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To stay or to go? ‘At risk’ young women speak about their influences and experiences in making decisions about post-compulsory schooling

Presented by
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Introduction
In this paper we discuss aspects of a research project designed to investigate young women and early school leaving. The project develops a biographical and cross-generational methodology to explore the gendered experiences, consequences of, and decisions about early school leaving. It identifies themes and issues in the experiences of several different groups of young women who have been either identified as ‘at risk’ of early school leaving, or who have actually left school before completing year 12.

One overall aim of the project is to make visible the experiences of such young women who, as we argue below, are increasingly falling from the policy purview. In doing so, we hope to refocus current debates about gender and education away from simplistic winners and losers binaries of ‘all boys versus all girls’, towards more nuanced and situated understandings of the patterns and effects of different kinds of gender-based disadvantage. Our attention is turned to both the macro picture of national and international concern about the individual, social and economic costs of early school leaving, and the micro picture of biographical experiences of particular young women who are negotiating their lives from the margins of education and work. What can we learn from these experiences? How are young women managing their lives under difficult circumstances? What resources do they/can they draw upon? And how might insights from their narratives inform policy discussions about young people, schooling, pathways and transitions?

Background
In situating this research, findings from two related bodies of research and policy are relevant. First, studies of transition from school and young people’s pathways, particularly entry to the labour market (Applied Economics 2002; Business Council of Australia 2003; Lamb & McKenzie 2000); and second, research on gender and educational disadvantage, and particularly the recent attention to the disadvantages and difficulties encountered by boys, and their relative poor performance in some forms of school assessment (Collins et al 2000; Epstein et al 1998; Gilbert, R & P, 1998).

A key issue for transitions studies, and for the research and policy field of gender and education, is the relationship between subject choice and school performance, and post-school employment. Existing research indicates that this relationship is different for different groups of people (eg Lamb & McKenzie 2000).
A recent study conducted for the Australian Commonwealth Government on gender and educational performance (Collins et al 2000a), found that although the 'average female' is doing better in end-of-school results than the 'average male', this success was not automatically translating into advantages in the post-school labour market. Conversely, boys' relatively weaker performance at school does not appear to be obviously translating into labour market disadvantage. McLelland and MacDonald (1999), drawing upon Australian Youth Survey Data on destinations at age 24, found that:

- A higher percentage of males than females successfully make the transition to full-time work
- A higher percentage of males than females are registered as unemployed;
- A higher percentage of females than males are in part-time work; and
- A higher percentage of females than males are out of the labour force altogether.

(Collins et al 2000b, p.45)

Statistical data further shows that the difficulties of at-risk young adults are intensified versions of a broader gendered pattern. Summarising the results, Collins et al (2000b, p.46) found that:

While 46 percent of at-risk young males have found full time work, only 15 percent of at-risk females have found such work; 9% of such males are in part time employment compared to 15% of females; 34 percent of at-risk males are registered as unemployed compared with 20 percent of at-risk females; and a huge 50 percent of at-risk females are out of the labour force compared with 11 percent of at-risk males - and, perhaps, even more startlingly, compared with 5 percent of other young adult females. When the three 'unsuccessful' entry categories - employed part-time, unemployed, and not in the labour force are added together, either for the at-risk, or for the 'others', it is clear that many more young women than young men find themselves outside the full-time labour force.

Such findings indicate an urgent need to investigate the gendered dimensions of early school leaving. In light of the relative disadvantages young women face in this area, (and given the current policy and media attention accorded to the educational disadvantages experienced by young men) we need to know more about how these women are making decisions about staying or leaving school. How do they negotiate the complexities and challenges of post-school life? Because we were also interested in understanding patterns and processes of social and biographical change, we developed a cross-generational and comparative design so that we could see how different groups of women (mothers, young women at school and post-school) managed these issues.

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1 'At risk' is defined here as leaving school early, without further qualifications, and having limited education over time.
Design and rationale of the Project
Our study has a methodological focus on eliciting three main types of understanding. The first is to develop a different kind of perspective than that commonly made available through data base and statistical research. There is a wealth of material available on the patterns and rates of participation in school and the labour market, but there is much less research on how young people themselves actually negotiate such transitions. In particular there is a considerable absence of research on those young people most disadvantaged by this experience of transition. In the case of young women early school leavers, this absence is particularly striking.

