Stories of early school leaving

Pointers for policy and practice

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Brotherhood
of St Laurence

Working for an Australia free of poverty

Contents

Acknowledgments

Abbreviations and acronyms

ARACY	Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth
BSL	Brotherhood of St Laurence
CAE	Centre for Adult Education
CDEP	Community Development Employment Projects
DHS	Department of Human Services
HSC	Higher School Certificate
JPET	Job Placement, Employment and Training
LSAY	Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth
TAFE	Technical and Further Education
VCAL	Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning
VCE	Victorian Certificate of Education
VET	Vocational Education and Training

Summary

Early school leaving – leaving school before completing Year 12 – is often seen as a problem both by policy makers and by parents, although it was the norm a couple of generations ago. For early school leavers, the pathways to further training and employment can be diverse, and for some difficult, with few full-time jobs available for young workers. School completion is viewed as a major policy objective in Australia, with considerable emphasis at both federal and state government level on increasing school retention rates.

The stories of eight young people who left school early illustrate some of the policy issues for the school to work transition. These issues include measures to improve school retention, youth income support and associated mutual obligation, provision of training and employment, and assistance in access to these.

Findings and policy implications

Eight young people who left school between the ages of 14 and 16 were interviewed about their experiences when they were aged 17. They were not randomly selected but were all those who had left school early from the Brotherhood of St Laurence's Life Chances Study, a longitudinal study which has followed some 140 young people since their birth in Melbourne in 1990. The eight included three girls and five boys, seven living in Melbourne and one interstate. They came from a variety of family backgrounds, some, but not all, quite disadvantaged. Some, but not all, had longstanding learning difficulties. By age 17, two were no longer living with their parents.

The young people's individual pathways since leaving school were diverse and complex and include experiences of trying to return to school, attempting TAFE and other post-school training, trying to find work and using employment services and other support agencies. In brief, by the end of the year they turned 17:

- Lisa[1], who had been trying to find employment, had found she was pregnant.
- Tom had left his fast food job and was looking for work.
- Carlo had tried a few jobs, was unemployed and was hoping for a job in construction.
- Brendan was unemployed and wanting to do a mechanic's apprenticeship.
- Duc had returned to school and completed Year 10, and intended to finish school.
- Andy had tried one job and one TAFE course and was doing a 6-month Green Corps program.
- Maddie had completed VCAL at TAFE and was hoping for an office traineeship.
- Emma had completed VCAL at TAFE and was planning to do VCE in a community setting.

Leaving school

The young people gave multiple reasons for leaving school. Typically they left because of negative experiences at school, rather than because they had an inviting job or training course to go to; only one left primarily for family reasons. They talked of difficulties with schoolwork, for example being overwhelmed with the work or struggling to catch up after missing school, of poor relationships with teachers, and of other students being bullies or snobs:

> I left school in the middle of the year, last year. I *hated* it there. I hated the kids. The kids were all snobs. And the teachers, they didn't really *listen* to what I was saying at all. They just couldn't be bothered.

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[1] Pseudonyms are used for the young people, throughout the report.

Nonetheless, some expressed regret about leaving and advised others to stay although they would not return themselves.

While the formal school setting may not suit all students, the young people's stories suggest schools could better retain others like themselves by providing more active support for those with learning and behaviour difficulties, ensuring a safe school environment, and providing active support for students returning to school or moving schools. In addition more flexible alternative learning environments will be appropriate for some.

Income support

Access to income support was a central issue for some of these young people who were unable to live with their parents while they sought training or employment. In particular, Lisa was suffering considerable financial hardship in spite of receiving Youth Allowance. She was also in unsustainable housing and about to become a mother. Some who lived with their parents felt they could survive with no income of their own, but some of these had very constrained lives.

The young people typically found their contact with Centrelink about income support confusing. The eligibility criteria were not explained to them in a way they understood, suggesting improvement in this communication is required.

Out of school training

Some early school leavers in this study expressed keenness to undertake some vocational training, while others, especially those who had learning difficulties at school, were clear they wanted a job not a course. Some wanted to work where they could learn on the job, for example through an apprenticeship or an office traineeship, rather than undertake further study as such.

Some had commenced but not completed vocational courses which were either too hard or not appropriate. However, others were pleased with their courses and with the assistance provided:

> [VCAL at TAFE] It's really good there actually. They're not really strict on you. It was a bit far from here, but I've managed it. And because it's a smaller class, like sometimes there'd only be four people in the class, or maximum 10 to 12 kids, there was always a lot of help. We did all different things.

The young people's experiences of seeking training highlighted issues of access to information and its relevance, high cost of some training, availability of support associated with training, and the question of where the training leads. For early school leavers such as these it is important to be able to plan pathways to training and employment with the assistance of a knowledgeable caseworker or careers counsellor.

Employment

Most of the young people had some experience of paid work. Frequently this was in fast food outlets; mostly it was part-time and short-term and for some only for trial periods. Many had spent considerable time unemployed and looking for work, handicapped by lack of experience and for some, after a time, by loss of confidence. In some cases reactions verged on depression:

> I'm really tired of being at home. It's every day you don't feel normal you know, it's shocking.

Employment obstacles raised by these stories include the shortage of full-time work for early school leavers, the availability of on-the-job training and the question of what are 'fair' wages for 16 and 17 year olds. Their failure to find full-time employment reflects the collapse of the full-time

youth labour market over the past decades, not simply individual motivation as some would suggest.

Assistance with training, employment and future plans

Since leaving school, the young people had received assistance with training, employment options and future planning, mainly from family, especially parents, and friends. Some had some assistance from Centrelink and Job Network providers, including JPET, although there were mixed responses to the help given by these service providers:

> Centrelink really didn't do much for me actually. I asked them straight out, I'd like a job if you can get me a job, that's all I wanted, they wanted to send me for courses and things like that, I don't like courses, honestly.

While one young woman had found the push from Centrelink to get into a training course positive, others were critical that they did not receive enough real assistance in finding real jobs. Some noted that their Mutual Obligation 'Activity Agreements' contained job search activities that they saw as pointless and that they were treated as numbers.

Other life issues

While the study focused on the young people's pathways in terms of training and employment, some had found that other aspects of their lives were more pressing at particular times, for example dealing with homelessness, pregnancy and domestic violence. Such issues need to be taken into account when working with the young people on their training and employment needs.

Conclusions

Given both state and federal objectives to increase school retention and reduce early school leaving, it is important both to improve the school experience for those at school and to provide well-articulated support and positive opportunities for those who have left.

Drawing together the young people's stories and their advice to others leads to the following priorities:

- There is a need for youth-focused services that are readily identifiable and locally accessible, will listen to and understand the complexity of the young people's lives, have wide knowledge of employment and training options, and can provide or refer to practical assistance.
- A second strand of assistance involves Centrelink and Job Network providers adopting more 'youth friendly' approaches and increasing their specialist youth services and workers.
- A third strand involves supporting the role of parents in assisting their young people's future planning, while taking into account the fact that some young people do not have parents who are able to assist.

The stories highlight some of the complexities and ambivalence of young people seeking work or post-school training. They illustrate how school, work and training fit in their wider lives and suggest a concept of 'complex lives' as a frame for understanding.

The early school leavers in our study illustrate the struggle that some young people have to participate as they would wish in the world of education and employment. They show also the resilience of some young people and the way they can respond to opportunity and assistance.

To ensure that young people are not excluded from appropriate opportunities, new ways of working with them are needed, ways that creatively combine learning, skills development and employment.

Part 1
Learning from the stories

Introduction

This report explores the stories of eight early school leavers, using their first-hand accounts to illuminate some of the policy issues for the school to work transition. The eight 17 year olds are participants in the Brotherhood of St Laurence's longitudinal Life Chances Study.

Much is written about the power of storytelling, and we see in the media a frequent requirement to have a personal story accompanying reports of research findings or of changes in policy. Personal stories can provide an effective way for people to relate to wider issues.

This study complements earlier research on voices of early school leavers (Smyth et al. 2000; Hodgson 2007), but with a focus on post-school experiences. It also acknowledges the renewed research interest in Australia in the experience of disadvantaged children and young people associated with the influential UK work of Tess Ridge (2002) and research promoted by the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY) (Redmond 2008; McDonald 2008). The study can also illustrate issues raised by some of the large data sets that have followed early school leavers, including the Longitudinal Survey of Australian Youth (LSAY) (Marks 2008) and the On Track surveys which follow Victorian school leavers annually (Teese, Clarke & Polesel 2007; Walstab & Lamb 2007).

This report outlines the current policy context and describes the research, part of the Life Chances Study. It then outlines the findings from the young people's stories and discusses the implications for policy development. The second half of the report presents the stories of the eight young people in detail.

The wider policy context

The research was undertaken in the context of the lowest (official) unemployment rate for some 30 years (2007) and of increasing vocational options for early school leavers.

