007, p. 5). In short, schools are required to restructure and reculture themselves around a more vocationally orientated approach to education and training to make sure that students are ‘job ready’ (Down, 2009; Keat & Abercrombie, 1993; Dehli, 1996).

Malley and Keating (2004) see a convergence of policy around a dominant version of vocationalism in Australian schools characterised by: (i) VET in School programmes; and (ii) School-based New Apprenticeships (p. 643). In short, governments of all political persuasions have put in place a set of largely utilitarian and economistic policies to address the problem of ‘getting a job’, and as a consequence have perpetuated the distinction between academic and vocational career pathways (Down, 2006; Ryan, 2002).

Despite the overwhelming common sense view that schools should prepare youth for work, especially for the large numbers of students who are typically categorised as ‘at risk’, ‘disengaged’, or ‘non-academic’; many students, teachers, parents and principals have expressed some concern about maintaining a balance between the academic and vocational curriculum. The concern focuses not so much on the pedagogical relevance of vocationally orientated ‘real world’ learning but the historical failure of vocational education and training to ‘disrupt the strong correlation between social advantage, school achievement and the competitive academic curriculum’ (Smyth, Angus, Down & McInerney, 2009, p. 104; Teese & Polesel, 2003; Connell, 1993).

Whilst human capital approaches have made significant advances in acknowledging the importance of assisting young people in ‘getting a job’ it has to be recognised, however, that this is only the beginning and many challenges persist. Developing and sustaining efficacious school and community cultures, structures, pedagogical practices and relationships are another level of complexity again. Bringing about the substantial level of change for schools and communities to turn around the problem of ‘getting a job’, we argue, requires detailed understandings of what is happening in young people’s lives as well as the structural transformations in the global economy.
Figure 1: Rethinking the conditions supporting young people ‘getting a job’
Rethinking the conditions for young people ‘getting a job’

A major outcome of this research has been the production of a profile entitled Rethinking the Conditions for Young People ‘Getting a Job’ (see Figure 1 opposite). The purpose of this profile is to advance current knowledge both conceptually and practically by drawing on the empirical experiences of young people themselves. Importantly, we believe qualitative data of this kind can serve an integral role in improving the policy-making process because it helps us to better describe the dimensions of the problem under investigation, paying particular attention to the manner in which the participants define the issue. Furthermore, these insider accounts not only provide an awareness of the multiple realities of the education system but a ‘validity check’ on the current obsession with statistical data (Rist, 1981, 1984, 1994). In developing this profile, however, we are not suggesting that it will be a definitive template, nor will it provide a set of ‘quick fix’ solutions to be applied to all schools and communities. Rather, the profile alludes to the major elements of whole school and community policies and practices that underpin any serious engagement with career aspirations, identity formation and education (Smyth, 2010). The profile highlights the kinds of structural, cultural, dialogical and pedagogical features and strategies that need to be in place for a whole of school and community approach to the issue of ‘getting a job’ (for discussion see Part 2).

Key messages

Drawing on the narratives of 32 young people involved in this research we can identify a number of key messages for policy makers, community leaders, businesses and educators, among them:

• Young people face an increasingly volatile and insecure labour market due to profound shifts in the global economy. In an era in which decent well-paid jobs are disappearing faster than they can be created the burden of joblessness falls heaviest on young people.

• Young people’s lives can only be properly comprehended in the context of the broader structural, historical and institutional forces shaping their identities and imagined futures.

• Schools need to become far more hospitable places for learning in which the needs, desires and aspirations of all students can flourish. This means reculturing, restructuring and redesigning schools in ways that connect to students’ lives, language, experience and needs.

• School curriculum needs to be organised around the interests and passions of young people and linked to real world standards and relationships. In short, young people deserve a curriculum that engages them in relevant, rigorous and authentic tasks of social worth in the adult world.

• Young people can easily be blamed if they can’t find a job because of personal ‘deficits’ (e.g., lazy, low aspirations, poor motivation and so on) rather than focusing on the need to reform the social context, especially the collapse of the youth labour market and the cumulative effects of economic and social disadvantage.

• It is timely to move beyond the tired debate between academic and vocational education and the traditional practice of streaming students into different courses for different classes of students. Instead, the focus should be on creating multiple pathways that provide both academic and real world foundations students need for advanced learning, training and civic responsibility.

• Students need to be better prepared for life after school. Succeeding at school does not necessarily mean young people are prepared to cope with post school life. Many students struggle with the school-to-work transition because they lack the necessary skills, abilities and capabilities to negotiate their way in the world. Young people need opportunities to explore the world of work with experts who understand the nature of meaningful work, not simply work experience.

YouTube: Ken Robinson—How do we educate our children to take their place in the economy?
http://www.ted.com/talks/ken_robinson_changing_education_paradigms
• There needs to be much greater recognition given to how family circumstances and social context impact on students’ performance at school. Staying on at school is not easy for students in financially distressed households. They are under pressure to earn an income to support themselves and their family. Furthermore, it is difficult for young people to appreciate the long-term benefits of education when they are experiencing the emotional fallout from complicated family circumstances.

• Government at all levels need to develop and support a coherent and sustainable youth employment strategy. Ideally, this should provide an appropriate living wage for young people, a concerted investment in job creation, training schemes and employment conditions and the provision of accessible and integrated services.

Structure of the report
This report is organised into three parts:

Part 1 Introduction
Sets the scene by: (a) providing an overview of the research including purpose, orientation, interview process, key questions, context, and industry partners; (b) considering the significance of youth unemployment and school-to-work transition problems as it is represented in the media, national and local data, and official policy responses; (c) mapping the key conditions supporting students’ ‘getting a job’; (d) identifying some key messages arising from the research; and (e) offering a some suggestions on how to read and use the report.

Part 2 Rethinking the conditions supporting students ‘getting a job’
Is the main body of the report in which we identify, describe and explain 16 conditions that are especially relevant to the task of rethinking youth unemployment in these uncertain times. Each of these conditions is written around a young person’s story and from this we identify a range of key issues, reflective questions and policy and practice recommendations for action. We use pseudonyms throughout this report.

Part 3 What can be done?
This part brings together the key findings of the report by: (a) examining how we might rethink policy and practice in more socially just and educative ways; (b) suggesting a conversational framework for thinking and action; and (c) identifying key questions, indicators and strategies for auditing your school/organization.

How to read this report
As mentioned earlier this report has been funded and supported by a large number of stakeholders with an interest in supporting young people into the world of work. We are mindful that attempts to address such a diverse audience, among them politicians, policymakers, administrators, school leaders, teachers, youth workers, career advisors, service providers, local councillors, parents, students and researchers, presents some unique challenges. In response, we have attempted to write the final report in a way that honours the students’ stories by giving them a space to speak back to the things that really matter to them—their lives, experiences, dreams and aspirations for a happy and fulfilling life.

We believe stories resonate best with people in terms of gaining insight and understanding and on this basis creating a different kind of conversation grounded in a commitment to giving all young people a fair go. We also appreciate that readers will be constrained by time and resources so each of the conditions contained in Part 2 can be investigated as a stand alone idea or as a part of ongoing inquiry around all 16 conditions over time.

The intent of this report is, therefore, to provide schools, community organisations and educational institutions with a set of resources organised around 16 conditions that are conducive to supporting young people in ‘getting a job’. Our hope is that these resources are not read as yet another ‘quick fix’ solution, an approach that has demonstrably failed us so far, but instead, a toolkit of ideas, stories, questions, and provocations with which to engage in the serious intellectual and practical work required to reinvent policies and practices to assist all young people in making a smooth transition from school-to-work. To assist in this task we have included a number of YouTube links throughout the report to provide a catalyst for further discussion.

Finally, Part 3 of the report provides some practical suggestions and guidelines for those individuals and groups wishing to organise themselves both within and across schools, community organisations and educational institutions in order to engage in some difficult conversations for the purpose of creating localised policy responses capable of making a difference in the lives of young people.
Rethinking the conditions for young people ‘Getting a Job’
Part 2
Part 2: Rethinking the conditions for young people ‘Getting a Job’

Understanding the complexity of the labour market

Someone always just beats me

It’s tough getting an interview. When I go for the interview normally I’m like the third or the second best. Someone always just beats me. So when they say “Just not the best”, I’m wondering what else they want. They don’t really tell you what they were looking for. They say, “Oh you were good, you had everything we needed but this guy is just better than you”. I don’t know why. Someone always just beats me. (#14 Lucas)

Lucas was a thoughtful and mature young person who had a clear idea about his future—he wanted to be an electrician. He was one of only sixteen students guaranteed a place in a pre-apprenticeship program at a specialist electrical course. Lucas attended the local high school in a community described as low socio-economic-status (SES) or ‘disadvantaged’. Approximately half of the students undertake studies orientated towards vocational education and training (VET). Under the umbrella of Industry Links, the courses in years 11 and 12 have components of Technical and Further Education (TAFE) certificate studies, work experience and school-based instruction in numeracy, literacy and job preparation. When we interviewed Lucas in 2011 he had commenced a pre-apprenticeship course in the electrical trades and was well on the way to realising his ambition of becoming a qualified electrician. Although the school supported him, it was clear that he had to find his own work experience placements in the field. In the process, he approached approximately two hundred potential employers before finding an employer willing to supervise his work experience.

Since finishing his pre-apprenticeship with TAFE in 2012 and graduating from high school, Lucas has struggled to secure a full-time apprenticeship in the electrical trades. In his words, “When I got my Cert 2 [Electro Technology] I thought I would be able to get a job but everyone else also has a Cert 2. The problem is you’re trying to get ahead of everyone else but everyone else is also trying to get ahead’. This has been a very frustrating time for Lucas and his family. In what could be described as an example of ‘cruel optimism’ (Berlant, 2006), he was led to believe that there were plenty of opportunities for electricians in the job market especially given the hype about skills shortage in the economy. Lucas assumed it would be relatively easy to gain an apprenticeship once he completed school. When we last met with Lucas in March 2013 he described how he spends much of his time searching online for vacant positions. When he does get an interview for a job, he invariably misses out. “Someone always beats me”, he says.

Key issues

A number of issues arise from Lucas’s predicament.

1. The burden of joblessness falls heaviest on young people: Young people today face a precarious labour market as the forces of globalisation, technology and free market policies destroy jobs faster than they can be created (Aronowitz & DiFazio, 2010). Despite evidence to the contrary, young people are told that education is a panacea to ‘getting a job’. Whilst it certainly may help, the power of schooling to fix social
and economic problems such as unemployment is illusory for growing numbers of young people (Grubb & Lazerson, 2004). In Lucas’s school community for example, youth unemployment is about 20% with official statistics showing that 37.3% of 15–19-year-olds are neither ‘earning nor learning’ (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2006, p. 17). Recent Council of Australian Government (COAG, 2008) figures confirm a ‘worrying picture’ nationally where 27.3 % of 17-24 year olds are not fully engaged in full-time work or study with 41.6% of poorer students and 60% of Indigenous students ‘falling through the cracks’ (Maiolo, 2013).

2. Statistics mask the reality of joblessness: Worryingly, these figures exclude many school leavers including Lucas who do not register with Centrelink—the Commonwealth government agency responsible for managing the unemployed. Neither does it account for the manipulation of data that occurs to hide the real number of unemployed particularly in times of crisis (Baker, 2013). Young people like Lucas find agencies such as Centrelink to be far too complex and alienating to be of much use to them.

2. The lack of job training opportunities hinders career aspirations: Contrary to what Lucas was told, few apprenticeships or jobs actually exist in the electrical trades. Governments constantly talk up the importance of schools in skilling young Australians—making them job ready—but the permanent full-time jobs simply do not exist and if they do there is intense competition for the few remaining positions available. This can be partly explained by the erosion of structured on-the-job training highlighted by a 33% fall in apprenticeship and trainee commencements in the first three months of 2013 compounded by a $1.1 billion cut to Commonwealth schemes to encourage the take-up of apprenticeships and traineeships (Ross, 2013) as well as the withdrawal of State government subsidies for young electrical apprentices in Western Australia (Perpitch, 2012, p. 2).

3. Young people require post school transition support: There appears to be few employment support mechanisms for young people once they leave school. Whilst Lucas was able to avail himself of career counselling services at school, he now relies extensively on family networks and his own initiative. Aside from the largely inadequate Newstart Allowance, Centrelink renders little assistance to job seekers.

4. Moving to independent living is difficult: It is difficult to see how young people in these circumstances can cope financially without a good deal of family support. Lucas has very little spare cash but at least he has a roof over his head and a supportive family, so he is probably better off than some of his peers.

5. School is disconnected from the world of work: Notwithstanding the skills he learnt in the VET course, Lucas views school as ‘something you have to do’. For him, school was largely irrelevant to his needs and interests. It was not until the senior years of school where he was able to enrol in a more practical vocational course that he saw some relevance of his schooling to ‘getting a job’, albeit a largely instrumental view of ‘becoming educated’ (Smyth & McInerney, 2014).

6. Students can easily become ‘the problem’ if they can’t find a job: It is a relatively short step to blame students who can’t find a job because of personal deficits (e.g., lazy, lack of ability, low aspirations, troublesome, ‘at-risk’) rather than focus on the collapse of job opportunities or the cumulative effects of social and economic disadvantage. It is important to move beyond ‘deficit’ and victim blaming approaches (Valencia, 1997; 2010) to consider the broader economic, social and political forces shaping individual lives. Lucas puts this point very well when he says, ‘everyone else has a Cert 2. The problem is you’re trying to get ahead of everyone else but everyone else is also trying to get ahead’.

7. Young people are competing globally for jobs: The promise of the ‘knowledge economy’ to create more high-skilled, high-wage jobs especially in the communications and information industries, for so long the cornerstone of the developed economies (and education systems), has been undermined by ‘the global auction for cut-priced brainpower’ as workers from the emerging economies such as China, India, Russia, and Eastern Europe compete for a diminishing number of decent, well-paid middle-class jobs (Brown, Lauder & Ashton, 2011, p. 5). Beck (2000) explains how ‘every location in the world now potentially competes with all others for scarce capital investment and cheap labour supplies’ (p. 27).
I’m not working at the moment

I’ve been sending in resumes and letters to say I want to go into jobs—anything on the mechanical side of things. I’m not too sure about applying for an apprenticeship. I’m just going to get a job and if they let me do an apprenticeship I’ll do it there. I’ve put in 6 applications about three weeks ago, 5 around this area and then there’s one down in ‘Inji’. Two of the jobs were advertised and the others were not. I just went up and said ‘I’m interested in mechanics have you got any work’? I’ve not heard back from them yet. I have to wait until tomorrow and see if I got it and if don’t I’ll go do another one. I haven’t seen any apprenticeships advertised at the moment. I would just like any job in any workshop. I look on the internet and sometimes in the paper for job advertisements. I got one of them from the local paper from the ‘Rayborn’ Industry area. There was one at Mike’s Tyres. I went there and it didn’t happen coz I didn’t have a forklift licence at the time. I have also applied to Domino’s Pizza Place down in ‘Rayborn’ but I haven’t heard back from them.

Paul

Jobs are hard to get, school is better

I left school about two months after you interviewed me last year. That was in Semester 2, 2012. I just couldn’t hack it any more. I was very unhappy. Basically I dropped out because I couldn’t get along with the teacher and the other students in the class just mucked around so much. I was repeating the year and they just seemed so immature. I couldn’t focus on my studies. I then spent 6 months at home and got really bored. I handed out resumes to heaps of places but didn’t get any work. Then I decided to apply to go to TAFE to do a course in Children’s Services. I got accepted. They knew me from when I was at school doing TAFE units.

Morgan

Permanency would be good

I’m happy with where I am now but I would like to get more hours and make it more of a permanent job. If I have my hours cut back I might have to look around for another job but at least I have got some experience behind me. Permanency would be good because it’s the best job ever.

Chantelle
Lucas’s narrative offers some important insights into how we might begin to rethink policy and practice in more socially just ways, for example:

1. There needs to be much greater recognition of how students’ lives are shaped by broader structural and institutional problems beyond their control. Shifts in the global labour market and the pursuit of free labour market policies are having a disproportionate impact on young people’s lives.

2. Policy makers, politicians and business leaders need to desist from blaming young people for the problems of the economy especially unemployment and instead, identify strategies for assisting youth into well-paid, secure and decent jobs.

3. Schools need to be better connected to the life-world of students—their language, culture, experience and interests in order develop a relevant, rigorous and meaningful curriculum.

4. Schools need to be more responsive to the kinds of capabilities students require for the 21st century especially the ability to negotiate their identities in a rapidly changing and complex world.

5. Education systems should show a greater willingness to support innovation in school design and pedagogy linked to real world problems rather than mandating ‘one size’ fits all models of schooling.

6. Schools and communities need to work together in radically new ways to guarantee all students a smooth school-to-work transition.

Reflective Questions

1. How have shifts in the global economy impacted on job opportunities in your local school community?
2. What evidence is available? How accurate is it?
3. What does the data reveal? What isn’t revealed?
4. What are the assumptions underpinning current policy responses?
5. Are they working? For whom? From whose point of view?
6. Whose problem is youth unemployment anyway?
7. What are the obstacles and barriers students face in ‘getting a job’?
8. How might we think differently about the problem?
9. What can be done?
Building cultural capital

Family are important to me

My parents are very big on study. They want me to do well at school and would like me to go on to university, but they will support me with whatever I decide to do. Most of what I know about paramedics has come from talking to my mum who is in the medical industry.

When we first interviewed Joanne in Year 10 she had definite goals set for her future; ‘I know I want to go on to university and do something to do with people’ she told us. With the encouragement and support of her family, Joanne was confident of what was required to help her achieve these goals. She attends a private co-education school and has the cultural capital – knowledge, taste, disposition, ways of thinking and acting - to succeed at school and the world of work (Bourdieu, 1979). Joanne explains, ‘what keeps me coming back to school is the fact that I like school and need to finish my studies’. Joanne is clear about how she will find her pathway to study paramedics. Identifying her personal abilities and resources are a major component of this journey:

I like Human Biology and I’m good at maths. I enjoy being around people more than sitting around in an office. I don’t want an office job. I like meeting people and I think it’s important to be able to interact with them.

A significant proportion of Joanne’s resourcefulness comes from the advantage of a supportive family who she confirms ‘are very important to me’ many times throughout the years we interviewed her. She elaborates:

A lot of kids have gone to the career counsellor but I just have never really bothered. I don’t know anyone who has done the paramedics course. We have a career counsellor and seminars that give you advice but I’ve got most support from my family.

Joanne turns to her mother for career information and gains valuable relational skills and experience when working part-time in her family’s own small business. Joanne is also able to experience some reality checks about certain careers as she realises that this work is periodic and has to rely on flexible hours and weekend work. ‘It’s not something I would follow as a career. I need to do something that I enjoy but I have to be realistic. Maybe nursing is an option’.

Along this trajectory, Joanne has been fortunate to work with her parents and the flexibility afforded to her. The work experience fits in neatly with school and this means her chances of doing well are not jeopardised. As she confirms, ‘I don’t have set hours. I’m lucky to have such flexible arrangements. Our business is very seasonal. Also mum can adjust my hours if I have a lot of school work.’ Robinson (1999) reports that students still at secondary school, who are working in part-time or casual jobs reported higher levels of satisfaction with their
lives than other students, ‘particularly with regard to their social lives, their independence and the money they had each week’. In addition, Joanne’s parents have encouraged a spirit of community service: ‘Yesterday, I worked with a group of disabled kids in a sport activity. I enjoyed it a lot. Mum was a bit worried about how I would deal with these kids but I was fine’.

Undoubtedly, the cultural resources of Joanne’s family have created opportunities that are not readily available to a lot of students especially those from low socioeconomic backgrounds. While school may have played a part in Joanne’s identity formation her values and dispositions have been largely shaped by her family circumstances. As Joanne confirms, ‘I am learning a number of things from the family business—like meeting different people, planning and preparing for gatherings and looking out for people’. Joanne’s supportive family environment has enabled her to develop social networks and personal dispositions highly valued by school and employers.

When we interviewed Joanne in upper school she was even more prepared and reflective about her career choice:

*I’m hoping to get into paramedics. I know you have to deal with some distressing things in this work but the gory side of it doesn’t bother me too much. Hopefully I can cope with the mental side of things.*

By the beginning of her final year of schooling, Joanne had found where she needed to go, what steps were required to achieve her career goal, and a backup plan:

*I need to go to Curtin University and get a degree in nursing first. So that way I kind of come out with two qualifications and something to fall back on. I would still love to do an exchange in Europe but I don’t think it’s going to happen because it’s going to take me seven years to get to paramedics anyway so I don’t really want to delay it.*

In 2014, we learn that ‘school finished really well’ for Joanne, ‘much better than I expected’. This success has led to Joanne entering university to study what she desired, a Bachelor of Nursing with the ‘plan to then carry on to paramedics after I’ve been registered for a couple years’. She has also kept her options open for the future, ‘I am not entirely sure if I’ll stick to that or specialise in some area of nursing’.

Key issues

Some important issues arise from Joanne’s narrative:

1. ‘Parental involvement and expectations can help to raise the educational outcomes of their children’ (Circelli & Oliver, 2012, p. 23): Some students do well at school because they come from supportive middle class families that have the cultural capital to help them succeed at school and navigate their career options. Lareau (2011) terms this ‘concerted cultivation’ as parents learn to draw out their children’s talents and skills. In general, middle class families feel more comfortable in dealing with their children’s school and feel a greater sense of entitlement, while working-class families feel much more ‘uncomfortable and constrained’ (p. 243). It happens to be the case that the knowledge, values and behaviours that characterise the middle and upper classes are the same as those required as one progresses through the education system. Unfortunately, the converse applies to the predispositions of students from working class backgrounds (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977).

2. ‘People live in communities which require fairness, trust and cooperation for survival’ (ACIRRT, 1999):

‘No workplace is an island and the social relationships which people foster are always found both inside and outside the workplace’ (p. 9). Students who are confident in interacting with people build relational and networking skills that place them in good stead for entering the labour market. When, for whatever reason, young people lack the cultural resources to succeed in school and work then schools and communities need to find innovative ways to expand their experiences, language, culture and aspirations to ensure all students receive a fair go. The adage that it takes a village to raise a child is, therefore, absolutely essential to building cultural capital and opening up new possibilities. This involves, working collaboratively with the strengths and assets of young people in order to reduce the distance between their class culture and the dominant culture of the education system (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977).

