

Critical Studies of Education 6

Barry Down  
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# Rethinking School-to-Work Transitions in Australia

Young People Have Something to Say

 Springer

# Critical Studies of Education

Volume 6

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We live in an era where forms of education designed to win the consent of students, teachers, and the public to the inevitability of a neo-liberal, market-driven process of globalization are being developed around the world. In these hegemonic modes of pedagogy questions about issues of race, class, gender, sexuality, colonialism, religion, and other social dynamics are simply not asked. Indeed, questions about the social spaces where pedagogy takes place—in schools, media, corporate think tanks, etc.—are not raised. When these concerns are connected with queries such as the following, we begin to move into a serious study of pedagogy: What knowledge is of the most worth? Whose knowledge should be taught? What role does power play in the educational process? How are new media re-shaping as well as perpetuating what happens in education? How is knowledge produced in a corporatized politics of knowledge? What socio-political role do schools play in the twenty-first century? What is an educated person? What is intelligence? How important are socio-cultural contextual factors in shaping what goes on in education? Can schools be more than a tool of the new American (and its Western allies') twenty-first century empire? How do we educate well-informed, creative teachers? What roles should schools play in a democratic society? What roles should media play in a democratic society? Is education in a democratic society different than in a totalitarian society? What is a democratic society? How is globalization affecting education? How does our view of mind shape the way we think of education? How does affect and emotion shape the educational process? What are the forces that shape educational purpose in different societies? These, of course, are just a few examples of the questions that need to be asked in relation to our exploration of educational purpose. This series of books can help establish a renewed interest in such questions and their centrality in the larger study of education and the preparation of teachers and other educational professionals.

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Barry Down • John Smyth • Janean Robinson

# Rethinking School-to-Work Transitions in Australia

Young People Have Something to Say

 Springer

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Perth, WA, Australia  
August 2017

Barry Down  
John Smyth  
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**Janean Robinson** is a research associate and has worked in tertiary education and taught in secondary schools in Western Australia since graduating from teachers college in the late 1970s. She has therefore never really left school! Her research interests are in critical ethnography and public policy in education, especially relating to changes in teachers' work and the lives of young people. She continues to publish work that advocates for greater social justice and democracy in education for voices that are seldom heard.

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# Chapter 1

## Introduction

### 1.1 What This Book Is About

*It's tough getting an interview. When I go for an interview normally I'm like the third or second best. Someone always just beats me. (#14 Lucas)*

*You need education or you finish up in the fish and chip shop. (#24 Jackie)*

*School helped me with basic life skills but nothing else. School wasn't a very happy experience for me. (#26 David)*

This book sets out to examine the experience of young people like Lucas, Jackie and David as they endeavour to navigate their way into the adult world of work. We intend to listen to what 32 young people are saying about their experience of schooling in the Australian context with a view to better understanding the barriers and obstacles they face in getting a job and, from their vantage point, identifying the kinds of pedagogical, relational and community-related conditions that need to be created and more widely sustained to assist their career aspirations and life chances. Putting it another way, we have a deep-rooted belief that educational problems related to complex phenomena such as school-to-work transitions are best understood by listening to the voices of young people themselves as key informants about their world.

Jonathon Kozol (2005), in his ground-breaking book *The shame of the nation*, makes the point that students themselves are the best data source and most 'pure witnesses' about what goes on in their schools. We are in agreement with Kozol (2005) when he argues that young people are far more reliable than many 'adult experts who develop policies that shape their destinies' (p. 12). Kozol (2005) elaborates: 'Unlike these powerful grown-ups, children have no ideologies to reinforce, no superstructure of political opinion to promote, no civic equanimity or image to defend, no personal reputation to secure' (p. 12).