We are researching young women in two communities (one in South Australia, one in Victoria) both located on the urban/rural fringe of a state capital city, both which have areas of poverty, significant rates of unemployment and other indices of social and economic disadvantage, including records of early school leaving. We want, then, to hear about how young women work out their decisions about school and work, how they manage transitions, and the extent to which existing educational and youth services are able to meet their needs. Central to this question, has been a focus on the kind of resources/capital that young women draw upon to manage these transitions and experiences, as well as the kinds of resources and support that would be or are most beneficial and most needed.

Second, we want to make two kinds of comparisons. One is between young women and their mothers, to explore the cross-generational patterns—continuities and disruptions—in the gendered experiences of school and work and social relations, and the different ways in which these were negotiated by the two generations of women. We have been particularly interested in researching how women's sense of self, their desires and ambitions, their orientation to relationships, work and futures has or has not changed across the mother/daughter generation. Here the impact of feminism, and dramatically changed education systems and labour markets are obviously crucial. We have deployed life history strategies—e.g. prospective and retrospective time lines—to prompt reflection on the choices and aspirations of both generations. The second type of comparison is between girls who are designated (by teachers at the local secondary school where we based our research) as at risk of early school leaving and those young women who have recently left school prior to completing year 12. Our purpose here is to understand how a group of young women today, living in an economically disadvantaged community, actually negotiate the consequences of early school leaving, the kinds of difficulties they might encounter, the support services and resources they find most helpful and their sense of future, in terms of education/training, work and relationships. In a policy context of more support and programs being directed to early school leaving (prevention, re-entry and transition programs) we want to find out how young women are actually faring.

The third kind of understanding we want to develop is of the experiences and perceptions of teachers and youth workers working in the local community. How
do their views and perspectives compare with those of the mothers and daughters? What programs are being offered, what sorts of resources are available, and are there stories of success? How might we mobilise the knowledge and expertise of teachers and youth workers to inform policy and program development? One overall focus, then, has been on the multiple perspectives and experiences of encountering the social and educational issue of 'early school leaving' within economically disadvantaged communities.

In developing these understandings within the overall project, we draw upon several bodies of theoretical work, including feminist debates about social justice, and Bourdieu's concepts of the different forms of capital and the relationship between habitus and field (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992; Fraser, 1997; Skeggs 1997; McLeod 2003; Allard 2003). In situating some preliminary findings and emerging themes in our interviews and focus groups with girls at school, their mothers, and local school teachers, we comment briefly here on two key concepts from the work of Bourdieu: namely his methodological interest in 'perspectivism', and his notion of social capital.

Bourdieu and perspectivism

The Weight of the World (Bourdieu et al 1999) is a powerful interview-based account of how 'ordinary people' are negotiating lives in a time of major social, cultural and economic upheaval. The many interviews and the structure of the book present the perspectives of different groups of people who are affected by a common experience—for example, life on a housing estate. Bourdieu describes this as a necessary 'perspectivism'. 'We must work' he argues, 'with the multiple perspectives that correspond to the multiplicity of coexisting, and sometimes directly competing, points of view' (Bourdieu et al 1999, pp.3-4). His research approach in that project, the method, was to listen attentively to the detail of people's lives in order to read the effects of 'objective relations' in the apparently idiosyncratic: to seek the organising, underlying and relatively systematic principles, relations, and structures that govern particular lives; to identify, in his terms, the interactions between social space/field and habitus. Additionally, in The Weight of the World, Bourdieu argues that in contemporary life there has been a proliferation of social fields, and points to the methodological and conceptual challenge of researching this alongside what he calls 'positional suffering'. In the context of such proliferation of fields and intensification of 'positional suffering', we are investigating, in two different sites, how groups of marginalised young women (young people who are particularly vulnerable to the kind of social changes implied in the ‘positional suffering’ analysis) are responding to and negotiating multiple social fields in transformed and transforming times.

Bourdieu and social capital

'Social capital' is used increasingly in a number of domains—including government policy and speech-making—and used for different purposes and with different effects, from the arguments of Robert Putnam about the decline of social capital, (Putnam, 2000) to survey-based studies that seek to measure the 'incidence' of social capital (Stone, 2001; Stone, Gray, Hughes, 2003; Winter,
Bourdieu’s use of the concept ‘social capital’ has a clear relational focus and is linked as well to the hierarchies of value that characterise the other key forms of capital that he identifies, namely cultural, symbolic and economic (Skeggs 1997 Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992). Bourdieu explains social capital as constituted through ‘contacts and group memberships which, through the accumulation of exchanges, obligations and shared identities, provide actual or potential support and access to valued resources’ (1993, pp. 143). Further, ‘social capital’ refers to resources based on ‘networks of more or less institutionalised relationships’ (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992, p.119). In this sense, social capital is particularly relevant to understanding experiences of social marginalisation, institutionalised relationships of inequality and the different kinds of networks that matter.