3. Communication between agencies working with young people is important: Schools, families and communities must work together to create a holistic approach to education and training with an emphasis on inter-agency collaboration and sharing of knowledge across the community. The primary focus is on student welfare and support within a strong ethic of care and integration of services. Whilst, the notion of the full service school has considerable appeal at the rhetorical level, long-term viability is contingent on improving the economic and social conditions within communities. In short, schools by themselves cannot alleviate the escalating levels of youth unemployment, homelessness, poverty and welfare dependency in Australia.
There is some communication taking place

This is where Jill ("The Link" teacher) has helped me. I am calmer now and I’m thinking before I talk. She helped me build up my reputation with the teachers. The teacher who suspended me wouldn’t believe that I could go in the higher group. Jill has talked about attendance and anger and she talked to my teachers and there is some communication taking place. She will tell me straight away if I need to improv

#27 Michelle

Now I have a better student-teacher relationship

I know which teachers to go to if I need help with studying and all that. Once all I’d think about is just not going to school or wagging school and just running amok, and getting in trouble, and not caring. But now I try and avoid every situation that I know is going to get me in trouble. I love my year 10 teacher. She’s really, really nice to me and I think she’s seen my improvements and is always willing to help me with studying or tutoring

#27 Michelle

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1 The Link is a pseudonym for a government funded program, established in the 1980’s in Australia with the “vision to empower people and build communities through self-sufficiency, social inclusion, practical training and enhanced employment opportunities.”
Rethinking policy and practice

Reflective Questions

1. How does cultural capital influence the success of different classes of students at school?
2. Why is this important in terms of how schools think and act?
3. What skills, strengths and assets do students already bring to school?
4. To what extent are young people’s talents and creative energies recognized, or not in schools?
5. How can these skills be integrated into the curriculum?
6. What communication channels exist between the school, family and other support agencies that work with students?
7. How can schools, families and service agencies support each other?
8. How can schools help students identify their personal abilities and build a set of resources that will sustain them?

1. Develop curriculum that is more responsive to the individual lives, language, experience, dreams and aspirations of students.
2. Build social networks that expand educational and vocational pathways for young people.
3. Assist young people to identify and use the social networking skills that they already have.
4. Identify skills and assets that young people bring to school. Use and integrate these into learning programs, curriculum and assessment.
5. Schools, families and communities work collaboratively to expand career experiences, planning, mentoring and advice.
6. Provide opportunities for young people to shape their communities through internships in workplaces based on students’ strengths and interests linked to school curriculum.
7. Open important communication channels between different agencies working with young people. Form alliances based around the needs of each and every student.
Developing skills, abilities and capabilities

The school doesn’t get it

I teach karate and I go to other countries and compete and do shows and things. I’ve been doing this for 8 years and I got my black belt when I was just 12 years old. My family got us involved in karate from an early age. My brother has just been over to the Commonwealth games. Eventually I want to have my own karate club but I want to do other stuff as well like becoming a teacher or working with animals. I haven’t really decided yet. I really love karate and I want to be the best in my age group. I don’t have time to do a part time job because I put in over 10 hours of karate a week. I teach at the local club but we don’t get paid for it. The good thing about karate is that it makes me stronger. The club is a family environment and the people are good. We learn all about the martial art of karate and the history behind it. It helps you with anger management. I don’t know what I would have been like without it. "The thing I like about karate is the competition, the winning and learning new things. The school doesn’t get it. They don’t like it when I go away for competitions and leave school because we are not going away with the school. This year it will happen a lot. When we travel we are usually away for a week at a time. This year it’s Sydney, Tasmania and maybe Canada. I’m in a sport that is not really part of their curriculum. If I was in soccer or basketball they would be a little more lenient.

It appears that Karen and her peers have little say in the choice of subjects and courses they wish to undertake in the senior secondary years. Decisions about their academic capacities and abilities are made by teachers on the basis of test scores and examination results in the middle years when they are barely 15 years old. Options for different pathways are closed off at a very early stage in their schooling. One of the effects of this sorting process is that many students, especially those from low socioeconomic and backgrounds, are streamed into vocationally oriented programs and consequently have little chance of making it to higher education. Thus schools exert a powerful influence on constructing students chosen pathways and futures. It could be otherwise says Karen: ‘The advice I would like to give to the school is to give students more opportunities to get into courses they are interested in.’

Key issues
1. Building on the skills, abilities and capabilities that young people have acquired from out-of-school learning experiences: Providing students with opportunities to build on and develop their capabilities is a crucial element in preparation for further education, career and civic participation (Oakes & Saunders, 2008).

General capabilities, including literacy, numeracy, information and communication technologies, critical and creative thinking, ethical understandings, and
intercultural understandings, are described as a ‘key dimension in the Australian Curriculum’ (ACARA, 2013, p. 2). From our observations, many young people already possess skills and capabilities acquired through part-time employment, participation in the visual and performing arts, sporting and recreational activities, engagement with social media and digital technologies, household and family responsibilities, and community service. However, despite the moves towards integrated curriculum in some schools, the prevailing model of secondary schooling in Australia incorporates a lock-step approach to learning with discrete subjects and curriculum boundaries. Students need many more opportunities to (a) negotiate aspects of their learning (b) integrate their personal concerns and interests into the curriculum, and (c) deepen the capabilities and skills gained from out-of-school learning experiences.

In a foreword to Moyle’s (2010) report on learning technologies, Professor John Bosco from Western State University comments:

\textit{How distressingly perverse it will be if our young people experience a richer learning environment when they are not in school than when they are in it (v).}

The challenge is to reconceptualise ‘youth as a resource to be nurtured for both social and economic purposes’ rather than a problem’ (Billett, et al., 2010, p. 474).

2. Developing alternatives to traditional pedagogies and assessment practices that stifle creativity, innovation and student engagement: A mandate to develop the creative and critical capacities of students would appear to be out of sync with accountability requirements of schools that focus on traditional forms of testing with an emphasis on recall of information, functional literacy and numeracy attainment, and skill-based competencies (Moyle, 2010). What is called into question here is the broader purposes of schooling. Sahlberg (2009) argues that creativity, risk taking and innovation are not being encouraged in schools because of a belief in the neoliberal doctrine of competition and the market as the best ways to improve education. According to Moyle (2010):

\textit{There are tensions between the economic purpose of education, driven through national and international forces, and the ways in which teaching and learning can be constructed to build students’ general capabilities (p. 60).}

3. Injustices arising from the sorting and streaming of students into vocational or academic courses in traditional high schools need to be challenged and transformed: Students are badly damaged by policies which give them little say in the selection of subjects and educational programs. In Beyond Tracking, Oakes and Saunders (2008) suggest that high schools shut off education and employment pathways for young people by forcing them to choose between academically oriented or vocationally oriented courses in the middle years of schooling. This often leads to students dropping out of school or, being seriously disadvantaged when they change courses. The challenge as they see it is to provide for multiple pathways that cater for the academic and real-world foundations that students require for advanced learning.

\textbf{YouTube: Ken Robinson talks about 3 principles of human flourishing in schools}

http://www.ted.com/talks/ken_robinson_how_to_escape_education_s_death_valley

\textbf{YouTube: Caine’s Arcade}

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=faIFNkdq96U
My family is dumb on computers

I enjoy computing and graphic design and that sort of thing. I’m not sure where my interest in IT came from. My family is dumb on computers. I have to teach them. I’m basically self-taught. We don’t have a lot of computer stuff at home but we have our own laptops at school so we can do Photoshop and that sort of thing. There’s a lot of satisfaction in making something yourself. I made a movie which went for 5 minutes that I did mostly at home in my own time on the weekends. I’ve learnt how to use Photoshop at school.

I’m lucky that I know what I want to do

I left school at end of Year 10. School wasn’t a big help to me and I thought there was no point in doing an ATAR course and going to uni. The school didn’t give me much freedom. Although we had a choice of subjects we had to do English, Maths and Religious Education. Food & Nutrition, Dance and Textiles were the other 3 subjects I studied. Dance was pretty basic and I’d been doing that at home for 6 years. ... So far as leaving school early goes, I would say to other students that if you don’t require a school certificate to get where you want to be then by all means go straight to what you wanted to be doing and just specialize in that alone. I’ve got a lot more knowledge in the area of fashion now than I would have, if I’d have completed year 11 and 12 at school.

Ever since I was little I wanted to be a star

I want to become an actor or a news broadcaster. I actually got all the information about [the Performing Arts Academy] yesterday. You have an audition as an entry requirement. If I don’t get into it I could always become a drama teacher. At school I’m in the performing arts and music programs. I’m studying Drama, Music, After School Drama (a club), English, Maths, Science and SOSE. My worst subject is Maths. Ever since I was little I wanted to be a star.
Rethinking policy and practice

Reflective Questions

1. Learning is not limited to classrooms. How can the skills, abilities and capabilities students acquire through out-of-school learning experiences be integrated more purposefully into the curriculum?

2. A great deal of emphasis is attached to the acquisition of narrow skill based competencies. What might schools do to engage students in more rigorous forms of learning that support the development of skills and capabilities that promote civic engagement and a critical awareness of the major issues confronting young people?

3. A binary between applied and academic learning is reinforced through traditional high school structures and practices that stream students according to perceived abilities and aptitudes. How might schools construct ‘multiple pathways’ (Oakes & Saunders, 2008), that enable students to participate in studies that integrate vocational, general and academic learning without shutting down post school options?

4. Traditional ways of teaching and learning are inadequate to the task of educating young people. How might schools generate learning experiences that are (a) challenging, relevant and engaging, and (b) support students to become more independent, resourceful and critically engaged learners (Smyth, Angus, Down & McInerney, 2008)?

5. Opening up the conversation. What might schools do to make young people more aware of the resources, opportunities and programs to further their knowledge of post-school education, training and employment options?

6. Overcoming inequitable practices. How can schools and education systems open up opportunities for all students not just a privileged minority when it comes to the provision of educational programs that extend student’s capabilities and skills?

1. How can schools be more flexible in allowing students like Karen to attend significant events such as the national karate championships?

2. How can students like Karen gain recognition and accreditation from their schools for their demonstrated achievements, skills and capabilities?

3. How can schools tap into the expertise and knowledge of their students’ skills (such as Karen’s in martial arts) and therefore benefit other students?

4. Who decides what constitutes the ‘official’ school curriculum in schools? Why are some programs/courses/subjects privileged over others? Which groups of students stand to gain or lose most from these arrangements?

5. Why are students so disempowered when it comes to making decisions about the selection of subjects and educational programs? What does this say about student choice and voice?

6. How can issues of career choice become a topic of conversation in schools for students like Karen? What are the consequences of not having these conversations?
Part 2: Rethinking the conditions for young people ‘Getting a Job’

Creating hospitable places for learning

I was told that timetable and course issues don’t allow me this choice

Media Studies is offered at the school and I was hoping that I could drop out of Industry Links and do a proper media course but I’ve been advised not to do that because it’s a bit difficult moving out of this program into another one. I was told that timetable and course issues don’t allow me to make this choice.

Adrian was far from a model student, and he was less than clear about what he wanted to get out of school. We only interviewed him once, but on that one conversation we obtained a clear sense of how he was not that different in many respects from a lot of other young people. Because of his fairly relaxed attitude that ‘if I do the course a job will follow’, problems were bound to follow, and they did.

After commencing a TAFE construction course at his high school because he saw getting a job in the trades as preferable to pursuing academic studies, he thought ‘it would be easy to get work in that field’. Work experience quickly changed his mind on that, and upon returning to school he decided to try his hand at media studies, largely because he had a mate doing that course. Here things became much more difficult than Adrian expected. He thought it would be a simple process to ‘drop out of the construction program’ and into the media program but was advised that ‘timetable and course issues don’t allow me to make that choice’.

He informed us that added to this he ‘has a few more hurdles to overcome before I get into this course’, that had to do with less than satisfactory grades that year and the fact that ‘I’m a bit lazy and I haven’t handed my work in on time’. He was prepared to admit that ‘I’ve been mucking about this semester. I have quarrelled with the head of department over a few issues and also run into trouble with my teacher—mostly about not doing the work’.

What seems to not be able to be taken into the account in his new choice of program, is that Adrian, possibly somewhat belatedly, has found a way to connect what he wants to study, with his interests out of school, and is even stacking shelves in a supermarket from 4.00-9.00 to save the money to purchase photographic equipment. He told us ‘I would like to travel overseas. I reckon there’s bound to be something in the media that will open up some possibilities here—taking photographs of various locations etc.’

Key Issues

1. ‘Bottom feeders’ are easily pushed around: Lack of clarity, even at the fairly tender of age 16 years, does make some young people in particular much easier to manoeuvre in terms of career programs. It is much harder to do this in schools where middle class parents have strong views of where they want their children to go and pursued the ‘concerted cultivation’ (Lareau, 2003) to make this happen.
2. It’s all up to you, and you wear the blame if it doesn’t work out: One of the lessons seemingly to be taught is that schools are not there solely for the students, and a standout example of this is in the case of Adrian, where students are told they have to find their own work placements, because if they don’t the school will, and it comes with no guarantees as to appropriateness. This can be a fraught process because negotiating these arrangements with employers requires a set of skills that are often beyond many teenagers—especially their understanding of the complex conditions of the labour market.

3. It is the student that has to flex, not the school: Where the desires of students and those of the school are severely out of sync, what inevitably follows are relationship problems between students and teachers, students become distracted, they become argumentative with teachers, and they end up wearing the blame for what is a really a scheduling problem.

Other student comments

They should offer more help

My grades at the moment are 1 A’s, 4 B’s and 2 C’s. I think the school should make more options available to students. They should also offer more help, like special classes, to support students who struggle. The rules and regulations put some people off: “Who cares about the rules”.

“You have to give it a try”

My science teacher said that I wouldn’t be able to cope with Stage 2 Biology this year but I’m doing it and it’s good. My feeling is that if you are not coping you can always change but you have to give it a try.

I just stayed at home

I just stayed at home. There was no particular reason, I just didn’t like it and it was boring. My granddad is Chinese and we would go camping a lot. He has taught me heaps. My reading and stuff is okay. I like to fix boats and cars and things like that. I’m into mechanics—motorized bikes, petrol remote cars with the X box. Micro Soft didn’t make them properly so I fix them up as well. My granddad taught me these things. He’s from China. He used to be a mechanic, a woodchopper person and an electrician. School kept me away from my granddad. He’s really important to me. I’m not doing any TAFE subjects at the moment. I don’t need any more qualifications and experience because I know it all. I can pull motors apart.
4. The students’ interests are secondary: Students like Adrian are still trying to work out who they are and where they want to go with their lives. The fact that they have a passion or an interest ought to be a signal to the school that this is something to be captured and built upon, rather than ignored. Adrian was clearly committed to wanting to make something of himself in the field of photography, even to the point of working long hours shelf stacking in a supermarket to earn money to purchase equipment. The obvious question here is—how come his school was seemingly unaware of this?

The school didn’t give me much freedom
I’ve always been interested in sewing and I do dancing… I wanted to get my career started early so I decided to do a TAFE course… I was not very academic at school. I’m more of a hands-on person. I just didn’t need to know advanced chemistry or anything like that… I left school at end of Year 10. School wasn’t a big help to me and I thought there was no point in doing an ATAR course and going to uni. The school didn’t give me much freedom.

I’m studying for a Bachelor of Arts
At the moment, I’m studying for a Bachelor of Arts, in fashion at university. I’m in my first year of a 3 year course. It’s going well but it’s pretty full on. Before coming to uni I completed my Cert 4 and diploma in applied fashion and technology at TAFE. That took me 2 years.

School helped me with basic life skills but nothing else
School helped me with basic life skills but nothing else. School wasn’t a very happy experience for me. I dunno whether my parents were very successful at school. Today I’m doing some group thing with The Link. We have to go to Centrelink and pick up a health care card so I can go to the chemist and fill out a prescription. It’s not really a busy day but in comparison to other days it’s a big day. Mostly we don’t have much to do at all.

YouTube: Neil Postman talks about the purposes of schooling
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GslzLHrve2M
Adrian highlights once again, the absolute importance of creating schools as hospitable places for learning. This means a preparedness to put the needs of students first, being flexible and responsive, building relationships based on respect, trust and care and providing opportunities to engage with the adult world. It involves policies and practices that can do some of the following:

1. There needs to be much greater emphasis on listening to students and less emphasis on doing what is tidy or the most convenient for schools and the education system.

2. It is eminently possible and cost-effective to construct learning experiences around the interests of students, and to still have rigorous standards of literacy. It requires imagination!

3. When students dislike school, find it boring or irrelevant, then relationship and behaviour management problems emerge. Having an engaging and interesting curriculum for all students should be the paramount concern.

4. To achieve the above, there needs to be a radical shift so that the student is the centre of interest, not national and international school performance on league tables, or other extraneous considerations.

Reflective Questions

1. Why should students be manoeuvred into courses they do not want to do, especially vocational ones?

2. Why should students have to invest large amounts of emotional energy proving to schools that they are right and schools are wrong, in terms of subject choices?

3. Where students do have vocational aptitudes, why is it that schools sometimes fail to recognise this and capture it so as to produce a relevant set of learning experiences for the student?

4. Why do transitions between education sectors have to be so difficult, especially for students who make (or are forced to make) inappropriate early choices?

5. How much responsibility should schools be required to wear for wasted young lives, when young people get lost in what they see as the inappropriateness of schooling?
Part 2: Rethinking the conditions for young people ‘Getting a Job’

Moving beyond the self-fulfilling prophecy of streaming

After seeing what my life would be like in a trade
I think I can do better than that

School is better for me now because I’ve changed from a VET course to doing ATAR subjects. In year 10 I started an ATAR course with some of the hardest subjects. Then I got tired of study I guess and went into the VET program. It was so easy but I should have just gone into mainstream. I was doing 6 subjects in Year 11 but this year I am doing four Level 2 and 3 so I can get into uni. I decided to make the shift after doing work experience in the VET area. It was labour work and I decided I didn’t want to do that. Now I want to study psychology at uni but whether my scores will let me do that or not I don’t know. What interests me about psychology is the study of human behaviour. I found that subject just so fascinating. (#1 Joe)

Joe’s career aspirations have changed during the course of his senior secondary years. In year 10 he was locked into a VET course but decided to move into the academic stream in year 11 where he found it very difficult to cope with the demands. Joe explained how a decision to specialize in VET studies in Year 10 had left him poorly prepared for academic learning when he changed to an ATAR course in Year’s 11 and 12. In his words, ‘It was a waste of a year’. Having decided that the trades were not for him, Joe was keen to study psychology at university but his ATAR score fell well short of what was required to gain entry. Joe said his ‘ATAR scores were quite bad and not enough to get into uni at all’. Joe explains some of the hurdles he faced in the following extract:

I hope to become a psychologist. I must admit I haven’t met any psychologists. I became interested in the subject last year. When I got into it I wanted to do it so much more. It’s a 1A subject so we don’t have exams for it but I’m riding on 82% which is good. But for a 1A subject I get more work. I’m doing well in Career and Computing but Maths and English are a bit difficult because of last year. Now I have a tutor for maths and that is helping a lot. My family is under the impression that my future is my choice and I’m not being pressured at all. They support me and think it’s all a good idea that I want to study psychology. I don’t think it will be easy to get into uni. Going into ATAR Maths was very difficult. I was on 40% after semester one so I had to pick up my game. If there were 3C levels required it would be easier but because I am doing 2C it will be harder. That’s one of the main reasons I won’t get into uni after high school straight away, but then I’ll take another path until I get in. I really regret doing the VET course. … If I don’t get into uni I will do a year at TAFE and then do Behavioural Science at uni or something like that. I don’t know what career I would go for after that but I am determined to do psychology though.
Despite doing poorly in ATAR, Joe displayed considerable determination and persistence as he tried to make something of his schooling. Undeterred, he explored alternative pathways to university, initially through the portfolio entry systems that operate at two universities and then, following a friend’s advice, enrolling at another university’s pre-enabling program known as UniPath. If he satisfies all the UniPath assessment requirements he will be able to embark on his psychology course at university in the second semester of 2012.

Despite a rather patchy school record Joe has shown a great deal of persistence and initiative in pursuing alternative pathways to become a clinical psychologist. When interviewed in March 2012 he had commenced a 14 week pre-university enabling program, known as UniPath. Joe satisfied the assessment requirements and commenced a psychology course at the university in the second semester of 2012. He has struggled with some aspects of the course and has reduced the units of study but he continues to hang in with university. When asked to reflect on his experience of schooling, Joe talked about the low expectations some teachers had of his ability, the support he received from others, the motivating forces behind his career aspirations and what he has learnt about clinical psychology from recent work experience with autistic children.

I was in the process of constructing my portfolio for one university when my friend, who is a student at another university, said that they have an alternative entry called UniPath. It’s only 14 weeks in length. There are several steps: an application form, an interview and after that if they want you to come back they will ask you to come back for a workshop. I thought I would have to write an essay but it was just answering questions. Once you are in you start the program. I’ve just finished module 1 and finished week 4. If you are in the UniPath program you automatically get into the course of your choice—in my case psychology—although I would have preferred to finish high school and go straight to uni. I didn’t want to do TAFE because that is a year in time. UniPath is great. I just love it. After seeing what my life would be like in a trade I think I can do better than that.

Looking back over my schooling I would say to other students that it’s important to follow your passion and do what you really believe in. My brother for example, left school in year 11 to do a linesman apprentice and he has been doing that for four years. He did it because it is what my Dad did. He has only just finished and he is bored and says sometimes that he does not really like what he is doing. I say to him sometimes, well why don’t you just change? I think it is quite sad, as he is stuck in it. Students have to find what they are passionate about and follow that course. I was lucky to find that out in Year 11 before I started in Year 12. And not give up because it does get really hard. My Year 12 results were horrible and it looked like I would not able to follow that plan. I had some teachers in Year 12 who were not very encouraging. A couple of them suggested that I should not do psychology because they thought I couldn’t manage it. To hear that from your own teachers feels pretty horrible as they should encourage their students. But there were teachers who helped me as well. Ms Jones (the careers officer) stood out because she took time with me. It is easy for teachers to say ‘why don’t you just do this and then that leads to that… but she got resources together and explained the options to me. She got me contacts and people to talk to which most kids don’t do in their spare time. So to have someone like that just say ‘give them a call’ it is not going to hurt and you might find out what you want to do. It is so hard to find teachers that are passionate.
Joes’ story raises important issues about the importance of student agency, teacher expectations, vocational counselling and the impact of streaming students too early. Joe is determined to make a success of his career and urges other students to follow their passion and do what they really believe in. When we approached Joe again in March 2014 he indicated there had been a major shift in his career direction:

As for what I’m doing with myself, I had a major change in career pathway! Finished my first year of psychology and decided it wasn’t right for me. I deferred for a semester and began studying a diploma of interior design at central TAFE in the city © hoping to go from that to interior architecture at uni.