School completion

Early school leaving – leaving school before completing Year 12 – is often seen as a problem both by policy makers and by parents, although it was the norm a couple of generations ago. The school leaving age is 16 years (recently raised from 15) in Victoria and ranges from 15 to 17 in other Australian states. Many young people are thus not required to remain in school until Year 12.

School completion is viewed as a major policy objective in Australia, with considerable emphasis at both federal and state government levels on increasing school retention. The Victorian Government's target is to have 90 per cent of young Victorians completing Year 12, 'or an equivalent qualification', by the year 2010 (DHS 2006). The Rudd government has promised to boost school retention rates to 90 per cent by 2020 (Rudd 2008). As part of that strategy, it proposes to spend $2.5 billion on building new trade centres in all of Australia's secondary schools. This would expand the alternatives to VCE/HSC for senior students within school, as well as equipping schools to respond to recognised skill shortages. However there is debate about the benefit of the strategy. It has been suggested (Marks 2008) that increasing the vocational component of schools is unlikely to retain many early school leavers, who are predominantly low achievers, and that resources would be better directed to appropriate post-school education and training once young people have entered the labour force.

In Australia, some 10 per cent of students leave before completing Year 10 and a disproportionate number of these are identified as low academic achievers, boys, Indigenous or from low socioeconomic families (Fullarton 2002). Those who leave before Year 12 have similar characteristics (Curtis &McMillan 2008; Penman 2004).

Teese and Polesel (2003), in reviewing the increased length of schooling, pointed out that economic vulnerability keeps many young people at school but at the price of scholastic vulnerability:

> Young people's perceptions of the economic value of completing school are diminished by the experience of failure and by the weak connections between schoolwork and the jobs that are closest to young people. Entering the labour market is often seen as preferable to investing more time in the uncertain benefits of school. (Teese & Polesel 2003, p.133)

Frequently nominated reasons for leaving school during Year 10 included: 'couldn't see where school was heading', 'schoolwork didn't interest me', 'not doing well enough to continue' and 'didn't get on with my teachers' (Teese & Polesel 2003, p.143). Girls were half as likely to leave school early as boys. The researchers also found major geographical differences.

Young people leave school early for a range of reasons. Some actively choose to leave to take up employment, some leave school because they see it as boring or not relevant to them, and many are responding to a mixture of push and pull factors (Teese, Clarke & Polesel 2007; Penman 2004; Dwyer & Wyn 2001). The complexity of the reasons young people leave school is highlighted by Smyth's study of some 200 students (Smyth et al. 2000). Initially the school leavers in that study were categorised, following Dwyer (1996), as positive, opportune, would-be, circumstantial, discouraged or alienated. However these categories were not ultimately useful as so many students could be categorised as both positive in terms of leaving and alienated in terms of school experience.

Pathways to employment

For early school leavers the pathways to further training and employment can be diverse. The annual Victorian On Track surveys provide valuable information about the destination of students leaving school. This includes longitudinal data (Walstab & Lamb 2007) comparing early school leavers with others over a three-year period. The surveys include large numbers of students, but may underrepresent the more disadvantaged school leavers who may not participate in this voluntary survey.

The 2006 On Track survey (Teese, Clarke & Polesel 2007) showed the destinations of those leaving before completing Year 12:

- 15.9% into VET (vocational education and training)
- 30.2% into apprenticeships
- 7.1% into traineeships
- 16.7% employed full-time
- 14.8% employed part-time
- 15.3% looking for work.

Research has shown early school leavers are generally worse off than others on various indicators in later life. There has been some debate about the success of pathways for early school leavers, with LSAY results (McMillan & Marks 2003) showing in 2000 (when they were aged about 20) that early school leavers (left before or at Year 10) were most likely to be *employed full-time* (71%), followed by later leavers (left before Year 12) (65%) and then completers (finished Year 12 but not entered higher education) (61%). However more non-completers than completers (not in higher education) were unemployed.

Among young people not studying full-time, full-time employment levels dropped from 39 per cent to 25 per cent over the last 20 years (Spierings 2005). Many, although not all, of those young people in part-time work wanted more hours of work. While unemployment is often shorter for

young people than for older job seekers, 9 per cent of unemployed teenagers were long-term unemployed in 2004 (Spierings 2005).

The combination of youth wages and part-time work compounds the likelihood of early school leavers in the workforce having very low incomes and remaining dependent on their families. However a number of families are not in a financial position to offer this kind of support.

Mutual obligation

Another area of policy debate is government income support for young people and the working of 'mutual obligation' around income support, 'job search' activities and 'work for the dole'. Centrelink (2007) states: 'Mutual Obligation is about you giving something back to the community which supports you'; and it warns about withdrawal of income support for those who fail to meet various prescribed activities. Under the mutual obligation policy, young people have been compelled to participate in various activities, such as applying for a set number of jobs and attending training courses, if they are to receive income support (Youth Allowance). It has been suggested that such a controlling approach does not work well for marginalised young people (Meijers & Riele 2004). It has also been identified as counterproductive for older workers (Marston & McDonald 2008). In a context where there are limited employment opportunities for low-skilled young people, mutual obligation has been described as an exclusionary policy that fails to meet its own objectives (Edwards 2008). The Brotherhood of St Laurence has called for a more flexible system with greater investment in those seeking work (BSL 2008b).

Assistance for early school leavers

There is a range of programs designed to assist young people at risk of leaving school early to stay at school or to make their transition to post-school training or employment (for example, the federally funded program Youth Pathways, the Victorian Managed Individual Pathways initiatives, or at a local level the Brotherhood of St Laurence's Transition Workers in Schools project and PACTS project for parents). Young school leavers seeking employment and income support are likely to have contact with Centrelink and Job Network providers, along with older job seekers. The federally funded Job Placement Employment and Training (JPET) program was designed specifically to assist young people (15 to 21 years old) who are homeless, at risk of homelessness or experiencing barriers to education, employment and community participation. JPET is now being merged into the Job Network provision. In Victoria, the Youth Transition Support Initiative, available in 12 Local Learning and Employment Network areas, supports young people who have left school to reengage with education and training.

Nonetheless it is likely that some young people leaving school early will receive no assistance, because of lack of knowledge of programs or because there is no locally available assistance. A recent action research study of young people's transitions found their knowledge of local services was very limited and they were confused by the names and acronyms of the programs they knew about (Kellock 2007). The Brotherhood of St Laurence's response to the Victorian Government's Vulnerable Youth Framework (BSL 2008c) has recommended the consolidation of the current fragmented youth programs into a single youth support service.

The Life Chances Study

The eight young people who tell their stories of leaving school are not randomly selected. They are all participants in the Brotherhood of St Laurence's Life Chances Study, a longitudinal study which commenced when they were infants in 1990. Life Chances started as a population study of all babies born in two inner Melbourne municipalities in that year and has followed the families over the years as many have moved away from the original area. Mothers were initially contacted through the Maternal and Child Health Centres which are notified of all births. The families in the study reflected the diversity of the inner area, with both high and low-income families and a range of ethnic backgrounds. The study has followed the lives of those children and explored factors

which influence their life chances, including family income, health, education, family relationships, social supports and ethnic background.

The children and their families have been contacted regularly. The study commenced with 167 infants and 17 years later was still in contact with some 140 families. Reports have been published of the findings for each stage (including Gilley 1993; Gilley & Taylor 1995; Taylor 1997; Taylor & Macdonald 1998; Taylor & Fraser 2003; Taylor & Nelms 2006; Taylor & Nelms 2008).

Stage 8½

This report presents findings from what we have named stage 8½ of the Life Chances Study. This comes between stage 8, when all the families and young people were contacted at the end of the year they turned 16, and stage 9, which commenced at the end of the year they all turned 17. At stage 8 all those who had already left school were identified. The aim of stage 8½ has been to explore in detail the experiences of those eight young people in order to inform program and policy directions in relation to early school leavers.

The *research questions* included:
>   Why did the young people leave school?
>   What pathways have they followed since leaving school?
>   What are the details of their experiences of seeking work and/or further training?
>   What organisations/programs have they been in contact with since leaving school?
>   What has proved helpful in their lives since leaving school?

Some of the relevant *policy questions* were:
>   Would increasing the options at school increase school retention? Are schools the right place for all young people?
>   Where do vocational training courses lead for early school leavers?
>   What attention needs to be directed to strengthening the youth labour market?
>   How well do mutual obligation and income support work for early school leavers?
>   What sort of services would best assist early school leavers with their future plans?

Method

Prior to stage 8½, we had followed up all the families in the Life Chances Study at the end of 2006 (stage 8). Part of the aim was to identify the early school leavers at that stage. Two had already been identified as 15 year olds in stage 7 and another six were now identified. There was phone follow-up with a number of the early school leavers in December 2006 or early 2007.