We have been exploring the idea of ‘social capital’ as a way of examining how the young women in our study negotiate their circumstances, and the kinds of resources they bring and draw upon. They clearly have limited access to ‘economic’ capital and do not embody the dispositions and modes of distinction that characterise privileged and high status forms of cultural capital. Nevertheless, we are arguing that these young women foster valuable and productive forms of social capital. In this light, we are interpreting friendships and social interactions not as the ‘background noise’ to school and work experiences, but as a fundamental emotional resource that young women draw upon for managing and supporting young women. Such resources and aspects of their daily experiences, we argue, need to be more fully acknowledged in programs and policy strategies designed to assist such young women.

Researching Perspectives

Drawing upon research from the Victorian site, in this section we explore two main themes, each from the perspective of the young women at school, their mothers and teachers. The first concerns the different meanings of staying or leaving school, and the second concerns the different meanings of ‘success’ articulated by the three groups of participants.

I. To stay or to go? Official discourse, longing and ambition

Perspectives from girls at school

The Year 9 and 10 young women who volunteered to be part of this project all indicated that they had considered leaving school. Yet, in an initial focus group with the young women, when completing prospective ‘life lines’, seven of the eight wrote that they intended to stay on at school through at least Year 12. Their reasons for doing so, which they discussed with us in the individual interviews, seemed to fall into three categories. First, to some extent, they appear to know and accept the official discourse that in this day and age economic well being is dependent on gaining at least a Year 12 certificate. The credential represents a recognised ‘goal’. They speak in terms of wanting ‘to do something’—i.e. to get ‘a good job’—and this is understood as dependent on completing at least Year 12. Some of them also indicated on their life lines that they intended to go on to tertiary education.
However, when these ‘goals’ were ‘probed’ in the interviews, the girls were very vague about what courses they might actually do, or the jobs that they wanted to aim for. The form that such a goal might take, ie., ‘where they want to be’ in two or three years time was ill-defined, particularly for the Year 9 girls. Two Year 10 girls were able to be more specific regarding their preferred career choices. One Year 10 young woman stated that she wanted to be a ‘chef’; the other aimed to be a childcare worker. These choices appear to be based on the kind of jobs with which they were already they were familiar—the Year 10 girl who wanted to be a chef has a boyfriend who is studying this and the other has a mother who runs a child care centre. Both have undertaken work experience in these areas.

The Year 9 girls were far more ambivalent about what they wanted to do after Year 12. Some could name a particular field of work (e.g. marine scientist, working with animals, running a night club, being a drug and alcohol counsellor) but all were very unclear about what qualifications they needed to get these jobs. The experience of tertiary education was familiar to only one of the girls whose two older sisters were currently studying at university; few could distinguish between what going to university or going to TAFE meant. It may not be unusual for young women in this age group to be unsure of what they want to do when they leave to school. Nevertheless, in interviews with the mothers, it was striking that the mothers themselves felt they had little advice to offer, or did not know how to help their daughters in thinking through their educational goals. Moreover, the girls did not see their parents either as being a source of advice concerning future choices.

While the young women were able to repeat and, in many ways endorse, the ‘official discourse’—i.e. ‘you must stay on at school and get a Year 12 Certificate’— this may have been repeated to us because they had heard it so often from their teachers and from their mothers and/or because they thought that this was ‘the answer’ we, as researchers wanted to hear.

A second reason, and for a number of them the strongest imperative, for remaining at school was summarised by the repeated phrase, ‘I don’t want to be like my mum.’ Staying on at school was a means to ensure that they did not become ‘like mum’. Most of the mothers had left school at Year 10, mainly working in low paid, low status jobs before marrying and having children, often by age 19. School and some kind of post-school qualification were viewed by several of the young women as a means to escape from what they perceived to be the unhappiness of their own mothers’ lives. They saw their mothers as lacking freedom, economic independence and personal choice. For example, Kelly says:

…it’s been really hard on Mum because Mum dropped out in year 10 or Form 4 or whatever they called it and umm, she just started a full time job at [the local supermarket] and she has worked there all her life. And it’s been really hard for Mum because all she does is work. She only gets Tuesdays and Sundays off and now Dad doesn’t work, she feels she’s the
one that everyone is relying on and that she has to bring all the money home and everything and its just really hard on her.

