‘Getting a job’: Vocationalism, identity formation, and critical ethnographic inquiry

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Abstract
This article examines the highly disputed policy nexus around what looks like on the surface to be the helpful field of vocational education and training. But, as Kantor and Tyack (1982) note, ‘the hopes of vocational education appear to have been misplaced’ (p. 2) not only in terms of labour market success, but also the manner in which they do not address the root causes of the conditions they purport to eliminate—poverty, unemployment, and economic inequality. The reality is that vocational educational policies residualise unacceptably large numbers of young people, especially those from disadvantaged circumstances, by reinforcing the myth that it is acceptable to force some young people to ‘work with their hands not their minds’ (Kincheloe, 1999, p. 139). This article draws on Australian research to describe the processes of critical ethnographic inquiry in which young people themselves are key informants in making sense of ‘getting a job’; how they regard the labour market; the kind of work they find desirable/undesirable; the spaces in which they can see themselves forging an identity as future citizens/workers—and how answers to these questions frame and shape viable, sustainable and rewarding futures for all young people, not just the privileged few.

Keywords
Vocationalism, identity, critical ethnographic inquiry, narrative portraits, work, disadvantage

Introduction
A great deal has been written internationally (OECD, 1994) and nationally (Rudd, 2008) about the relationship between national economic growth, productivity and the development of human capital. A plethora of reports and policy prescriptions from international agencies such as the OECD, IMF and World Bank, national and state governments of all political persuasions, right wing think tanks, and Business Roundtables have advocated the need to realign schools more closely to the demands of global capitalism. At heart, the argument is that schools are failing the economy—teachers are underperforming, students lack skills and aren’t ‘job ready’, and standards are falling. Underlying these complaints is a high degree of public anxiety and moral panic about youth largely generated by fear of social and political unrest, skills shortages, future employability and economic competiveness (Sarup, 1982, p. 30). When the economy falters, as its prone to do (Harvey, 2010), or faces a catastrophic meltdown such as the Global Financial Crisis (GFC) of 2008, then schools (and those inside them) not only become the scapegoat of ‘disaster capitalism’ but part of the solution in the form of free market ‘shock therapy’ and ‘structural adjustments’ (Klein, 2007).

Clearly, the neo-liberal/neo-conservative agenda is to put education to work as part of a broader ‘conservative restoration’ (privatisation, centralisation, vocationalisation and differentiation) (Apple, 1996, p. 29) while rendering its own ideologies invisible. In this scenario, schools must be more closely aligned to the shifting imperatives of the global market by adopting a more vocationally orientated approach to education and
training to make sure that students are ‘job ready’ (Kelly & Gaskell, 1996; Down, 2009).

In response, there has been a proliferation of activity at all levels of government—reports, policies and pronouncements—about the idea of schools as a primary training ground for workforce development leading to productivity growth (COAG, 2008). As Ball (1999) explains it, ‘Educational knowledge is reworked in terms of the skills, competencies and dispositions required by the economy’ (p. 198). In Australia, this has lead to what Malley and Keating (2004) describe as a ‘policy convergence’ around a dominant version of vocationalism in Australian high schools characterized by: (i) VET in School programmes; and (ii) School-based New Apprenticeships (p. 643). As a consequence, 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’ whilst perpetuating the distinction between academic and vocational career pathways.

Despite the overwhelming commonsense 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 concern about maintaining a balance between the academic and vocational curriculum and the differential rewards that it brings to different classes of students (Kincheloe, 1995). The concern focuses not so much on the pedagogical relevance of vocationally orientated ‘real world’ learning—which is clearly preferable for many young people bored with the abstract nature of the academic curriculum—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; Devine, 2004; Connell, 1993).

