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Angwin, Jennifer, Blackmore, Jill, Harrison, Lyn and Shacklock, Geoffrey
2001, Pathway planning and 'becoming somebody' : Exploring the
tensions between wellbeing and credentialism with students at
(educational) risk, in *AARE 2001 : Crossing borders : New frontiers in
educational research : Australian Association for Research in Education
conference proceedings*, Australian Association for Research in Education,
Coldstream, Vic.

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Pathway planning and "becoming somebody": Exploring the tensions between wellbeing and credentialism with students at (educational) risk

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Paper presented to AARE Annual Conference

Perth, 2-6 December 2001

Introduction

In the past pathways could be described as bridges over a creek, well sign posted so you knew where you were heading and how you were going to get there. Now the bridges have been washed away and all that is left are a series of rocks. You don't know how stable they are from the surface, how long they will last or what the currents will do. The path is forward, sideways, backwards and you don't know where you will end up on the other side. New skills are required to negotiate this path.

Teacher

This is the context for the Geelong Pathways Project undertaken during 2000-1. The Geelong Pathways Project was part of an initiative by the Victorian Department of Education Employment and Training. It was funded as part of the implementation of the Ministerial Review of Post Compulsory Education and Training (Kirby 2000) Pathways Planning Project for all 15-19 year olds in Victoria. The aim was for young people to consider their future options through more structured planning supported by schools, as well as inter sectoral links locally being mobilised to support young people to make choices about their futures. The Geelong Pathways Project, one of twelve projects across Victoria, was auspiced by the City of Greater Geelong Youth Services Research and Development Unit, sought to review the current literature on pathways planning and related issues, identify models of practice that works, map existing services and strategies. Data was collected through 89 interviews with Year 10 and 11 students in three Geelong schools, other agencies and two tertiary institutions. Careers teachers and program providers were also interviewed, and a survey of staff understandings of pathways planning was undertaken. The focus of the project was to listen to and record student voices, given the emerging literature about the need for students to inform educational policy and practice (Rudduck 1996).

Youth transitions and conceptualising pathways in new times

The social conditions of industrialised nations are changing rapidly and continuously and we seem to be living through a major historical transition in society that has been variously described and theorised as post-industrial (Kumar 1995), late modernity (Giddens 1990), postmodernity (Anderson 1998), the risk society (Beck 1992) or the individualized society (Bauman 2001). However we choose to describe these new times, which we coterminously live and conceptualise, what we can be sure of is that many of the social, economic and cultural certainties of past decades, including social infrastructures around employment, education, health and welfare, are no longer stable or continuous in the ways that even very recently had been taken for granted. How we experience and understand our human condition, both individually and collectively, is no longer securely informed or bounded by concepts and knowledges that are endowed with certainty or predictive power (Bauman 2000).

For those of us who investigate and seek to understand educational pathways within and beyond school the message is clear. It is that our work must be grounded in a recognition that young people make and manage movements between education and work, and also between school and future lives as citizens and consumers, in positive and creative ways within the uncertainty of what Giddens (1999) has called a 'runaway world'. Importantly, we must recognise that this making and managing is tied closely to young people learning about themselves, society and their agency for planning and constructing futures.

The point that we are making here is that youth and adolescence, as transitions from childhood to adult phases of life, in education, in personal and family relationships, in economic prosperity and in many other life domains are not the same for young people today as they were for their parents (Furlong & Cartmel 1997). Traditional ways are called into question, changed and reinvented, in a process that enables young people to respond to the riskiness of opportunity in the runaway world. Bauman (2001) says that coping with this ever present questioning of how transitions may/should occur is about distancing ourselves from the habits of the past and becoming comfortable in learning and planning without them.

Postmodern humans are denied the luxury of assuming, with the Shakespearian hero, that 'there is method in this madness'. If they expect to find a cohesive and coherent structure in the mangle of contingent events, they are in for costly errors and painful frustrations. If the habits acquired in the course of training prompt them to seek such cohesive and coherent structures and make their actions dependent on finding them – they are in real trouble. Postmodern humans must therefore be capable not so much of unearthing a hidden logic in the pile of events or concealed patterns in random collections of colored spots, but of undoing their mental patterns at short notice and tearing down artful canvases in one sharp move of the mind; briefly – to handle their experience the way a child plays with a kaleidoscope found under the Christmas tree.