Sarah, another Year 9 student, says about her own goals:

I don't reckon my life is going to be like my Mum's because she had kids early and she married early like at 18 or something and then she's just been like a housewife all that time and she has only had little jobs every now and then. Whereas I want to do something with my life. I don't want to get married young and have kids young. I want to experience life a bit before I--get a good job and that and I want to have a job--like not just be a housewife. [...] Like my Mum didn't really have a chance-- like she had kids and was married by 18 or 19 or whatever and I just want to-- before I get stuck with kids or something, I want to do something.

Education for most of these girls is understood as a way out of the unhappiness that they see their mothers' experiencing, a means to escape their mothers' destinies.

Despite their stated beliefs that education was a means to an end, a way of not being like their mothers, of attaining a degree of independence for themselves, for most of the young women, the actuality of staying on at school was also viewed as difficult. This was usually due to three main reasons: a widespread sense of 'boredom' in their classes; a sense that they had to 'struggle' with the work and that they do not get the help they need, (particularly in Maths); and a feeling that their needs are not recognised by many of the teachers.

A sense of 'boredom' also carried over into other dimensions in their lives. The geographical area itself, (at the end of the train line), on the urban/rural fringe offers little by way of extracurricular activities for the young women. There is a swimming pool and some organised sports, though these were not used much by the group interviewed. Consequently, they spent a lot of time together at each other's homes, or going to a nearby regional centre for movies and an under-age nightclub. One of the young women was very involved in the scouting movement where her mother was a Scout Leader; another was a keen horse rider. Because of limited public transport, there was no easy access to other activities that are usually more easily available in larger metropolitan areas--activities such as music lessons, dance, etc. Even if these were readily accessible, their family's financial constraints put these beyond the reach of some.

Life is elsewhere
The girls' decisions concerning their present lives and hoped-for futures, as well as their attitudes to school are shaped by their knowledge of the official discourse, their mother's experiences of school, (often unhappy or negative ones), and by their desire to not repeat the patterns of their mothers' lives. The girls are able to articulate the official discourse—but see 'life' as happening elsewhere—outside school and outside their own geographical location. Thus, for these young women, there is an apparent tension between a stated desire to complete school,
in terms of both official discourse and a desire to not be ‘like mum’), and sense of
how hard staying will be, given boredom, a sense of struggling and of seeing ‘life
as elsewhere’. Their choice to stay at school seem to be made on the basis that if
they put in the time, endure the boredom, they will ‘buy’ their way out via a
credential. It is as if being in Year 9 or Year 10 in this location is purgatory that
must be endured until they are old enough or free enough to move on. Escape
comes at a price and the price is school.

Mothers’ perspectives on staying at school
All but two of the mothers had grown up in the area. One had attended the same
secondary college as her daughter. All had left school by Year 10, although
several had subsequently gained post-school qualifications and one was
considering a return to tertiary study. In interviews, all of the mothers were clear
about wanting their daughters to be happy, to have more time for themselves
between finishing school and getting married and having children. Each
expressed a desire for her daughter to have a different life (more exciting?) than
they had had…to travel, to live on their own, to have their own apartment before
‘settling down’. Most of the mothers were less concerned about whether their
daughters stayed in the area. Indeed, some of the mothers seem to expect that
their daughters will necessarily leave the area.

A number of the mothers, while clear about wanting their daughters to stay at
school at least until Year 12, nevertheless were concerned and unsure about how
to help them. Joanne, who completed a one-year nursing certificate after she left
school at Year 10, speaks about her own sense of not being able to help her
daughter, Mandy. She says:

Mandy, she is a bit of a lost soul. She will say, ‘What am I going to do
when I leave school?’ She doesn’t know, and every time you suggest
something, you can’t see her in that role anyway. So you know she is
definitely a worry. […] You don’t know what to do whether to push them
into it or subtly suggest things because you know, she sort of has stupid
ideas like ‘I will work in a nightclub as a DJ or something. I will run my
own business’. And --you know. So I said, ‘Why don’t you try nursing or
something?’ But she is, ‘No, I couldn’t.’ So--we will see.

Their lack of knowledge, a sense of inadequacy in being able to help their
daughters when they ‘struggle’ with school work, are poignant themes
underpinning much of what many of the mothers—and their daughters say. This
translates into frustration on the part of their daughters—and themselves. Sarah
describes her relations with her parents:

And now they [her parents] get like, they don’t talk to me about my report, like
when I get my report, because like I struggle a bit and its not always good and
I do try my hardest. I get abused and everything and I get all these
punishments and that for not doing good on my report. Like they should see
where I am coming from, like they should see how I’m doing. They reckon,
they keep saying to me, ‘Oh you know you’re smart and you know you’re going to do it’. But I am not and I do struggle.