Key Issues

1. Students need a well-rounded education that combines academic and manual learning: Oakes and Saunders (2008) argue that traditional high schools shut off education and employment pathways for young people far too early by forcing them to choose between academically oriented and vocationally oriented courses in the middle years of schooling. This often leads to students dropping out of school or, in Joe’s case, being seriously disadvantaged when he tried to change courses. The challenge as they see it is to ‘go beyond’ the ‘tired debate between academic and vocational education’ and the traditional practice of streaming students into different high school courses. Instead, the focus should be on developing multiple pathways ‘that provide both the academic and real-world foundations students need for advanced learning, training and preparation for responsible civic participation’ (p. 6). Such approaches would require a ‘radical reworking of the traditional high school’ including:
   - non-traditional structures e.g., career academies, small autonomous schools, magnet programs, small learning communities and occupational training centers;
   - integrated curricula e.g., project-based learning and other engaging instructional strategies;
   - innovative teaching and assessment practices e.g., expert mentors, realistic workplace simulations, authentic learning tasks and exhibitions;
   - different placement strategies e.g., internships and;
   - quite different assumptions about what students can accomplish in high school and beyond as well as alternative admission to post compulsory institutions (pp. 6-7).

2. The social practice of streaming may not always be in the best interests of students: Students like Joe, (and Karen and Adrian below) highlight how streaming works in schools and in ways that may not always be in their best interests. At the end of year 10 students receive official recommendations based on their subject marks. There appears to be little room for negotiation. Some students choose to leave school whilst others feel they have no right to challenge subject selection. For some students the possibility of studying Stage 2 ATAR courses is not possible because these subjects are not offered and instead, students are encouraged to study Stage 1 courses with implications for the future career pathways. Irrespective of school decisions around subject selection and streaming, many students flourish because they are willing to pursue their passions and interests and make the system work for them. Thus, schools exert a powerful influence on students’ imagined futures as they construct educational pathways and career options based on the artificial division between academic and non-academic students. Almost a century ago, John Dewey (1944/1916) warned about the dangers of an education that leads to ‘direct’ trade training and a narrowing of the curriculum:

   To predetermine some future occupation for which education is to be a strict preparation is to injure the possibilities of present development and thereby to reduce the adequacy of preparation for a future right employment’ (p. 310).

3. Opening up opportunities for the least advantaged: The division between academic and vocational education and training is premised on the assumption that schools should develop a practical and job orientated curriculum for ‘non-academic’ students because of their perceived intellectual inferiority. Historically, vocationally orientated curriculum has been used to restrict the numbers of students climbing the educational ladder previously reserved for the upper and middle classes, on the grounds that the ‘masses would ‘lower standards’, ‘threaten ‘excellence’, and impede the progress of the academic elite’ (Bessant, 1989, p. 70). As Connell (1993) puts it, schools are very ‘busy institutions’ involved in the ‘production of social hierarchies’ by ‘steering … young people towards different educational and economic fates’ (p. 27). Thus, schools are caught up in a process of ‘rationing education’ and producing ‘ever widening inequalities associated with gender, ethnic origin and social class’ (Gillborn & Youdell, 2000, p. 1). As the critics argue, vocational education and training has some major shortcomings:
• It has segregated the poor and minority youth into a curriculum that reduces their access to high skill, high status, high-pay careers
• It teaches skills that are obsolete in a rapidly changing economy
• Its instruction is narrow
• Its image revolves around a picture of students working with their hands and not their minds
• It leads too often to nonprestigious jobs (Kincheloe, 1999, pp. 138-139).

As Australian schools become increasingly stratified and residualised there is a danger that public schools in poorer neighbourhoods are confined to offering vocational programs as a means of encouraging working-class children not to drop out of school while keeping them from receiving an academic education (Oakes, 2005, p. 153). The challenge ahead is to find ways of integrating academic and vocational learning so that all students can learn to use material and conceptual tools in authentic activities. Kincheloe (1995) believes that vocational education approached in this way is not only more respectful of the intellectual and creative potential of all learners but recognises that crafts and trades involve higher orders of intellect. Importantly, it refuses ‘to validate the common assumption within the culture of formal education that the theoretical ways of knowing of the academic disciplines are innately superior to the practical ways of knowing of the vocations’ (p. 270).

YouTube: Suli Breeze ‘I will not let an exam result decide my fate’ (Slam Poetry)
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D-eVF_G_p-Y
Most students are not able to get in the higher stages or into the subjects they want

The issue of career choices is not really a topic of conversation in our school. I feel optimistic about my future. I would like to have karate as the main part of my life as a job but I know I have to have a job to do that. I have some good mentors, especially at karate. They are older people and it’s their careers. The owner of our club is the president of karate club in Australia. The advice I would like to give to the school is to give students more opportunities to get into courses they are interested in. Most students are not able to get in the higher stages or into the subjects they want. I would be motivated to be one of the top students if I could have the opportunity to study a subject like human biology that I fought to do against their recommendation. I would study it every day. But I wouldn’t have the guts to go up to them [the school authorities] and say that I wanted to do a subject against their advice. A lot of my friends are frustrated by this process. That’s why they have left.

I was told that timetable and course issues don’t allow me to make this choice

When I joined Industry Links I just wanted to get a job in the trades. Originally I chose TAFE Construction because I thought it would be easy to get work in the field. But after work experience I realized it was not as great as I thought it would be so I decided that I wanted to get into Media Studies. I’ve always been interested in movies. This change won’t delay my graduation this year because as long as I pass my Construction course and do the work placement I will get through the year. I’ll have two more years at school including this year. I became interested in media through an older friend who’s doing the course. He’s been making movies and says it’s really good. If I’m accepted I’ll probably do a media course at Perth TAFE. As to what career possibilities may open up, I’ve not really done any research but I figure something will come up after I’ve done the course. My mum’s been very supportive. She’d rather I be doing something I enjoy doing than just any old job.
Joe’s story alerts us to the twin problems associated with streaming students too early in high school and the artificial division between academic and vocational courses. Joe, Karen and Adrian’s experience suggests that these social practices whilst administratively convenient may not always be in the best interests of students especially those from ‘disadvantaged’ school communities. For these reasons there are strong grounds for rethinking policy and practice:

1. There needs to be a greater emphasis given to the integration of academic (high status) and vocational (low status) knowledge in real world contexts. Only then can we begin to appreciate the usefulness of academic skill in addressing real life problems and at the same time, how vocational activity involves higher order thinking and creativity.

2. All students irrespective of social class, ethnicity or gender have a right to access academic knowledge because it leads to high status, high skilled and high paid careers.

3. Academic and vocational knowledge should be equally valued because both involve high orders of intellect.

4. There needs to be a ‘radical reworking of the traditional high school’ (Oakes & Saunders, 2008) to ensure that all students are exposed to innovative, personalised and authentic real world learning tasks.

Reflective Questions

1. What do these stories reveal about the process of subject selection, and career choices? Who benefits? Whose interests are served?

2. What assumptions underpin the social practice of streaming? Where do they come from?

3. What are the arguments for and against streaming of students? Where do you stand? Why?

4. Why is there a reluctance to critically engage with the academic-vocational distinction in schools?

5. How can schools foster integration between academic and vocational learning? How can it assist students’ learning and career aspirations? How might schools have to change?
It was the worst year

I was in Year 9 and I hated it. I dislocated my arm and then I broke my foot. I had glandular fever and was off school most of the year. My dad was in and out of jail and he used to bash my Mum. I tried out drugs then. I would only go to one or two lessons a day and then I would get screamed at. Now I am on tablets for ADHD but I think I’ve stuffed up my sleeping pattern.

Michelle has been interested in nursing from a young age and has had lots of personal experience in the medical field as her mother had a kidney removed and Michelle herself has had reoccurring kidney infections. Her father has been in an out of jail and during that time Michelle experimented with illicit drugs. She stopped doing so when she realised that her fitness was more important in achieving her future career choice to be a paramedic or a nurse. Michelle was working part time at a fast food store but it was not a job she wanted to do for the rest of her life. When we last interviewed Michelle, her goal was to pass Year 12 and go to university. Initially, she wanted to be an architect but then realised she sought a career where she could ‘help people; I want to be known. I want to be a hero’ she told us. However, she also stated ‘I do have some problems to overcome if I’m going to achieve my goal’.

During Year 9, Michelle says her grades ‘were pretty bad because of my absences but the comments were good. I had iron deficiencies and broken bones and things so I handed in all my medical certificates. That’s why they wrote the comments so that I could achieve better grades’.

When it came time for Michelle to transition from Year 10 into upper school she commented that ‘teachers sorted us into two grades—people in the higher class and the lower class. I am in the higher class but I think it’s still too easy’. Michelle believed that the health and domestic issues plaguing her and her family were a major obstacle and that if only she could perform and improve her grades then she would achieve her career goal.

Regardless of performance and grades in lower school, Michelle did not gain entry into the university bound ATAR course at school. Initially, she was placed in the ATAR course until she became ill again and because of her past reputation as ‘underperforming’ she was advised that the subjects would be too challenging for her. Michelle was angry and frustrated by this decision and unsurprisingly it soon escalated to the point where her reputation as a capable student deteriorated rapidly. ‘Someone would do something wrong but I got the blame’ she says. Michelle was placed on medication for ADHD that lead to further complications because the tablets interfered with her sleeping pattern. In her words, ‘I go to sleep at the wrong time… I am always tossing and turning at 4 am’. As a consequence, she was late for school most mornings. Given the school’s inability to deal with these issues, Michelle decided to make a fresh start at another school (at least 50 km from her home).
Michelle attended her new school for one semester during Year 11. The challenge of public transport (walking to and from train stations, a long train ride, and buses to and from stations to school) and having to make new friends and adjust to teachers she did not know was overwhelming. She returned to her old school the following semester. Even though her former school experience was not ideal, at least she knew ‘which teachers to go to if I need help with studying and all that’. Unfortunately, Michelle turned to both illicit and prescriptive drugs and withdrew to the back of the classroom in order to cope with school. Michelle elaborates:

Sitting still and studying can be hard if what I’m learning is boring or I already know it, or it’s too basic. Usually I just sit around staring and shaking my leg. But if it’s really interesting, then I’ll just keep my head down and listen to the teacher. I try to isolate myself from people in class so I can concentrate. I’ve changed. It used to be that I was the kid in the class who got blamed if someone did something wrong. Now I’m the last person to be blamed because I’m always in the back by myself doing my work.

**Key issues**

Michelle’s narrative is truly complex and highlights yet again the unequal starting points many young people have to overcome in their lives. Michelle’s circumstances shed light on four main issues in relation to ‘getting a job’:

1. **Personal, family and health circumstances impact on schooling and career aspirations:** Michelle’s story reveals a great deal about the ways in which personal, family and health related problems interfere with school completion and the likelihood of ‘getting a job’. The complex circumstances surrounding Michelle’s life proved too much for her and like many students she was unable to cope with the rigidity and boredom of schooling. When students like Michelle view personal and educational difficulties as ‘their fault’ then there is often little expectation that school can or will help them to succeed in their lives. Michelle’s circumstances shed light on four main issues in relation to ‘getting a job’:

2. **Establishing a sense of identity and self-worth is essential to success in school, careers and life:** Students like Michelle are struggling to find their place in the world. School is one of the few places left where young people can explore where they fit and who they are. Importantly, school should be a place where students develop the kinds of attributes, knowledge and capabilities required to succeed in school, work and family life. Michelle’s story is a timely reminder that schools must be concerned with much more than the ‘academics’. For students, their priority is about establishing relationships and connections with peers and learning to navigate the adult world with all its complexity. This is largely a relational activity in which students learn how to make sense of and negotiate the complex demands of their life both inside and outside of school. In short, students are ‘becoming somebody’ (Wexler, 1992) in ways that are ‘socially constructed, fluid and multifaceted’ (Nairn et al. 2012) and always in relationship with others. Viewing schools as relational sites is, therefore, absolutely pivotal to the task of producing good citizens and smart workers (Bingham & Sidorkin, 2004; Ainley & McKenzie, 2007).

3. **Streaming students’ works against the best interests of the least advantaged:** Streaming students on the basis of grades in the competitive academic curriculum functions to reinforce educational inequality for the least advantaged (Connell, 1993; Teese & Polese, 2003). Michelle explains how this works in her school: ‘teachers sorted us into two grades—people in the higher class and the lower class’. Irrespective of students’ circumstances, the desire of schools to improve their statistical performance on standardised tests overrides the needs of students like Michelle. If education is only concerned with academic grades and performance based on externally imposed standards designed for university entry then opportunities to engage students and expand their learning in creative, rigorous and meaningful ways is squeezed out. By considering the complex lives of students—their individual needs, desires and aspirations, then it is much harder to categorise them into academic and non-academic classes. Rather, the focus is on what is in the best interests of each student—emotionally, intellectually, and socially. In Michelle’s case, the question becomes what does she need to realise her dream of becoming a paramedic and how can the school help?

4. **Working with students’ strengths:** Michelle’s story illustrates what school reformers have been arguing for a long time—genuine school reform must start with the needs of kids. The problem, according to school principals like George Wood (2005), is that ‘the basic shape of the high school goes unquestioned’ and as a consequence remains ‘unchanged … because we would rather blame the kids than take on the hard work of restructuring our schools’ (p. 33). Wood believes that schools must start from where students are at, for example, Michelle’s interest and experience around care, first aid and determination to become a nurse or paramedic. In this way, Michelle has some ownership and commitment to school based on meaningful activities and relationships (Bottrell, 2011).
Some things at home have made it difficult for me

When I first started school here my Mum was going to jail. I was hanging out with the wrong people. I hardly came to school because I didn’t want to be there- I lost motivation because of all the things that were happening. Life at home wasn’t good and there was the usual fighting.

#24
Jackie

Busy lives, competing demands

I have lots of commitments with drama, band performance and after school work and I may have to cut back on some of them. It is a matter of making sacrifices. I used to be very sporty but now I’ve dropped out of some activities.

#20
Cassandra

The biggest hurdles I face are getting into ‘uni’ and getting out of high school

Our family immigrated to Australia from Sudan in 2003. My parents don’t work. Dad is disabled because of an eye sight problem and Mum is a carer for him. My parents want me to do well at school.

#28
Yasmin
Michelle’s narrative more than most, reminds us of the damaging lives that many students lead through no fault of their own. These problems do not park themselves at the school gate; therefore, schools need to find creative approaches to negotiating complex needs both inside and outside of school.

1. School’s need to be organised in ways that build relationships to support those students in greatest need. This means acknowledging the impact of interpersonal and family relationships on students’ lives when designing and implementing school programs. The question becomes then, how does school culture, structure, organization and pedagogy support students’ lives and experience, especially for the most vulnerable?

2. Schools need to be organised in ways that accommodate the growing number of young people who move between periods of education and training and (un)employment in casual and part-time jobs and do not necessarily follow a linear career trajectory. Schooling should be flexible and tailored to accommodate a range of pathways that suit differing needs and interests at different times.

3. Young people need to be given the space to undertake identity work as a pivotal part of ‘becoming educated’ — morally, ethically, socially and politically. Schools need to accommodate the needs of all students by knowing each student well and using their interests as a starting point for learning and building future career aspirations.

4. Young people need to have opportunities to act in their world through internships in workplaces, participatory action research projects, and creative performance based activities.

5. Blurring the boundaries between academic and vocational learning is an important first step in dismantling social hierarchies of class, knowledge and power. All students must be given opportunities to use material and conceptual tools in authentic activities.

Reflective Questions

1. How might we think differently about young people disengaging from school?

2. What strengths and assets do students bring to school? How do we accommodate them, or not?

3. What structural, curriculum and pedagogical approaches will motivate students like Michelle to stay at school without compromising their identity?

4. What pedagogies will help all students to think critically and assist them to find a job or continue with further study?

5. How can we better work together with young people, their families and their communities to ensure that all young people succeed in school, careers and life?
You need education or you finish up in the fish and chip shop

Joining the navy appeals to me because I want to get away from Roe Reef. I want to travel and its good money. I have an uncle and another relative who enjoyed the navy life. I’m not sure what you have to do to get into the navy. I think you have to complete year 10 and average C’s. School is helping me because you need certificates and that. Jill has also helped me. Without her support I would probably still be wagging and swearing at teachers. What I don’t like about school are the teachers, the uniforms and getting suspended. It makes me angry and upset when they say I am not going to make anything of myself. They don’t have a right to say that. Jill has helped me get back on track. I now see that you need an education to get on in life. You need education or you finish up in the fish and chip shop (#24 Jackie).

Jackie comes from a traditional working class background. Her father is the sole income earner and neither of her parents nor any other members of her family have participated in higher learning. Although she has had something of a chequered career at school, Jackie says that her time with Jill, a teacher in The Links program, opened her eyes to the importance of education. The choice is quite a stark one for her: ‘You need education or you finish up in the fish and chip shop’, she says. Jackie harbours an aspiration to go to university but is realistic to concede that it will be a struggle given her relatively poor academic record. In the second interview with Jackie she was no longer at The Link and instead of planning for a career in the navy has opted to do a Certificate 2 in Tourism hoping this will lead to work as an airhostess or travel agent. Jackie provided some insight into her unhappy school experience and gradually revealed much more about the disruptive impact of family trauma on her life and schooling. She has shown a great deal of resolve and courage in trying to make something of her life often with little outside support.

Importantly, Jackie recognised the changes in herself. ‘I am still the same person’ she says, and adds ‘but I have quietened down a bit’. Despite the chaos in her life, shortcomings in the way in which the school dealt with her problems and the lack of a supportive family, Jackie shows a remarkable degree of fortitude, determination and hope. More than most young people, Jackie has had to navigate some difficult times whilst exploring opportunities to help her transition from school to further education and a decent job. Her sense of agency and determination to make something of her life is quite inspirational.

Going beyond menial, piece rate and poorly paid jobs
Key issues
A number of issues arise from Jackie's story.

1. Students are acutely aware of the link between school and future jobs: Jackie is a good example of what Brown (1987) describes as ‘the ordinary kids’—the students who intend to leave school as soon as possible in the hope of ‘finding a ‘tidy’ (good) working-class job’ (p. 39). These students understand the link between school and becoming an adult, which becomes a powerful reason for ‘making an effort’ and hanging in at school. With the collapse of the youth labour market, however, there is a real danger that ordinary kids ‘no longer believe that school certificates will help them to get jobs they want’ (p. 61). Because they see little relevance in the formal curriculum of school there is insufficient reasons to maintain their commitment to school.

2. The problem is not a lack of aspirations but the knowledge and means to achieve them: Jackie is typical of many students who aspire to getting a good job. She dreamt of going to university, joining the navy and becoming an airhostess. Unfortunately, the harsh realities of life including family trauma, negative experiences of school and lack of family support conspired against her at crucial times in her young life. Research indicates ‘that the problem is not, in fact, a lack of aspiration by either young people or their parents, nor is it a need to make them more aspirational, but rather there is insufficient knowledge and means to make goals achievable’ (Smyth & Wrigley, 2013, p. 120; Goodman & Gregg, 2010; Carter-Wall & Whitfield, 2012). As Carter and Whitfield (2012) express it: ‘What might look like ‘low aspirations’ may often be high aspirations that have been eroded by negative experience’ (p. 4).

3. Good work versus bad work: Young people want to move beyond menial, piece-rate and poorly paid jobs. Jackie’s story raises an important question about what kinds of jobs are realistically available to young people these days? In Jackie’s case she is adamant that she did not want to ‘finish up in the fish and chip shop’. Nonetheless, young people today are being told in no uncertain terms that they must be ‘flexible and not particularly choosy, not to expect too much from jobs’ (Bauman, 2004, p. 10). One of the most common exhortations from politicians is for young people to ‘take any job’ (Ireland, 2014) including ‘casual, insecure, seasonal work such as fruit picking’ in Tasmania (ACTU, 2014). In other words, young people are required to labour as a means of making a living (‘bad work’), rather than seeing work more broadly as ‘a sense of completion and fulfilment’ (‘good work’) (Kincheloe, 1995, p. 66). The key issue here is the extent to which young people have an opportunity to develop a ‘life project’ involving ‘self-esteem’, ‘self-definition’ and ‘long-term security’ (Bauman, 2004, p. 151).

4. Good jobs are disappearing faster than they can be created: Increasingly, the rhetoric of the knowledge economy with its promise of high skilled, high tech and well paid jobs is proving to be an illusion for greater numbers of young people. The reality is that the global economy requires less high skilled, creative and analytic knowledge workers and a growing number of people working in part-time, casualised, and marginal jobs in the service sector (Brown, Green & Lauder, 2001; Furlong & Cartmel, 1997; Aronowitz & DiFazio, 2010). As Sweet (cited in Eckersley, 1988) observed in the 1980s, there is a rapidly growing number of ‘marginal, deskilled, dead-end, casual, part-time jobs that are not linked to training or career paths’ (p. 30).
Other student comments

I’m interested in mechanics, have you got any work?

I’m not working at the moment but I’ve been sending in resumes and letters to say I want to go into jobs—anything on the mechanical side of things. I’m not too sure about applying for an apprenticeship. I’m just going to get a job and if they let me do an apprenticeship I’ll do it there. I’ve put in 6 applications about three weeks ago, 5 around this area and then there’s one down in Inji. Two of the jobs them were advertised and the others were not. I just went up and said ‘I’m interested in mechanics have you got any work?’ I’ve not heard back from them yet. I have to wait until tomorrow and see if I got it and if don’t I’ll go do another one. I haven’t seen any apprenticeships advertised at the moment. I would just like any job in any workshop. I look on the internet and sometimes in the paper for job advertisements. I got one of them from the local paper from the Rayborn Industry area. There was one at Mike’s Tyres I went there and it didn’t happen cos I didn’t have a forklift licence at the time. I have also applied to Dominos Pizza Place down in Rayborn but I haven’t heard back from them.

#32
Paul

I want to make this world a better place

I still love history and I still love to study. I chose a broad area of study because I didn’t want to lock myself into a career pathway. You can always change. So my plan is to do the Literary and Cultural Studies course for three years. In the meantime, I have been looking at health sciences and health promotion which looks really interesting. I did health studies in year 11 and 12 and got the top student prize. It’s something that I know that I can do well. You probably don’t know that the World Health Organisation has eight millennium development goals where they try and stop Aids and things like that. Health promotion has very good connection with the actual industry itself, you can work with the WHO, Cancer Council, Heart Foundation and so on. I did the science at school so I can change over if I want to.