In this article we want to pursue this argument by drawing on a research project funded by the Australian Research Council and 17 Industry Partners (2011-2013), among them: three local government authorities; 9 public and private secondary schools; the Western Australian Department of Education; Bridging the Gap, a not-for-profit service provider for young people; and Challenger Institute of Technology, a technical and training provider. The intent of this collaborative research is to better understand the vocationalisation of schooling from the point of view of students themselves: how they think about the world of work and ‘getting a job’; how they regard the labour market; the kind of work they find desirable/undesirable; the spaces in which they see themselves forging an identity as future citizens/workers—and how answers to these questions frame and shape viable, sustainable and rewarding futures for all young people, not just the advantaged minority.

The article is organised around three main parts. In the first part we describe something about the context in which the research takes place and the particular circumstances in which many young people find themselves through no fault of their own. In the second part we explain our theoretical orientation and argument in more detail. Here we attempt to unpack the complexity of the relationship between schooling, jobs and rewards and the mythology on which it is based. In the final part we elaborate on the nature of activist and critical ethnographic inquiry with particular emphasis on the use of longitudinal interviews and narrative portraits to help us to get inside the issue of the vocationalising of young lives and how young people are thinking about the world of
work. But first, we want to provide a brief snapshot of the circumstances in which young people now find themselves in relation to the labour market.

What’s happening to young lives?
Tony Vinson’s report *Dropping off the Edge: The Distribution of Disadvantage in Australia* draws attention to the powerful ‘links that exist between … such factors as early school leaving, low job skills, long term unemployment, court convictions and eventual imprisonment’ (p. vii). He describes ‘the enduring story of the disadvantaging 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).

Though a bleak picture, this does not tell the entire story. The challenge of ‘getting a job’ is about to become much harder for increasing numbers of young people, especially for those who come from contexts of disadvantage. The evidence shows that young people have been major casualties of the GFC (Office of Youth, 2009, p. 45; FairPay Commission, 2009, p. 5) as they face a ‘complex and fragile global economy’ (Best & Kellner, 2003, p. 75) characterised by a significant reduction in the size of core full-time jobs and a growing number of people working in part-time, casualised, low-paying and repetitive jobs in the retail, trade and service sectors (Furlong & Cartmel, 1997; Dwyer & Wyn, 2001; Aronowitz & DiFazio, 2010). For young workers there is a ‘compounding vulnerability’ due to their general low levels of pay and conditions, precarious employment, high level of vulnerability to exploitation, and low quality jobs all of which contribute to a declining skills base with ramifications for both the individual and society (McDonald, Bailey, Oliver & Pini, 2007, pp. 63-64).

The most recent data in Australia shows that 15.9% (up nearly 3% on 2008 figures) of 17 year old teenagers 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 age 18 not being fully engaged. For 18-19 year olds the figure was 29.1% and 19 year olds 27.8% (Foundation for Young Australians, 2010, p. 6).

Locally, Australian Bureau of Statistics data for the City of Rockingham and Town of Kwinana in Western Australia (research sites) confirm that significant numbers of young people are not receiving the benefits of education and training and/or employment. In Rockingham 37.3% (and up to 43.7% in the suburb of Coolongup) of 15-19 year olds are not attending any educational institution. In Kwinana the figure is 44.3% (and increases to 58% in the suburb of Medina) (ABS, 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 (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, Angus, Down & McInerney, 2008).
Furthermore, Rockingham and Kwinana have been especially hard hit by the GFC of 2008 and ‘bear the brunt of hard times’ (Gibson, 2009, p. 5). Reporting on a recent survey of steel fabrication companies in Kwinana, 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 Rockingham and Kwinana (Weekend Courier, p. 8), the promises largely 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).

Addressing complex employment issues such as those we have described here requires a research approach capable of illuminating the interplay between the broader structural forces of deregulation and privatisation and the ‘new geography of livelihoods’ (Ross, 2009, p. 1). Beck (2000) brilliantly describes this process as the ‘Brazilianization of the West’ (p. 3) whereby ‘every location in the world now potentially competes with all others for scarce capital investment and cheap labour supplies’ (p. 27).

This research, therefore, endeavours to shed light on how these global shifts in the economy impact on young people as they struggle with the process of ‘becoming somebody’ in uncertain times (Wexler, 1999). As Wyn (2009) 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). But first, we want to say something about our theoretical orientation and argument before considering in more detail what it means to do activist and critical ethnographic research.