Sarah’s sense of not being ‘smart’ and her frustrations are evident. It is also possible that Sarah’s parents may not have the necessary skills, expertise or social resources to provide the requisite support or the knowledge necessary to survive and thrive within a particular educational milieu. Some of the mothers are reminded (via their daughters) that because they did not ‘stay’ past Year 10, they themselves are not viewed as ‘successful’ in terms of education, economic advantage or freedom of choice. It is precisely such indicators of ‘success’ that the mothers most hope for in their daughters’ lives—often expressed as wanting them to ‘be happy’. From the mothers’ perspectives, this means staying on at school. While they feel unable to help their daughters move beyond the expressed boredom, what they offer—and it does seem a significant factor in the young women’s decisions—is strong encouragement to just keep going. Simply staying on at school is a measure of success, and is frequently affirmed.

Teachers’ perspectives on girls staying or going
Teachers at this school work hard to find ways to keep the young women ‘staying on’. The school offers VCAL (Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning, an alternative to the Victorian Certificate of Education, whose assessment requirements are oriented to university entrance). Two of the young women interviewed are involved in a pre-VCAL program at Year 10, the ‘alt [alternative] Year 10’. The school also offers ‘special programs’ for those not coping—although most of these programs seem designed for boys rather than girls. A ten week ‘self-esteem’ program for girls has been offered and this year, a new assertiveness program is being used with both girls and boys: ‘Rock and Water’ is being trialled with the year 7 groups, and an abridged version of this of being trialled with Year 9s and a Year 8 group. The Student Welfare Coordinator explains this initiative as targeted for kids ‘identified by the Middle Years Team as needing some assertiveness skills. They have perhaps been victims of ongoing bullying, their social skills might need a bit of development. It’s voluntary, they don’t have to attend, but they are really embracing it and it’s proving quite successful with those kids.’ (Interview with SWC 9/03)

However, for girls who describe themselves as ‘loud’ and ‘outspoken’, (as a number of the young women interviewed do), or who have been suspended or regularly thrown out of class for failing to conform to expected behaviours, there does not seem to be any formal program of support—although they do know about and access the ‘welfare’ programs through the Student Welfare Coordinator on an individual basis.

From the perspective of some of the teachers, girls’ ambivalence towards school was interpreted as a sign of ‘lack of ambition’. Teachers describe the students as

… academically not strong. They haven’t got great ambitions, and in particular the girls, overall they haven’t got great ambitions. They don’t want to go to University and become a lawyer or doctor anyway. They’re
pretty happy. At lot of them actually stay in the area too when they leave [school]…

Indeed, some of the teachers are fairly dismissive of the area itself: ‘Staying in the area’ after leaving school isn’t seen as a positive decision, but rather as another indicator of a lack of ‘ambition’:

I would think that if people would get out of the area it would be good for them. The ones that stay around, you see down the street a year or two, three-five years later. I’m not sure if the area, like staying in the area is all that good…

They also describe student choices regarding ‘careers’ as falling within a conventional ‘male – female divide’. This too is interpreted from the teachers’ perspectives as a lack of ambition.

... when you discuss it with the girls and what they’d like to do, we still have a large number that want to do nursing and work in the hospitality industry and in the secretarial work. To try and get them to stretch further than that is sometimes difficult. Because a lot of them, you know you talk and discuss with them, and say ‘well you’re doing very well at school’. You know they hear it from their teachers and they say ‘oh no I won’t get very good marks at the end of the year, I won’t get into teaching or this or that’, so they have a very negative attitude to it from the start. And it’s very hard to get them to change from that, so they’re coming to Year 12, a lot of them with that already.

The need to get the young women to ‘stretch’, to aim higher, to become more ‘ambitious’ is central to the desire of the teachers to keep them at school, to enable them to see themselves as competent and capable. Changing the young women’s ‘negative attitude’, helping them to aspire to be ‘more’ than nurses or teachers is viewed by teachers as a necessary step in order to help them to ‘stretch’. Such a view however, tends to neglect the meaning of success and ambition within these families, many of which are economically disadvantaged and do not have a family history of post-compulsory schooling, or of further education and training. In this respect, a daughter becoming a teacher or a nurse is not perceived as a second-rate achievement. Teachers’ perspectives on these as ‘default’ and conventional pathways for young women is important to consider in terms of changing expectations of gender (and echoes early feminist reforms targeting girls to be non-traditional). But it only tells a partial story of the meaning of success, one which ignores social and class change in relation to schooling and work, and contrasts with the perspectives from the mothers on their ambitions for their daughters’ success.