#2
Janine
Jackie’s story highlights some of the tensions schools face in dealing with young people struggling with school, family troubles, and future careers. Each of the stories in this section (Jackie, Paul and Janine) challenge the common sense view that students lack aspirations and instead, help us to locate individual troubles in the wider context of shifts in the global labour market and the ways in which schooling can either enable or constrain their aspirations. Against this backdrop, there are important policy and practice implications:

1. There needs to be a shift in thinking about aspirations as bundles of individual deficits towards a deeper analysis of the changing labour market conditions confronting young people and the institutional arrangements that serve to enable or constrain their ability to find ‘good’ work.

2. All young people should be treated with dignity and respect and above all, deserving of a relevant, rigorous and meaningful education that gives them the best opportunity to succeed in careers and life.

3. Young people need opportunities to explore the world of work with experts and craftsmen who understand the nature of meaningful work, not simply work experience.

4. Governments need to show leadership in conceptualising and supporting the development of a coherent and sustainable youth employment strategy. Ideally, this project should provide an appropriate living wage for young people and a concerted investment in job creation, training schemes and employment conditions.

5. There needs to be a much greater focus on preparing young people for life after school rather than measuring, testing and comparing students around a narrow official curriculum and way of being in school.

Reflective Questions

1. How might my school think differently about student aspirations? Is a lack of aspirations really the problem?

2. To what extent does my school challenge pejorative stereotypes about students’ backgrounds, abilities and capabilities?

3. Is vocationalisation and competencies based job training the answer, to what problem?

4. What kinds of jobs actually exit in my community and beyond?

5. What kinds of knowledge, skills and values are required in the modern workplace?

6. How does my school help students in preparing for post school life?

7. How can students be given opportunities to engage in meaningful (good) work and learning?
Finance is a bit of an issue

Finance is a bit of an issue. My mum works as a carer but a couple of months ago my parents separated. It was and still is a messy breakup. Dad used to be at home with us but he’s not now. There’s been a lot of conflict around all this but we all pulled together around mum. I’m more careful now about how I spend money. My grades did drop off a little bit but school was still a thing that was a big part of our lives really. I’m now working at ‘Big W’ in Admiral about 10 hours a week. I get money and am not overloaded with work and still have time to do my study. My after-school music has stopped and I don’t do martial arts either. I wanted to do both but just got too lazy.

I’m very lucky when it comes to my family stuff

When it comes to the future I’m not the type of person who looks ahead much. I live in the present—whatever happens, happens. My family doesn’t put any pressure on me. They will support me with whatever decision I make. School is helping me along this track. Our year 11 is good. My little plan is to take over the xxx business from dad…I suppose I have a ready-made business to go in to…I think I’m pretty good at selling.

I’m not sure how I feel about my future. I don’t see it sitting in an office. I would like to be out there doing something in the sporting area. A lot of people only focus on one thing and then when it doesn’t go right they don’t know what to do. They’ve got nothing but I have something to fall back on in the xxx business. I’m very lucky when it comes to my family stuff.

Clearly, young people have very different opportunity structures, and the broader contexts of their lives are writ large in the way they envisage their futures and how they go about bringing their plans to fruition.

Young people like Warren have what might be considered a ‘dream run’ in terms of options and family circumstances, compared to others like Sue, who have to navigate quite complex lives outside of school in dealing with messy family break-ups and the issues that come with it. Holding onto a long-held aspiration to become a nurse has been a challenge for Sue, while Warren on the other hand, knows he has a much smoother ride through schooling because of his comfortable (and stable) family circumstances. He acknowledges that his educational journey is relaxed and much less stressful than others he knows.
In many respects, the contrasts between two young people could not be starker, and we are left wondering where the place of schooling is in both of these cases.

In the final interview with Warren he revealed that because he was not stressed in his Year 12 by not having to worry about his future, which was secured for him, he actually did well enough to gain entry to university and was studying a physical education program—not something he had anticipated nor been actively pursuing.

For Sue, her plans have shifted around quite a bit. She still has a passion for nursing, but was committed to completing schooling and then doing a program to become an Enrolled Nurse at TAFE. She had abandoned the idea of entering a university nursing program and transferring to physiotherapy, and instead sees the TAFE nursing program as a possible step into nursing in a university.

It seems that young people like Sue, who have to rely on their own personal resources (her mother was a disability carer), are much more susceptible to plans that might be unrealistic, and therefore they need to spend a lot of time having to refocus them to make them attainable. In contrast to Warren, the journey was not as smooth.

Key Issues

In respect of Sue, Warren and Noreen there are two key issues.

1. The resources required to get into the job opportunity space are inequitably distributed: Put simply, some young lives are cluttered with lots of out-of-school things that impact seriously on their school lives. The effect is that resources these young people might otherwise have to pursue their aspirations for a job, are diverted meaning that they end up having to deal with matters that deflect one of the major reasons they are in school.

2. The burden of life stresses impacts significantly and differentially on young people’s capacity to pursue career aspirations: Creating a pathway to a job is not a straightforward or linear process. Many young people are forced to be mature beyond their years in handling hurdles and obstacles, usually in their lives outside of school. Others have to seemingly contend with less of these kinds of impediments and we are left wondering how schools can possibly level up the uneven playing field. We suspect that this can only (and does in many occasions), occur through the sensitivity, awareness and humanity of individual teachers and schools in the way they get up close to what is happening in young lives, and adjust the way they operate accordingly. If we had a word for it we would call it a ‘humanizing pedagogy’ (Bartolome, 1994; Salazar, 2013).
Caught between hanging on, while letting go

Singing is still an important part of my life. I was supposed to go to the X factor auditions yesterday but it didn’t happen. My mum decided at the last minute not to take me and I was pretty upset about it… [and] after our interview last year I realized that I needed to have a back-up job.

A big part of the music thing is to travel to America. That’s where things happen. Most people who sign up to record labels are there. I need money to get into WAAPA so I have to save a lot of money for all the books and stuff like that. At least I have a plan now and I’m only 16 years old. I’m no longer working at the pizza place. I went from there to another restaurant in town. I got the job because I knew the owner but I’m going to be starting at a café soon… I’ve graduated from being a runner on the tables. I’m on the till now which is a bit easier. I do 6 hours there every Friday which gives me a bit more time for school.

I am working at the café doing casual hours. I am 17 now and desperately saving money.
Sue and Warren from different perspectives shed light on the ways in which young people experience very different opportunities in terms of career options and family circumstances, all of which have broad policy and practice implications.

1. Much greater recognition needs to be given to the impact of family circumstances on students’ performance at school. Staying at school is not easy for students in financially distressed households. They are under pressure to earn an income to support themselves and their family. Furthermore, it is difficult for young people to appreciate the long-term benefits of education when they are experiencing the emotional fallout from complicated family breakdowns.

2. Whilst schools cannot be expected to resolve out of school problems, they are one of the few public institutions left where students can be supported in a safe and nurturing environment. In these circumstances, the school becomes a major source of cultural capital for young people wanting to succeed in life and careers.

3. Schools need a ‘humanizing’ pedagogy that ‘values the students’ background knowledge, culture, and life experiences’ (Bartolome, 1994, p. 190). Rather than pursuing a ‘myopic’ focus on ‘finding the “right” teaching methods that will work with students who do not respond to “regular” instruction’ (p. 174) the emphasis should be on ‘the real question – which is why in our society, subordinated students do not generally succeed academically in school’ (p. 176). Pursuing this question will provide policymakers with a more realistic understanding of how the burden of life stresses impacts significantly and differentially on young people’s capacity to pursue career aspirations.

1. As a society, how might we structure things differently so as to enable young people to reach their full potential? Anything less is a social waste.

2. Given that most impediments are socially constructed, what impediments of our own making, can realistically be removed so that these young people have a greater likelihood of living their dream for a job?

3. How might schools better respond to students’ interests outside of school?
I hope to be singer or musician

I hope to be singer or musician. I like to do sport as well, especially basketball, but music is the most important thing. I find singing and playing an instrument is a good way to show emotions. It’s a way of expressing myself. Music has not always been part of my life. It’s really just came out since I came here to [high school]. The school encouraged and helped me a lot. We have a band here at school. I like pop music that makes me dance. The school gives you the freedom to sing what you want at performances. We haven’t had any musical performances yet. The music teacher chooses the senior students to do that. School is helping me to get where I want to go but I could do with a few more performances because I’m not very confident and that would be good. I have singing lessons at school but no private lessons outside of school.

Noreen is an indigenous student with a passion for singing. When we first interviewed her in August 2011 she was fourteen years old and involved in a specialist music program at her local high school. She spoke enthusiastically about the encouragement she received from her Year 10 music teachers and her dreams of a singing career. ‘School is helping me get to where I want to go’ she said, although she added that she needed more opportunities to perform and did not have the benefit of out-of-school singing tuition available to other students. Noreen was aware of a performing arts program at university but said she had not thought too deeply about job prospects at this stage. She explained that her father wanted her to go to university but questioned whether the school believed in her ability. ‘I guess the biggest problem I may face [is] if people don’t think I am as talented as I think I am then it could be a bit upsetting but if that is what I have to go through then I have to’, she said.

When we caught up with Noreen in March 2012 she had a part-time job in a pizza bar. Working 12 hours a week put pressure on her studies and social life but she was still keen to find work in the contemporary music industry. Influenced partly by her teachers who doubted her ability to cope with academic subjects, she now had a Plan B. ‘Singing doesn’t always work out’, she explained, ‘so I’m doing hospitality and tourism which is a two year vocational education course. If I don’t follow through with my singing I will have something else to fall back on, or do something else’. However, this course of action was likely to make it much more difficult for her to gain entry to university as she acknowledged. ‘I would like to do performing arts at uni’, she explained ‘but because I’m doing hospitality it will be pretty difficult to make the swap’. Noreen tossed around the idea of studying drama but this was not offered as a subject at her school. She canvassed the possibility of appearing in live TV programs and contacting talent agents in Perth but none of these strategies came to pass. Despite the set-backs she said that she is gaining a good deal of experience through her school productions and performances in local community venues.
Our third interview with Noreen took place in March 2013. Now in Year 12, she was fully engaged in the hospitality courses and contemplating employment in the field—possibly as a hospitality teacher, although she doubted her ability to handle the theory. A career in the music field seemed less likely now but she had recently found out from her Year 10 music teacher that it might be possible to enrol in the performing arts program at university through an alternative entry process. A school counsellor explained that she encouraged Noreen to take advantage of her aboriginality to further her singing ambitions and to seek out the possibility of scholarships that offer places for indigenous students at university. Despite the setbacks Noreen has not given up on her dream. ‘In twelve months’ time I could be working in the hospitality industry’, she told us, ‘but I expect I’ll still be researching what I need to do to get into the music industry’.

Key Issues

1. Becoming somebody: how young people have aspirations, interests and a desire to contribute to the betterment of themselves and society: In the current policy environment young people, especially those living in low socioeconomic and welfare dependent communities, are often stigmatized and demonized by the mainstream media, conservative politicians and ideologues of the Right. All too frequently they are portrayed as having little drive, ambition or capacity to contribute to the good of society. A deficit discourse has infected Australian politics with the cause of educational disadvantage being consigned to individuals and their families (Smyth & McInerney, 2014). In contradiction to these pathologizing accounts, the narratives we have highlighted in this study show quite clearly that young people do have goals, a measure of agency and self-belief, and desire to make something worthwhile of their lives. Noreen’s passion for music and dance, her willingness to put on hold her social life, and her determination to succeed at school, despite the setbacks, reveal how much faith she has in education and the possibilities of rewarding post-school pathways.

2. We know what’s best for you: how schools can encourage/inhibit/support the learning identities and life choices of young people: Although Noreen harbours the possibility of a musical career her current VET studies and part-time work history suggest that she is being drawn more towards work in the hospitality industry. Without performance experience and considerable school support, gaining entry to a performing arts course at university will be very difficult. This does not mean that she will not be able to gain experience and enjoyment from singing but there are likely to be barriers to higher education studies. The message she receives from her teachers is that she is a ‘non-academic’ student best suited to vocational education courses rather than teaching or higher education music studies. Coming from an indigenous, working class background it is difficult for her to contest the learner identity being constructed by the school. In contrast, the financial resources and social networks available to middle class families allow them to fund out-of-school musical tuition for their children, access appropriate counselling services and participate in a broader range of musical experiences. te Riele (2002) argues that many students have ideas about what they would like to do with their lives but lack the means of getting to where they want to go. She emphasises the crucial role of schools in demonstrating the relevance of the official school curriculum to the most marginalised students:

Students want to see how the knowledge [contained in the school curriculum] is useful, or is linked with real life or with their own personal interests, needs, expectations and abilities. When students do not necessarily know what is ‘best’ for them in these circumstances, it is up to educators to demonstrate usefulness and actively seek to connect knowledge with students’ lives (p. 261)

3. Reality bites: how young people have to make difficult decisions about a desire to follow their passion in life and the necessity of earning a crust: Like many young people, Noreen reached a point in her schooling where she had to make some compromises about her courses of study and post-school pathways. Though her main desire was to carve out a career in music she accepted the need for Plan B – VET studies leading to the possibility of employment in the hospitality area. Several factors were being played out here, not the least being (a) low teacher expectations of her academic ability (b) lack of self-confidence on her part (c) realization of the poor employment prospects in the music industry. Noreen has had to negotiate a difficult pathway in striving to maintain an interest in music whilst ensuring a productive post school transition. She has done so with some advice from her teachers but minimal career counselling and services and lack of opportunities to gain practical experience and work placement in the field of music. According to Billett et al. (2010) many of the goals of schooling emphasise the autonomy of students in taking control of their own transition from school to higher education, training or employment yet ‘requirement to exercise such agency is likely to be unevenly required by school students’ (p. 472). Paradoxically, the very students who lack access to appropriate cultural capital (e.g. young people at risk) are likely to be required to exercise the most personal agency in negotiating effective transitions, yet may well be the least equipped to do so. (p. 472)

Although schools may not be able to compensate for students lack of cultural capital they have a responsibility to engage students in a curriculum which matches where possible their interests and capabilities whilst providing opportunities to extend their knowledge and understandings of other aspects of their lives and post school options.
Many students spoke enthusiastically about their passions, interests and hopes for the future. In some instances, they were framed in terms of vocational/employment aspirations but they also talked about the value they attached to recreational, cultural, social and aesthetic interests. We have selected the following examples of young people fired with ambition and a sense of purpose about what they want to do with their lives.

I really want to become a nurse

I want to be a nurse when I leave school. At the moment I’m studying a Certificate Entry into Nursing. After that I’m going to go to TAFE and do Enrolled Nursing just so I can work while I’m studying and then to uni to become a registered nurse specialising in midwifery. To be honest, my interest in nursing came about when my mum’s boyfriend had accident. When I was assisting the nurses treat him I thought “I really want to become a nurse”. Being the person that always wants to help others I thought “This is good for me”. There are a couple of us that want to do nursing so teachers put together the Nursing TAFE course for students in the school.

I like everything that has to do with fashion

If I go to university [fashion is] what I’ll do. I’ve always wanted to travel to places like Paris and work. I don’t know where my interest in fashion comes from. I guess it just hit me. I’m not so much into the design side, more coordinating events and things like that. I’m not sure what I need to do to get into this events organizing, probably a TAFE or university course.

I like writing and in the long-term I would like to write a book

I read a lot and I’m especially interested in anthropology and sociology. I like creative writing and I’m also interested in primary teaching. So my interests are pretty varied I guess. My passion for reading and writing come from my family. Mum and dad read a lot to me when I was young. Then I started reading myself and I’ve always had books around me. I like fantasy stuff. I’m a big fan of Harry Potter. I didn’t have a lot of friends when I was young so I read a lot. I’ve been told I’m good at English. I find when I’m reading you can see how society interacts within in stories and that mirrors what happens in the real world. I have studied about sociology/anthropology courses and I like history and the classics. It adds up to understanding how the world works.
Noreen’s narrative, together with those of Jane, Sara, Sharon, and Stephanie, reveal a broad sweep of the talents, passions and interests that young people possess. Some schools/teachers do a better job than others in fostering and developing these attributes.

1. Schools need to know students well and value their knowledge, skills, talents, interests and capabilities.

2. Students with less developed views about their capabilities and interests need a range of opportunities to explore and expand post-school pathways?

3. Learning opportunities need to be personalised in ways that foster the development of students’ innate interests whilst encouraging them to explore other possible choices.

4. Teaching has to start from the position that students have something worthwhile to say about what and how they would like to learn. In other words, there needs to be a much greater emphasis on negotiating the curriculum with students.

5. Schools, families and agencies need to work cooperatively to foster students’ talents and interests and assist them to pursue rewarding post-school pathways?

Reflective Questions

1. How can schools encourage and support students like Noreen in their identity formation and aspirations?

2. To what extent are ambitions to pursue a particular career constrained by institutional structures, teacher expectations and the courses of study schools have to offer?

3. Why did Noreen not investigate the possibility of special entry provisions for indigenous students at university? Was she uninformed of the provisions, unsure as to who to turn to for advice or, as the school counsellor speculated, ‘unwilling to play the Aboriginal card’?

4. How did Noreen arrive at Plan B? How much say did she really have in the choice of school subjects? To what extent were her parents involved in this decision?

5. How does learning and teaching in schools connect to students’ life experiences, expectations and interests?

YouTube: Addison’s journey—From internship to university

YouTube: Sameer’s story—the importance of mentorship and internships
Part 2: Rethinking the conditions for young people ‘Getting a Job’

Confronting class and gender stereotypes

My dad has encouraged me to get into the oil and gas industry. That’s where the money is.

When it comes to getting a job I could rely on dad a bit as well as applying for positions myself. The kind of job I could go for with the diploma is site management and working at places in the north west of W.A. I’m interested in offshore work. There are pros and cons with the ‘fly in fly out’ lifestyle but we are used to it as a family because that’s what my dad does. The money is really good (well over $100,000 a year). I’m interested in the management side of mining but could also consider getting a trade. I haven’t explored these ideas very well.

Early Aspirations:
I enjoy computing and graphic design and that sort of thing. I’m not sure where my interest in IT came from. My family is dumb on computers. I have to teach them. I’m basically self-taught. We don’t have a lot of computer stuff at home but we have our own laptops at school. (#7Mark, 2011)

Lack of Careers Advice:
I’m not sure about getting a job in the IT industry. I know the industry is growing but it may be a bit harder in future to get work… I don’t get a huge amount of support for my interest in graphic design at school although my IT teacher is really good and takes us for excursions to places where we see IT in action. (#7Mark, 2011)

Parental Influence and change of direction:
I still like the idea of graphic design but I’m thinking about getting an apprenticeship in mining. I thought about it over the holidays and decided to change. My dad has encouraged me to get into the oil and gas industry. That’s where the money is. So far I haven’t really had any career advice at school… I’ve started looking at some of the courses I can do. There’s a Diploma in Oil and Gas which is a 2 year course but I’m not sure how difficult it is to get into. In Year 10 you have to receive at least C’s. (#7Mark, 2012)

Reality Bites:
My parents were pretty proud of my decision to do this course because they knew I wasn’t doing fantastically well at school. I applied for a pre-apprenticeship in plumbing in August last year… I was thinking about work in the oil and gas fields but I changed my mind. I don’t know
why exactly. It was just something different, like no one really in our family knows how to do that. I don’t think much about computing and design as a career now. I think it will just be more of a hobby for me… I’m not overly academic and what I’m doing now is more hands on… My family have given me a lot of support. (Mark, 2013)

Mark is an interesting story of a kid whose career interests have cascaded. What we see here is a mismatch between aspiration and a feasible career option in IT. We can see his struggle to try and work his way through his interest and passion, where the industry was going in terms of labour market conditions, and the difficulty he had in accessing the resources to fulfill his aspiration, including a deficit of career advice from the school. While there was no lack of family support in the form of parental influence, in the end this did not translate into the kind of transition that was necessary. Finally, we finish up with a case of ‘reality bites’—a working class kid ends up in a trade. To borrow from Wilkinson and Pickett (2009) in The spirit level: why more equal societies almost always do better, this is a case of how class operates ‘under the skin’ (p. 31).

Another way of regarding what has happened to Mark is that it is an instance of a young person being given a lesson in what Willis (1977) referred to in his seminal study as Learning to labor: How working class kids get working class jobs. While it was not quite the case that Mark was predestined to finish up in a working class job, nevertheless his options appear to have been quite constrained by the resources he has access to—particularly of an informational and networking kind—that would have been necessary for him to have feasibly translated his passion for IT into a career pathway.

Mark admits, probably as a way of rationalising his career decisions, that he is not sure why he has changed his mind several times, but ‘not doing well’ at school and being ‘more hands on’ is probably a convenient way of explaining away his inability to pursue a more professionally-oriented job. His reference to his family giving him support in his plumbing pre-apprenticeship, is probably code for the fact that they can understand work of this kind, whereas the field of IT is much more murky, and as a consequence will have to remain a hobby for Mark. At a variety of crucial points Mark is missing some important bits that would have been necessary for him to have transcended what is a difficult class divide.

Key Issues

1. Class is not something people feel comfortable talking about explicitly: There is a myth in Australia that we are a classless society, that Jack is as good as his Master. As a consequence, we hide the issue behind other labels in order not to confront it and talk about it.

2. Developing a career path requires access to significant resources: Again, when we individualise problems, we make invisible the broader context, and getting a job is not something that can be attributed solely to individual effort and application.

3. Regardless of class background, most parents have aspirations for their children: Aspirations are always framed and constrained by histories, it is just that some people have histories that position them better than others to assist their children.

4. ‘Hands on’ is a term often used to explain away the difficulties some kids have at school: This is often a way of shifting the problem from what the school does, or does not do, onto young people themselves. Young people are to a degree complicit as well in presenting themselves as ‘hands on’ people, which is probably more accurately a reflection of their family background and history.
Other student comments

I’m joining the army

I’ve made the decision and my parents said “go for it”. I’m not sure what drew me to the army. I watch a lot of TV shows, like Bear Grylls, and the outdoor life appeals. The army lifestyle is unpredictable. It’s never going to be routine. You get to travel to different places and meet people. It’s hands-on work as well—not just sitting in an office. I’m going to do a week’s work experience at the Naval Base shortly. I was a rebel without a cause but I can see some purpose in school now. You have to follow orders in the army but I’m good with orders when I consider it’s important... I’ve mentioned it to a few teachers and they think it is right for me, being the sort of person that I am. (#6 Anton, 2011)

Our family came from northern England. Mum is a hairdresser. Dad was recently laid off as a railway manager. He’s done just about everything in his life. He was a roofer, bricklayer, carpenter and he’s run three shops—a jack-of-all trades.

Nb. It turned out Anton missed out on getting into the Army because he was unaware of the Australian citizenship requirement.