**Unsettling beliefs about ‘getting a job’**

Against this backdrop, we now want to be more explicit about our theoretical orientation and argument. At the outset, we do not pretend to take a neutral or impartial position as researchers. Our research seeks to unsettle some widely accepted ‘truths’ about the links between education, jobs and rewards. Our ‘take’ on the field of vocational education and training is, therefore, somewhat more circumspect and sobering than we are used to hearing from advocates of the Knowledge Economy who promise us a high skilled, high waged economy, the so called ‘clever country’ (Jones, 1984). Here, we are in agreement with Grubb and Lazerson’s (2004) argument that while the ‘Education Gospel’ of vocationalism is largely rhetorical it does serve to reinforce an education system and educational practices ‘whose purposes are
dominated by preparation for economic roles, … and one that is responsive to external demands—in this case, to demands for the “essential skills employers want” (Carnevale, 1990) and the “skills of the twenty-first century” (p. 3).

But, as Kantor and Tyack (1982) note, ‘the hopes of vocational education appear to have been misplaced’ (p. 2) not only in terms of ‘labour market success’ (Freeman & Wise, 1982, p. 3) but also the manner in which they do not address the root causes of the conditions they purport to eliminate—poverty, unemployment, and economic inequality (Kantor & Tyack, 1982, p. 2; Grubb, 1989; Cuban, 2004; Bauman, 2010; Anyon, 2005). The reality is that vocational education and training policies residualise unacceptably large numbers of young people by reinforcing the myth that it is acceptable to have the bifurcation in which young people are forced to ‘work with their hands not their minds’ (Kincheloe, 1999, p. 139).

In pursuing this line of reasoning Cuban (2004) proffers three persuasive arguments as to why it is timely to pause and critically reflect on the current policy obsession with vocationalism in schools. First, there is no evidence to support the proposition that the mismatch between employers’ requirements and workers’ skills in a rapidly changing economy has caused lower wages and higher youth unemployment. In fact, ‘increasing the job ready skills of high school graduates would hardly erase youth unemployment when millions of jobs go overseas in search of lower wages, not higher skills levels’ (p. 131). Second, there is no evidence that more education makes workers more productive. Cuban (2004) argues that the evidence available fails to show any causal links between school reforms, test scores and worker productivity, something the advocates of human capital theory conveniently overlook (pp. 131-135). Finally, there is no evidence to show that increases in worker productivity increase the nation’s global competitiveness (pp. 135-138).

Cuban (2004) goes on to argue that the faith of policymakers, politicians and educators (although not all) in vocationalism to magically cure a range of social and economic problems is, therefore, largely misplaced and ‘rooted in a robust popular conviction surrounded by factually frail assumptions’ (p. 137). Ultimately, systemic school reforms of the kind advocated by economic modernisers ‘cannot provide job opportunities, reduce inequalities in wealth, or enhance family life’ (pp. 125-126). The assumption that more and better education can resolve whatever problems exist in the economy is not only exaggerated, simplistic, and naïve but distracts attention from the real culprits—the organisation of work, the nature of labour markets, and the economic consequences of globalism (Grubb & Lazerson, 2004, p. 22). Furthermore, it also masks the ‘thorny political issues around equality, opportunity, and redistribution’ (Brown & Hesketh, 2004, p. 6).

Nowhere are these issues posed more starkly (and disturbingly) than by Brown, Lauder and Ashton (2011) in their aptly titled book The Global Auction: The Broken Promises of Education, Jobs and Incomes. What they reveal, is that the promise of ‘learning equals earning’, for so long the cornerstone of developed economies, has been seriously eroded by ‘the global auction for cut-priced brainpower’, as workers from emerging economies such as India, China, Russia and Eastern Europe compete for a shrinking number of decent, well paid middle class jobs (p. 5). What we are now witnessing, according to Brown et al’s (2011) argument, is a ‘price competition for expertise’ which is forcing ‘students, workers, and families into a bare-knuckle fight
for those jobs that continue to offer a good standard of living’ (p. 7). The upshot is that ‘the neoliberal opportunity bargain’ (p. 5) has failed to deliver on ‘the promise of the good life for those with ability and the willingness to work hard’ (p. 5). Increasingly, the only winners in the global labour market are a minority who succeed in the competition for the best jobs (Brown, Green & Lauder, 2001).