Some teachers also explain the girls’ ambivalence towards school and lack of ambition as a consequence of there not being a very ‘academic’ culture amongst the parents’ in the area, observing that most of the parents are either ‘on
pensions' or 'in business or the services'. Conventional gender expectations and impoverished family culture are discursively linked.

So you're not going to have that role modelling of you know, 'girls can do anything', they're still very traditional roles and expectations for women and men. And the women, the parents that are working tend to be secretarial type jobs, nursing assistant. I would imagine that there would not be many women, mothers in this school who actually have tertiary qualifications...But it's a real, you know-- there isn't an academic culture amongst the parents at all.

On the one hand teachers' official discourse is to keep young people at school, to make school more attractive and inclusive. But on the other hand this rhetoric, this official discourse appears be undercut when they talk about and 'blame' the ongoing [negative] impact of the young women's 'family backgrounds', and how these impact on the girls' ambitions and decisions to stay or to leave. Responsibility for staying or leaving returns to home.

The school offers career advice—but not until the end of Year 10 when decisions regarding VCE or VCAL need to be made. These conferences include parents as well as students. This provision of 'career advice', while perhaps useful, does not appear to address vital issues to do with how the girls actually imagine and judge themselves. Many of them expressed a feeling of not being 'up to doing' tertiary studies—of not being 'good enough'. Being 'told' they can do it is different from feeling, believing, even imagining that they can. This sense of self is in part linked, we are suggesting, to the different kinds of social and cultural capital the young women inherit, and the different orientations to school, work and futures that these foster. Most of the young women do not have experience within their own families of what is involved in going beyond Year 12—going on (or even staying on) is not seen as a taken-for-granted assumption. From the perspective of the young women, who so often talk of being bored at school, being advised to choose 'ambitious' careers that require even more years at school may be viewed by them as simply extending their sense of school as 'purgatory'—without addressing the problems they experience simply in staying on.

II. What counts as 'success'? Friendships, intimacy and family background

From the girls' perspectives

So, what counts as success? How do the different groups of participants in our study view 'success'? While teachers are concerned about the young women's lack of engagement in school, an alternative perspective on the girls' orientation to schooling is evident in their intense pre-occupation with interpersonal relationships and friendship. Rather than seeing this as a diversion away from a more successful schooling experience, we suggest instead that a great deal of learning is taking place within and through such friendships. Significantly, these friendships provide meaningful and intensely felt experiences; they develop and are a crucial part of young women's social capital, part of their 'resource base' for managing difficulties in their lives, including school and decisions about futures.
Friendships are a central feature in their lives and they use these as a way to counteract the boredom of staying on in school when they are feeling disaffected. Several of the Year 9 girls say that friends are the only reason they continue to go to school. And this network of close relationships pays off for the girls in terms of getting help when there are crises for them at school or in the family. Not only do the friends become their source of advice, but they also provide support in seeking assistance from other sites of help. For example, the school’s Student Welfare Coordinator commented that the girls use these friendships, draw upon them in order to access the services that she can provide. She says:

You get a lot of friends bringing girls; you don’t get friends bringing boys…the girls will come themselves or bring their friends...friends have been quite significant in bringing kids with quite big issues. And I noted a real increase in that in the last couple of years.

While much research has focussed on the centrality of friendships within this age group, (Allard, 2002; Hey, 2000; McLeod, 2000; Plummer, 2000; Skeggs, 1997; Walkerdine, Lucey & Melody, 2001; Weis & Fine, 1993; Yates & McLeod, 2000) perhaps schools do not give enough attention to the ways in which young women use this field of social interaction as a site to develop survival strategies. While friendships at this age can be described as ‘fraught’, these young women nevertheless view their relationships as a reliable means to acquire emotional and social support and an important resource for gaining help.

From the mothers’ perspectives
‘Success’ in terms of what the mothers’ wanted for their daughters took three forms: First, as already noted, the mothers wanted their daughters to be ‘happy’ and for many of them, this seemed to mean having more carefree lives then their own. In a sense, focussing on ‘happiness’ encapsulates and reflects the mothers’ own desires without providing much direction for the girls.

Second, many of the mothers spoke of their desire to have much closer relations with their daughters than what they had had with their own mothers. The desire to ‘not be like my mum’ figures as a cross-generational theme. However, what the mothers meant by this is decidedly different than what the daughters’ desires signified. For example, Catherine, Kelly’s mother, reflects on the relationship that she had with her mother:

Oh my mum just was--Dad left and Mum sort of--her emotions went with him and she just looked at raising us and as long as we had food and clothes on our back, that was her main thing in life. Which was really a shame but...But no, we never had that close [relationship], and none of us have...she sort of shut down the emotional side. There was no photos of Dad left in the house from when he left and that was it. It was never talked about, everything was sort of put under the carpet...