Stage 8½ involved first phone interviews in May/June 2007 with the eight early school leavers. Three interviewers who had previous contact with the young people undertook the interviews. These produced some rich descriptive case material on the experiences of early school leaving and the challenges faced in gaining training or employment. The young people agreed to being contacted again and were sent a letter for information and consent outlining the purpose of the next interview.

The eight were interviewed again at the end of 2007, in person, with the exception of one interstate phone interview. They were then all aged 17. They were each paid $35. Their stories were recorded and transcribed. Each young person's story, with minor editing to remove questions and repetitions, was returned to him or her for comment and approval prior to publishing.

Stage 8½ focused on young people's voice as a methodology, following the important precedent of the large-scale South Australian study *Listen to me I'm leaving* (Smyth et al. 2000). For the face-to-face interviews it was decided to use part of a narrative technique, the Biographical Narrative

Interpretive Method (BNIM) (Wengraf 2007). This technique starts with asking for the participant's story in a specific but open way. In our study this opening question was:

> Please tell me the story of your life since you first left school, the events and experiences that have been important to you personally. You can begin wherever you like and I won't interrupt.

After the participant ran out of things to say, the second part of the interview involved some prompts based on issues raised by the story. The third part of the interview, not always part of the BNIM, but used in all our interviews, involved following up particular themes of the research if these had not already been covered. This included clarifying pathways, training, work, getting assistance, income and future plans. The final question was about what advice the young person would give to those working with early school leavers. The specific analysis technique of the BNIM was not used in this study; rather transcripts were analysed in relation to the themes that had shaped the study.

The story question produced varied responses among these 16 and 17 year olds. While one girl gave a very detailed description of leaving school and her experiences in training, most gave quite concise responses. The briefest response was:

> Not much happened. I left school, I'm looking for work, that's about it. Yeah, that's about it. I don't know what else.

Following more specific questions, this response was elaborated to describe moves interstate, going back to two other schools, part-time work, seeking training, betrothal and pregnancy. Given the participants' responses and the aims of this study, the story question provided a useful start to an interview, but the follow-up questions were invaluable to elicit additional information. The young people were asked if they needed any additional help with future planning and if they asked for this they would have been referred appropriately.

One of the paradoxes of the narrative method is that while the stories of the young people provide a wealth of detail of their lives, especially in comparison with a tick-the-box survey, they raise numerous additional questions and highlight how little we can know about the lives of others, even in a study that has followed families over many years.

Further, the stories could be interpreted in various ways by focusing too narrowly, especially when the young people make seemingly contradictory comments. For example, it would be possible to describe the young people who spend months at home unemployed as 'layabouts' if other aspects of their lives are not taken into account, such as their discouragement from job refusals, their distress at lack of work, their limited education and the wider context of a collapsed youth employment market that offers few opportunities for sustainable work with prospects to advance.

The report

This report presents the findings in two ways: the first part covers significant themes, illustrated with quotes from the young people, and discusses implications; the second presents the individual stories at length, allowing readers to appreciate the individual experiences and make their own analysis. The stories start with a brief outline of the young people's background and then present their own accounts of their lives after they had left school, from interviews conducted when they were aged 16 and 17. The stories have been left to stand on their own, so that the individual situations can be seen in their complexity including changes over time (acknowledging of course that they provide only glimpses of the young people's lives).

However we also wish to draw out from these stories their implications for some wider issues, for example school retention, vocational training, assistance with job seeking, and income support.

Part 1 of the report presents and discusses some themes apparent in the young people's responses and illustrates these with quotes drawn from their stories. The reader can refer to the fuller story of each young person in Part 2. Some may prefer to read the stories first.

Introducing the eight young people

The eight young people (three girls and five boys) had left school between the ages of 14 and 16. The official school leaving age in Victoria at this time was still 15 years. Most, but not all, came from families that had been on low incomes, and some from highly disadvantaged backgrounds. Two had been among the ten most disadvantaged infants at the first stage of the study (Taylor 1993). The eight were from a variety of ethnic backgrounds and their parents included Vietnamese, Hmong and Italian-born as well as Australian-born. There was one Aboriginalyoung man. Seven of the eight were living in Melbourne at the time of the interviews, although two of these had been interstate the previous year. One was currently living interstate. Some, but not all, had a history of learning and/or behaviour problems over their school years. None was highly engaged with school when they left. The young people are introduced briefly in the following panel. Pseudonyms are used.

Eight profiles

Lisa grew up in a large family on a low income. Her parents were part of the community of Hmong refugees from Laos whose cultural beliefs remain strong. At nearly 15 she chose to be betrothed to a Hmong boy and left school to live interstate with his family. She tried returning to school but found this difficult and spent some time unsuccessfully applying for retail jobs. She hoped to get an office traineeship. At 17 she found she was pregnant and she and her fiancé were struggling to find somewhere to live.

Tom had a disrupted childhood after his mother died when he was 10. He lived with various relatives and had a number of changes of school. He had attention and behaviour problems at school. He decided to leave his last school, an alternative school, at 14. At 17 he had had one fast food job but had mostly been unemployed. He was sharing accommodation. His future plans were to 'get a job and hang out with mates'.

Carlo grew up in a two-parent family. His parents were Italian-born and his father worked in the construction industry but had at times been unemployed because of injuries. Carlo had attention, learning and behaviour difficulties at school from an early age. He went to an alternative school but left at age 15 after he was assaulted. He first tried a number of work and training options including a carpentry apprenticeship, but at 17 had spent the year at home unhappily unemployed. He wanted a full-time job in construction.

Brendan's parents separated and he grew up living with his mother, but with support from his father, in a medium-income family. By Year 6 he was having a lot of health problems and learning difficulties, including an auditory memory disorder. He attended a Catholic secondary college but left during Year 10 because he hated school. He first did a pre-apprenticeship, but at 17 had been at home unemployed for some time. He was hoping to do an apprenticeship in mechanics.

Duc's Vietnamese parents separated when he was young and he had a disrupted childhood with many moves of school. At times he lived with his mother and at others with his father who had a stable job and higher income. Aged 15 when he was living interstate with his mother, he left school and also left home. At 16 his father 'rescued' him and brought him back to live with him. Duc returned to school and, at 17, had completed Year 10 and intended to complete school and go to university.

Andy's early years were disrupted**.** His parents separated and he moved interstate with his mother. His father was Aboriginal and died when Andy was young. At 12 Andy was doing well at school and was in an accelerated class. By 15 he disliked school and was truanting

although the school acknowledged he was a capable student. He left school in the middle of Year 11, aged 16. He worked for a couple of months and started a TAFE course but also spent some months unemployed. At 17 he was enjoying working on a 6-month Green Corps program and was 'all right for now'.

Maddie lived with her sole parent mother in her early years which were disrupted by health and housing problems. After her mother died, she lived with relatives and then with her father as a sole parent. At 15 in Year 9 she ran away from home and missed a lot of school. She returned but finally left school the following year aged 16. She worked at a fast food outlet and later undertook VCAL as a TAFE program. At 17 she had completed her VCAL year and was hoping to get an office traineeship.

Emma grew up in a two-parent family on a medium and later a low income. Music has been an important part of her life and she plays in a local orchestra. By 15 she did not look forward to school and felt she was not doing well. She left school aged 16 at the end of Year 10. She then undertook a VCAL course at TAFE thinking she might want to be a chef. During the year she picked up VCE English at CAE. At 17 she had completed VCAL and the one VCE subject and hoped to finish her VCE at CAE and perhaps become a music or English teacher.

Findings and policy implications

This section draws together the experiences of the eight early school leavers to address the research and policy questions identified. First the individual pathways are outlined; and then their experiences are considered under the headings of leaving school, income support, training, employment, and gaining assistance with training and employment. Under each heading a policy question is explored in relation to the data. The section concludes in drawing together these issues to discuss the policy implications.

The young people are identified by pseudonyms. For their fuller stories the reader should refer to Part 2.

Pathways

The young people's individual pathways since leaving school are diverse and complex and include experiences of trying to return to school, attempting TAFE and other post-school training, trying to find work, and using employment services and other support agencies. Table 1 gives a very brief outline of their pathways but does not show the variety of short-term jobs, work experience and courses that the young people undertook, or the geographic mobility of some. It does show that by the end of the year they turned 17, one had returned to school and one was being paid in a short-term employment program, but none of the remainder was in full-time work or study.

