The changing context of Australian youth

and its implications for social inclusion

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Introduction

Some groups of young Australians (young Indigenous people, young people in rural and remote areas and young people from low socio-economic backgrounds) are less likely than their peers to achieve optimal outcomes from education, and are more likely to: have high rates of unemployment; experience precarious employment; and have poor health outcomes. Successive reports have pointed out the statistical correlation between poor school performance and negative employment outcomes (Dusseldorp Skills Forum, 2006; Foundation for Young Australians and Education Foundation, 2008). Over the last 20 years, an extensive literature has developed, describing and analysing the relationship between school success and labour market opportunity, identifying poor or faulty transitions from school to work as a significant cause of social exclusion. In response, governments have put in place measures and policies to monitor young people’s transitions, give young people at risk advice on ‘pathways’ that will keep them connected to formal learning or to employment, and focus on vocational learning and skills. This presentation acknowledges the importance of these measures, but argues that the almost exclusive focus on school to work transitions is missing something. Measuring the statistical relationship between educational and labour market outcomes has not generated a discernable change in patterns of social inclusion (Foundation for Young Australians and Education Foundation, 2008).

I argue that measures to improve social inclusion must take account of the changing social and economic realities with which all young Australians engage, regardless of their social or physical location. I argue that, in becoming an effective learner in 21st Century Australia, two elements in particular have emerged as especially significant: identity and wellbeing. These elements deserve greater attention in addressing educational approaches that promote social inclusion.

Findings from the Life-Patterns study provide evidence that faced with the social and economic environment of the 1990s and 2000s this generation has negotiated new approaches to life (Wyn et al., 2008). The study is one of the few insights into Australian youth in transition that does not focus exclusively on problems and failed transitions and that does take into consideration young people’s subjective assessments and their broader life experiences. The analysis tends to focus on the ways in which young people have made successful transitions and to analyse the diversity that exists within the ‘mainstream’ of Australian youth (Dwyer and Wyn, 2001). Nonetheless, processes of inequality, marginalization and social exclusion have affected the lives of participants and their experiences raise questions about the capacities and resources required to manage successful transitions in these times.

How has social change impacted on young people?¹

There is a convergence of opinion that the social, political and economic processes of late modernity have meant:

¹ This section draws extensively on Wyn, 2008a
1. Greater complexity of pathways through youth. Changes in the nature of work have meant that young people must make their own routes through education and work in new economies and negotiate uncertainty through ‘personal’ choices (Furlong & Cartmel, 2007). The individualisation of the risks of changing skill requirements in the economy and the emergence of flexible and precarious labour markets means that young people feel the need to hold their options open and to make decisions that enable them to balance being in the present with an orientation to the future. A majority of young people are both workers and students, establishing a pattern in secondary school that they will continue throughout life (Stokes & Wyn, 2007). The links between education and employment are also increasingly complex and unpredictable (Wyn, 2006).

2. Adulthood is achieved incrementally and earlier than for previous generations. The relevance of age as a marker of transition to adulthood is therefore reduced and new patterns of adult life are forged relatively early, breaking down clear distinctions between youth and adulthood (Wyn et al, 2008), as noted by youth researchers in many countries. For example, in Europe, Leccardi and Ruspini (2006) see a ‘new’ youth; in the United States, Arnett (2004) has identified ‘emerging’ adulthood and in the UK Henderson et al. (2007) explore the ‘invention’ of adulthood by young people. Paradoxically, in all Western countries, youth researchers note the increased length of time that young people spend in education, and the trend towards lifelong education.

3. Wellbeing has a heightened significance in a world in which uncertainty predominates and identities are (of necessity) a work in progress. Quality of life for young people has been affected dramatically by the increasing fragmentation of social institutions and communities (AIHW, 2007). Wellbeing has become a social concern and a personal quest, a public preoccupation and a private responsibility (Wyn, 2009).

Research on young people’s relationship to schools (e.g. McLeod & Yates, 2006; Davies, 2004) provides evidence that:

1. In late modernity, some ‘ways of being’ are more effective and better rewarded than others (Kelly, 2006). Successful ‘transition’ into adulthood depends on being able to engage reflexively and continuously in the processes of constructing one’s self as choice-makers and to demonstrate that one takes individual responsibility, is resourceful and a ‘reflexive, enterprising subject’, regardless of age (McLeod & Yates, 2006). Young people are required to hold a strong future orientation and to be able to plan
the process of becoming an adult. These subjectivities are an essential resource base for the successful negotiation of education and labour markets in new economies, as well as other aspects of life including wellbeing.

2. New forms of inequalities based on class and gender are emerging and older inequalities based on race are entrenched. There is evidence that the imperative to make and re-make oneself, to construct one’s own biography and to “be your own person” have had a stronger impact on some groups of girls than on boys (McLeod & Yates, 2006). In particular, young women from high socio-economic backgrounds appear to be the most responsive to the need to perform required identities (as reflected in academic and labour market success). By contrast, young men from low socio-economic backgrounds are the least likely to be seen to need to be open to change with new times and continue to rely on ‘ways of being’ that served men from their communities well under different economic conditions and are the most likely to be unemployed (White & Wyn, 2008; McLeod & Yates, 2006).