(Bauman 2001, p. 125)

For young people, this tearing down of the artful canvas is no more evident than in those transitions typically associated with the post-compulsory years. These transitions can no longer be considered uniform or linear in the ways that they once were and, what is more, it is likely unhelpful to do so (Soares 2000). Indeed, to think like this by valorising tight structure, simplicity and predictability in transitions is to invite the 'costly errors and painful frustrations' that Bauman refers to above. The shift from full-time to part-time labour markets for young people (from teenagers to those in their late twenties) is but one example of this failure of the old transitions. For instance, some young people have not one, but several part-time and casual jobs. Making the transition from school to work (or to further education) does not necessarily mean taking a single fulltime option. Some leave school early, some take time-out before studying at university, and many will cobble together a mix of activities that are considered sensible ways toward future lives irrespective of institutional and familial pressure to follow normalised pathways into adulthood (Maguire, Ball & Macrae 2001). Transitions that seem workable, or appeal, are often not coordinated or patterned in the ways that they once were, but may be seen as time-appropriate and even reversible when required (Du Bois-Reymond 1998). That is to say, they do not happen in predictable sequences or at known times and do not need to be considered permanent. Furthermore, the usual transitions do not occur for all in the same order, or at the same time, but are likely contingent upon the social, economic and peer resources that are available at a particular time and place (Wyn & White 2000). Importantly, the movement from one aspect of life to another is less likely to seem like a bridge from one thing to another than it is to appear as a transition point in space and time where immediate and quite specific life choices are made and acted upon.

Our research has provided multiple insights into the conceptual intersections between thinking about life transitions and reflexive understandings of self and society through an investigation of how young people understand and engage with pathways planning either when in secondary school, or when working with youth agencies after leaving school. Thinking about the future, life choices, work and study is something in which children and young people engage at every stage of their educational lives but it becomes especially important towards the end of the compulsory years of schooling when a decision is required about staying on or leaving school. At school, young people making the transition to the post-compulsory years are encouraged to think of their choices about work and further education and training as about choosing pathways to the future largely because the concept of the 'pathway' as an educational and developmental conduit from one stage of life to another is dominant in the policy and practice environments of the post-compulsory years (Kirby, 2000; Dwyer

and Wyn, 1998).

For us, pathways planning is that intersecting set of processes and decisions which young people engage in as they make choices about future educational and work options. Gaining information and making use of it to inform individual decisions about how to plan and activate both their short and medium term futures is what young people are doing when they are pathways planning. Our findings indicate that pathways planning for students managing the transition to post-school destinations remains narrowly focused on the VCE and tertiary entrance. While in the most direct sense this significantly disadvantages the 70% who do not go on to university or higher education, more broadly it demonstrates that schools fail to recognise that educational and other life transitions are no longer certain nor are they reducible to well understood movements from one to another location (such as school to university or to fulltime work). The mapping of a defined pathway from school to work or further education once carried with it a well understood destination and a transition that was predictable and transparent. Yet in these new times, transition points, to work for example, materialise long before completing school. When transitions occur like this, at points, rather than in coordinated ways, identities are in constant flux and the presentation of stable identities associated with linear transitions can appear meaningless and empty. Managing the ongoing reconceptualisation of transitions and their links to identity construction cannot be ignored by schools and youth agencies.

'Shaping up' schools

Numerous federal and state policies are shaping how school systems and schools attend to students most 'at risk'. While individual schools are expected to take responsibility for youth at risk, schools are often not the focus of research around youth at risk. This is due, on the one hand, to the recent theoretical interest on theories of youth identity, with some exceptions, notably (Yates 2000), and on the other to the individualising policies that map and track youth but fail to address the contextual relationships within which youth engage with education, work and training. This project found that how student's made decisions was not so readily disentangled from the social circumstances of their personal and educational lives, or of their experience of school as policies suggest. (see the case study).

Systemic dispositions

A key theme emerging from the study was how system wide imperatives (markets, focus on academic curriculum, school disciplinary policies) as well as policies (Youth Allowance, VET in schools) converged to encourage particular overt and covert systemic dispositions and 'school habits' that impacted on the relations between teachers and students. The habits of schooling were closely associated with limited definitions that equated success to academic achievement and to system wide emphasis on conformity in behaviour and appearance.

While the 1980s saw the move to comprehensive coeducational schools, as in the deindustrialised economy, traditional pathways into the trades disappeared, there was also a move towards a single exit certificate (Victorian Certificate of Education), inclusive and multiple modes of assessment as well as a mix of external and school based assessment, hurdle and assessable tasks. During the 1990s these more innovative and inclusive approaches were undermined by a reduction of assessment to one score for university entrance. Schools, in the context of competitive relations, have become increasingly focused on narrow outcomes, usually academic outcomes on standardised tests and VCE results, and image management (well disciplined and uniformed students) in order to attract and retain students, responding to common sense understandings of what constitutes a good school.