Table 1 Pathways since leaving school

Young person	Age left school	Year left	Main activity 2006	Main activity 2007	Main activity December 2007 Age 17
Lisa	14	Yr 9	back to school twice	unemployed	unemployed
Tom	14	Yr 8	unemployed	fast food job	unemployed
Carlo 15		Yr 8	apprenticeship	unemployed	unemployed
Brendan 15		Yr 10	pre-apprenticeship	unemployed	unemployed
Duc	15	Yr 9	unemployed	back at school	back at school, Yr 10
Andy 16		Yr 11	unemployed	unemployed	Green Corps
Maddie	16	Yr 10	school	completed VCAL at TAFE	unemployed
Emma	16	Yr 10	school	completed VCAL at TAFE	planning VCE

Leaving school

The eight early school leavers had attended a variety of schools: a high status Catholic college, two alternative schools for young people with difficulties in the mainstream and various government secondary schools.

The young people explained their reasons for leaving school. For most this was to do with difficulties at school, although for one leaving school was due to family reasons. Having left school some contemplated returning and, while most rejected this idea, two had tried doing so. Their accounts of leaving school and, for some, of returning are outlined below

Problems with school

The young people who had left school often gave multiple reasons for leaving. The most frequent reason was problems at school. Most disliked some aspect of school and two had been asked to leave (Emma, Maddie). The aspects mentioned included difficulties with school work, for example being overwhelmed with the work (Emma) or struggling to catch up (Lisa); poor relationships with

teachers (Andy, Brendan); and other students being bullies (Tom, Carlo) or, in one case, snobs (Brendan). In terms of multiple reasons for leaving school, Andy, an Aboriginal student, mentioned his own laziness, but primarily treatment by the principal of his state high school:

> The main reason … there were a number of contributing factors. I guess it was partly to do with my own laziness, but a bit of harassment at school from my teachers, the principal. He was just hassling me, giving me a hard time, pulling me out of class for unknown reasons. … he'd like to pull me out in front of my friends to make an example of me. I thought it was a bit of prejudice, or discrimination.

Two specified they 'hated' school:

> I left school in the middle of the year, last year. I *hated* it there. I hated the kids. The kids were all snobs. And the teachers, they didn't really *listen* to what I was saying at all. They just couldn't be bothered. (Brendan)

> I left school because I felt a bit afraid of this year. It's not just the workload, it's the whole environment, it's the other kids, it's an all girls' school. It was just the other kids I was with, I mean I hated going to school. (Emma)

Some mentioned that they had been truanting or skipping school before they finally left (Andy, Maddie, Duc). According to Duc, when he moved interstate school was 'boring', it was too easy and when he started skipping school, 'Nothing happened, they didn't call or anything', and he felt his mother was too busy with a failing business to be involved.

The two young women who had been asked to leave school (Maddie, Emma) described their experiences. Maddie had missed school on a number of occasions when she ran away from home. The school had helped her return but eventually she felt they gave up on her:

> They kicked me out. Just too many absences, stuff like that … First they were helping me. I was doing all right, but then I kind of stuffed it up for myself.

Sometimes the reasons received different prominence at different interviews. For example, Emma first spoke of feeling afraid of school, but at the next interview described how she had been asked to leave:

> At the end of last year I had been called into one of the offices and two of the teachers came and said to me that because I wasn't doing my work that I couldn't do VCE there. I suppose they 'suggested' that VCE wasn't for me.

Sometimes a single event was presented as the trigger for leaving school: for example, Carlo had left after being 'belted up'.

Family reasons

Lisa's situation was rather different in that she left school initially for family reasons rather than because of problems at school. Lisa left school when she moved interstate to live with her fiancé and his family. She had liked school and wanted to continue, but felt she had to earn some money. After a few months working, she went back to school, but then left again when they moved back to Melbourne where she started at a third school. This time she left (in Year 10) because she found catching up with the schoolwork too difficult and she received no special assistance. While it is unlikely that school action could have influenced her staying at her first two schools, appropriate assistance might well have kept her at the third school.

Returning to school

The young people reflected on returning to school as a possibility, but most rejected it. Lisa felt she would still struggle with the work if she returned and mentioned she would then be in the year below her younger sister: 'I'd be so upset going back to Year 10'. Andy had thought about going back but 'I've sort of snapped out of the school life mode' and also the principal who upset him would still be there.

Emma really wanted to leave her particular school:

> I've thought about going back to school, but I don't want to do it. There was just so much pressure … what I *really* wanted, I think, was not to do VCE at that school.

Ambivalence about school is well illustrated by Carlo, who said his parents had asked him about going back to school. On one hand he said, 'I don't want to go back to school, school's for some people and for some people it's not'. But he also said, 'You want to go to school, I regret it you know, if I could go back to school, which I don't want to really, but it would be good to get some more education in me'. In terms of identity, another young man (Tom) was clear: 'I'm not really a school person'.

Duc, who had returned to school on moving back to Melbourne, had just finished Year 10. His father's support in this was important. Duc claimed he was getting on well at school except that he found maths a struggle. He reported he had received no extra help from the school with what he had missed.

Policy questions
Would increasing options at school have increased retention? Are schools the right place for all young people?
The young people's perspective is probably well summarised by Carlo above: 'School's for some people and for some people it's not'.

While increased vocational options and other proactive interventions at school could well help keep some young people engaged with school, this would not have made much difference to many of our eight early school leavers, including those who left because of conflict with or harassment by teachers and fellow students, those who did not feel safe at school, those who left for family reasons and moves interstate or for those who had been asked to leave school. Those who had long histories of learning difficulties seemed unlikely to become engaged with school because of extra options. For example, Brendan enjoyed his mechanics pre-apprenticeship at TAFE and one could postulate that he might have stayed at school if such an option existed there; however he left school mid year because he 'hated' school.

While school may not be for everyone, these young people's stories suggest some avenues for schools to do more to help retain students at risk of early school leaving. They suggest the need for more inclusive, student-centred learning to promote young people feeling they are 'a school person'. In particular schools need to provide:

- active support for those with learning and behaviour difficulties
- a safe school environment
- better support for young people returning to school or moving schools, especially interstate.

Income support

The Centrelink payment, Youth Allowance, is the main form of income support for young people. It is available to full-time students aged 16 to 24 and to unemployed young people aged 16 to 20, subject to parental and personal income tests and, for the unemployed, to Activity Agreements, under the banner of mutual obligation.

There has been considerable community debate about 'mutual obligation': there is concern on the one hand that young people who are unemployed may become 'dole bludgers' if they receive income support and on the other hand that given the low levels of Youth Allowance (the dole), that they may be experiencing serious deprivation and social exclusion.

In brief, of the eight young people who were early school leavers, at the time of the interview when they were aged 17:

- One received a training wage on the 6-month Green Corps program ($270 per week) (Tom).
- Three received Youth Allowance (Tom, Lisa, Maddie).
- Four had no formal income and relied solely on their parents (Carlo, Brendan, Emma, Duc), some, but not all, of whom had incomes above the eligibility level for Youth Allowance.

The young people talked about the difficulty in access to Youth Allowance and, for some, the adequacy of the payment. All the young people had made some attempt to get the allowance, but half had been unsuccessful.

Of the three receiving Youth Allowance, one (Tom) who was not allowed to live with his father was receiving the independent rate ($348 per fortnight). He was sharing accommodation and felt he could 'survive', but he had trouble affording 'clothes and stuff' and had been to the Salvation Army for vouchers for food. Two (Lisa, Maddie) were receiving the basic rate of $190 per fortnight. Their responses to it were very different. Maddie who was living with her father and did not have to pay board could manage well enough. However Lisa's financial struggle was dominating her life. She was struggling to meet bills and pay for food in a shared house, and she and her fiancé were trying to find other accommodation before their baby was born. Her fiancé was receiving an apprenticeship wage.

> We have nothing for our future. When we move out we're going to be struggling to save up to buy food and stuff like that, bedding and a bed and especially the baby coming up and there's nothing prepared for that as well and no money for that as well.

Some of the other young people may not have been eligible for Youth Allowance because of their parents' income, but it seemed that two from low-income families had not received Youth Allowance because of bureaucratic hurdles (Emma, Carlo).

> I haven't got Youth Allowance. I went to Centrelink a while ago and I tried to get an allowance, but they wouldn't give me it, because I didn't have enough points type of thing. They wanted a driver licence, birth certificate, school reports, all that type of stuff, I only had one school report because I didn't really care about it at the time. I had a bank card but they wanted more identification of myself and I didn't have enough so they wouldn't give it to me, so Centrelink has given me nothing. No dole, never. (Carlo)

Duc had made a variety of attempts to get Youth Allowance and was not impressed. When he had left his mother's home and was living on a farm with his brother he tried unsuccessfully to get Youth Allowance (presumably at the independent rate):

> I've been to Centrelink, with my dad, my brother and my mum, all separate times. I can't get Youth Allowance because of my dad's income, it's too high. I could get it when I was living with my mum and then it just got cut off for some reason, I'm not sure why, I think we didn't go to the meeting or something, the interviews … When I was with my brother it didn't work out either, we tried to do that because he needed help paying the rent either way. So I was going to apply for Youth Allowance and Rent Assistance but when I went to the interview she just said I didn't have a reasonable enough excuse, I'm not sure why.