Young people understand that gaining educational credentials will not guarantee them a job and that they must actively construct education and employment biographies that make them attractive in precarious and changing labour markets. At the same time, the need for individuals to create effective pathways through education and work has heightened the relevance of identity work and the task of actively constructing one’s biography.

Descriptions of young people’s education transitions tend to focus almost exclusively on the school-work nexus and to ignore important aspects of young people’s lives, such as their health and wellbeing. This is a significant oversight, since increasingly health issues, such as obesity, drug abuse and mental health promotion are addressed directly through school curricula. A recent national study of 19–20-year olds conducted through the Australian Institute of Family Studies found that while a majority of young people were coping well, between a third and a half of them were experiencing ‘serious adjustment problems’ (Smart and Sanson, 2005: 12–13). Recent figures show that 25% of young Australians experience a mental disorder (AIHW, 2007). Young people who do not complete secondary school have higher rates of mental disorder (35%) than those who do not (25%) and young unemployed are more likely to suffer a mental disorder than other young people (AIHW, 2007).

Are schools keeping pace with change?
Social and economic changes have made the traditional alignment between school and work, forged in the industrial economies of the 1950s, increasingly problematic (Wyn, 2008a). The nature and pace of change has meant that new skills need to be learned, frequently, and new circumstances regularly adapted to. Digital technologies have enhanced our capacity to access information and have created the expectation that individuals will learn how to use successive waves of new technologies in personal life and in work settings. At the same time, the widespread emergence of flexible and precarious employment has meant that individuals need to
be able to regularly learn new skills and take up different options in order to survive. This requirement for perpetual learning has meant that all stages of life require education and educating, and all areas of life are learning opportunities.

In recognition of the changing context of formal learning, OECD reports promote the significance of higher education as the new mass education sector that will ensure that Australia has the skill base for economic development, promote social cohesion, and deliver prosperity to individuals (OECD, 2007a). The increased requirement for formal learning means that knowledge has become a crucial resource as well as an industry. The completion of secondary education is normative and it is expected that young people will participate in post-compulsory education. This development has put pressure on governments to transform education systems so that they can meet the needs of ‘knowledge economies’ (OECD, 2007b).

Higher rates of participation in secondary education, combined with high levels of immigration, means that the population in secondary schools is more socially diverse than ever before. Yet many elements of contemporary secondary school education, including ideas about young people and learning date back to the 1950s. The expansion of post-compulsory education has mainly been achieved through an increase in participation by older students, building on educational frameworks and assumptions that have been inherited from an industrial era. In other words, secondary education has been more expanded than transformed. Examples of outmoded elements of schooling include age-based learning, the idea of a mainstream, valuing young people for their future contributions only and the separation of learning institutions from communities.

In Australia, up to one quarter of young people leave school ‘early’ and do not complete their secondary education by the age of 18 (Foundation for Young Australians and Education Foundation, 2008). The age-based system of education means that it is very difficult for these young people to find their way back into formal education because very few schools offer a ‘second chance’ once the normative, education – age nexus is broken. The organisational reliance on age appears increasingly outmoded in an era of life-long learning. Even though schools contain increasing numbers of young adults, their potential as decision-makers is seldom recognised. Opportunities for participation in decision-making by young people in formal education (secondary or tertiary) remain limited, reflecting a view that young people are recipients of education not participants in learning. While this understanding of the role of young people may have served an industrial economy, it does not make a good fit with the demands of living in late modernity.

Identity and wellbeing form a central tenet of learning in many programs designed in partnership with Indigenous communities for Indigenous youth (Collard & Palmer, 2006; Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 2008). Yet, in the main, while issues such as wellbeing and social cohesion are given lip-service, Australian educational policies overwhelmingly emphasize a utilitarian and economistic vision of education. It is difficult to see how this can be maintained in
the longer term. As the pace of social change makes the relationship between education and individual outcomes increasingly unpredictable, the industrial model of preparing young people for established jobs and occupations is increasingly outmoded.

Conclusion
Educational systems have been slow to respond to the changes in young people’s learning needs and some of the trends in contemporary educational approaches have further isolated education from broader social trends through an increased inward focus (e.g. standardised testing, ranking of school performance). New and older patterns of inequality of outcomes based on class, gender, race and geographic location are formed as some groups are more able to draw on cultural and economic resources than others to secure success.

In as much as educational policies have recognised the need for education to respond to social change, this has tended to rest on traditional assumptions about the preparation of young people to serve the economy. This has created a disjuncture between educational policies that continue to frame education within an industrial model (instrumental and vocationalist) and the requirements that young people themselves have for the capacity to be good navigators through new economies, to live well, and to engage with complexity and diversity.

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