The market pressures of the 1990s exacerbated particular tendencies or dispositions of many schools towards even more academic orientations. We found in our study that the dominance of markets resulted in the following;

- the academic orientation of the VCE,

- the standard curriculum offerings and inflexible timetables,
- the difficulty and cost of provision of VET,
- the lack of adequate funding to meet students who have difficulties(Angwin et al 2001, p. 17).

In general, work programs and VET, were not seen as the core business of schools, and system wide policies encouraged this tendency as schools are judged on an 'academic success' culture. That is, systemic dispositions due to the collective impact of policy and funding regimes which undermined the rhetoric of student choice, resulted in students being expected to fit schools rather than schools adapting to student needs as schools lack the funding for flexibility and system rewards and values focus on academic outcomes. Youth most 'at risk' were not the 'core business' of many.

Habits of schools; the academic curriculum

There are issues concerning the dominance of the academic curriculum in all schools. Schools often market themselves in terms of their scores, seeing these as the outcomes that count for young people. Yet only 30% of Year 12 student continue on to higher education; so what is the relevance of this curriculum for the other 70% of students? Teachers own experience of education via this academic route clearly influences the culture of the schools and the difficulties that many schools experiences in establishing relevant and effective VETIS programs, that are affordable, accessible and do lead to jobs or VET qualifications have resulted in many students being unable to access VET programs at school. High achieving students are most likely to take VET subjects in order to improve their ENTER scores. The students for whom VETIS was seen as a 'solution', girls and students with low levels of academic skills, access these courses least. Simple issues such as bus timetables prevent young people from accessing VET programs.

Habits of schools; careers advice

Across the range of research sites it was apparent that structures are in place to advise and support young people as they make decisions about careers, subject choice, staying on or leaving school. All schools had careers teachers, careers centres, regular visits from Vocational Training advisors, youth workers and so on. There were clear roles and responsibilities for year level coordinators, subject coordinators, VET coordinators and teachers were briefed as to what was in place. However few young people who were at risk of becoming early school leavers, seemed to see the careers program as able to inform them as their decision making processes. Often discipline issues interfered with career planning. The agency, as to who young people choose to talk to, about what and when, remains with the young people themselves. By the time that their academic work is under strain, their relationships with teachers breaking down, they are unlikely to want to sit down and take a long term view of what their options might be if they walk out from school. They rely on friends and family for information and advice and often this advice is out of date and inaccurate.

The complexity of players in the post compulsory sector, the range of providers and courses, the raft of qualifications, force young people with the least academic capital to make the most complex choices and decisions of any students. If you get a high ENTER score choice is easy. If you leave school without any certificate, then the options are far more complex. Information about the pathways that are most likely to lead to jobs or recognised qualifications are complex and few teachers interviewed had a good understanding of the options available, nor the complex way in which the different sectors linked, that is pathways from school to ACE to workplace to TAFE are no longer linear and one directional.

what they want is a job – a real job, not part tie or casual, but full time, one which provides workplace training and leads somewhere.

Spierings 2001

Habits of schools : exclusion

A lot of our students have been kicked out of schools around Geelong and can't get back in. Usually it is 16 and 17 year olds who are pit on unrealistic contracts and are asked to leave when the contracts are broken. This year it is 14 and 15 year olds, and parents don't realise that they can fight to have them stay at school. Schools don't give parents the full story and parents don't know the system. Teachers seem to react badly to normal behaviour for 14 year olds, such as mobile phones and body piercing. We get a lot of students in January/February, end of the first semester and in October/November before exams so they don't show up in the stats.

Agency Worker -Geelong

One of the main themes emerging from our research was that of school exclusion. At a time of unprecedented retention rates in the post-compulsory sector the burgeoning literature, particularly in the UK, on school-exclusions might seem anomalous. However, as Selina McCoy (2001) and others (see Smyth, 1999; Whelan and Hannan, 1999; Wright *et al*, 2000) have pointed out the phenomenon of rapidly rising participation and retention has had little effect on class inequalities in educational attainment. Although she emphasises class here, other axes of inequality such as race, ethnicity and gender, and the complex interaction between these factors in particular settings that together produce educational inequalities, needs acknowledgment.