Physical access to Centrelink was an additional problem:

> When me and my brother were living on the farm it took us at least an hour or two hours to be able to get the closest Centrelink, and my brother's car broke down and she kept asking us for an interview … And sometimes when I got there she went 'no' I can't have an interview today, which meant I wasted two hours of walking. I had to walk there, because in the country everything is a long way. It was in a country town. (Duc)

Policy question
How well does mutual obligation and income support work for early school leavers?
The mutual obligation policy is of interest in relation to early school leavers who are sometimes stereotyped as bludgers and as not fulfilling their part of the obligation. Carlo had indeed spent the last year at home unemployed, but had found the experience quite distressing: 'It's every day you don't feel normal you know, it's shocking'. He certainly could not be described as a dole bludger as he had not even received a payment. He also did not want to accept money from his parents and so lived a very constrained life, seldom going out. Nonetheless his future hope was for full-time work, sticking to a trade and 'work, work, work'.

Access to income support was a central issue for some of these young people who were unable to live with their parents while they sought training or employment after leaving school. In particular Lisa was suffering considerable financial hardship in spite of receiving Youth Allowance. She was also in unsustainable housing and about to become a mother. Some who lived with their parents felt they were able to survive with no income of their own, but some lived very limited lives.

The young people typically found their contact with Centrelink confusing and did not have the eligibility criteria explained to them in a way they understood. This suggests an area for improved communication.

The young people's experience of the 'mutual obligation' activities are outlined below. It is pertinent to ask what is a reasonable expectation of 15 to 17 year olds and a reasonable provision of 'service' to them in a mutual obligation framework.

Out of school training
Between them, the eight early school leavers had experienced many kinds of training since leaving school. In brief these included:
* VCAL at TAFE (Emma, Maddie) – both completed
* VCE subject at CAE (Centre for Adult Education) (Emma) – completed
* pre-apprenticeships (Brendan, Carlo) – one completed (Brendan), one not completed (Carlo)
* apprenticeship – not completed (Carlo)
* IT course at TAFE – not completed (Andy)
* Green Corps – completed (Andy)
* no training (Lisa, Tom, Duc).

The main issues raised by their experiences included their access to information and its relevance, the cost of training, the availability of support associated with training, and the question of where training leads.

Looking for training

Some of the early school leavers were keen to have further training to prepare them for a job. In contrast others simply wanted paid work and to learn on the job and a couple were quite resistant to being sent to courses (Carlo, Tom). For some this reflected limited literacy or numeracy, or learning difficulties.

Information and relevance

Finding information about the range of possible training options was not necessarily easy for the early school leavers. They had received some information from such sources as school careers counsellors (Emma), the internet (Andy) and Centrelink or Job Network providers (Maddie, Lisa).

Finding the right and relevant course was a further problem. For example Andy had decided to follow up his computer study at school by doing IT at TAFE. He waited for months to start a TAFE Certificate III course in IT technical support which he had found on the internet, only to discover it was too specific for him, that providing IT phone help was too 'stressy', and that most of the other people in the course were already working in IT.

Brendan had completed a 6-month pre-apprenticeship which he enjoyed but it was not the course he or his parents had expected; and Carlo had commenced a pre-apprenticeship which rapidly proved to be beyond his capabilities (see below).

Cost of training

Cost of training was raised by Lisa as a major barrier to her doing a course. Her Job Network provider tried to get her into a 6-month tourism course but she could not at 16 afford the $900 fee. So she was looking for an office job with a traineeship, 'so I can get a certificate while doing a job as well'.

Experiences of training

VCAL at TAFE

VCAL (Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning) is a Year 11 and 12 qualification focusing on 'hands on' learning, which is often called a vocational equivalent to VCE. It can be offered within schools and also by TAFEs and community organisations. It can be done at three levels (foundation, intermediate or senior).

At the end of the year, two young women had just completed VCAL at TAFE. Maddie had a sense of achievement and felt her father was very proud of her.

Maddie had enjoyed VCAL at TAFE:

> It's really good there actually. They're not really strict on you. It was a bit far from here, but I've managed it. And because it's a smaller class, like sometimes there'd only be four people in the class, or maximum 10 to 12 kids, there was always a lot of help. We did all different things. We did a lot of projects, they were the main things. Once I knew what the project was, what I had to do, I was just working my arse off, always bringing work home, staying back at TAFE. I'm just glad I got it done. I liked the physical activities. I liked going out for sport and leisure and stuff – and we got marks on that as well. And cooking. We did a lot of films, just monologues about ourselves and all that stuff. And it was good.

In contrast, Emma's parents had been very upset that she was doing the lower status VCAL rather than staying at school and doing VCE. Early in the year Emma had said she liked doing VCAL at TAFE: 'They're smaller classes, it's more friendly'. By the end of the year she reflected that she knew that she would find the VCAL course easy: 'Well I liked that, but at the same time I knew it wouldn't give me very many opportunities'. Emma had changed her career direction and no longer wanted to be a chef. She had also found the cooking classes intimidating. Halfway through the year she picked up Year 11 English at the CAE and this gave her the confidence to decide to try to complete VCE, without having to return to what she saw as the pressures of her former school.

> [My parents] didn't want me do VCAL instead of VCE because they thought that that would give me much less options. I agree with them now.

Support available with training was important for both these young women. Maddie spoke about her 'worker at TAFE', a caseworker linked to her VCAL program:

> My worker at TAFE, they know what I'm looking for and stuff like that. So I've got a lot of help there and they help me out with court and dentist and everything so it's really good. I've got lots of help there … They help you out if you need your learner's [permit]. I had a couple of court cases – transit fines on public transport – they took me to the court. I got all that worked out. Dental, I get free dental and my worker takes me there. It's helped a lot … My worker at TAFE, she's going to help me out with a traineeship … She's always helpful and she'd always talk to me and listen to what I had to say and stuff like that. But even my teachers at TAFE, like they're always nice and caring and stuff like that.

For Emma, the advice she received from careers counsellors at school and at TAFE proved important and she found their knowledge of a range of options very helpful.

Pre-apprenticeships

Two young men had tried pre-apprenticeships. Brendan who wanted to become a mechanic completed a pre-apprenticeship in mechanics after he left school:

> I liked it because I was doing what I enjoy doing, pulling apart stuff and putting it back together … I didn't learn heaps, but I learnt pretty much the basics. I'm not sure what you need to learn going into an apprenticeship.

However he said he and his mother had thought the pre-apprenticeship would help with his VCE and count towards an apprenticeship only to find it did not: 'It was the wrong course'.

Carlo had briefly tried a pre-apprenticeship in cabinet making:

> Cabinet making, that's with a ruler all day and I don't really understand rulers and markings and big drawings and you've got to do with stuff like that. It really confuses me. He tried to teach me, the guy at the TAFE, but I said 'No, it's not me'. So I left there.

Green Corps

Green Corps is an Australian Government youth development and environmental training program for young people aged between 17 and 20 years. At the end of 2007, Andy was undertaking a Green Corps program, doing bush regeneration. He enjoyed the outdoor work, working in the nursery and that he got paid, 'but it's only a 6-month course'.

> I think I'm all right for now. I don't really know where I'm going. But that's not exactly a bad thing. I don't really know at the moment, but I'm sure as options open up to me I'll make good decisions now. (Andy)

Policy question
Where do post-school vocational training courses lead for early school leavers?
One of the key questions raised by these young people's experiences of training was where the training course led. What would be available after 6 months of Green Corps (Andy)? Would Maddie, having completed VCAL at TAFE, be able to find an office traineeship? Or would Lisa, with no extra training, be able to find the office traineeship she wanted? And what about Brendan who had completed his pre-apprenticeship, but then had been unemployed at home for many months?

The experiences of these young people point to the importance of being able to plan pathways to training and employment with the assistance of a knowledgeable caseworker or careers counsellor, and also raise the issue of the cost of a preferred course.

Employment

Most of the young people had some experience of paid work. Frequently this was in fast food outlets and mostly it was part-time and short-term and for some only for trial periods (Tom, Maddie, Duc, Lisa, Emma). This was the sort of work school students do in addition to their study rather than jobs leading to a career. Two had rather different work experiences, one (Andy) having worked full-time in a computer assembly factory for a couple of months and another (Carlo) having tried assorted labouring work in the construction industry, an area he wanted to continue to work in. One (Brendan) had had no paid work.

Some of the young people had undertaken 'work experience' as part of their school program. This included work in an office (Maddie with her sister) and in a local library (Duc). Four had some experience of working with one of their parents (Lisa and Duc with their mothers in fast food, Brendan and Carlo with their fathers in trades).