Gorz (2005) puts it more bluntly, ‘There is not and never will be “enough work” (enough paid, steady, full-time employment) for everyone any longer’ (p. 57). The reality is that, ‘society (or rather capital) no longer needs everyone’s labour, and is coming to need it less and less’ (p. 57). The whole notion of ‘the “work-based society”, in which everyone could hope to have security and usefulness—is dead’ (p. 57; see Sennett, 2006). The question becomes then, ‘how are we going to tell the workers’ (Kincheloe, 1999) about ‘this enormous fraud”? (Gorz, 2005, p. 57). If good jobs are disappearing faster than unstable and mediocre jobs are being created, as Aronowitz and DiFazio, (2010) argue, then investing in ‘more education and training in a shrinking market for professional and technical labor might lead nowhere for many who bought the promise’ (p. 14).

Pulling the threads of our argument together, what we are attempting to do in this research is to unsettle commonsense beliefs about the relationship between education, jobs and rewards. In view of the evidence and arguments available to us, and from the point of view of young people, there is an urgent need to interrupt those everyday ideologies, assumptions, and practices that perpetuate social hierarchies and educational inequalities. Our intent is, therefore, to reinvigorate discussion and research in the area of vocational education and training with a view to creating and sustaining a more socially just future for all young people. In pursuing this broader democratic project we ask new and urgent theoretical and practical 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 labour market?
- What social and economic conditions limit possibilities and opportunities for young people?
- How does social class organise 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?
Doing critical ethnographic research
In searching for answers this study is positioned as deploying a broadly critically ethnographic approach. While it is not a full-blown critical ethnography in the sense of being continuously embedded in a context for an extended period of time, nevertheless the theoretical and political orientation we adopt in the study is one of being explicit about our non-detached perspective, our concern to find out from young people about how they believe power works, and our belief in the need for informants to have considerable scope in the way they tell us their stories and how they make sense of their lives—all of which places this study in the socially critical domain. The way we are approaching our orienting proposition of ‘getting a job’, is to pursue this from the vantage point of young people, rather than the institutional, political or economic position of powerful institutional or organizational perspectives, that are interested in advancing human capital and national skills formation, satisfying labour market trajectories, or responding to what they regard as demands for global competitiveness. Our interest in these matters, is subsidiary to the interests of young people, and we countenance them only in so far as young people see them as issues to be challenged or that present them with obstacles, interferences or perplexities. If anything, our position is one that is framed around enabling young people to challenge extant notions of vocationalism and ‘getting a job’ as conventionally presented to them, and to recast it differently if they have experienced it as interfering with their larger project of identity formation.

To a large extent, our research is therefore a form of ‘activist ethnography’ (Frampton, Kinsmen, Thompson & Tilleczek, 2006) that in many respects derives from Dorothy Smith’s (1988; 1990; 2005) ‘institutional ethnography’. As Frampton et al., (2006) put it, political activist ethnographers ‘acknowledge that knowledge is produced through a reflexive social process of mutual determination and learning from other people’ (p. 4). This approach is in direct contrast to forms of ethnography that ‘subscribe to an objective, value-free approach, pretending that the world can be explored from some disinterested neutral place somehow above or outside the social’ (p. 4). We also subscribe to the view that ‘the social standpoint you take has an impact on what you can see’ (p. 5). Like the institutional ethnography pioneered by Smith, our concern is to ‘look upon the lookers to see how they do it’ (Frampton, et al., 2006, p. 6)—in other words, to examine how young people who are subordinated see the processes which silence and marginalize them, how they understand the workings of power, and how they envisage and experience other possibilities.

Our purpose is to try and get inside the issue of the vocationalising 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.