McCoy points to the influence of school ethos (here student/teacher interactions are emphasised), particularly 'discipline, correction and reward structures' as having either a positive or negative influence on retention of early school leavers. She outlines several positive factors such as an emphasis on personal and social development programs, a climate of expectation and the maintenance of minimum standards, the school's encouragement of parental participation and the parents' levels of cultural capital as positive factors in contributing to retention rates (McCoy, 2001, pp. 6-8). Participation in part-time work is seen as a negative influence but it is not clear whether engagement in work affects commitment and a student's sense of the relevance of schooling or whether participation is a reflection of already existing alienation (2001, p. 8).

This is a good example of the transition work that young people engage in that is not positively recognised by schools. It is ironic that at a time of policy reform concerning VETIS, Enterprise Education, traineeships and new apprenticeships, that schools still do not see the importance of their role in the formation of young people's habitus regarding the world of work.

Wright *et al*, in their study of the effects of race, class and gender on school exclusions in the UK (2000) also acknowledge the effects of school cultures on retention rates. They discuss the existence of a powerful dichotomy in schools – the well-behaved majority and the challenging few. In a climate of competition between schools the challenging few are seen as in danger of damaging the educational chances of the well-behaved and preventing schools from attracting desirable students. The authors liken the minority to other historically marginalised groups who are marked as deviant and thought capable of contaminating the 'law-abiding majority' (2001, p. 26). The discourse that produces this dichotomy emphasises discipline and punishment and actions are designed to 'reinforce structures that have broken down' (2000, p. 35), rather than question the structures themselves. While it is acknowledged that schools need to have a consistent approach to the application of sanctions it is also evident that not all students misbehave for the same reasons and that consistency does not allow for the flexibility that is often needed when dealing with students from a variety of backgrounds. On the other hand, allowing exceptions to the rule can often result in confusion over boundaries and inconsistencies in applying the rules. This dilemma is not easily resolved. In a similar vein Cooper *et al* consider what they have called 'dilemmas of intervention' and characterise these as follows:

Fairness (treating all the same) - Fairness (recognising difference)

Rights/needs of the collective – Rights/needs of the individual

Need for correction – Need for understanding

Treating students as independent moral agents – Treating students as needy adolescents

Responsibility for staff wellbeing – Responsibility for student wellbeing

Need for confidentiality – Need for information

High expectations – Relaxed, non-confrontational relationships

Obedience – Autonomy

Tight role boundaries – Permeable role boundaries (2000, p. 171)

These dilemmas were identified from a series of school case studies on inclusion carried out by the authors in the UK. Schools that adhered more closely to the strategies on the left hand side, perhaps not surprisingly, had higher rates of exclusion than schools who adopted strategies on the right. However, choices for action were not always clear cut despite different orientations and the importance of making student well being central to this process was thought to be paramount.

Wright *et al* also point out that an emphasis on discipline can lead to exclusion as punishment, a strategy that is perhaps a natural consequence of adhering to the tight role boundaries and the emphasis on the needs of the collective identified by Cooper *et al* above. This view of exclusion is seen as being ‘for their [the student’s] own good’ and carries with it the assumption that this form of punishment will have a positive outcome for the young person. There is however a contradiction here between care and control that it is difficult for many young people to understand. Here, the whole notion of ‘punishments’ is called into question, particularly with older students who object to being treated like children at a time when they are more like adults. Maguire *et al* (2001) have noted that many young people have access to adult behaviours at an earlier time than previous generations so that the line between adulthood and adolescence is being increasingly blurred. There may be stark differences between life in and out of school for many students in danger of exclusion thus making an emphasis on ‘control’ even more problematic. Wright *et al* found however that there were different ways of administering exclusions that were not based on punishment but instead on a duty of care and a commitment to helping students in difficult circumstances. One of the schools in this study saw temporary exclusions as a diffuser; allowing students a breathing space in which to learn by their mistakes. The authors point out that if exclusion was used as a tool to reinforce teacher/school authority then the school was likely to have a high exclusion rate.

The discussion so far has centred on official exclusion practices but as Vulliamy and Webb (2000) note, ‘unofficial’ exclusions are a regular practice in most schools. Cooper *et al* (2000) estimate that if unofficial exclusions were included, the rate of exclusion may be up to fifteen times higher than official figures. They maintain that issues of social justice are central to exclusion and point out that the UK (like Australia) is a signatory to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) ‘which unequivocally asserts every child’s right to education’ (2000, p. 3). Some of the practices documented include: teachers bypassing administration; parents being invited to find another school for their child; schools organising transfers to more suitable schools; work experience and TAFE studies used to ensure that some students are never at school (Vulliamy & Webb, 2000, pp. 4-5).