Their experiences raise issues both about looking for work and of the actual employment. Difficulties in looking for work included both lack of experience and loss of confidence, while employment issues included the nature of the work, youth wages, travel and hours of work.

Looking for work

Some of the young people spoke of their discouragement and, at times, depression at being unable to find work.

Lisa illustrates mixed experiences of finding work. Her first job in a fast food outlet she found easily, referred by a friend. She later had a few weeks work experience in the fast food place where her mother worked. She wanted to work in retail but had been interviewed and rejected:

> I just looked for work and I struggled to find a job in Melbourne because I don't have much experience. I have nothing that qualified me for a job and stuff like that. I looked for mainly retailing. It's hard cos most of them needed people with qualifications or experience in retailing which I don't have, only in food. I want to work in a shop that sells stuff like products or clothing or something like that. It's turned out I've been unsuccessful. I've been applying for Seven Eleven three times and they took me for an interview three times and I got the same letter back … I didn't get the job. I've tried like clothes shops and Broadmeadows shopping centre and Priceline … Employers want you to be confident – which I'm not really, I'm not that talkative – and better experience, which I don't have.

Her proposed solution, with her caseworker's assistance, was to seek an office traineeship with on-the-job training.

We asked the young people what they thought employers wanted and what sort of work they were best suited to. These did not always match. Some expressed confidence in their abilities for the workplace,

for example being friendly (Tom) or organised (Maddie), while others were much less confident, for example Lisa (above) and Emma who said she was 'not too good at beaming at people'.

Some young people clearly lost confidence from job refusals and from unsuccessful work trials:

> I was quite discouraged by both of those jobs I went for earlier in the year not working out [two food outlets]. I was thinking maybe I could try again for another job like that, but maybe I'm just not for that kind of job, maybe I'm too clumsy or something. (Emma)

The impact of being unemployed could be quite depressing, as Carlo illustrated:

> For all this year I haven't done anything, I've been sitting at home, I've been actually looking for work and I haven't found any, so yeah … I actually look through the papers. Look through all the internet, Yellow Pages, ask people around in the area, family, anything I can find actually. I'm really tired of being at home. It's every day you don't feel normal you know, it's shocking.

Some had difficulty motivating themselves to apply for jobs. For example, Brendan, who was hoping in due course for an apprenticeship, spoke of applying for part-time supermarket work at one interview but had not really followed this up six months later. Duc spoke of getting a part-time job now that he was back at school:

> I've applied for heaps of jobs, well a few. I did Safeway's, McDonalds, pretty much those two.

Experience of work

Work in fast food outlets was the most common paid employment for these young people as mentioned above. This was not work that they wanted to continue into the future and some saw such jobs as tied to their young age and low 'youth wages'. Most expressed some dislike of this work; some specifically mentioned rude customers (Lisa, Maddie).

Maddie and Tom both 'hated' McDonalds and both mentioned the wages.

> McDonalds was my first job. It's the only job I've ever had really. Just work at the register, learn how to make McChickens, McFillets, Fillet-o-fish. But it was horrible … You'd always get rude customers, always complaining, and I hated it. I got along with everyone, I didn't have any arguments or problems with any of the people working there, it's just I didn't like the job. They couldn't put me on seven days because of my age, but they pushed it pretty much. They were always asking me to stay back and because they were paying me $6.60 an hour it was cheaper for them. But it was all the time. (Maddie)

> I hated it. I wanted to do register and that and I was just stuck out the back cooking all day and I hated it. I guess in the end I just left because I didn't want to be cooking every day …. To start with it was hard, but I just got used to it. I was casual … I was like earning $60 a week. So it was basically crap. I was on like $5.90 an hour. I hated it. That was youth wages. (Tom)

Wage levels were also an issue for Andy in a different industry. The feeling he was not being paid fairly was a main reason for his leaving the job, although this led to unemployment rather than higher wages:

> I started working for a computer company and they built high tech computers for industrial companies and the guy there … he [paid] me for an administration wage but he would get me to do technical stuff so I would be missing out of probably about 30 bucks of wages. So I left that job too because he was underpaying me. (Andy)

Carlo, who had struggled academically at school, weighed the merits of the various jobs he had tried and how physically or mentally challenging they were, and preferred the bricklaying:

> Carpentry wasn't a bad job. There was a bit of difficulties with all the power tools. It was pretty dangerous and with experience you would pick it up, but it was a pretty dangerous job. Plus the foremen there, they treated you pretty bad, always swearing at you, pushing you around … Concreting … you need a lot of experience for that type of job … Carpentry, that was not too bad, but cabinet making was the hardest, I'll tell you that. Those drawings. All that stuff confused the hell out of me. Bricklaying was one of the hardest physically, mentally it had to be cabinet making. Bricklaying was probably one of the most easiest, that had not much involved in it and it was a bit enjoyable … I want something a little bit heavy, not too heavy.

Transport was quite a problem for those wanting work (or training) but too young to drive, even if they had access to a car.

> Travel was another factor of me leaving the job, you see. I accepted the job but it was in a big, hilly industrial area, just out in the middle of nowhere. I'd have to get up at six, the job would start at nine. I'd get up at six, catch a six-thirty train, then I'd have to get a bus into the industrial estate of where I'd work. And from when I'd get there, I'd have to walk another five minutes to where I'd work, in the middle of just bush and industrial sort of buildings and stuff. And then I'd have to sit out the front because I'd get there at about eight and I'd have to sit there about an hour or an hour and fifteen, just in the cold. (Andy)

Carlo had been offered help with a bricklaying apprenticeship but the jobs were all in the distant new outer suburbs:

> There's no transport out there unless I get out at one station and walk another 45 minutes or half hour … all the work's too far out, I don't have a car, a licence, I'm not even 18 to get your P's, so it's out of the question for me.

Two young people spoke of long travel times to get to training but felt it was worth it (Andy doing Green Corps and Maddie doing VCAL).

Hours

Most of the early school leavers were hoping for full-time not part-time work as a step towards their adult work lives. For example Maddie, having completed her VCAL wanted a full-time job (an office traineeship):

> I've got too many friends that are in part-time jobs and I don't see the point in it … Wherever I work that's what I want to do for the rest of my life. I don't want different part-time jobs, even though it helps on your résumé.

Policy question

What attention needs to be directed to strengthening the youth labour market?

Three issues that emerge from the experiences of the young people in this study are the availability of full-time work for early school leavers, the availability of on-the-job training and the question of what are 'fair' wages and hours for 16 and 17 year olds.

[Note: To give an example of pay at one of the workplaces some of the young people discussed: the current (September 2008) pay rates for 15 and 16 year olds at McDonalds range from $7.04 per hour (part-time and full time, first 15 weeks, 5am to 1am) to $10.17 (casual, after first 15 weeks, 1am to 5 am) (Personal communication).]

Assistance with training, employment and future plans

Since leaving school, the eight young people had received assistance with training, employment options and future planning, mainly from family and friends, and to some extent from Centrelink and Job Network providers, although there were mixed responses to the help given by these services. Some had contact with specific youth services such as JPET (Lisa, Tom) and workers associated with TAFE programs (Maddie, Emma). Some had had contact with other services including housing, health, legal, counselling and welfare services as they tried to sort out their wider lives. The young people also gave advice on what would help other early school leavers.

Family and friends

The most frequent source of help with training and employment seemed to be family, particularly parents. Family help included providing work experience, pointing out appropriate job advertisements or opportunities and sorting out training options.

Andy saw his mother's help as more useful than Centrelink in gaining his first job:

> I think Mum found the job in the paper. And she just mentioned it to me – 'You should really apply for this'. So I wrote a quick covering letter explaining my situation and I attached my résumé to it and it was the first proper full application that I actually spent time on. Compared to a Centrelink application where I just send my email and my job seeker ID number and I just go 'Yeah, send'. But this one I actually just sat down and properly applied for and within two hours they actually rang me back and said, 'Could we have an interview with you?'. And I said, 'When?' and they said, 'Tomorrow'. And I said, 'Wow, definitely' … My mum's very helpful. She finds things for me and if I ever get muddled up and don't what to say to someone over the phone she'll always suss it out for me and help me through that stuff, so she's great like that.

Andy was enjoying Green Corps which he joined because of a friend:

> A friend introduced me to Green Corps, someone who is doing it with me … his parents suggested it to him and he suggested it to me.

Friends sometimes helped in finding an immediate job (Lisa, Tom) but were less involved in young people's future planning:

> Mum and Dad, they're supportive in everything. My friends, not really. I don't really talk to them much. They are at school. (Brendan)

It should be noted that only two of the young people were living with both natural parents, four were with one parent and two (Lisa, Tom) were living with neither parent. Some parents had very limited ability to provide any assistance, because of their own financial and employment stresses or mental health problems. Three young people had experienced the death of a parent during their childhood.