From this lack of a close relationship with her mother, Catherine has set out to do things differently in her relationship with Kelly.
At least we can talk and I encourage her [Kelly] to... at least I’ve always said to
her, ‘I always want you to be honest with me and it doesn’t matter what you
do, we can fix it but if you let things go and it gets to the point when we can’t,
then that’s when we’re in trouble.’

Int: What do you see as important in terms of the work of mothering?

Umm well just trying to be there if they want to talk to you and just-- I always
wanted my girls to feel secure and happy in their life.

Third, several mothers spoke about wanting their daughters to feel valued and
recognised at school in ways they themselves felt they were not. Feeling ‘valued’,
the mothers believe, would not only enable their daughters to experience
academic success but also a sense of personal affirmation—a type of ‘success’
they themselves had not known at school. For example, about her own schooling
experiences, Katie, Sarah’s mother, said:

...I was very middle of the road at school--they probably wouldn’t hardly have
even noticed me. The impression I got going to XXX High School-- which was
huge in those days-- was that I wasn’t really anyone that would be
remembered there and even—I just slotted in did a bit of work and then
left... only the best and the brightest would have been noticed, I think...I really
didn’t like high school, didn’t like it at all. I hated it because it was just-- you
were just one of the masses there.

Some of the mothers explicitly talk about wanting their daughters’ experiences to
not repeat the traditional class and gender experiences they had encountered. In
some of the mothers’ reflections, patterns of class and gender. For example,
Catherine says:

...I come from a single parent family and then they, see back then, when I talk
about when I left school which was a while ago, they didn’t really push women
to go through to-- it wasn’t a big deal, you know. And all my friends that
went on to college actually came from well-to-do families, you know, and they
seemed to be the ones that went further through school.

And:

I just thought that girls, well, girls and boys, were treated better at school these
days than what we were and I thought they were given more opportunity and
that they were encouraged and that they actually like learning. But
... obviously there is still a problem within our school system if girls like [Sarah]
are kicked out of class [for laughing].

So for a number of mothers ‘success’ means more than just merely staying on at
school—although that too is deemed to be essential. Success also means being
recognised and encouraged and supported in ways they themselves never
experienced. They are aware of the gendered dimensions of schooling; aware too of the importance of gaining the ‘credential’ since the jobs that they took up—low paid and low status—are not what they want for their daughters. While they are able to voice their desires for their daughters to have a different, more affirming experience of education than they had, their own sense of themselves as being able to bring about such change via intervention within the school, and liaison with teachers seems limited. Their emphasis on having close, and trusting relationships with their daughter suggest that the interpersonal and affective are the parts of life they feel most in control over or able to direct.

From the teachers’ perspectives
The Student Welfare Coordinator was well aware that for many parents in the area, their own schooling experiences were not recalled as either pleasant or ‘successful’. She understood that consequently they did not necessarily have positive memories or ‘a sense of comfort’ when it came to working with the school to assist their daughters to achieve successful outcomes. This as played out in the unwillingness of parents to take an active role in their daughters schooling. She says:

We don’t have a high degree of involvement from parents, but I think we are just as much responsible for that. And we are doing a lot of work at the moment...we are really trying to develop that and work towards making parents feel more comfortable in the school. So I don’t think that’s necessarily—in the past it was very difficult to get parents involved. It’s not as difficult now, but we need to do a lot of work in engendering a sense of comfort and all of that.

However, not all of the teachers share this perspective, or understand parents to be ‘ambitious’ for their daughters. Some of the teachers, as noted earlier, see ‘success’ as equated with ambition to be something other than a nurse or a teacher or a secretary and they perceive the young women as lacking in this due to the ‘traditional gender roles’ and ‘negative’ attitudes played out within their families.

I reckon it’s similar to the, like I said, the negativity of the parents to schools and teachers and that. And that gets passed down to their kids and it shows in the way they conduct themselves at school and talking to a lot of parents, a lot of the mothers, when you meet them, are younger than me and they’ve had their kids when they were kids. It’s like kids have kids at sixteen, seventeen and so they’re then early thirties or mid thirties and so then their own daughters end up having kids. It’s just the same thing because their parents’ attitude, well it happened to them and it often happens to their daughters as well. And that’s, I reckon that’s very, just the parental upbringing and their attitudes that just come through to the kids in regards to getting pregnant and that.