In the study, we are adopting a three phase interview process, each of which places a different inflection at temporal points on what we are trying to glean through young people’s stories.

First, there is an *Aspirational Interview Phase*, in which we are creating a space within which to start a conversation with these young people, and possibly for them to share
their story for the first time with adults other than parents and their teachers. We are interviewing a total of 33 young people aged between 14-17 years (years 10—12), in government and independent schools (9 schools, 3 students per school at each year level of year 10, 11 and 12)—27 students; an employment and re-engagement program (3 students), and a technical and further education college (3 students). The orientation is around one of inviting the young people to draw us into their thinking and how they are acting, and positioning themselves in relation to ‘getting a job’. Part of the conversation involves them explaining what interests them in their lives and what part that will play in leading them towards decisions about employment. We are asking them: where these interests come from; what is shaping, forming and sustaining these interests; what part their family has had either directly or indirectly, such as in being role models, or simply in supporting them as they make decisions; whether they currently have part-time jobs, and what that does in helping them understand the world of work, or even in deterring them from certain kinds of work; how they envisage or endure difficulties, such as their knowledge of labour market conditions and uncertainties; and how they envisage handling obstacles or impediments to fulfilling their aspirations and intentions. In sum, this first round of conversations is very much focussed 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’.

Second, there will be further conversation with the same young people, nine months later, that we might regard as a Following-up Developments Interview Phase. Here we will be picking up the conversation, this time in the light of their experiential developments of one kind or another. Some of these young people will have left school and possibly gone on to forms of higher education, others may have found employment, others will have done things that confirm their earlier intentions, and others will surely have taken directions in their lives we could not possibly have envisaged. It is at this point in the research that we will begin to see how the original stories have deviated or developed, and in short, we will start to get a sense of the intervening factors and events that have become prominent in shaping these young lives.

Finally, seven months after this, we will have a final conversation or Life Events and Outcomes Interview with these same young people, in which we ask them to describe where they have arrived at, and to reflect back on the course of events and their meaning, since we began interviewing them over 12 months previously. It is at this point that we will be asking these young people to try and piece their story together in light of their own biographies and the events and occurrences that have intervened and impacted their lives around ‘getting a job’. This interview, more so than the two earlier ones, may provide us with insights into the role of wider social forces, and how much agency young people believe they have had in forming an identity within these wider conditions. In some cases, they may be able to tell us something about marginalisation and conditions they feel have been orchestrated at a level outside of their control. As Nagle (2001) indicated in her seriatim interviews with students in vocational high schools, interviews at this point in a cycle are often ‘the easiest to initiate’ but also the most challenging to pull off because we are asking participants ‘to make meaning’ (p. 16). In our case, we will be asking young people about connections they have
experienced between school, life, and work, and how these have operated differentially, and with what effects.

We see our approach as contributing to an understanding of activist research (Hale, 2001) in several ways. First, like Hale (2001), we believe ‘there is no necessary contradistinction between active political commitment to resolving a problem, and rigorous scholarly research on that problem’ (p. 13). Second, we concur that activist research has the ‘potential to lead to better research outcomes’ because of the way it pursues issues in a ‘deeper and more thorough empirical’ way, and the ‘theoretical understandings’ it brings to problems ‘that otherwise would be difficult to achieve’ (p. 13). And, third, research of this kind, because it is not straightforward, brings with it ‘tensions, contradictions and ethical dilemmas’ that when identified and confronted, produce a situation in which ‘the research outcome is improved’ (p. 13). As Hale (2001) puts it, neither is activist research ‘restricted to research on or with people who are activists’—rather, research of this type involves a distinctive mindset or orientation that:

(a) helps us better to understand the root causes of inequality, oppression, violence and related conditions of human suffering; (b) is carried out, at each phase from conception through dissemination, in direct cooperation with an organized collective of people who themselves are subject to these conditions; (c) is used, together with the people in question, to formulate strategies for transforming these conditions and to achieve the power necessary to make these strategies effective (p. 13).