Centrelink and Job Network

Centrelink provides income support for eligible young people and refers those who are seeking work to various Job Network providers to undertake 'activities' which ideally would lead to employment. Activity Agreements are 'negotiated' between the job seeker and the provider (although this is not an equal relationship) and are seen as spelling out the 'mutual obligation responsibilities' of the job seeker, who may lose payments if these are not met. Activities may include 'intensive job search', paid work experience, vocational education or training, and other programs. Disadvantaged young people may be referred to the youth program JPET (Job Placement, Employment and Training) for more specialised assistance.

The young people did not necessarily remember the names of the agencies they had contact with and, for example, sometimes referred to Centrelink when they were probably discussing a Job Network provider.

Maddie had found the working of the mutual obligation requirements helpful in focusing her on study and in linking her with a course:

> When I left school last year I was on the Centrelink payments for a while, just looking for work. And then I started working at McDonalds. I lasted there about four months – I hated it – so I quit. And then Centrelink told me I can't just be doing nothing, and I thought no, I want to study, I want to do my VCE. So Centrelink got me on to this TAFE. They actually gave me a few options of different TAFE I could go to, they said it's actually a lot easier than school – high school, you know. It was to do VCAL, it's like VCE, like an alternative.

For Lisa, her experience of Centrelink depended on the staff. She identified the help she received from Job Network, although it had not produced a job after three months.

> Centrelink, they pay me. It just depends on staff. Some are quite easy and over and done with. Some are really difficult, they ask you a lot of questions and are a bit more difficult to get paid. And they ask you to bring more statements … Job Network, they just help me look for a job, update my résumé, like helping with letters, sending letters, finding jobs.

However, many of the other comments about Centrelink and activity agreements were more critical: the contact had seldom resulted in the young people obtaining work or useful training. Carlo complained of being offered courses when he really wanted a job:

> Centrelink really didn't do much for me actually. I asked them straight out, 'I'd like a job if you can get me a job', that's all I wanted. They wanted to send me for courses and things like that. I don't like courses, honestly.

> Centrelink put me through a course ages ago but I left there because they really pissed me off. I don't remember what it was called. It was like a tutoring place. (Carlo)

Access to a computer was the only help Tom felt he had been given:

> Job Network? I had to go to them, because I was on Centrelink I had to go. They don't really help you, they just give you the computer and let you search. They don't really do anything. They make you do it. I've had to do my résumé myself. I think [Job Network] was helpful because I always had the computer access when I needed it. I don't have the internet at the moment. I go to my friend's place.

Andy felt that the Job Network Activity Agreement requirements were 'a bit silly' and he resented being treated 'like a number':

> Activity Agreements, so they make you sit there in classes with unemployed people and you have to just learn to write a covering letter, find advantage points in interviews and do all that tactical stuff in jobs … job seeking, presentation really. How to set out a résumé, covering letter, all that sort of stuff. And then they make you sit there for about two hours searching jobs, ten jobs a day, which sort of seemed a bit silly for the fact that if you were really trying for a job, there wasn't going to be that many jobs. But it was compulsory, so if you wanted to be a draughtsman you'd have to find ten draughtsman jobs.

> Employment services. They're a bit 'We'll help you, but only because we're getting a cut for ourselves' sort of ethic that I see them having. My experience with them is not very helpful. They can be helpful but only on a very minimum basis. They'll barely help you scrape through because they don't really care if you get a job or not, they just want to know if you can get the numbers down so they can get paid. You feel like a number when you work with them, you don't feel like a person. (Andy)

Lisa did not see the point of her Activity Agreement with Job Network as she felt she was expected to look for jobs simply to fill in the form:

> I don't think there's a point if I just have to put down jobs … I'd find jobs on the computer at Job Network and some would be on paper that I would phone and call them and ask them. I did that for three months.

JPET

It seemed only two or three of the young people had been referred to JPET. Maddie was receiving good support from a worker and mentioned JPET but was not sure if this was the name of the program. In Lisa's case, JPET was helpful in seeking work and in dealing with her wider issues, but in Tom's case it was not.

> JPET, she's been helping me look for a job but then after I found that I was pregnant she is helping me look for housing as well. She's been referring me to, like this group called Crossroads, they've been getting support letters so we can get a place. She's been looking out for properties for us and she's been calling up these services. (Lisa)

> I've been on JPET but they cancelled it. Centrelink organised it and then JPET cancelled it. I think it's because I was too far from there. Because I'm there and they're in another area. I think I had a meeting, that was it. It was like four months ago. I had no interest in it. (Tom)

Other aspects of life

While the focus of the above has been on the young people's pathways since leaving school in terms of training and employment, some had found that other aspects of their lives were either more central or at least exerted a major influence at particular times. These influences need to be taken into account when working with the young people on their training and employment needs. To give some diverse examples:

- Lisa from a Hmong refugee family had chosen to have a traditional betrothal at age 14. At 17 she was expecting a baby. Strong cultural factors meant that she could not live with her own relatives and she and her fiancé were struggling to find accommodation.
- Maddie was contemplating a restraining order against a violent boyfriend, who often came to her TAFE and caused trouble and had recently attacked her.
- Duc had tried unsuccessfully to get money to cover living costs when living on a farm with his unemployed brother. They were subsequently attacked in a house raid.

Another important factor which could influence their current planning was depression or other mental health problems. It seemed that at least two of the young men had some element of depression which was caused or exacerbated by failure at school and/or unemployment.

What would help others

The young people were asked, 'If you were advising a service about how to help young people who have left school to plan for their future, what would you tell them?' Some gave brief responses while others responded at some length, and reflected on their own experiences. The responses included direct advice to young people, some of which could have been seen as good advice to themselves, but also included what they had found helpful in services they had dealt with and where such services could be usefully located.

Their advice to other young people included the importance of school and education and of sticking to one thing (Andy, Carlo, Maddie). They wanted services providers who were very knowledgeable about the options available (Lisa, Emma) and who would listen to the young people and find out what they wanted (Emma, Brendan, Tom, Duc). Their suggestions for services included phone

services and services located in schools, libraries or youth centres or at Centrelink or Job Network (Lisa, Emma, Duc).

Two of the early school leavers (Andy, Carlo) had clear advice for other young people to stay at school. They both valued aspects of school, although neither themselves wanted to return.

> I'd just say, 'Stay at school'. Because you don't realise how many social connections you have at school … Cos it's not really that long. I wish I had finished it … But I'm not interested in going back. I figure I've got all I can for me out of the school system that I could. (Andy)

> You want to go to school, you want to learn, you know, one day you want to get somewhere. (Carlo)

'Stick to one thing' was the good advice from Carlo who had made a number of unsuccessful attempts at different jobs:

> I would say to the blokes that had just got out of school and need a job or something: dedicate your job, like pick a job like bricklaying, carpenter, electrician, plumber whatever, a good trade, because in the future tradesmen are going to be very wanted you know, they're going to be getting probably paid a lot, because there's not many left. And so I'd say to the blokes or the guys, dedicate a job, stick to it, work, finish your apprenticeship, then when you want you can start up your own business, make heaps.

Maddie had similar advice, reflecting on her experience of successfully completing VCAL with help from a caseworker:

> Just got to put your mind to one thing and just do it. You know you can't be thinking about other things, you've got to have your head cleared and think this is what I want to do and you've just got to do that one thing. Doesn't matter how hard it gets or whatever, try and get the help and support, and you've got to stick to the one thing and don't go off track and go and just do something else.

Some identified the importance of service staff who were knowledgeable about the options for young people and who could make appropriate referrals:

> They need to know all the options; knowing how to get more information about all those options; I suppose being understanding and all of that. I think the most of what is needed is knowing all the available options at that time. I suppose you don't have to know all the details but know how to get further details. (Emma)

It was important that service providers were good listeners and understanding:

> You need to be able to get a person that's a good listener, they've actually lived that kind of life before, but if I had to interview someone else who was just like me I'd be able to understand them much more. (Duc)

Duc's suggestions for services ranged from improving Centrelink to phone services:

> [Centrelink] could be made more helpful, it needs to be more helpful for kids. I reckon the interviews should be made at home or something. Cos, depending on the teen, it's really hard for him or her to be able to get there … Like youth services, I've just heard about those. Like the 1800 Kids Helpline. I think it should help some kids. It's a good place to be able to talk to. [*Duc had tried the phone service himself but only talked for a second because his mobile phone had a low battery.*]

Policy question
What sort of services would best assist early school leavers with their future plans?
The experiences of the eight young people highlight the important role of families and suggest the relevance of supporting parents in supporting their children, but it must also be acknowledged that some young people do not have parents who can help.