The irony is that, whilst young people are compelled to stay on at school until 17 years of age in Australia, we know relatively little about their lives or what works

best for them (Smyth & McInerney, 2012). The rationale behind this book then is that, unless we have an active way of accessing how young people think about and make sense of their imagined futures, there is a decided risk that many of them may not avail themselves of even the limited opportunities for work. We believe that this kind of insider research is especially relevant to understanding the lives of those students ‘on the threatening boundary of the classroom’, that is to say, those students who are deemed to be ‘marginal’ and ‘designated as “slow learners”, or “remedial”; or, eventually, “vocational”’ (Rose, 1989, p. 8).

Maxine Greene (1995) provides a helpful take on this issue when she argues that we can choose either ‘to see the world small or to see it big’ (p. 10). In her words, to see things small ‘one chooses to see from a detached point of view, to watch behaviours from the perspective of a system ... a vantage point of power or existing ideologies—taking a primarily technical point of view’ (pp. 10–11). This leads to a preoccupation with technical matters or means–ends thinking that ‘screens out the faces and gestures of individuals, of actual living persons’ (p. 11). On the other hand, to see things big ‘one must resist viewing other human beings as mere objects or chess pieces and view them in their integrity and particularity instead’ (p. 10). In this way, we are able to see things ‘from the point of view of the participant in the midst of what is happening ... to be privy to the plans people make, the initiatives they take, the uncertainties they face’ (p. 10). Greene’s (1995) insight is a timely reminder of the importance of lived experience in comprehending how young people are making sense of and navigating their way in the world. Drawing on the experience of young people in this book, we take Greene’s (1995) advice to make the themes of ‘transformations, openings, [and] possibilities’ more ‘audible’ in our conversations (p. 17).

In a nutshell then:

Our purpose is to try and get inside the issue of the vocationalizing of young lives, how young people are thinking about the world of work, how their aspirations are being formed, the way they see themselves as making sense of the prospect of entering the world of work, and the obstacles and impediments, how school is a part of this project, and how in the end, their stories enable the policy context to be radically informed in a different way (Down & Smyth, 2012, p. 211).

The book, and the research on which it is based, is set against the backdrop of the Global Financial Crisis (GFC) of 2008 and the ruthless pursuit of neoliberal ideology as the primary arbitrator of decisions about the organisation of social and economic life (Giroux, 2015; Harvey, 2007). Our intent is to better understand how these broader structural dynamics are impacting on the lives of young people and how they make sense of what is happening. As Wyn (2009a) puts it, we need to comprehend the

disjuncture between educational policies, which continue to frame education within an industrial model (instrumental and vocationalist), and young people’s own requirements – the capacity to be good navigators through new economies, to live well, and to engage with complexity and diversity (p. 49).



A central contention of this book is that young people face an increasingly ‘complex and fragile global economy’ (Best & Kellner, 2003, p. 75) characterised by a significant reduction in the size of core full-time jobs and a growing number of people working in part-time, casualised, low-paying and repetitive jobs in the retail, trade and service sectors (Furlong & Cartmel, 1997). The harsh reality is that ‘the global economy increasingly relies on low-wage, part-time jobs comprised of an army of “contingent”, “disposable”, “temporary”, and “footloose” labourers’ (McLaren & Farahmandpur, 2005, p. 44).

In this context, the rhetoric of the knowledge economy and its capacity to create more high-skilled, high-wage jobs especially in the communications and information industries, for so long the cornerstone of Western economies and education systems, appears to be a ‘big lie’ (Macedo, 1993) from the point of view of growing numbers of young people. As Brown, Lauder, and Ashton (2011) argue, ‘the global auction for cut-priced brainpower’ (p. 5) means that workers from emerging economies such as China, India, Russia and Eastern Europe are all competing for the diminishing number of decent, well-paid, middle-class jobs. Against this backdrop, young people are destined to become what Standing (2011) describes as the ‘precariat class’ beleaguered by the four A’s: anger, anomie, anxiety and alienation (pp. 19–20).