I want to become a mechanical fitter

I would like to get an apprenticeship in this field either now or after year 12. My Dad is a roofer and has his own business. During the holidays I go to help him. This work has nothing to do with the trade that I want to do. It just keeps me busy. Finishing my schooling and my TAFE certificates should help me get a job. My family thinks that getting a trade is a good idea but they haven’t pushed it on me. I’m not sure how hard it’s going to be to get a job. I’ve been for an aptitude test and I’ve been applying where I can. I’ve done some interviews. I think the experience I’ve had in the job should help me. I won’t need as much supervision so I’ll be able to get to work straight away. I’ve been a school leader. I was head boy, voted by my peers. They trust me. The TAFE course has also been very good. Gaining the certificates means that I’m more qualified than the other guys. The ATAR course was a possibility for me. In year 10 I really enjoyed science and if I didn’t get into this program I would have gone into the academic stream. I know it might seem a shame that I could leave before the end of Year 12 but I’ve got all the certificates that I need. Staying on is not going to add anything to what I want to do. I got A’s and B’s for all my subjects. Now all the companies release their apprenticeships at the beginning of the new financial year so looking for an apprenticeship in December is no good. My Dad said I could always fall back on the business as a safety net but it’s not what I want to do for the rest of my life. But if that happened I would go back to TAFE and do more certificates like forklift driving and heights certificate.

“No” I don’t want another interview. I have nothing to say that helps with your research. My schooling was a waste of time. All those resumes and interview practice. I applied for heaps of jobs and prepared myself really well but it is the guys in t-shirts and thongs that get them so why bother? No-one ever gets back to me so I might as well give up. (#15 Richard, telephone interview, 2012)
Mark's narrative (as well as Anton and Richard’s) highlights the ways in which those everyday practices and activities (Smith, 1999) in families and schools perpetuate different educational outcomes for different classes of students based on their family histories and class location. If we are going to address these fundamental social inequalities then educational policy needs to do some very different kinds of work. By way of example:

1. Rather than blaming individual students, families and communities for poor academic performance, there needs to be greater focus on analysing how cultural processes of advantaging and disadvantaging occurs for different classes of students based on class, gender and race.

2. There needs to be a process of working through sources of social division between the young because ‘in most walks of life the turn to money and the market has reanimated an exacerbated long standing source of social division between the: middle and working class, black and white and male and female’ (Mizen, 2004, p. 21).

3. Extra attention needs to be given to the aspirations of all students and the resources - financial, relationships, curriculum, pedagogy and community -they need to achieve them.

4. Helping students to ‘get a job’ is not only about individual effort and application but involves ‘building a more equitable society (Berliner, 2006, p. 988; Wilkinson & Pickett, 2009) and far-reaching policy reforms in public housing, transport, wages and conditions, health services and family support programs (Anyon, 2005). Efforts that focus solely on teacher quality, curriculum, school organisation or student aspirations (although important) are unlikely to bring about the level of change required to address educational disadvantage (Sahlberg, 2011).

5. It needs to be acknowledged that young people especially those on the margins of society have suffered a disproportionate share of job losses during the global economic crisis. In the third quarter of 2010, the OECD-average youth unemployment rate represented 18.5% of the labour force aged 15/16-24 (OECD, 2010, p.1).

Reflective Questions

1. How are issues of class buried and made invisible in the way the curriculum in my school is constructed and enacted?

2. In what ways is my school complicit in perpetuating the notion that ‘working class kids get working class jobs’ (or no jobs!)?

3. Is ‘hands on’ a label that is really used to relegate certain kids in my school, regardless of their real capabilities? Is it a way of stereotyping them for tracking decisions already made?

4. What can the school do to redress the imbalance of opportunities available to some kids?
Engaging with big ideas

‘I want to make the world a better place’

When I leave school I want to go to university and I would like to travel and teach. I want to make this world a better place. I want to make people happy and help others. When I was younger I wanted to be everything – a doctor, a lawyer and so on. My family also wanted me to do these things but recently I started to think about teaching. Lawyers get paid better money than teachers but my parents want me to be happy because it’s my life. So they are okay with the idea now. (Janine #2)

Making a new life in a foreign country can be a daunting experience for young people. Seventeen year-old Janine and her family migrated to Australia from Portugal. She has three younger sisters and three step brothers and her father is a mechanic who works offshore in East Timor. Janine says her mother came from a very poor background and attaches a great deal of importance to education. She acknowledged that she had been a big influence on her life. ‘She always believes that you should go after your passion’, she explained. When we first interviewed Janine in March 2011 we were struck by her zest for learning, her willingness to engage with big ideas and her altruistic intentions in seeking to make the world a better place.

Her decision at the time to pursue a teaching career rather than the better-paid pathway of the legal profession seemed somewhat indicative of her sense of idealism and moral conviction that work should contribute to the betterment of society not just financial gain of individuals.

Janine had a strong sense of purpose about her schooling. It was evident in the goals she set, her meticulous approach to planning, and her understanding of what she needed to do to get into university. She combined her studies with work experiences that, in her words, took her out of a ‘comfort zone’.

I’ve got a plan from where I want to go with my studies. I like to live by a plan. I am doing five ATAR subjects. You need at least 4 to get into uni. If I have that extra subject then I don’t need to stress as much. My grades are okay. I’m getting mostly A’s and B’s. I’ve been into a couple of primary schools to do work experience and am trying to get into a court as well. You need to do something out of your comfort zone. I am going to the Magistrates Court in Perth and that will test me a little. I will see what happens there. I loved the experience at the primary school. The teachers were really nice but I really want to do high school teaching. I am going to the University of Western Australia Open Day in August.

Rethinking the conditions for young people ‘getting a job’
Janine was especially interested in Australian history and politics and was fortunate enough to be selected to travel on a Rotary-sponsored visit to Canberra. When interviewed again in March 2002 her intention to become a teacher had remained unchanged but she had fine-tuned her area of specialization to that of history teaching in a secondary school or university. On completion of her senior secondary schooling Janine chose to have a six-month break from studies before commencing a three-year degree in Literary and Cultural Studies at university. She explained that she had decided on a broad area of study because she didn’t want to lock herself into a career pathway. However, she was looking at the possibilities of work in health science and health promotion, a field where she felt she could improve the lives of people. She explained:

You probably don’t know that the World Health Organisation has eight millennium development goals where they try and stop aids and things like that. Health promotion has very good connection with the actual industry itself, you can work with the WHO, Cancer Council, Heart Foundation and so on.

Key issues

1. Given the opportunities young people have a sense of altruism and a willingness to engage with big ideas: The rewards of schooling are often viewed through an economic lens but Janine’s narrative reveals how students can be motivated by altruistic factors. From her perspective, the purpose of schooling and the value of work is not just about financial gain but the possibility of making a difference to peoples’ lives. She is willing to step out of her comfort zone in exploring challenging work experience placements and has grappled with big ideas that are not always part of the school curriculum.

2. Student engagement with big ideas is often restricted in traditional high schools: Contributing factors include: the persistence of didactic pedagogy; uniform curriculum; standardized testing and national benchmarks; high stakes testing; and, an emphasis on memorisation of facts rather than dialogic forms of learning connected to big issues confronting young people and society. According to Flinders (2005) a tendency to limit conversations in classroom to ‘safe’ topics rather than controversial issues constitutes a ‘null curriculum’— that which school do not teach. With reference to the teaching of history in American secondary schools Bruce (2010) argues that nationally imposed testing regimes thwart engagement of students with big ideas.

...this type of micromanaged accountability can cause some teachers to focus on direct instruction as a means of achieving test results rather than a deeper understanding of history. (p. 145)

3. Schools need to engage students in learning that ‘challenges them to build a critical understanding of their presence in the world’ (Freire, 2004, p. 74): Given the precarious state of the planet, the increasing likelihood of global conflict, environmental degradation and threats to human rights and livelihood, young people should have the freedom and opportunity to discuss and debate big ideas rather than passively responding to a scripted syllabus. Examples of pedagogies of engagement with big ideas include:

- curriculum which integrates young peoples’ concerns with larger issues facing the world (Beane, 1990)
- developing curricula around (a) ‘generative’ themes from everyday life; (b) ‘topical’ themes of local, national global significance; (c) academic themes within subject disciplines (Shor, 1992)
- a curriculum in which students experiences and understandings of oppression become an entry point into discussions about global issues (Bigelow & Peterson, 2002)
- promoting students as active agents of social change (de los Reyes & Gozemba (2002)

YouTube: Ken Robinson talks about the importance of creativity
http://www.ted.com/talks/ken_robinson_says_schools_kill_creativity?language=en
Other student comments

The following extracts from portraits exemplify ways in which students think outside the narrow zone of financially rewarding vocational pathways as they engage with moral and social issues. Some point to ways in which schools created opportunities for them to explore big ideas.

A little goal of mine is to save the world

I am interested in environmental science and I plan to go to university. It’s an interest I’ve had ever since primary school. Originally I was going to go with zoology but with environmental science I found that I could do zoology as well. I want to learn more about endangered species of animals. A little goal of mine is to save the world. This year I’m studying six subjects and I’m getting all A’s and B’s. My family will support me in whatever I choose. I don’t think it’s going to be difficult to get a job when I finish my course. Everything that has an impact on the earth needs environmental science and at the moment there are not enough people with these degrees. I’ve not done a lot of research about this area but I know that Murdoch Uni runs the course and half way through it has a break where you go out to work as well as studying. School has been helpful in giving me opportunities to learn more about environmental science.

#17
Janet

There’s more to the world than our little path

When it comes to getting a job I think it’s important to do some training in TAFE or university. I also I think it’s important to be able to interact with people. School does help with this. [Our school] is big on service compared with other schools. I’m involved in the Red Cross and a cookery club. Dad is involved in Rotary Club and they’re fund-raising for a Kenya project. There’s more to the world than our little path. My parents are very big on study. They want me to do well at school and would like me to go on to university. But they will support me with whatever I decide to do.

#8
Joanna

To be a creative writer you have to have a passion for writing

I like writing and in the long-term I would like to write a book. I read a lot and I’m especially interested in anthropology and sociology. I like creative writing and I’m also interested in primary teaching. ... To be a creative writer you have to have a passion for writing. I get ideas from the internet. You get constructive criticism from others. A lot of ideas I get from experience outside of school. At school you have to do a lot of assessments and English is mostly about writing essays. There’s not so much creative writing.

#19
Stephanie
1. The Australian curriculum needs to create spaces where young people can craft and explore their own big ideas in schools and the wider community.

2. The notion of ‘students as researchers’ (Steinberg & Kincheloe, 1998) should be at the heart of knowledge production in schools.

3. Schools need to identify the major obstacles and impediments to developing a curriculum around big ideas.

4. Schools should allow students to investigate major environmental, economic, cultural and social issues confronting the world today.

5. The Australian Curriculum needs to position/envision students as active agents in transforming their world.

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**Reflective Questions**

1. What were the big ideas that interested Janine?

2. How did she develop a sense of altruism and how did this influence her views about the purpose of higher education and work?

3. To what degree did her school encourage the expression and development of these ideas?

4. How much of her learning and engagement with these ideas happened as a result of her personal initiatives?

5. How did the topics/themes/issues derived from academic subjects she studied in Years 11 and 12 contribute to her engagement with and understanding of big ideas?
We need more preparation

It is now week 3 and I need a holiday already! It is so different from high school. The university has taken independence to a whole new level and they never warn you about it. Last year in high school they kept saying ‘come to our uni’. It looked like I would only have 2 days at uni but now I am doing 20 contact hours and that does not include all the study and travel time. They had said ‘10 hours max’ and I am doing 50 hours a week.

Preparing students for life after school

Janet has been focusing on attending university from a young age...‘I am interested in environmental science and I plan to go to university. It’s an interest I’ve had ever since primary school’ she tells us when we first meet her in Year 11. She attends a public secondary school where not many students are completing ATAR and yet Janet is confident about studying 6 ATAR subjects and achieving ‘all A’s & B’s’:

I want to learn more about endangered species of animals. A little goal of mine is to save the world. Everything that has an impact on the earth needs environmental science and at the moment there are not enough people with these degrees. There are going to be hundreds of jobs in my field of study. The mining companies have to employ environmental scientists or they don’t get permission to mine.

By Year 12, Janet is still achieving good grades but she notices that ‘there is a lot of homework’. Nonetheless, she is finding school enjoyable because she senses she is being counselled well and that her subject choices are the right ones to enter into university:

...school is helping me to get to where I want to go. The course overlaps with first year uni subjects so it won’t be so hard next year, plus the teachers just hand you the work and don’t remind you until the day its due so we are ready for uni.

The support mechanisms in place during these final years of study enable Janet to complete her schooling and achieve her dream of entering university. These include her family, her friends and having a decent part-time job in her local community working at the public library where she is ‘learning teamwork and responsibility’. Even though both her parents left school when they were in Year 9, the encouragement they provide to Janet is very important:

My family will support me in whatever I choose and are happy with my decision...but it’s me who wants to do this environmental science course. My older sister just got a normal job and she didn’t go to ‘uni’. I feel my future is pretty much set. I will continue to live at home. My friends all like ‘uni’ and I think I will love it too. I went to one ‘uni’ with a friend and sat in lectures for a couple of months and it was like a big class room.
Whilst upbeat about her final year of school, Janet described the stress she was under during the final university entrance exams:

They were okay but I got really sick during the last three. According to my friends I even fell asleep during the last one. But the exam supervisors didn’t really care. They wouldn’t let me take ‘butter menthols’ to help me breathe and when I finished my bottle of water they would not let me go and fill it up because I did not have a doctor’s certificate. However, I still got 84.9% points—enough to get into my first preference.

On entering university in 2013, Janet’s initial enthusiasm soon waned. She was not prepared for the long hours required to meet her study commitments and the long commute to university and back. She also had to forgo her part-time job, but continued to live at home to save the cost of student accommodation.

The university enrolment procedure was a major hurdle for Janet. In her words:

…trying to self-enrol is the worst thing. There were 7 steps involved in the process and yet they make it look simple. However, for each step you have 10 different things, then you have to press ‘save’ at the end of each step otherwise you lose everything. Then I only had a day after acceptance to choose the course units. My choices then clashed so I had to come into the ‘uni’ to sort it out. Then I found out I could not do a double degree because there were too many clashes—even though that is what I was offered.

Janet goes on to explain some of the difficulties she encountered in making a smooth transition from school to university:

School taught me some independence but here it is like “here is all the stuff, now just go and do it”. There is nothing set. You have to figure out what you are meant to be learning. We have the lectures and tutorials but that is only the overview. Then you have to learn everything in depth and you don’t know how far to go. You are just meant to understand it. My best friend was doing the same course, but she has just had to defer because she got very sick. Last Friday she collapsed because of all the stress. She just couldn’t handle it. I have met a few people but it is really hard. There are about 400 people in lectures and they all seem to know each other. At the moment I do not have any clear plans for the future. I am thinking of working for local councils but at the moment I’m just trying to keep up with everything. My parents do support me but they left school in Year 9 so do not really understand what is involved. My two sisters are still in middle school. At school they say ‘uni’ is going to be “the best year of your life” but it would be a lot better if they warned you what was coming.

Janet’s story highlights the importance of having appropriate support (e.g., family, income, transport, encouragement, mentoring, skills, and knowledge) to help students make a smooth transition from school to university. Janet relied on her parents to provide financial assistance, accommodation, transport, and spending money. Many students in low SES families simply cannot afford the costs of sending their children to university. Many university students are living in the family home and travelling to and from university by public transport. It is a struggle to hold down a part-time job, which otherwise would have provided them with some independence.

Even though Janet comes from a technologically savvy generation, she struggles with the practice of on-line teaching and learning. When we interviewed her in her first weeks at university she did not have a mobile phone or a personal computer. She was very disgruntled about the dependence placed by the university on resources that she did not have. Furthermore, Janet travelled a long way each day by bus and train to attend university and has not really met many other like-minded science students. She is also unsure about the expectations and how ‘deep’ her learning should be, something she thought her schooling would have prepared her for. Janet’s experience presents another side to the reality of making a smooth transition from school to university. As far as Janet was concerned the glossy TV and radio advertisements, brochures, and on-line services and resources promoting universities as ‘a breeze’ for first year students fell short of the mark.
**Key issues**

Some important issues arise from Janet’s narrative:

1. **Students need to be better prepared for life after school:** Succeeding at school (read exams) does not necessarily mean students are well prepared to cope with post school life. Schools are closed institutions that are segregated from the big issues and ideas confronting society at the beginning of the 21st century. Learning is tightly scripted around compartmentalised subjects disconnected from the life-worlds of students. Students sit passively day after day waiting for the next set of instructions from their teacher. As Wyn (2009b) explains, these ‘transmission approaches to learning are relatively ineffective and have a poor fit with the ways in which young people today need to learn in and out of school’. Instead, young people need to be ‘capable of exercising choice, making decisions and navigating their own learning from a very young age’ (p. 55). The idea of ‘leaving [school] to learn’ is one promising approach to redesigning schools in ways that connect education to the real world of life and work organised around students’ passions and interests (Washor & Mojkowski, 2013).

2. **Students require logistical support:** If students are going to make a smooth transition into the adult world whether it is for study and/or work they require logistical support including family, financial assistance, transportation, accommodation, and career guidance. Janet’s story reveals a great deal about the burden of travelling long distances especially for those young people who depend on public transport and also juggle part-time jobs. ‘A significant number of students combine study and part-time employment and while this may be considered a positive mix of learning and earning, in many cases, it also results in time-management pressures for students who have to juggle the demands of study and work’ (YACVic, 2007, p. 4).

3. **Transport infrastructure needs to be frequent, efficient, cheap and fast:** As Skattebol et al. (2012, p. 167) discovered, ‘areas where labour markets were weak and unemployment was high were often also characterised by poor transport infrastructure and deep patterns of social exclusion of low-income families offering fewer labour market opportunities’.

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**Other student comments**

**My family have given me a lot of support**

I applied for a pre-apprenticeship in plumbing in August last year; my parents were pretty proud of my decision to do this course because they knew I wasn’t doing fantastically well at school. I’m not overly academic and what I’m doing now is more hands on… My family have given me a lot of support. They took me to open days and helped me fill in the application forms… I’d probably prefer to just stay local. I don’t really have any contacts in the plumbing business so I’ll have to rely on the MPA (Master Plumbers Association).

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**It takes me about an hour and twenty minutes… I’m pretty tired**

I go to ‘Baysi’ on Fridays. That takes me about an hour and 20 minutes. Monday’s my easiest day but on Friday I have all my subjects in a row so that’s probably the hardest. I’m pretty tired by then because I have to get up at 5 in the morning on Thursday. I miss English on Thursday but I can catch up with it on Friday. The teachers are pretty relaxed about it and supportive.
Janet’s narrative provides some important insights into a number of key policy and practice implications in terms of preparing young people for a smooth transition from school to university and/or work, for example:

1. Provide students with opportunities to pursue their passions and interests in real-world settings in which they can develop learning competencies relevant to the adult world e.g., internships with expert mentors.

2. Broaden assessment to include real-world performances and contexts in which students demonstrate their skills, understanding and knowledge.

3. Provide academic credit for competencies developed in out of school interests and accomplishments e.g., sport, arts, dance, music, language, and employment.

4. Extend measures of ‘academic’ success (e.g., ATAR, NAPLAN) to include a wider range of competencies required for success in life and careers e.g., autonomy, curiosity, innovation, creativity, problem solving, inquiry, reasoning, initiative, citizenship, perseverance, leadership, and mastery.

5. Develop integrated funding and support mechanisms including counseling and career planning to assist students in the transition from school to work and/or further study.

6. Provide a comprehensive, efficient and rapid public transport system around key employment and educational hubs.

Reflective Questions

1. How might schools be redesigned in ways that connect students to the world of work?

2. What kinds of knowledge, skills and values are required to succeed in the world of work?

3. How can schools allow students to pursue passions and interests more deeply with experts?

4. How might public transport be enhanced for young people locally?

5. What kinds of assistance do young people require to make a smooth transition from school to university and/or work?

6. What are the gaps? What can be done?

YouTube: What they don’t teach you about career fulfilment
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a7gFkLqIv1E
Part 2: Rethinking the conditions for young people ‘Getting a Job’

Navigating and reading the world

My course path is to university

I like to think I am doing well in my subjects. My predicted score is 76.2 and the Broadway Scheme will give me 5 additional points for entry to University. That will give me 81.2. I’ve looked at creative writing at university, which is part of a double major in sociology anthropology and communication. At another university I am looking at a primary teaching course and some of the editing units. Teaching would be second or third down the list. It’s something I could do after I’ve got a degree. When I finish uni I’ll look for work anywhere I can read and write.

It is clear from Stephanie’s narrative that she is an accomplished student capable of navigating and reading the world and the script of school. She knows how it works and what she is expected to do if she wants to get into university. Stephanie could be described as ‘good’ student, one who knows the game and how to play it (Thompson, 2011). At our first meeting with Stephanie, she described in great detail her passions and interests and how she might pursue them:

I like writing and in the long-term I would like to write a book. I read a lot and I’m especially interested in anthropology and sociology. I like creative writing and I’m also interested in primary teaching. So my interests are pretty varied I guess. My passion for reading and writing come from my family. Mum and dad read a lot to me when I was young. Then I started reading myself and I’ve always had books around me. I like fantasy stuff. I’m a big fan of Harry Potter. I didn’t have a lot of friends when I was young so I read a lot. I’ve been told I’m good at English. I find when I’m reading you can see how society interacts within in stories and that mirrors what happens in the real world. I have studied about sociology/anthropology courses and I like history and the classics. It adds up to understanding how the world works. I was thinking about doing a Classics course at UWA. It is really interesting.

When we interviewed Stephanie in her final year of school she identified the choice of subjects that provided her with the optimum university entrance score... ‘I’m studying Stage 3 History, Stage 3 English, and Stage 2 Maths (I’m not so good at Maths), Stage 3 Biology and Stage 3 Chemistry’. Stephanie is a very intelligent and articulate young woman who has her sights firmly set on going to university. Her real passion is creative writing and she would like to pursue her interests in anthropology, sociology and history with an ultimate aim of working in a museum and/or writing books. Stephanie is well informed about the entry requirements for courses in WA universities and she knows how the Broadway scheme operates2. She has even calculated the TER points that she is likely to obtain. With well-educated and supportive

2 The Broadway scheme allows students with an ATAR of 75 or above from a Broadway-identified school to receive an offer into a three-year undergraduate degree (Bachelor of Arts, Bachelor of Commerce, Bachelor of Design or Bachelor of Science).
parents, Stephanie probably has access to social capital and networks that are not readily available to many of her peers. She likes school and her teachers but acknowledges that she and her friends are in a minority when it comes to having a clear idea of what they want to do after leaving school. In spite of her talents, Stephanie says she lacks confidence in her own ability at times.