From the outset our research has involved 17 partners in designing the research proposal, and we will further that partnership as we undertake our fieldwork and make sense of our data. We will develop ethnographic case studies from the interview transcripts, and through an action research process with the young people, we will thematise the data, and seek their assistance in making sense of and validating it. With the partner organizations, all of whom have been involved in the education of these young people, we will engage them in a collaborative process across the ethnographic accounts, in developing a ‘Profile of Conditions Supporting Career Aspirations and Getting a Job’. Through this process, we hope to arrive at a situation of being able to challenge some of the entrenched shibboleths embedded in and that sustain dominant vocationalised views of young people, and develop richer and more complex policy and practice understandings that are informed by the experiences and biographies of young people.

Excavating the interview data
Having completed the Aspirational Interview Phase we proceeded to construct a series of narrative portraits to help us to: (i) make sense of the lives of these young people in a preliminary way; (ii) identify some emergent themes, issues and questions to pursue in the two follow up interviews; and (iii) begin the process of ‘dialogic theory building’ whereby data constructed in context is used to clarify and reconstruct existing theory (Lather, 1986). Drawing on Lawrence-Lightfoot’s (2003) notion of the ‘essential conversation’ we wanted to expand on her idea of the ‘borderlands’ where different cultures, races, and classes come together to negotiate ‘the contested terrain and common ground’ between families and schools (pp. 246-247). What we like about Lawrence-Lightfoot’s approach is the manner in which she identifies ‘empathy and
respect’ as essential ingredients in productive dialogue around the ‘complex and difficult challenges’ and ‘dangers—both internal and external—that adolescents are facing’ (p. 243). It resonates with our desire to ‘attend carefully and listen deeply to the perspective and wisdom’ that students bring to the conversation (p. 243). So, how does this form of critical inquiry and analysis work?

First, we constructed a narrative portrait of each participant based on the Aspirational Interview Phase. This comprised of a short synopsis followed by the words of the participant. By way of example we present James’s story below:

**‘School kept me away from my granddad’ (James, a pseudonym)**

In *Schooling Ordinary Kids*, Brown (1987) claims that working class kids display three different ways of being in school and becoming adult, namely (a) ‘getting in’ (b) ‘getting on’, and (c) ‘getting out’. He suggests that a minority of students—and we could probably include James in this category—reject schooling as boring, irrelevant and frequently repressive. These young people are far more concerned about getting away from the world of school kids into the world of working class adults and employment at the earliest opportunity. James’s Chinese granddad is a very significant influence in his life. The things that he most values, especially mechanical skills, have been learnt from his grandfather. Although James has a great deal of technical and practical knowledge what he brings to the classroom is not valued by the school. On the contrary, the school has such little regard for his scholastic capabilities that he has been told (in James’s language) that he can’t be ‘taught’. It is interesting to contrast James’s negative side effects of medication for ADHD with that of Jennifer’s alleged benefits. This portrait was developed from a transcript of an interview with James conducted on the 4th of August 2011.

Before coming into Bridging the Gap I just never went to school. 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 mum is my main carer. No one in our family went to uni. My sister is still at school and my cousins finished school but they have learning disorders. I don’t have any of those problems. 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. Microsoft 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. I’ve worked at a volleyball centre. I like basketball but I’m into motors more than sport. 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. I’ve been in Bridging the Gap about three weeks. I would be happy to go into TAFE. Because I’ve repeated so many times I can’t go to school anymore. I can’t be taught (sic) anymore and they are not going to waste their money. Because I had to repeat year 11 they said the best thing to do is to leave school. I went to a BTG Leadership camp where you work together. We did hiking and stayed in little huts and things, it was good. I have ADHD but I don’t take any medication now. When I was on the tablets it did things to me and I wasn’t a normal kid (James).