Yet, there is a common-sense view among policy makers, politicians and educators (although not all) that education is a panacea for whatever problems exist in the economy and society. In response, governments of all political persuasions have adopted a set of narrowly conceived and instrumentalist policies driven by human capital approaches to education and training. Within this logic, the primary purpose of education is to make sure that students are ‘job ready’ and compliant workers. Whilst we agree with the view that schools must equip students with the skills and knowledge to survive in the world economically, they must also prepare young people extraordinarily well as future citizens. This involves nurturing critical capabilities and dispositions to help them understand the forces impacting on their lives as well as the relation between work and democracy (Kincheloe, 1995, pp. 27–28). Freire (1998) put this extremely well when he said that future workers ‘need to engage in the process of becoming citizens, something that does not happen as a consequence of “technical efficiency”’ alone (p. 94). What Freire (1998) is alluding to here is the pivotal importance of an education that includes both ‘technical and scientific preparation and speaks of the workers’ presence in the world’ (p. 92).

Therefore, this book is timely in terms of investigating what is happening to young lives and from their perspective what alternatives need to be brought into existence. In constructing an alternative vision and practice for education and training we advocate the right of all young people to have a say in these broader public debates based on a commitment to the principles and values of social justice, respect, trust, care, dignity, democracy and citizenship (Beane, 2005; Giroux, 1997). The underlying proposition of this book is that, when young people fail to find a rewarding job, then as a society we are all worse off: (a) young people fail to realise their potential and make a meaningful transition to a rewarding adult life; (b) the wider community is deprived of the valuable contribution young people could be making; and (c) society and the economy are unable to access the unique, valuable

contributions that can be made by young people. Put simply, the book seeks to make visible the dreams, desires and aspirations of young people in order to create a socially just future. That is the essence of this book.

## 1.2 Rethinking School-to-Work Transitions

To begin, we want to say something about the title of this book, *Rethinking school-to-work transitions*. There are two key assumptions we make in choosing this title. First, we believe that the act of thinking or thoughtfulness (as opposed to thoughtlessness) is absolutely pivotal to tackling complex social phenomena such as school-to-work transitions. Drawing on Smith (2004), we begin ‘with a sense of problem, of something going on, some disquiet, and of something there that could be explicated’ (p. 9). This resonates strongly with the kind of ‘critical’ thinking we advocate in this book, by which we mean a willingness to question those common-sense assumptions, beliefs, habits, routines and behaviours that operate behind our backs and in ways that may not always be of our own choosing (Kumashiro, 2004). The intent of critical thinking, as we use it throughout this book, is to raise awareness for the purpose of bringing about social change based on self-reflection (Freire, 2007). We believe critical thinking (as opposed to carping and negative thinking) is a key ingredient in our effort to create more robust and socially just policies and practices for the benefit of all young people. As Apple (1999) reminds us, ‘How we think about something makes a considerable difference in how we act’ (p. 9).

Second, if we really want to advance policies and practices that have a chance of working, then we must be prepared to ask some difficult questions capable of unsettling everyday explanations of the way things are. On this point, we are in agreement with Shannon (1992) when he argues that ‘Asking questions is a constructive act because it makes change possible’ (p. 3). Of course, challenging questions are not always welcome in a culture that demands immediate answers to complex social problems, irrespective of whether they work or not. As Kumashiro (2004) points out, ‘troubling knowledge’ makes us feel uncomfortable because it seeks

to work paradoxically with knowledge, that is, to simultaneously use knowledge to see what different insights, identities, practices, and strategies it makes possible while critically examining that knowledge (and how it came to be known) to see what insights and the like it closes off (pp. 8–9).

Hence, asking critical questions is fraught with difficulty because it can interrupt some deeply embedded world views, for instance, the flawed assumption linking education, productivity and jobs (Cuban, 2004; Down, 2009). Furthermore, having open debate among ‘enlightened citizens’ (Agger, 2007, p. 19) is not easy in a society dominated by the values of consumerism, individualism and competition, supported as it is by a ‘complex machinery to effect thought-control’ (Shor, 1987, p. 49). This task has become even more complicated with the emergence of ‘post-truth’ politics. The *Oxford Dictionaries* (2016) recently named ‘post-truth’

the word of the year and defined it as: ‘Relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief’. In this context, we adopt the term ‘rethinking’ to signify a spirit of both critique and alternative possibilities.