Stephanie is very astute about what is required to succeed in careers and life:

*The things that I think will help me get a job are having a good work ethic, English competency, dedication to studies and a good ATAR score. To be a creative writer you have to have a passion for writing. I get ideas from the Internet. You get constructive criticism from others. A lot of ideas I get from experience outside of school.*

In 2014, Stephanie reported that all her planning and hard work at school was now paying off. Whilst doing very well at university she still kept an eye on the future just in case:

*Everything’s going well, I’ve just started my third year at uni while still working casual hours; I’m currently looking into the honour courses for my course and post graduate courses for primary school education.*

**Key issues**

Some important issues arise from Stephanie’s narrative:

1. **Some students do well at school because they know how to ‘read the script’:** These students usually have a supportive and secure family and they know where to go and who to see to provide them with the correct advice in helping them to navigate and access their future career paths. There are ‘overlapping structures and sets of relationships which create meaning for young people and that play a crucial role in their decision-making about education and work’ (Cuervo & Wyn, 2014, p. 5).

2. **Students are motivated to plan their career paths when they have a sense of purpose and encouragement from friends and other significant adults:** students seek out the information required when feeling confident and secure in their choice and are motivated to achieve the pre-requisites to get there.

3. **Offering a range of pathways suited to differing interests and needs:** When students feel as though school is meeting their interests and needs they are more likely to remain at school (Lamb & McKenzie, 2001, p. ix). Khoo and Ainley (2005) found that a young person’s intentions to complete school and continue with further education, or not to complete, expressed at 14 or 15 years of age, are important indicators of actually doing so. Education can be a tool to ensure that young people gain a livelihood or it can be a threat to belonging by taking them away from important relationships (Cuervo & Wyn, 2012, p. 6).

4. **Being positively oriented to school is important:** ‘Students who are positively orientated to their school and are actively engaged in its academic work and other extracurricular activities are more likely to develop an intention to continue through school and beyond, and then go on to fulfil that intention’ (Hillman, 2010, p. 5). In contrast, ‘student–teacher relations, student behaviour and teacher morale, have been identified as factors associated with early school leaving. Moreover, the quality of student–teacher relations appears to have a residual effect beyond school’ (Curtis & McMillan, 2008, p. 47).

5. **Social resources play an important role in assisting students to navigate and read the world of work:** A study by Snee and Devine (2014) discovered ‘classed differences between the children of parents who had experienced some upward mobility and those who had remained in working-class positions’. Middle-class parents were more likely to directly influence the choices that their children were making and be more critical of the role of the official resources provided by the school’ (p. 13). ‘Young people who possess high human capital (education, ability, and experience) have more opportunities to move to a high-skill job’ (Karmel et al., 2013, p. 2).

**YouTube: Students talking about their experiences**

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_wBuexmAASE&list=UUIGT6D56NSk
WWWkDjd04jQQ%20Inbox

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PCZHbXjnqk
School is helping my ambition quite a bit through the Drama and English studies. These courses have helped to build up my confidence and I’m learning a lot of good skills, like how to read scripts and work with different people. I learn about facial expressions and body language. I love coming to school. You get to see your friends and you’re setting yourself up for life with a good job. Not all kids are like me. Other kids hate coming to school. They see what they’re learning as a waste of time. But I don’t care what other people think of me.

#20
Cassandra

I’m really good and I’m currently studying at Polytechnic West doing a Cert 3 in Aviation Studies. I’m planning on hopefully getting a job for ‘Virgin’ next year and doing domestic flights as a flight attendant.

#20
Cassandra

Things are a little better for me now. I’m not hanging out with ‘the crowd’ anymore. I am still the same person though but I have quietened down a bit. I don’t go out and get in trouble with the cops. I decided that I didn’t want to be left behind and have no money. I wanted a good job. I didn’t want to be a druggie/loser on the dole. My friends have helped me to work through some issues. I deleted my facebook account because of the bullying. I don’t want to end up like the rest of my family. There was no routine or anything. It wasn’t very good—just violence and all sorts of things. When I moved out to my friend’s house it’s like really quiet and I have a routine. I feel I can get my life on track kind of thing. I really want to get away from ‘Roe Reef’. There are quite a few travel agencies here and the other day I was thinking about offering my services. Life’s pretty good now; sometimes I am surprised how well I pulled myself away from the trouble I was in. I wanted to give up but I got out of it so why give up now? In two years’ time I can see myself working in a travel agency, having my license and a car. I’ve got my Ls. The people I live with are going to get me driving lessons.

#24
Jackie
1. Redesign schools (curriculum, organization, timetables, pedagogy, and relationships) in ways that provide students with the flexibility and opportunities to gain real world knowledge, skills, and experience in order to build confidence and a sense of purpose for the future.

2. Listen deeply to students’ aspirations, interests, needs and desires as the basis for planning, decision-making, and involvement in education, work and life.

3. Provide a range of learning environments that are attractive and relevant to students’ learning (Ainley & McKenzie 2007).

4. Provide comprehensive career services and support to assist students in planning the transition from school to work and/or further education and training.

Reflective Questions

1. How can school communities assist all students to access employment opportunities and make connections to their chosen career pathways, not only those who have learnt to ‘read the script’?

2. What conditions need to be created to encourage students to remain positively orientated to school?

3. What kinds of pathways can be offered to satisfy a diverse range of needs and interests?
Attending to lost, confused and meandering students

I can’t really think of anything I want to do

I don’t know what skills I have…I’ve never been for an interview. Life is up and down for me at the moment. I don’t know what I will be doing in 12 months’ time —whatever happens I suppose. I don’t have any particular ambitions. I don’t have a job but I have done volunteer work.

David appears to have few aspirations. He is lost, confused and meandering with no clear idea about what he wants to do with his life both present and future. When we first spoke with David he had just entered The Link programme because he could no longer cope with the bullying at school. He had attended three other schools and two different technical colleges - things were not working out well for David:

[The Link] has given me an opportunity to do a course in something—I think it was Cert 2 in Business—and the chance to further my education or something. Today I’m doing some group thing. We have to go to Centre Link and pick up a health care card so I can go to the chemist and fill out a prescription. It’s not really a busy day but in comparison to other days it’s a big day. Mostly we don’t have much to do at all.

David is being directed from program to program. He is not sure why or where it will lead him. He seems to have little control over decisions and simply wanders between programs continually bored, lost and confused:

Recently I got into the Early Engagement Project (EEP) as part of The Link. There are 7 others. I am not really sure of the details of how it works but I’m hoping to get a job out of it.

Unfortunately David didn’t ‘get a job’ on this occasion which only served to reinforce his negative experiences of school failure:

School helped me with basic life skills but nothing else because mostly we don’t have much to do. School was not a good time for me. I wasn’t connecting or learning anything. Most of the people I knew didn’t want to know me anymore and because I was so far out of touch with school I felt like an outcast.

#26 David

3 The Link is a pseudonym for a government funded program, established in the 1980’s in Australia with the ‘vision to empower people and build communities through self-sufficiency, social inclusion, practical training and enhanced employment opportunities’
Young people like David don’t lack aspirations as is commonly assumed. Rather, it is a matter of finding the appropriate cultural and educational settings in which he can achieve his dreams, goals and aspirations for a better life. David himself describes how this important identity work gets done at The Link:

I’ve done some work experience in the past year. I spent about a month working as a volunteer at the Salvation Army store and then worked at a local environment centre where I did odd jobs like weeding, pruning and cutting trees. I’ve have just come back from a one week camp residential which was part of the EEP. We did team building, getting to meet new people, leadership type skills and had a trek. Now I have a clearer view of what I want to do. I want to do something in the field of law. The Link helped me work that out. We did an aptitude test to figure out what kind of job I would be best at. I’ve been researching the duties of a paralegal and I would like to have something to do with the government, civil law, power legal, small claims court—something where I’m helping the community. I have always had an interest in video games and TV series to do with law like Judge Judy. I’m not entirely sure what I have to do to get there but I know I have to attend Law school and then pass the Bar exam.

David is very committed to improving his circumstances but lacks the knowledge and skills required to negotiate the complex procedures to gain entry into university. He has no idea about alternative entry programs or enrolment processes. He is a student who needs appropriate support, counselling and mentoring to help him realise his desire to become a paralegal. Meanwhile, he continues living at home and fills in time watching television or video games and has no idea of where to go to get help. Whilst important, he needs much more than volunteer work, camps and bonding activities if he is to navigate an educational pathway that will prepare him academically for university and a career in the paralegal area:

In a few months’ time the programme will end and I will need to get a part time job. Even if I get into Law School I know I would like to get an easy part-time job so I can pay for things as the need arises. I don’t really get any support for my plans from family and friends. I don’t really talk to my Mum. I don’t talk to anyone. Sometimes I ask Dad if he knows anyone who can get me a job. He would like to help but doesn’t know anyone. Centre Link has helped me. I get some Youth allowance which pays for my monthly phone bill. Next year when I turn 18, Mum will ask me to pay the rent which will be around $50 a week. I should be able to manage that because I don’t have much of a use for the money I get at the moment.

David clearly has aspirations but isn’t sure how to achieve them. He is searching for ways to move off income support and into full-time work (Cruwys et al., 2013, p. 25):

To achieve my goals I definitely need encouragement from people and recommendations. I may have got a bit of motivation at school but it was never really enough. But I was overwhelmed then and not happy at that point in my life. Work would be good. I have never even had a real part time job so anything would be good. I’ve applied at a lot of places like KFC, Hungry Jacks and supermarkets but they never get back. That would help. I did a Cert 4 in something at Perth TAFE. What it was I can’t quite remember.

In 2014, David tells us that he still doesn’t have a job, but he is enrolled in a TAFE course in music performance. He does not indicate, however, if he is enjoying the course and if it will lead to employment. He still appears to be floundering; doing things to fill in time and overcome boredom and isolation. The world of work is elusive and he is excluded from it. Evidence indicates that David’s ‘failure to find a first job or keep it for long can have negative long-term consequences’ in terms of his long term career path and future earnings (OECD, 2010, p.1; OECD, 2014, p. 20).
Key Issues

Some important issues arise from David’s narrative:

1. Neo-liberal policies and institutional changes have produced a large and growing number of young people living and working precariously: Growing numbers of young people are being confined to a series of short-term jobs, without recourse to stable occupational identities or careers, stable social protection or protective regulations relevant to them (Standing, 2011). Bauman (2004) suggests that the notion of unemployment in the modern world is seen as an ailment and then full employment an attainable cure and ultimate destination. The contradiction is that ‘one of the most commonly offered recommendations...is to be flexible and not particularly choosy, not to expect too much from jobs, to take the jobs as they come without asking too many questions, and to treat them as an opportunity to be enjoyed on the spot as long as it lasts rather than as an introductory chapter of a ‘life project’” (pp. 10-11).

2. The disappearance of work is a key condition for trapping the underclasses: White and Wyn (2013) argue that ‘various social and economic processes sort jobs and job seekers geographically and segment their networks’, trapping them in disadvantaged positions and then excluding them from labour markets (pp. 21-23).

3. Those unable to find a job or made redundant are at risk of remaining unemployed for a significant time: In her survey of the 2008-2010 economic downturn, Anlezark (2011) found that although Australia experienced a relatively mild downturn, young people bore almost the entire weight of the full-time job decline (including apprenticeships), and a disproportionate share of the increase in unemployment. Increased unemployment drives young people out of full-time work and into inactivity or part-time work and discourages further education (Herault et al., 2010, p. 20).

4. Young people’s satisfaction or happiness relates to their education and training activities and their participation in the labour force: Rothman and Hillman, (2008) concluded from three decades of Longitudinal Studies of Australian Youth (LSAY) that young people’s satisfaction and happiness is related to positive experiences of education and training and gainful employment (p. 40). When social institutions (like schools) include or exclude particular individuals and classes of students (i.e. who ‘belongs’ and who doesn’t) then problems arise. Cuervo and Wyn (2014) argue that the metaphor of belonging is very helpful in understanding how students want ‘to be connected to people, places and issues that matter to them’ (p. 3).

5. Attending to building positive and nurturing attitudes in the middle and early secondary years of school, can influence educational intentions and subsequent participation (Hillman, 2010, p. 6): In this way, student attitudes and choices can be regarded ‘as malleable influences on participation, because they are in part formed in response to curriculum, teaching practices and organisational arrangements’ (Hillman 2010, p. 6).

6. Gaining a certificate or diploma can actually reduce the probability that an individual may exit marginalisation (Cruwys et al., 2013, p. 26): The practical challenges involved in obtaining qualifications might be such as to temporarily increase hardship because of the substantial investment of time, money and resilience from a group with limited resources. Ten years is a very long time to remain marginalised - education cannot be considered a “quick fix” for marginalisation (Cruwys et al., 2013, p. 19).

7. Access to well informed and appropriate careers advice is important (Liu & Nguyen 2011 p. 9): Accessing appropriate and timely advice is absolutely crucial to effective transitions to economic participation (YACVic, 2007). Importantly, such advice needs to take account of ‘the wider circumstances surrounding the attitudes and behaviours of students and young people’ (p. 3). This involves attending to issues ‘outside school’, because ‘the failure to address these external issues often resulted in behaviour which had a negative impact on student transitions’ (p. 3).

8. Students require knowledge about the availability of local services: Students are generally unaware of the various options that are available in terms of transition support and services. This is exacerbated by the ways in which services are branded and identified by funding agencies. Young people are confused by the names given to programs and services. Young people also indicated that they would prefer ongoing support relationships to assist with their transition from school to paid employment. They would like a more personal form of assistance than that which is frequently available through short-term, ‘outcome-focused’, government-funded services (YACVic, 2007, p. 3).
1. How can integrated services be established and maintained in order to assist and support young people in the transition from school to further education and training and/or employment?

2. How can schools promote positive educational experiences to ensure that students engage meaningfully with school and the school environment, have good relationships with their teachers, and maintain the networks they form with their peers and their community?

3. How can the ‘churning’ cycle of long-term economic marginality (MacDonald & Marsh, 2005) be broken (i.e. the moving in and out of employment and or between unemployment and low level jobs)?

**Reflective Questions**

**Meandering**

I know I have a few hurdles ahead of me. I love to do everything and don’t always complete tasks so remaining focused is a big challenge for me. It was nearly my ruin last semester. It’s just self-will and confidence. It’s good getting feedback from teachers. I don’t think teachers realise they still need to give me positive feedback. It’s a matter of doing my assignments without finding 3 or 4 interesting things to do at the same time. I used to play a lot of pool and snooker which doesn’t help. My mum was fine with all this. She knew where I was. She comes from a quirky and passionate family so she understands me. But she always made sure I was safe and made sure one of my friends would pick me up if I was playing pool out late.

**#22 Kyle**
Rethinking policy and practice

David’s narrative offers some important insights into how we might begin to rethink policy and practice by attending to the lost, confused and meandering students in progressive ways, for example:

1. Develop a ‘portfolio’ of schools that allow school districts to provide a variety of educational options including clusters of small schools to meet the needs of all students, especially marginalised students (Darling-Hammond, 2010, p. 267). These schools can provide real choice based on different philosophies, structures, curriculum and pedagogy rather than insisting on ‘one size fits all’. Being open to alternative ways of ‘doing’ school is more likely to enhance ‘attitudes, engagement and intentions on educational achievement and participation’ (Hillman, 2010, p. 6).

2. Work towards the idea of occupational citizenship founded on the principles of full freedom and basic income security for all young people by allowing all forms of work to flourish (Standing 2009). For example, the Brotherhood of St Laurence (2014) advocates the establishment of ‘a youth-specific wage subsidy program targeted at 19 to 24-year-olds that prepares young people for work and supports employers to develop the skills of the young person. It could be funded by a redesign of existing wage subsidy programs and through sharing the Job Commitment Bonus between a young person and their employer’ (p. 5).

3. Invest in the intellectual and social development of students beyond a narrow focus on ‘academic’ performance in examinations for the purpose of university entrance. Evidence indicates that when individuals have access to social support and social contact regardless of their depth of disadvantage then they are more likely to overcome marginalisation. This speaks to the importance of personal social capital, community participation and the social cohesion it generates, providing tangible resources such as assistance in finding a job, and, particularly, providing essential emotional resources, such as sense of belonging (Cruwys et al., 2013, p. 26).

4. Develop participatory approaches with young people that allows them to participate as active citizens, endowing them with rights and recognition and focusing on what they want and how they understand their role in the community (Black et al., 2011, p. 45). Principles that have worked in youth participation according to Black et al. (2011) include:

- A clear and conscious focus on young people’s strengths and a commitment to fostering these strengths.
- Addressing issues in ways that respond to their own priorities, interests and needs while maintaining a safe environment for their efforts, particularly where the issues being addressed through these efforts are personally confronting or challenging.
- Providing opportunities for self-expression and creativity.
- Including activities that are both purposeful and enjoyable.
- Creating supportive relationships and connections.
- Ensuring appropriate and adequate support from skilled workers and effective role models (p. 47).
Paul was enrolled in an Education Support Centre (ESC) for students with disabilities. He was diagnosed with ADHD and autism. Paul was very interested in cars and panel beating and was determined to gain an apprenticeship. Like other students (such as Anthony and Gary) he enjoyed work experience. Paul indicated that whilst he missed doing the broader range of subjects available to him in mainstream high school especially foreign languages, the ESC helped with other skills like repairing and selling bikes and communicating with customers.

Paul liked the ESC because it allowed him to pursue more practical activities around his interest in panel beating. He continued studying foreign languages independently at home as these were not available at school. Quite a challenge for any 15 year old boy:

> I really enjoy doing things with my hands and I am teaching myself Chinese and Japanese out of school. There are Filipinos working at the panel beating place and they speak these languages. I learn in my own time and I like being in an individual room not getting distracted by other kids.

When we first interviewed Paul in Year 11 and asked him what he wanted to do when he left school he mentioned panel beating because his greatest interest was in painting car designs and air brushing (something his grandfather had inspired him to do). He had also been encouraged during his work experience:
I did a cycle of work there—one day cleaning, the next day painting and the third day panel beating. I really liked this part because I enjoy sanding—doing things with my hands. ... A Filipino guy who is really good at airbrushing taught me how to sand back car panels and apply coats of paint properly. After I tried it he said “you’re a natural”. My step dad wants me to do something different but I like panel beating. My real dad wants me to do roof tiling. I get along well with both of them. I have completed Horticulture Cert 1 and now I’m doing Business Cert 1. It’s all about how to run a business.

In the beginning, even though Paul was hopeful about his future, he indicated a realistic attitude about being able to find work in his chosen field. Nonetheless, he maintained a sense of optimism and started to actively seek work using the information and job seeking skills acquired at the ESC.

Paul was feeling confident that the certificates that he was completing at school would help him find work in his chosen field and maybe eventually allow him to run his own business. During his Year 12 interview he told us how everything seemed to be falling into place and he had made some clear plans for the future:

There are a lot of things that have happened since we last met. I’ve been looking at work in 3 different industries. One is panel beating and I’ve almost got my Cert 3 with TAFE. I’m doing that so I can get an apprenticeship. Next door is a panel shop and I’ve been thinking of going there for the second half of the year for work experience. If I do well there it might turn into a job. I also like welding and spray painting. I’ve completed certificates at level one in horticulture, business education and mechanics. I’ll have a cert 2 in mechanics when I leave. That should help me get into panel beating and spray painting. I’ll probably do Cert 3 and 4 courses at TAFE over the next couple of years.

When we interviewed Paul a year later, the situation was no better. He told us that even though he had finished Year 12, graduated from school with a WACE certificate and completed a Certificate 2 in panel beating at TAFE; he still did not have an apprenticeship or any work:

I did do a bit of the course in spray painting but I dropped out because I had to do something for the family at the time. I’m not working at the moment but I’ve been sending in resumes and letters to say I want to go into jobs—anything on the mechanical side of things. I’m not too sure about applying for an apprenticeship. I’m just going to get a job and if they let me do an apprenticeship I’ll do it there. I’ve put in 6 applications about three weeks ago, 5 around this area and then there’s one down in ‘Inji’. Two of the jobs were advertised and the others were not. I just went up and said “I’m interested in mechanics have you got any work”? I’ve not heard back from them yet. I have to wait until tomorrow and see if I got it and if don’t I’ll go do another one. I haven’t seen any apprenticeships advertised at the moment. I would just like any job in any workshop. I look on the internet and sometimes in the paper for job advertisements. I got one of them from the local paper for a tyre place in the industrial area. I went there and it didn’t happen coz I didn’t have a forklift licence at the time. I have also applied to the Pizza Place but I haven’t heard back from them.
Despite Paul’s determination and enthusiasm to gain certification he remains unemployed, even unable to find part-time or casual work and unable to afford transport. He is, therefore, dependent on welfare and other agencies:

It costs money to run the car and I don’t have any part-time work. I’m on a Centrelink Youth Allowance. I’m not really sure how much I get but I know it’s around $200 a week and something to start off. I’ve had 2 weeks so far. When I went there we signed up and they said that I had to go and look for jobs and that. I went to go to Smile for support but we eventually went to another place that helps with disabilities. So far have they been helpful. They sometimes drive me to places that are pretty far away.

After three years of hard work to become suitably qualified and then actively seeking an apprenticeship or any kind of work, Paul’s job prospects are not looking good. The only experience of work he has is temporary and through support agencies.

I was keen to do some air brushing a while back but I pretty much cancelled it, yeah. I’d like to come back to it later down the track but not straight away once I get more experience in that type of work and then do it. I really just want to be doing something—preferably panel beating but I’m not sure if there are a lot of apprenticeships around. Sometimes they keep it a secret. I know there was one down at ‘Rayborn’ but when I went down there they said ‘No, no, we don’t have one’, but I know that someone left there cause one of my mates goes to work in there so he tells me everything. Panel beating does get busy. One time I was doing work experience at a place and I had to work on 13 cars. At these places they do almost 30 cars in a week and the last car I didn’t get to do coz they took it off me and I was like ‘why?’ and it was really the easiest job as well.