Then, we began the process of introducing theory to help us to explain the narratives. Thus, James is a student who is typically described as ‘at risk’—marginalised, alienated and disconnected from school. In his words, ‘I can’t be taught (sic) anymore, they are not going to waste their money … they said the best thing to do is to
leave school’. So ‘I just never went to school … it was boring’. Instead, James preferred ‘to fix boats and cars … mechanics and things … motorized bikes’. For students like James, school is of little interest or meaning in terms of their perceived futures. When students view educational difficulties or ‘personal troubles’ (Mills, 1959) as their fault (e.g. ‘I can’t be taught’), then there is little expectation that school can or will help them succeed in education, careers or life. As Fine et al (2008) explain it, ‘Low expectations from adults convert into self-defeating attitudes by which students hesitate to ask for help they need’ (p. 233). As a consequence, students are more likely to fail or drop out of school and ‘conclude that it is “my fault”’ (p. 233). The point being made here, and put so well by Fine et al (2008), is that schools ‘whisper intimately the words, that land on and saturate the soul of youth’ (p. 226). Sadly, for increasing numbers of marginalised students like James, it’s a message about their ‘fundamental disposability’ (p. 226; see Giroux, 2009).

Taking another example, Pippa’s narrative is built around the theme of connecting to emotions and interests and the desire to express herself—‘It’s a good way to show emotions and express myself’. Pippa’s story illustrates the importance of meaning and purpose in her educational experience, things that will satisfy her individual creativity, passions and interests (Dewey, 1938). Therefore, it should hardly be surprising to hear students describe with great enthusiasm their love of music, singing, fashion, art, performance, cars, dance, caring, and sports, to name a few. Pippa describes her passion and enjoyment when she is ‘singing and playing an instrument’. For many students like Pippa, the search for personal fulfilment and satisfaction is often frustrated by the realities of ‘doing school’ where individual creativity is stifled by institutional arrangements (Pope, 2001) and a labour market in which the availability of meaningful work is shrinking (Sennett, 2006; Kincheloe, 1995, 1999).

Finally, Janean’s story highlights the importance of altruism and the cultural resources of families in ‘getting a job’. Janean declares that ‘I want to make this place a better place’. In doing so, she debunks some of the popular misconceptions about ‘troublesome’ youth lacking skills, motivation and commitment (Males, 1999). Janean explains ‘When I was younger I wanted to be everything, a doctor, a lawyer … but recently I started to think about teaching … I want to make people happy through teaching’. Janean’s story also reveals how the cultural resources of families fashion their children’s desires, aspirations, needs and capabilities (Lareau, 2000). Janean describes in some detail those ‘practices of living’ (Weiss, 2008, p. 2) that play such a prominent role in determining whether children succeed or not in school (p. 2). She speaks about ‘doing something out of my comfort zone’, ‘going to UWA Open Day’, ‘living to a plan’, and being ‘in academic extension … and chosen to go to Canberra … to meet Julia Gillard and Kevin Rudd’. While Janean describes her mother as coming from a poor background, she says her ‘mother always believes that you should go after your passion’.

These glimpses into three young peoples lives (33 of them in total) and how they think about ‘getting a job’ will provide a foundation for ongoing interrogation when we return to the field to conduct the next two rounds of interviews during 2012. Then, we will speak to our participants about any fresh insights they may have about their lives, identify new and unexpected developments or events, and fill in any gaps and inconsistencies in their stories. In the meantime, we continue to build theory by reading off the clues provided by these informative stories.
Conclusion
At heart, therefore, this research is about creating spaces for young people like James, Pippa, and Janean to tell their stories and make sense of the conditions that both enable and constrain their aspirations, desires, dreams and needs in ‘getting a job’ in uncertain times. In pursuing this kind of ‘activist ethnography’ we examine how young people themselves understand the workings of power, and how they envisage and experience other possible lives (Rose, 2006). In short, we are attempting to develop in-depth understandings of what’s happening to young people in terms of their own identity formation and what schools, teachers and communities can effectively do to create the conditions to support them. Drawing on young people’s narrative portraits we ultimately want to identify and explain the barriers, obstacles and interferences they face in ‘getting a job’, and on the basis of these narratives explore the educational, policy and practice contexts that need to be created in order to fulfil their aspirations of finding rewarding work.

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