There are numerous qualitative and quantitative studies that point to the centrality of teacher student interaction (social and pedagogical) in terms of student alienation, engagement and success (McCoy 2001). As Mc Coy points out, an emphasis on academic performance is importance, but what counts

as success has to be broadened so that vocational courses are not seen as the lesser alternative, or as not being girl friendly, leading to withdrawal of many girls. With the concern about retention rates mounting, there is also recognition that lower student achievement and early school leaving is a consequence of long term and gradual disengagement with schooling. Clear and structured academic expectations can promote engagement and retention, as well as regular monitoring of progress in a positive way, with teachers as mentors, advocates as well as exercising pastoral care.

One of the key recommendations of our report urged schools to reorient their core business so that the emphasis was on cooperative rather than compliant relationships (Angwin *et al*, 2001, p. 38). Cooper *et al* see 'respectful and attentive listening' (2000, p. 188) and 'dialogue, negotiation and engagement' (2000, p. 192) as important components of this reorientation. They maintain that the experiences of students and teachers in inclusive schools and classrooms include:

- A sense of being valued as a person
- A sense of belonging and involvement
- A sense of personal satisfaction and achievement
- A sense of being accepted and listened to
- A sense of congruence between personal and institutional values
- A sense of the personal meaningfulness of the tasks of teaching and learning
- A sense of efficacy, of power to influence things for the better (2000, p. 193)

Current policy climate

For the first time the Kirby review suggests that in order for schools to improve outcomes for young people, that more resources need to be made available to support services, welfare and career planning. Schools are encouraged to link with other agencies to provide these services within the school and beyond the school, through the Local Learning and Employment Networks (LLEN) which link all sectors of post compulsory education and training with employers, support agencies and the community. The Bracks government has directed over \$65 million to the establishment of these networks across the whole state, devolving funds and responsibilities for local programs and decision making to the local level.

A further policy change as a result of the Kirby Review, aimed to decrease the numbers of early school leavers had been the introduction of the Managed Individual Pathways (MIPs). Schools are now being funded to ensure that all young people engage in a series of careers planning activities and that schools 'track' all students who leave school. In an attempt to broaden the curriculum for students at risk of becoming early school leavers, a new qualification framework is being trialled, the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL) which will include a range of options other than the current VCE and VETIS programs. A second key policy reform has been Public Education: the Next Generation (PENG). This report makes a commitment to quality public education and the ongoing funding of public education. PENG also advocates monitoring and supporting teachers standards, to ensure that quality teaching will become central to improving outcomes for young people (Connors 2000).

At the same time as these two reports acknowledge the differences amongst schools, their local communities and outcomes, and the Bracks government has committed over \$65 million dollars to this end, contradictions in the policy context remain. The Premier also asserted that schools will;

- increase the percentage of young people who complete year 12 or the equivalent.
- increase the number of adults undertaking education and training and so increase the overall level of educational attainment and literacy levels in Victoria.
- make near-universal participation in post-school education and training the norm in our society. (Bracks 2000).

Conclusion

We would argue that schools and agencies need to begin seeing the transitional work that young people are engaged in as a part of their core educational business. That is, an ongoing engagement in understanding both educational and social transitions, along with the development of skills and dispositions to support and enable that participation, should be fundamental learning for young people involved in education or training. We see this as a major shift from the all too familiar – that is, mostly paper and pen based tasks linked to careers counseling and participation in work experience – that our findings would suggest is widespread. By seeing educational and social transitions as active in how young people define themselves in relation to their readings of futures, we are suggesting that schools and agencies take on transitional work as pedagogical work. That is, that transitional work is of such a fundamental kind that it needs to inform curricula, pastoral care and peer interaction. Conceptually, this is about building "fluid individualized systems of social capital" (Raffo & Reeves 2000) that enable young people to access and flexibly manage changing networks of people, knowledge and opportunities.

Making transitional work part of core business would require moving beyond limited notions of 'assisting' transitions. It would entail recognising that in these new times young people are engaged in a continuous process of identity construction which does not depend on older problematic understandings of the links between education and post-school life. Further, it would require an admission of the pedagogical role of popular, media, consumer and techno cultures in the lives of young people and that the integration of these with what happens in education and training settings is necessary (Fitzclarence, Green & Kenway 1998). Our position in this paper is to reconceptualise youth transitions and pathway planning in ways that takes into account the shifting connections between schooling and futures for young people as core educational work and to make suggestions to better enable schools and agencies to work with young people in living with multiple and fragmented transitions.

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