Key issues

A number of issues emerge from Paul’s experience and the consequences for him in terms of ‘getting a job’:

1. **Despite the best efforts of students with disabilities their efforts are often considered ‘invalid’** (Slee, 2011, p. 13): Paul’s experience of school and his search for a job illustrates how students with disabilities can easily become marginalised (Lamb, 2011, p. 337) and confined to lower forms of occupational preparation compared to their mainstream counterparts (Polk, 1988, p. 124). With an increasing emphasis on standardised test scores, competition and market choice, ‘liability students’, as Slee (1998) describes them, can become a problem for the normalising high school. Therefore, it is hardly surprising to find an escalating number of students being diagnosed with medical and intellectual conditions requiring ‘special attention’ (Slee, 1998; Pohl, 2013). Whilst Paul finds it much easier to learn in the caring and supportive environment at the ESC, the social stigma of being labelled ‘special’ or ‘disadvantaged’ has repercussions in a highly competitive labour market.

2. **The pressure for credentials leads to ‘qualification inflation’ and a ‘devaluing of all qualifications’** (Ainley & Allen, 2010, p. 4): COAG considers a Certificate III to be the minimum-level qualification for improving employment outcomes (COAG Reform Council, 2010). Working his way up to higher levels of education is still a long road for students like Paul (as well as Anthony and Gary) (Griffin, 2014, p. 19). Paul begins by enrolling in Certificate 1, and then moves through to Certificate 2. He travels a long way from home to attend TAFE, however, he is still repeating lower level qualifications that most students now have. Participating in higher levels of education (or more accurately credentialing) is, for many students, ‘like running up and down an escalator’ (Ainley & Allen, 2010, p. 4).

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*The Smile Program’s purpose is ‘to enhance the lives of children affected by a rare disease or condition, by providing responsive financial and practical assistance and facilitating access to information, resources and services for their families and carers’.*
3. People with disabilities are being marginalised in the labour market: In his 2013 Australia Day address to the nation, Paralympic gold medal winner, Kurt Fearnley, highlighted the extent of disability inequality in Australia in the following words:

If you have a disability in our country, you’re more likely to be unemployed, more likely to be living in poverty and more likely to be less educated than if you didn’t have that disability. In comparison to other economically rich nations that are members of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, the statistics for Australia are damning. In Australia, 45% of people with a disability live in, or near, poverty; more than double the OECD average of 22 percent. We rank 21st out of 29 OECD countries in employment participation rates for those with a disability. We rank 27th of the 27 in terms of the correlation between disability and poverty. Our system is broken, it isn’t doing enough.

(Extract from a speech by Kurt Fearnley, 24th January, 2013; available online).

In a feature on ABC’s The Drum, the Disability Discrimination Commissioner Graeme Innes spoke to Steve Cannane, painting a picture of where the sector stands upon his departure for People with Disabilities (PWD).

- PWD 30% less employed than people in the general population
- Percentage of PWD in public service 5.8% to 2.9% in last 15 years
- PWD make up 15% of the working population
- 45% of PWD live in or near poverty – the lowest on the OECD list
- Year 12 completion rate for PWD is half that of the general population (25%, as compared to 50%)
- 37% of complaints to the discrimination commission are concerning disability (2012/13)
- Organisations leading the way in employing people with disability: Westpac (13%) Department of Health and Ageing (10%), ANZ, and Telstra.

4. The ‘dangerous rise of therapeutic education’ (Ecclestone & Hayes, 2009): Vulnerable young people facing long-term unemployment because of social disadvantage and/or disabilities (Furlong & Cartmel, 2004) are often blamed for the circumstances in which they find themselves. Deficit and victim blaming explanations (Valencia, 2010) have shifted responsibility for human well-being from social institutions and society to the individual. Such approaches fall back on a crude Social Darwinism whereby the strong and fittest survive whilst the weakest, least able and least determined do not so well. In this context, Eccelstone and Hayes (2009) warn about the ‘the dangerous rise of therapeutic education’:

In the present climate, the focus has shifted completely away from changing the world towards changing yourself in order to accept your vulnerability and human frailty and then to be coached to have ‘appropriate’ emotions associated with emotional well-being (p. 161).

YouTube: Alex lights up the Sydney opera house—from weakness to strength
I like being in the Support Unit

The people are nice. In this place they take time with you. I’m learning stuff at my own pace. Mum wants me to do another year at school—Year 13—but I want to get out. English is my worst subject. I don’t really like it. I’m not that into writing and stuff. It’s a bit boring. I’d rather be doing outdoor activities. I like being in Ed support better than mainstream. You get assistance here. Also I don’t like being around lots of people at once. I can do it sometimes but not all the time.

You really need to be able to read and write in life

Looking back on my school experience the advice I would give to young people is ‘don’t be stupid and don’t muck around. Sit and learn’. I didn’t listen to the teachers. If I could go back I would put my mind to it and do it differently. I could then have a good career instead of nothing like at the moment. I have done some dumb things and not make the right decisions. I should have got a better job. I am a lot better reader now because my girlfriend and my Mum and friends help me. But if only I had listened to those teachers, I would have learnt stuff and known more words. I could go to night school.
1. Ensure that all school policies and programs ‘provide a similar foundation of learning and deliver access to the full range of further education and work opportunities for all’ (Lamb et al., 2000, p. xi; Lamb, 2011, p. 337).

2. Providing ‘A rich and varied school education is probably the best intervention that society can offer’ (Liu, & Nguyen, 2011). The key question is how the physical, social, cultural and educational practices of schooling include/exclude students with disabilities (Slee, 2011, p. 13).

3. Identify strategies to enhance school to work transitions for students with disabilities (Griffin, 2014, p. 19). Successful school to work transitions are more likely if employers are willing to offer ‘high quality opportunities for work experience, training and progression’ (Keep, 2012, p. 28).
The teachers have helped me to maintain this pathway

I am more of a people person. I definitely want to work with people, and in particular children, so nursing and midwifery appeal to me. Right now I am focused on psychology. It’s about the human mind and how it works. My friend is studying psychology at the moment and loves it. My sister has been through a lot with a psychologist and that’s where my interest may have come from as well. When I finish Year 12 I will definitely be going to university. My parents never went to uni. They finished school in year 10 but my sister has been to university and it’s the next step for me. This year I’m doing 5 ATAR subjects. I didn’t want to do 6 because I thought it might be too much. When I was in year 10 I wasn’t sure if I would do the ATAR course but they said I was capable of doing it. I’m pretty glad I did do it. The teachers have helped me to maintain this pathway. They are very calm and make sure that you understand everything. You need that motivation. At the beginning of the year I didn’t have a goal but now I have reason for going to uni and I have to put the effort in to make it happen. School does help me.

The school hasn’t helped much

I think it will be difficult to get a job as a mechanic. The school hasn’t helped much. Mum does job searches on the internet for me. I guess I could face a few hurdles getting a job. Reading is the big one. I don’t know how to read the best. But I’m getting help and I’m improving. I reckon school could help me a bit more. They said they were going to help me get a white card so I can go on to building sites. This is an important safety aspect of scaffolding. If all goes well I’ll do a 3 year apprenticeship in mechanics after I finish the traineeship. If I can do that I could work in the mines. It’s pretty well up to me to search out apprenticeships. Sometimes they will take you on after a work experience. But from what I can see there aren’t too many apprenticeships in mechanics. Scaffolding is Plan B for me. They pay you more in this work.
When interviewed in August 2011 sixteen year-old Libby said she intended to study midwifery at university and credited her school and teachers for keeping her motivated and convincing her that she was capable of undertaking ATAR courses leading to university entrance—something she did not contemplate in Year 10. In the following year Libby decided to opt for speech pathology instead of midwifery. With an ATAR score of 90 in her Year 12 exams she had no difficulty in gaining entry to university. The school played a positive role in challenging Libby’s expectations of schooling, helping her to frame career and education goals, giving her the confidence to push ahead with ATAR studies and keeping her on track.

Diagnosed with a learning disability at his local high school Anthony was moved into an education support unit where much of the curriculum emphasis is on the acquisition of basic skills in numeracy and literacy and TAFE certificate courses. Anthony would like to become a mechanic and needs to gain work experience in the field as well as an understanding of job opportunities and the training needed to improve his chances of work. Anthony has struggled to find an apprenticeship in mechanics. In the absence of much support from school a lot of the legwork in job searching has been done by his mother.

The idea that educators should start from what is best for young people rather than deferring to the institutional goals of schools and education systems is hardly novel yet it is abundantly clear from youth narratives that the needs and aspirations of many students are not being met by current policies and practices. The extracts from student portraits described here illustrate the positive features of senior school curricula and pedagogies that assist young people to develop educational pathways and those that limit their opportunities and inhibit or undermine their plans and aspiration.

Key Issues

1. Schools still have a tendency to make the student ‘fit the curriculum’ rather than designing curriculum around the interests, needs and concerns of young people: Schools are constrained by mandated curriculum, higher education entry regulations and staffing/resourcing issues but students’ desires and aspirations are often undermined by (a) inflexible timetabling arrangements that restrict subject choices; (b) tracking and sorting policies which consign them to vocational or academic courses; and (c) inadequate or unsatisfactory counselling processes. Invariably, the students who suffer most from these come from low SES and/or non-English speaking backgrounds. Delpit (1995) claims that we have created in most schools ‘institutions of isolation’ (p. 79) which militate against success for culturally diverse groups of students. At the core of her argument is the view that a good deal of classroom instruction seeks to remediate perceived deficiencies arising from the cultural and linguistic backgrounds of children.

   We foster the notion that students are clients of “professional” educators who are met in the “office” of classroom where deficiencies are remediated and their intellectual “illnesses” healed. Nowhere do we foster inquiry into who our students really are or encourage teachers to develop links to the often rich home lives of students, yet teachers cannot hope to begin to understand who sits before them unless they can connect with the families and communities from which their students come (p. 79).

2. When it comes to exploring post-school pathways and gaining work experience far too much is left to the initiative and enterprise of individual students and their families: Socially well-connected and financially well-off middle class kids have a distinct advantage over low SES students when it comes to accessing career and higher education counselling services, work placements, job and traineeship positions mentoring programs, and after-school-hours tutoring programs. In the absence of system support students are reliant on the good will and expertise of individual teachers. Joe (see below) appreciated the efforts of a school counsellor in helping him to navigate an alternative pathway to university.

3. Schools can and do make a positive difference in furthering the aspirations and educational pathways of young people: Notwithstanding institutional constraints and entrenched pedagogies, there are secondary schools where ‘students come first’. In these schools there is a genuine belief that all students can succeed with the right level of support, encouragement and guidance. Rather than implementing ready-made curriculum teachers strive to develop curriculum from the ground-up or direct young people to educational programs tailored to their particular needs and interests. (See, for example, remarks from Libby, Sue and Jane about teacher expectations, counselling services and specially designed nursing courses.) In these schools:

   • teachers challenge deficit stereotypes and expectations of young people based on judgments of their ability and intelligence
   • students are encouraged to think positively and creatively about educational pathways and post-school vocational options
   • there is a prime concern for the relational aspects of learning and a willingness on the part of teachers to hang in with young people in tough times (Smyth, Down, McInerney, 2010)
• students and teachers investigate together questions and problems that emanate from students’ everyday lives (Shor, 1987)

• teachers have high expectations of young people and engage them in a rigorous curriculum

• teachers assist students to develop learning plans and educational pathways that connect to their interests and capabilities

• young people are assisted to find relevant work experience placements and/or directed to appropriate services

• there is a high regard for the social dimensions of teaching (Bigelow, 2006, pp. 6-8): instructional practices are (a) grounded in the lives of students; (b) critical; (c) multicultural, anti-racist, pro-justice; (d) participatory and experiential; (e) hopeful, visionary; (f) activist; (g) academically rigorous; and (h) culturally and linguistically sensitive.

Other student comments

Teachers put together the Nursing TAFE course for students in the school

At the moment I’m studying a certificate entry into nursing course at school. After that I’m going to go to TAFE and do Enrolled Nursing just so I can work while I’m studying and then to uni to become a registered nurse specialising in midwifery. ... The subjects I’m doing at school are Human Biology, Maths, English, Outdoor Education and I’m also doing Cert 4 Entry into Nursing which counts as two subjects. There are a couple of us that want to do nursing so teachers put together the Nursing TAFE course for student's in the school. When I finish this year I will have a Cert 4 and can choose to go straight to university or TAFE. The TAFE course we are doing counts for 8 WACE points. A couple of girls and one boy are studying it. The guy wants to be a paramedic. I want to go to TAFE to do the enrolled nursing course which is 18 months. I can be working as an enrolled nurse when I go on to university.

School is helping me along that way

My grades go last year were pretty good. I’m not an A grade student but I’m not failing either. School is helping me along that way. We can do a nursing course in year 12 and that’s pretty cool. I think it’s like part of a TAFE course during year 12.

It is so hard to find teachers that are passionate

I had some teachers in Year 12 who were not very encouraging. A couple of them suggested that I should not do psychology because they thought I couldn’t manage it. To hear that from your own teachers feels pretty horrible as they should encourage their students. But there were teachers who helped me as well. The careers officer stood out because she took time with me. It is easy for teachers to say ‘why don’t you just do this and then that leads to that’... but she got resources together and explained the options to me. She got me contacts and people to talk to which most kids don’t in their spare time. So to have someone like that just say ‘give them a call’ it is not going to hurt and you might find out what you want to do. It is so hard to find teachers that are passionate.
• Schools work best for students when teachers are able to develop curriculum that connects with students’ interests, concerns and aspirations whilst expanding their horizons and getting them to think creatively about post-school possibilities.

• What is best for students will always remain problematic but we suggest that rather than slavishly following the latest trends, or allowing those at a distance to drive the school’s agenda, curriculum decisions should be made by participants (students, teachers, parents) on the basis of informed research rather than some knee-jerk reaction.

• When a new idea or policy presents itself the critical question that should be asked is how might this improve students’ learning? This requires educative rather than managerial leadership in schools (Smyth, McInerney, Hattam & Lawson, 1999).

• What do the narratives reveal about the ways in which schools can support or restrict the identity formation of young people?

• Who (and on what basis) decides what is best for young people when it comes to making crucial decisions about senior school subjects, educational programs and post-school pathways? Who wears the consequences for these decisions?

• Why does the timetable have to drive the curriculum in high schools? Who benefits most/least from timetabling practices and other entrenched structures, e.g. hierarchy of curriculum, sorting and streaming?

• Why is so much of the responsibility for arranging work experience placements and accessing career and higher education advice sheeted back to young people and their families?

• How much responsibility should schools/education systems/other service providers assume for facilitating students’ transition between education sectors and workplaces?
What can be done
Part 3
Part 3: What can be done

Rethinking policy and practice: Some ‘big’ ideas

Introduction
We now turn to the question of what can be done? In Part 2 we focused on listening to the stories of young people to help us gain a better understanding of what’s happening in their lives and what changes are desirable. To this end, we proposed a series of policy and practice recommendations as well as some reflective questions to consider around each of the 16 conditions supporting young people in ‘getting a job’. In this part of the report we want to encourage schools and communities to expand on these recommendations by providing a toolkit of ideas and strategies to support local investigations into young people ‘getting a job’. We argue that these dialogic encounters are absolutely essential in bringing about the substantial level of change required to improve the life chances of all young people in these uncertain times.

In this section we begin by introducing some ‘big’ ideas to assist in the task of rethinking the conditions supporting young people in ‘getting a job’. We describe these as orientating ideas because they provide a lens through which we can look afresh at the relationship between schooling, youth and jobs. We are in agreement with Bauman (2004) when he argues that ‘we do not really know how to tackle this trouble. We lack even the tools to think about reasonable ways of tackling it’ (p. 15). Hence, our emphasis on ‘big’ ideas as a starting point for addressing one of the most persistent and protracted problems confronting Australia today—youth unemployment.

In pursing this task, we advocate a particular kind of critical thinking. It involves a ‘habit’ of mind that avoids ‘oversimplifications, compromises, and convention’ and is not beholden ‘to some particular ideology or policy, but to following one’s conscience’ (Berkowitz, 2010, p. 8). This kind of thinking demands a degree of courage and independence because it inevitably challenges a host of everyday assumptions and practices with which we have grown so familiar and comfortable. In the sections to follow we allude to three ‘big’ ideas that we have found especially helpful—‘sociological mindfulness’, ‘educated hope’ and ‘critical compassionate intellectualism’ (see Smyth, Down & McInerney, 20014 for discussion).

At first glance, these ideas may appear to be somewhat obscure in terms of how we normally talk about education, training and employment in which the language of skills, competencies, attitudes, credentials, pathways, readiness, standards, benchmarks, performance, outcomes and so on prevail. But that’s exactly the point. In our view, we desperately need a new kind of language informed by a set of robust ideas to help generate some alternative ‘ways of seeing’ the problem in order to lay the groundwork for rethinking policy and practice. So let’s now briefly describe each of these ‘big’ ideas in turn.

Sociological mindfulness
To begin, we are attracted to Schwalbe’s (2008) idea of ‘sociological mindfulness’ because it provides us with a handy way of understanding the social world. Of particular relevance to this report is the relationship between what’s happening in schools and the classroom, and the wider sets of structural conditions making it the way it is. Schwalbe (2008) describes this kind of activity as ‘sociological mindfulness’ by which he means ‘taking the bigger picture into account and trying to see how one part of the social world—the economy, for instance—is related to other parts—schools, for instance. If we don’t do this, we will fail to see important things about how our society works’ (p. 12).
Central to Schwalbe’s (2008) argument is the view that ‘the social world could not exist if we did not re-enact it every day’ (p. 27). What he is saying here is that ‘our thoughts, feelings, and behaviours keep it going’ (p. 27). More importantly, whilst our everyday actions (e.g., habits, routines, beliefs, institutions) contribute to its making there is also ‘the possibility of acting differently, of choosing not to support arrangements that are harmful or unjust’ (p. 28). In short, our challenge is to understand why things are the way they are, how they got that way and how they can be changed for the better.

At the outset we wish to acknowledge that when confronted by seemingly intractable and complex problems such as youth unemployment it is easy to assume that we don’t have any power. After all, somebody else is in charge it’s their responsibility. What can I do? This becomes a major obstacle to people taking action due to a sense of futility (fatalism) and inevitability (determinism) about the way it is. For instance, schools adopt a narrowly conceived and instrumentalist approach to vocational education and training based on the belief that schools should ‘adapt the student to what is inevitable, to what cannot be changed’ (Freire, 1998, p. 27). This functionalist logic assumes that schools should prepare students for whatever jobs are available. In the words of Bauman (2004):

One of the most commonly offered recommendations to the young meanwhile is to be flexible and not particularly choosy, not to expect too much from jobs, to take the jobs as they come without asking too many questions and to treat them as an opportunity to be employed on the spot as long as it lasts rather than as an introductory chapter of a ‘life project’, a matter of self-esteem and self-definition, or a warrant for long-term security (p. 10).

Thus the institution of schooling functions as a large sorting machine for the labour market within a global production system driven by unbridled free-market individualism, competitiveness and profits. Guy Standing (2011) explains it this way:

A central aspect of globalization can be summed up in one intimidating word, ‘commodification’. This involves treating everything as a commodity, to be bought and sold, subject to market forces, with prices set by demand and supply, without effective ‘agency’ (a capacity to resist). Commodification has been extended to every aspect of life—the family, education system, firm, labour institutions, social protection policy, unemployment, disability, occupational communities and politics’ (p. 26).

Given these broader shifts in the global economy and on the basis of what young people are saying to us about their experience of ‘getting a job’, we have adopted the notion of ‘rethinking’ to help us better describe what we believe needs to happen in supporting young people to succeed in education, careers and life. To put it bluntly, the status quo is neither desirable nor acceptable for increasing numbers of young people, their teachers, parents or communities. At heart, this involves asking some very different kinds of questions, like:

- why things are the way they are?
- how they got that way?
- what set of conditions are supporting the processes that maintain them? (Simon, 1988, p. 2).

By tackling these kinds of questions we are starting to engage in ‘sociological mindfulness’.

Educated hope

Central to this wider educative project is a spirit of ‘educated hope’—an idea that encapsulates a sense of ‘incompleteness’ or ‘unfinishedness’ of the human condition (Freire, 1998, p. 66). We find this idea especially useful because it is through this awareness that ‘the very possibility of learning, of being educated, resides’ (p. 66). We believe this more optimistic and empowering view of education affords young people an opportunity to engage in learning that not only helps them to adapt to the world but to intervene and transform it (p. 84). In other words, young people are given an opportunity to negotiate their identities in ways that help them to become both smart workers and active citizens. Viewed in this way, young people are always in ‘the process of becoming—as unfinished, uncompleted beings in and with a likewise unfinished reality’ (p. 84). This is a very powerful idea in the context of how we think about young people and the kind of education they receive. Contrary to a lot of pessimism around these bigger issues we believe schools and communities have the power and agency to change the way it is—it simply requires imagination to see that ‘another kind of school is possible’ (Wrigley, 2006).
In pursuing this task, we believe the idea of ‘educated hope’ provides a counter the various versions of false hope described so vividly by Duncan-Andrade (2009) and made visible by the participants in this research (see Part 2). For instance: ‘hokey hope’—‘an individualistic up by your bootstraps [approach] that suggests if youth simply work hard, pay attention, and play by the rules, then they will go to college’ or get their dream job (p. 182); ‘mythical hope’—‘rooted in celebrating individual exceptions’ such as sporting champions and rag to riches stories (p. 184); and ‘hope deferred’—in which students are asked ‘to set their sights on some temporally distant (and highly unlikely) future well-being’ (p. 185). In contrast to false hope, ‘critical hope’ ‘rejects the despair of hopelessness’ to convey a sense of how young people might gain ‘control of destiny’ (Syme, 2004, p. 3).

Critical compassionate intellectualism

Finally, Cammarota and Romero’s (2006; 2009) notion of ‘critically compassionate intellectualism’ provides another way into this work. Elsewhere, Smyth, Down & McInerney (2014) have described it this way:

The major contours of this approach lie within the meaning of the three touchstone words of the title:

- **Critical**—which is to say, challenging deficits, pathologies and stereotypes which act to demean and position certain groups of people in situations of unwarranted and unjustified subservience.

- **Compassionate**—the notion of authentic (as distinct from a synthetic) sense of caring towards improving life chances and circumstances, rather than blaming people for the conditions in which they find themselves, and over which they have little real control.

- **Intellectualism**—which refers to being analytical and asking questions like—How did things come to be like this? Whose interests are served by things remaining this way? What are the impediments or obstacles preventing change? (pp. 42-43).

From this advantage point, we believe schools and communities are much better placed to undertake the kind of critical inquiry required to make a difference in the lives of young people. But first, we want to say something about the importance of asking critical questions and why this is especially relevant to supporting young people in ‘getting a job’.