[...]
A lot of them, that’s their aim in life, its where they see themselves going. They don’t see themselves as getting a career and that sort of stuff. They just see themselves as having a child early. I don’t know how you can, whether that’s just across the state, or it’s stronger here. I wonder what statistics would say, but they seem pretty... you’d probably know, you speak to some girls, that’s seems to be their aim in life.

From the teachers’ perspectives, girls’ likelihood of success is strongly linked to notions of ‘family background’, a term that is threaded through so much of the teacher’s talk about girls, schooling and futures. ‘Family background’ is represented as a complex set of relationships that do not provide the young women with needed resources or capabilities. Moreover, ‘family background’ is deployed as both an explanation (excuse?) for the limits of what the school can do, and as a ‘self-evident’ explanation of the girls’ decisions. While the official discourse of retention continues to prevail, an equally powerful discourse about ‘family background’ works displace some of the responsibility of schools and teachers to respond to this imperative for some of the most marginalised young people.

Concluding remarks
We have argued that attending to the perspectives of different groups allows us to develop a picture of ‘early schooling leaving’ that is significantly different from that conveyed in much pathways research. We have tried to draw out the emotional dimensions of ‘pathways decisions’, as a way of enriching the mass of statistical based research on destinations and outcomes. This latter kind of study is essential. It alerts us to patterns of difference and inequality, but it cannot answer questions about how and why such patterns are sustained or interrupted, or take on different social and personal significance. We have focussed on how the views and experiences of the young women, the mothers and the teachers are differently criss-crossed by knowledge of ‘official discourse’ but that simply reiterating the rationality of that discourse does not shift deeply held views of any of the groups.

For the young women, they speak the language of staying at school, they know the imperatives, but they remain unpersuaded by that and are more influenced by the emotional ties and support of friends. In contrast to much of the ‘pathways’ and transition research, we propose that decisions about staying or leaving school need to more fully acknowledge the emotional and interpersonal dimensions of these decisions. Simply urging upon young people the official and rational discourse of policy and the labour market (i.e. more school is an unquestioned benefit—but for whom, one might ask?), does not appear to take account of the complex decisions young women are making. In looking more closely at the different perspectives on young women’s decisions about school leaving, we hope to illustrate some of the competing tensions, between official discourses and more ‘private’ belief and emotional longing.

The mothers long for their daughters to stay at school; they are the most hopeful of the three groups, but also in a sense the group more often at a loss to know
how to make that happen. Mothers, teachers and the girls all recognise the importance of staying on at school, and making the transition from school into work or onto tertiary education. However, this recognition is insufficient in itself to address the girls’ disaffection with their current schooling, their sense of ‘struggle’ and boredom. Additionally, knowing that they ‘should’ does not help address the sense the girls have of not being ‘good enough’, nor does it assist their mothers who do not see themselves as having the requisite knowledge (resources/social capital) to help their daughters make informed decisions.

For the young women and their mothers, staying at school is expressed as more of a ‘wish’ or a hope—or an obligation—rather than an assumed, taken-for-granted, ‘natural’ life choice. This is in part due to their family experiences of schooling and further education, and to what the young women observe in their communities. It is also possibly connected to their mothers’ lack of confidence in knowing how to help their daughters engage with school and help them plan for their futures, a future that both generations agree will be different from the one the mothers experienced.

For teachers, their desire to ‘help the girls’, to provide many and varied programs sits alongside their views of such girls and families as fundamentally lacking in ambition and capacity for success. For example, there appear to be a lot of extra programs and overt displays of support. The value of this kind of support and ‘social capital’ work has been discussed by Croninger and Lee (2001) who argue that such attention to building informal social relations is particularly beneficial for ‘at risk’ students. On the other hand, when talking with teachers, they convey a sense of low expectations; a sense of the girls’ background holding them back; that success is not something that comes naturally or easily to ‘these kind of students’, who are seen to lack familiarity with a ‘culture of success’.

Developing a perspectival and multi-layered reading of the sign ‘early school leaving’ helps us to better understand how the different views interlock, and helps illuminate the powerful and contradictory discourses that shape the field and associated policy and professional debate. From the perspective of policy research it points to the need to consider the emotional dimensions—simply urging ‘official discourse’ upon young women does not work, especially when such discourses coalesce with the desires of their mothers, from whom the young women wish to differentiate themselves. Further, the teachers shift between an official discourse (‘keep girls at school) and a more informal though deeply held professional commonsense about family background, producing a set of entrenched assumptions about gender and class that sit uneasily alongside attempts to improve the educational experiences and outcomes for young women.

References