The young people identified problems in the way Centrelink and Job Network work with early school leavers. This suggests the need to make the role of the services clear and 'youth friendly', to help young people understand the system, and to ensure any activities are potentially helpful rather than 'silly'. Other issues include convenient location (or outreach) and service providers who will listen carefully. Continuity of relationship with service providers is important for these young people.

Discussion of policy implications

Smyth and colleagues (2000) point to the need to move beyond the quantitative research that frames early school leaving in terms of attributes such as socioeconomic status and gender, and see how the larger issues are embedded in the everyday experiences of the young people. This report explores the narratives of eight young people as a way to illuminate issues for early school leavers.

The stories highlight some of the complexities and ambivalences of young people seeking work or post-school training. They illustrate how school, work or training fits in their wider lives and suggest a concept of 'complex lives' as a frame for understanding. The complexity of their lives include the issues around their age (as 14 to 17 year olds); gender; ethnic or racial identity; their family situation, including family income and support; their health, including mental health; and their academic and other abilities; as well as the wider and changing social, economic and environmental context in which they live.

School retention

While young people who leave school early, as a category, do not do as well on various measures as those who complete Year 12, the policy answer cannot be simply to keep them all at school, especially given the negative experience schools have provided for some young people. For an inclusive approach there need to be in place both school-based programs to engage young people better and also flexible alternative learning situations.

The early school leavers in this study had typically left school because of negative experiences at school, rather than because they had an inviting job or training course to go to. Nonetheless, some clearly expressed regret about leaving and advised others to stay.

Given both state and federal objectives to increase school retention and reduce early school leaving, it is important to both improve the school situation for those at school and to provide well-articulated support, opportunities and a positive image for those who have left.

The challenge for schools is to become more inclusive of all students, including those with learning and behaviour difficulties. While high school retention is a major policy goal, it should be remembered that not all schools are making this a top priority. Smyth and colleagues (2000) found that some schools manipulated school discipline policy and guidelines to get rid of difficult students given the school league tables push. The On Track survey (Teese, Clarke & Polesel 2007) found half the early school leavers said they would have stayed on at school, had they had encountered 'more respect or care' while at school.

The experiences reported by the young people in this study confirm the continuing relevance of earlier studies. For example, our one Aboriginal student spoke of harassment and discrimination and being singled out in front of this friends. Smyth et al. (2000) noted from their interviews that

the trouble Aboriginal students experienced in staying at school seemed to come from being harassed by racial slurs, feeling shame in classrooms and not being able to get help. The same study also found not feeling safe at school, which involved lack of adequate supervision from teachers, was an important interference with completing school.

There is a challenge for some schools to acknowledge that 'School is not for everyone' is a reason, not to 'get rid' of difficult or struggling students, but rather, as demonstrated by the Brotherhood's Transition Project, to assist them within the school and to promote positive post-school pathways.

Policies are needed that facilitate schools' promotion of school retention in an inclusive framework. Schools need to:

- actively support and engage young people with learning and behaviour difficulties
- provide a safe school environment
- actively support those returning to school or changing schools (especially those arriving after the start of the school year, and those from interstate)
- increase awareness among the teaching profession of the issues that reduce young people's school engagement and retention.

Post-school training

The *Victorian Education and Training Reform Act 2006* provides a guaranteed place in TAFE institutions, the Centre for Adult Education, Adult Multicultural Education Services or participating adult community education providers, to young people who have not completed Year 12 or its equivalent.

Some early school leavers in this study were keen to undertake some vocational training, while others, especially those who had struggled most at school, were clear they wanted a job not a course. This raises the question of whether this is a false dichotomy and what combinations of work and training are possible. The main issues relating to post-school training raised from the experiences of our early school leavers are information and relevance, cost, availability of support and the question of where the training will lead.

Disadvantaged young people need easy access to expert sources of information about training options. Two of the young people who had undertaken TAFE courses felt that these were not the right courses for them and were not what they had expected. They (and their parents) required more than internet information to make good decisions.

Cost of training was a major barrier for one of the young people who, as a 16 year old, had no way of meeting a $900 fee for a tourism course her Job Network provider recommended. While the others did not focus on cost as a barrier, current policy development suggests it could become a bigger barrier. It has been reported that the Victorian Government, with federal support, is planning to greatly increase TAFE places, providing a government-funded training place for those without post-school qualifications, but this would also involve almost doubling the current fees for students (Tomazin 2008).

The value of good individual support associated with training courses was illustrated by two of our early school leavers. They included one doing a TAFE VCAL course, whose caseworker was able to assist with a range of life's complexities that could well have prevented her from completing the course. By contrast, some others dropped out of TAFE courses with no apparent follow-up.

The question of where particular courses will lead is significant for those undertaking them. However clear pathways are not always apparent. For example, how often does a pre-apprenticeship lead to an apprenticeship, or where does VCAL lead?

Youth employment

The early school leavers in this study had difficulty in getting full-time employment. This reflects the collapse of the full-time youth labour market over the past decades, not simply individual motivation as some would suggest. Their work had been predominantly in the fast food sector, part-time and short-term. Having left school, some had a strong desire to work where they could learn on the job, for example as an apprentice or an office traineeship, rather than to undertake further study as such. How can employers best provide training for young workers? More on-the-job training is one of a number of requirements that employers need to provide to support young workers in their first jobs (Tresize-Brown 2004). The development by TAFE colleges of customised responses to meet the needs of both individuals and employers is recommended by a recent Brotherhood of St Laurence submission on skills reform (BSL 2008a).

The debate about low youth wages involves, on the one hand, assertions that junior wage rates (an age-based percentage of adult wages that increases each year, generally up to age 21) are necessary if inexperienced young people are to be competitive in the labour market. On the other hand there are concerns about young workers living in poverty and issues of equity and exploitation. Youth wages were mentioned by a number of the early school leavers who felt they were being exploited and that they were primarily a source of cheap labour, being asked to work longer hours because of their age. It was important for them that wages were seen to be fair.

Having to travel a long way to work was a barrier for some of the young people where there was limited public transport. There is a policy issue of the wider importance of public transport for this group with no access to alternative transport because of their youth.

Income support and mutual obligation

How does the policy of mutual obligation work for disadvantaged young people? This policy is of interest in relation to early school leavers who sometimes get stereotyped as dole bludgers and as not fulfilling their part of the obligation.

While one young woman in our study seemed to have found the push from Centrelink to get into a training course positive, others were more critical in that they did not receive enough real assistance in finding jobs. They noted that their 'Activity Agreements' contained job search activities that they saw as silly or pointless and that they were treated as numbers. Their comments are similar to those of older unemployed people (Marston & McDonald 2008).

Some of the eight early school leavers were unemployed but were not receiving Youth Allowance and so were technically not 'dole bludgers' but may also not have been counted in the unemployment statistics. These included young men leading very constrained lives who seemed quite depressed.

While there have been some special programs, such as JPET, for disadvantaged young job seekers, they had not reached all those in this study who could have benefited from them. In reviewing income support, policy makers need to take into account the needs of young early school leavers and particularly those unable to live at home.

What could the government do to better fulfil their side of this 'mutual' obligation for early school leavers? Two main points are:

- more accessible, more adequate income support for those young people in need
- meaningful assistance in finding jobs, rather than 'make work' Activity Agreements.

Providing assistance to early school leavers

Drawing together the early school leavers' stories and their advice to others leads to the following recommendations. First there is a need for youth-focused services which are readily identifiable and locally accessible and where staff:

- will listen and understand the complexity of the young people's lives
- have wide knowledge of employment and training options
- can provide or refer to practical assistance.

A second strand of assistance involves Centrelink and Job Network providers adopting more 'youth friendly' practices and increasing specialist youth services and workers.

A third strand involves acknowledging and supporting the role of parents in assisting their young people's future planning, while taking into account the fact that some young people do not have parents who are able to assist.

The stories support the Brotherhood's call (BSL 2008c) for consolidating assistance into a readily accessible single youth support service.

Conclusions

The early school leavers in our study illustrate the struggle that some young people have to participate as they would wish in the world of education and work, in spite of a context of nearly full employment. Their stories highlight the complexity of their lives and the diversity of their situations. They show also the resilience of some of the young people and the way they can respond to opportunity and assistance. The findings confirm the importance of listening to young people's own stories of their transitions from school to training, to work, or to unemployment.

Given the strong policy push to increase school retention, the report highlights the challenges for policy and programs to meet the diversity and complexity of the situations of early school leavers. There can be no 'one-size-fits-all' policy response1 in encouraging school completion, in providing vocational training or in assisting in job seeking. These Life Chances case studies demonstrate the need for more flexible and integrated approaches to maximise the social and economic participation of young people, acknowledging the financial and other barriers they face. These approaches are needed both within schools and through out-of-school options.

New ways of working with young people are needed to ensure they are not excluded from appropriate opportunities, ways that creatively combine learning, skills development and employment.

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