**Asking ‘critical’ questions**

Returning to our profile Rethinking conditions for young people ‘getting a job’ (Part 2) we can now begin to see how each condition provides a foundation for rethinking policy and practice. In pursuing this task we have provided a series of reflective questions to help initiate conversations and local investigations. There are two key assumptions we make in this regard. First, the act of thinking or thoughtfulness is absolutely pivotal to tackling complex social phenomenon such as youth employment. The kind of thinking we advocate is ‘critical’, by which we mean a willingness to question those common sense assumptions, beliefs, habits, routines and behaviours that operate behind our backs and in ways that may not always be in our own best interests. The intent of critical thinking is to raise awareness for the purpose of bringing about social change based on self-reflection. We believe critical thinking (as opposed to carping and negative thinking) is a key ingredient in our endeavours to create more robust and socially just policies and practices for the benefit of all young people. As Apple (1999) reminds us, ‘How we think about something makes a considerable difference in how we act’ (p. 9).

Second, if we really want to advance policies and practices that have a chance of working, then, we must be prepared to ask some difficult questions capable of unsettling the way things are. On this point, we are in agreement with Shannon (1992) when he argues that ‘Asking questions is a constructive act because it makes change possible’ (p. 3). Of course, troubling questions are not always welcome in a culture that demands immediate answers to complex social problems irrespective of whether they work or not. Asking critical questions is fraught with difficulty because it challenges some deeply embedded worldviews about how things should be. Furthermore, the idea of having open debate among ‘enlightened citizens’ (Agger, 2007, p. 19) is not easy in a society dominated by the values of consumerism, individualism and competition supported by a ‘complex machinery to effect thought-control’ (Shor, 1987, p. 49). For these reasons, we believe there is an urgent need to create spaces in which people can come together around a set of cultural and educational practices to produce local knowledge relevant to their school communities.

We shall do this in two steps, by first, suggesting a process for getting organised to undertake an investigation with colleagues around some aspect(s)
of the empirical evidence presented in Part 2, and second, elaborating a model of critically reflective practice (CRP) to support these investigations. Together these interrelated processes are designed to assist schools/organisations in producing knowledge, raising awareness, building networks and taking action for the purpose of helping young people find decent, secure and well paid jobs.

Getting organised

To begin we shall provide an overview of a dialogic process that we have used now for more than two decades in schools and communities across Australia. This model is based on the assumption that successful policies and practices are more likely to occur when schools/organisations develop their own local theories and practices out of an understanding of the uniqueness of their particular communities (Hattam, Brown & Smyth, 1995, p. 5). We believe this model may have some potential benefits for your school/organisation. We present this model in summary form below and invite you to examine the booklet Sustaining a culture of debate about teaching and learning for further details and strategies to guide your work.

Figure 2: A model for local investigations (Hattam, Brown & Smyth, 1995, p. 5)
A model for local investigations

- **Affiliate:** find a group of volunteers to examine rigorously some substantial educational issue e.g., one or more of the 16 conditions described in Part 2.
- **Examine:** using the group find out what is going on or consult with others to find out what they think about the issue e.g., talking to students, their parents and/or service providers.
- **Represent:** the knowledge produced through examining the issue is represented in a form that stimulates further debate and dialogue with the wider school community e.g., a discussion paper, student and teacher stories, diagrams, photographic display, oral presentations, seminars, mini-conference and so on.
- **Interrupt:** collectively explore alternatives, challenge myths, question practices, and locate issues in the bigger social picture e.g., finding other perspectives, using the 16 conditions as a focus for debate, discussion and critique.
- **Take action:** decide what can be done to incorporate the new shared understandings into practice, and then act strategically and prudently e.g., develop an action plan that outlines strategies, timelines and who will do what, developing alliances and networks, and seeking the advice of and support from a critical friend from outside your school/organisation.
- **Re-examine:** within the group begin to monitor the changes and to answer the question—how will we know we have made a difference? e.g., set up some collaborative ways of observing changes in practice, collect anecdotal records of what’s happening, celebrate achievements and progress in various forums.
- **Checking out:** finally, check out with the group, how the process is going—is it beneficial for school-to-work transitions? How do you know? e.g., What has this process done to improve school-to-work transitions? How has the process contributed to a better understanding of the issue? How has this process enhanced relationships with students? How has this process contributed to pedagogical change?

At the heart of this model of inquiry is the notion of critically reflective practice. In the section to follow we shall elaborate on the usefulness of this process for conducting local investigations in the hope that it will galvanise local educators and community activists around a set of practices capable of interrupting the way things are and improving the employment outcomes for all young people.

**Critically reflective practice**

In this section we want to provide an overview of critically reflective practice—its nature, purpose and processes—to help guide individuals and groups wanting to pursue this line if inquiry. We will also provide some references along the way for individuals to consult as and when they require further information.

The activities described here are designed in a way that will assist your school/organisation to address the core conditions supporting young people in ‘getting a job’. We believe critically reflective practice provides an opportunity to create spaces for critical inquiry leading to a better understanding of the phenomenon of youth unemployment and on this basis developing a more progressive and socially just set of policy responses. Carr and Kemmis (1983) argue that:

Teachers ‘become critical’— not in the sense that they become negativistic or complaining, but in the sense that they gather their intellectual and strategic capacities, focus them on a particular issue and engage them in critical examination of practice through the ‘project’ (p. 43).

To support this kind of critical reflection we recommend a four-phase model of critically reflective practice described by Smyth (1991) and represented in the conceptual diagram below (see Smyth, et.al, 1999, Teachers’ Learning Project: School Culture as the Key to School Reform for discussion).
To put some flesh on this model we provide a summary of the key elements of each phase below extracted from Smyth, Down and McInerney (2014). We believe this represents as good a description of critically reflective practice as we can find (see Smyth, et.al, 1999, Teachers’ Learning Project: Critical Reflection on Teaching and Learning for discussion).

Describing … what do I do?

Teachers start by describing the ‘situational specifics of their teaching’ (Smyth, 2011, p. 52). This involves the habit of journaling daily events, instances, and observations about classroom life. In this way teachers build up an account of their teaching for future analysis and discussion with colleagues. With the assistance of colleagues they begin to look for ‘similarities, differences, patterns, regularities, discontinuities, contradictions and ruptures in their teaching’ (p. 52).

Informing … what does this mean?

Based on the evidence contained in their journals teachers begin to ‘unravel the complexity of classrooms … so as to exemplify local theories and gain a platform from which to make sense of their teaching as well as from which to explain it to others’ (p. 52). At this stage, teachers assume responsibility and ownership over the intellectual foundations of their practice rather than relying on the theories and knowledge of external ‘experts’.

Confronting … how did things come to be like this?

Teachers expand their theorizing by questioning the assumptions, beliefs and values underpinning their practice. At this stage teachers are encouraged to move beyond seeing their practice as idiosyncratic or individualistic preferences but a part of a broader constellation of cultural norms. Here teachers ‘ascertain “how things came to be this way” and what broader forces operate to make them like this biographically’ (p. 52) by asking questions such as:
• What do my teaching practices say about my assumptions, values and beliefs about teaching?
• What social practices are expressed in these ideas?
• What causes me to maintain my theories?
• What constrains my views of what is possible in teaching? (pp. 52-53).

Reconstructing ... how might things be done differently?

By investigating these kinds of questions teachers are ‘starting to think about how to act in different ways and are moving toward reconstructing parts of their teaching and the contexts and structures within which they teach’ (p. 53). As teachers reconstruct their practice they also assert ‘control through self-government, self-regulation, and self-responsibility’ (Smyth, et. al, 1999, p. 22). Furthermore, they ‘deny the artificially constructed separation of thought and action, of theory from practice, of mental from manual labor, and ... [also] jettison the false and oppressive view that people outside of classrooms know what is “best” about teaching’ (p. 22).

Auditing your school/organisation

Armed with these ideas, strategies and resources we are now at the point where we can pause and begin to think about making concrete plans in our own school/organisation. We want to use the notion of an educational audit to help you identify some key questions to guide your actions and monitor performance. In short, we want you to address two essential questions:

• What will you do specifically?
• How will you know when you are successful?

The list of key questions below is designed to promote discussion in your school/organisation about what you might focus on in your own policies and practices. These are examples of the kinds of things you can identify for the purpose of establishing priorities and strategies against which you can monitor your performance in assisting young people in ‘getting a job’. We would like to stress that this is not intended to be some kind of checklist but a starting point to develop your own auditing tools relevant to your context and circumstances.

Schools

Schools are responsible for the education and care of young people until 17 years of age—legislatively, financially and ethically. Therefore, a lot hinges on the effectiveness of schools in meeting the needs and aspirations of young people in ‘becoming somebody’. Based on the stories of young people in this report, there appears to be a widening gap between the ways in which the institution of schooling functions and the needs of young people at the beginning of the 21st century. This should not be taken as a criticism of dedicated and hardworking teachers, students or parents who do remarkable work in difficult circumstances. Rather, it provides an opportunity to explore how school design and pedagogies might be reinvigorated to better prepare young people for learning and the world of work in complex and rapidly changing times. This kind of rethinking involves a preparedness to be open to new possibilities based on a spirit of critique, innovation, creativity and imagination. To get things started, you might find the following kinds of questions useful:

• How are students’ lives, experiences and aspirations incorporated into the school curriculum?
• How are the least advantaged students in the school treated?
• How relevant are curriculum activities for students?
• How well do you know your students?
• How flexible are school structures in meeting the needs of students?
• Who gets to decide what is taught, how and by whom?
• How is conflict and behaviour handled in your school?
• How are externally determined mandates and policies dealt with in the school?
• How relevant is the traditional ‘one size fits’ all approach to schooling?
• How often do students experience the adult world in their learning?
• What opportunities exist for students to work alongside skilled craftsmen?
• How often are students given authentic tasks in real world settings?
• What are the patterns of participation and retention?
• What patterns of post-school educational, trade and career choice are evident?
• What patterns of subject availability and course offerings are there? Why?
• How are academic and non-academic students treated in your school?
• What are the effects of streaming on students’ learning and post school pathways?
• How successful are students in making the school-to-work transition?
• Where will your students be in 1, 2, 5 and 10 years time?

Industry and business
Industry and business have a keen interest in the kinds of skills, knowledge and dispositions young people have as future workers. There is considerable debate about whether schools are producing students with the right skills in terms of workforce planning. A recent survey indicates that more than a third of Australian workers believe their education failed to give them the skills needed for their job (Bita, 2014). These debates become especially acute in times of economic and social crises such as the 1930s depression, 1970s recession and 2008 global financial crisis. In response, official policy pronouncements have attempted to tighten the links between schools and the economy by adopting human capital approaches to education and training. These policies are based on the argument that what is in the national interest, broadly defined as improving Australia’s global competitiveness and productivity, is also good for schools. No doubt, schools have a major role to play in preparing young people for careers and post school life—a point skilfully made by our research participants. Equally, these same young people also desire an education connected to their interests, passions and dreams. Above all, they want a learning environment in which they are treated with trust, care and respect. On this basis we can begin to identify a number of questions worthy of investigation such as:

• Does your industry/business have a commitment to youth employment?
• Does your industry/business have a youth employment strategy?
• How many traineeships and apprenticeships do you offer?
• What are some obstacles and barriers to employing youth? Why?
• How might you individually and collectively address these problems?

• How are young people perceived and treated in your workplace?
• How are young people mentored in your workplace?
• What opportunities exist for ongoing training and development?
• How might you become an advocate for young people?
• What kinds of workers do you most require?
• What skills, knowledge and attributes should they have?
• How might you work with schools in more innovative ways?
• How can you mitigate the impact of economic downturns on youth?
• How can you act politically to employ more young people?
• Who do you need to talk to?
• What does success look like for your industry/business?
• If you could recommend one major change to assist young people in ‘getting a job’ what would it be?

NGOs
Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are citizen-based associations that operate independently of government to deliver resources and services for the benefit of local communities. As Federal and State governments cut expenditure on welfare programs and students drop out of mainstream schooling at alarming rates NGOs are asked to fill the void by offering a range of re-engagement or alternative educational programs usually with short-term contracts and inadequate funding. This has resulted in a proliferation of organisations competing against each other for scarce resources leading to short term planning, lack of coherence and ad hoc program delivery. A recent study shows that 70,000 students a year avail themselves of alternative or ‘flexible’ education programs with the majority of them coming from marginalised or disadvantaged backgrounds (Preiss, 2014). A number of participants in this research described the benefits of these alternative learning spaces (e.g., ‘The Link’) and the significant difference it made to their lives. Indeed, there is much to be learnt from these re-engagement programs in terms of how young people are treated and the kinds of approaches to teaching that are more inclusive of a diverse range of students (McGregor & Mills, 2011, p. 844; Smyth & Robinson, 2014).
However, the broader question still remains, how do we ensure that these students are not simply ‘offloaded’ on a financial shoestring only to receive short-term remediation without access to higher order knowledge which is so critical for success in careers and life? Against this backdrop, the questions to consider might include:

- Why are young people dropping out of school?
- What effect is it having on the capacity of NGOs to manage them?
- How do NGOs deal with the stigma of warehousing young people nobody else wants?
- How might NGOs become sustainable in a policy sense and financially?
- What needs to happen educationally to help young people access a rigorous education?
- Should NGOs become genuine alternative education providers with appropriate funding to provide access to further education and training?
- How might these alternative educational choices assist marginalised young people?
- What kinds of alternative learning spaces are possible in your community?
- What kinds of pedagogical, organisational and relational approaches are desirable in these learning spaces? How might this happen? With whom?
- How do we ensure that young people are not limited to low level competency based programs and instead, connected to high quality intellectual knowledge and skills?
- Where else can we find these alternative approaches to education and training working? What does it look like? What can we learn?
- Who are our allies? Who will advocate on our behalf?

Local government

As the third tier of government in Australia’s federation, local government has increasingly found itself dealing with the fallout from a range of federal and state government funding cuts to schools, universities and vocational education and training programs. Additionally, there has been a dramatic shift towards user pay principles in education and training as well as a tightening of eligibility criteria for unemployment benefits that only serve to exclude those young people who can least afford it. In this policy environment, local government seeks to coordinate policy responses relevant to their particular circumstances e.g., youth services, mental health and wellbeing, transport, recreation and sport, job creation and education and training. These issues are compounded in rapidly growing suburbs serving largely ‘disadvantaged’ communities on the fringes of the city. Whilst largely outside the legislative responsibility of local government, these issues become major priorities as local government endeavours to build cohesive and prosperous communities in which young people can learn, work and thrive.

- What are the social, economic and cultural assets of the community? How fairly are they distributed within the community?
- How might schools be repositioned as a vehicle for community capacity building?
- How can local communities work with schools to promote civic engagement and strengthen the social and cultural resources available to young people?
- How can students be involved in community development projects and service learning to enhance their appreciation of the local economy, environment and heritage?
- How do local communities provide access to adult members of the community and build social networks that open up educational pathways and career opportunities for young people?
- How can schools and local communities work together to develop public policy responses sensitive to the needs of young people?
- What opportunities exist in the community for contextualised and applied learning that connects young people to workplaces, career pathways and mentors?
- How can local government work with community groups and residents to generate employment opportunities?
- How can communities move beyond deficit stereotypes—criminal activity, drug and alcohol abuse, teenage pregnancy and so on—to embrace a capacity building alternative that recognises the assets, skills and resources of the community?
- Where does the creative and innovative thinking occur in your community around education and careers? How is it nurtured and supported? How is change effected? By whom?
- If you could recommend one major change to assist young people in ‘getting a job’ what would it be?
State government

State government is constitutionally responsible for the provision of school-based education and training. In Western Australia this falls under the jurisdiction of the Department of Education. More broadly, the Department of Training and Workforce Development is responsible for the planning and coordination of training and workforce development. According to Skilling WA—A workforce development plan for Western Australia ‘A key role for government is in the planning and coordination of workforce development efforts to maximise the availability of skilled labour’ (p. 41). Given the pivotal role of State government around the education and training of young people we can identify a number of key questions worth considering, like:

- What are the patterns of education, training and employment for young people from different geographical regions? Why?
- What is the pattern of unemployment and underemployment of young people from low SES school communities?
- What are the barriers and obstacles? What needs to change? How?
- How are funding cuts to TAFE impacting on the quality of training opportunities for young people?
- How might the status of TAFE be improved compared to universities?
- How can public education in low SES communities be revitalised?
- What kinds of educational innovation are required? Why?
- How might the government better support young people in ‘getting a job’?
- How does the government think about these problems? How might it think differently? What are the alternatives?
- How might the government listen more deeply to students’ voice in policy development?
- Where are the sites of innovation around school-to-work transition? How are they nurtured and supported? What can we learn from them?
- How do existing policy regimes, rules and regulations inhibit innovation and risk taking?

Federal government

Whilst it does not have constitutional responsibility for education and training the federal government is responsible for the larger macro economic settings impacting on youth, employment, education and training. It is a major source of funding for schools, universities and TAFE as well as specific purpose grants. The Federal government seeks to work collaboratively with the States to achieve reforms and outcomes through the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) intergovernmental forum. The outcomes are usually communicated as National Partnership agreements e.g., Youth Attainment and Transitions Agreement, National Agreement for Skills and Workforce Development, National Partnership Agreement on Skills Reform and National Partnership Agreement on Low Socio-Economic School Communities (www.coag.gov.au). With the election of the Howard government in 1996, the Federal has taken a more dominant role in formulating education policy directions including a significant increase in funding to private schools with diminished provision of resources for public education. This is not the place for a full analysis of these policies other than to say that we have seen a sharp shift towards a national agenda to make curricula more responsive to the workplace and national economic goals (see Smyth, Down & McInerney, 2010 for discussion). In addition, there is increased emphasis on vocational education and training and an ethos of corporate managerialism, marketing, individualism, competition, choice and commercialisation in schools. These wider traveling polices seem to fit comfortably with recent budgetary cuts especially welfare benefits for unemployed youth and the government’s use of language to describe people as ‘lifters’ and ‘leaners’ (Garner, 2014). Arising out of these broader policy settings the following questions are likely candidates for further investigation:

- How are broader shifts in the global economy impacting on the youth labour market in Australia?
- How does the commitment to free market policies impact on the nature, purpose and processes of education?
- How have government funding policies impacted on schools, TAFE, and universities? Who benefits? Who loses?
- Are all students able to access educational programs and resources that meet their individual and collective needs?
• To what extent is social justice included as a guiding principle in government policy and how is this monitored?
• How does the competitive academic curriculum perpetuate inequalities in education?
• How does the divide between academic and non-academic curriculum reinforce exclusionary structures and pedagogies for working class students?
• How can the government support more young people into alternative learning spaces to pursue their careers and training?
• What kinds of financial support do young people need to make a smooth transition from school-to-work?
• What are the specific policy initiatives to promote educational innovation, creativity and job creation for young people?

Universities

Students and their families value university level qualifications because it leads to decent, secure and well-paid jobs. Historically, access to universities was the preserve of the wealthy and aspiring middle classes whose sons and daughters attended the elite private religious schools. They monopolised the professions such as law, medicine, engineering, science and architecture and in the process built a strong educational market for those who could afford to pay for the privilege. Despite attempts to open up university education to more students and families from low SES backgrounds the pattern of inequality and social reproduction persists. Based on the stories in this report there is clear evidence that the cultural knowledge valued by schools and required for success in year 12 and entry to university is often an alienating experience for students from working class families. Equally, for middle class students their cultural capital is well suited to the expectations of schools and universities. With the rapid expansion of VET in schools programs in low SES school communities these academic divisions function to reinforce a stratified and class-differentiated education system (Tranter, 2012; Teese & Polesel, 2003; Teese, 2000). The complex cultural processes of advantaging and disadvantaging of different classes of students raises a number of key questions for universities:

• How does the senior secondary curriculum and higher education selection processes work against the best interests of students from low SES schools?
• How might a capabilities approach to portfolio entry address some of these concerns?
• How can universities work more closely with schools and TAFE to develop alternative entry pathways for students typically excluded from university?
• How do universities demonstrate their commitment to low SES school communities?
• What are the patterns of course enrolment for students from low socio-economic backgrounds? Is this a problem? What can be done about it?
• What kinds of pedagogies are needed to support university learning especially for first year/generation university students?
• Who will be most disadvantaged by the introduction of full fee paying courses?
• What financial support is available to support students from low SES communities?
• What kind of research is most useful to young people? Where is this happening? Who advocates for marginalised youth? How are their views incorporated into decision-making?

Concluding remarks

In these concluding remarks we want to draw together the key threads of this report while providing a foundation for action in supporting young people in ‘getting a job’. We are under no illusion as to the enormity of the task, but we believe that the strategies and ideas outlined in this report offer a sense of hope and possibility. At heart, this report has endeavoured to do three things. First, we set out to listen to what young people themselves have to say about education, training and employment and what works best for them. If the intent is to enhance the educational experience of young people and the transition from school-to-work, then we believe it makes a great deal of sense to hear what they have to say. Whilst, policy makers, community leaders, educators and parents have much to contribute to these debates, we made a deliberate decision to focus on what young people themselves have to say. We believe these insider understandings can provide essential clues about what kinds of conditions need to be created and more widely sustained to improve the life chances of all young people (Smyth & McInerney, 2012).
Second, we created a series of portraits to help us represent the lived experience of our participants. We believe the use of portraiture is a powerful explanatory tool because it allows us to investigate contemporary social problems by honouring the lived reality of participants in ways that add authenticity, integrity and rigour to the research process. Drawing on individual biographies we then developed a profile of conditions supporting young people in ‘getting a job’ – 16 in total (see Part 2). These conditions provided us with a broader set of categories that allowed us to delve more deeply into the ways in which individual lives are shaped by broader historical, social and institutional sets of arrangements. In the process we identified a series of key issues arising from each condition as a provocation to deliberate on some reflective questions and recommendations for rethinking policy and practice.

Third, we concluded by advancing a set of ‘big’ ideas to assist in the task of rethinking policy and practice. These ‘big’ ideas we believe are capable of providing a more enduring approach to education, training and employment than existing policy frameworks that have failed far too many young people. If we are going to make headway then we believe a good starting point is a willingness to engage with colleagues in asking questions and formulating local policy responses. To assist in this task we have provided a toolkit of ideas to help you get organised to undertake local investigation by forming alliances within and across school/organisations to raise awareness, develop plans, gather evidence and take action. We describe these intellectual and practical endeavours as critically reflective practice.

Finally, we want to say that schools/organisations/individuals acting alone cannot address or transform major social problems like youth unemployment and structured inequalities in communities. Indeed, it requires a village to raise a child. If we are to make the radical changes required to enhance the employment prospects of young people then it will take a whole school and community approach and the active support and goodwill of the diverse groups and individuals that make up the community. Based on the evidence presented in this report we can confidently say that listening to what young people have to say is a promising start.
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