For us, this requires the use of what Mills (1971/1959) describes as ‘the sociological imagination’, in particular the distinction he makes between ‘personal troubles’ and ‘public issues’. In short, Mills (1971/1959) argues that individual biographies can only be properly comprehended when examined in the context of the social institutions and structures in which they are located and that give their lives ‘understand[ing] ... significance and meaning’ (p. 178). For instance, when talking about the issue of unemployment, Mills (1971/1959) argues that because ‘the very structure of opportunities has collapsed ... the correct statement of the problem and the range of possible solutions require us to consider the economic and political institutions of the society, and not merely the personal situation and character of a scatter of individuals’ (p. 15).

Similarly, Schwalbe (2008) describes this kind of activity as ‘sociological mindfulness’, by which he means

taking the bigger picture into account and trying to see how one part of the social world – the economy, for instance – is related to other parts – schools, for instance. If we don’t do this, we will fail to see important things about how our society works (p. 12).

Central to Schwalbe’s (2008) argument is the view that ‘the social world could not exist if we did not re-enact it every day’ (p. 27). What he is saying here is that ‘our thoughts, feelings, and behaviours keep it going’ (p. 27). More importantly, whilst our everyday actions contribute to its making, there is also ‘the possibility of acting differently, of choosing not to support arrangements that are harmful or unjust’ (p. 28). In pursuing this kind of sociological perspective, we endeavour through in-depth ethnographic interviews to document not only the daily complexities, uncertainties and possibilities of young people’s lives but also the ways in which their identities are shaped by broader structural, institutional and historical forces beyond their control. In short, the challenge ahead is to understand why things are the way they are, how they got that way and how they can be changed for the better.

At the outset, then, we wish to acknowledge that when confronted by seemingly intractable and complex problems such as school-to-work transitions it is easy to assume that we do not have any power. After all, somebody else is in charge so it is their responsibility. What can I do? This becomes a major obstacle to people taking action due to a sense of futility (fatalism) and inevitability (determinism) about the way things are. For instance, schools adopt a narrowly conceived and instrumentalist approach to vocational education and training based on the belief that schools should ‘adapt the student to what is inevitable, to what cannot be changed’ (Freire, 1998, p. 27). This functionalist logic assumes that schools should prepare students for whatever jobs are available. In the words of Bauman (2004):

One of the most commonly offered recommendations to the young meanwhile is to be flexible and not particularly choosy, not to expect too much from jobs, to take the jobs as they come without asking too many questions and to treat them as an opportunity to be employed

on the spot as long as it lasts rather than as an introductory chapter of a ‘life project’, a matter of self-esteem and self-definition, or a warrant for long-term security. (p. 10)

Thus, the institution of schooling functions as a ‘savage sorting’ machine for the labour market within a global production system driven by unbridled free-market individualism, competitiveness and profits (Sasson, 2014, p. 4). Guy Standing (2011) explains it this way:

A central aspect of globalization can be summed up in one intimidating word, ‘commodification’. This involves treating everything as a commodity, to be bought and sold, subject to market forces, with prices set by demand and supply, without effective ‘agency’ (a capacity to resist). Commodification has been extended to every aspect of life – the family, education system, firm, labour institutions, social protection policy, unemployment, disability, occupational communities and politics. (p. 26)

Given these broader shifts in the global economy and on the basis of what young people are telling us about their experience of getting a job, we have arranged our arguments around the notion of rethinking school-to-work transitions to help us better understand what is happening in young people’s lives and what needs to change. Putting it another way, the status quo is neither desirable nor acceptable for increasing numbers of young people, their teachers, parents or communities. If we are to effect change then we need to ask some different kinds of questions, such as: Why are things the way they are? How did they get that way? What set of conditions are supporting the processes that maintain them? (Simon, 1988, p. 2).

So why does this criticality matter? In a foreword to a special edition of the *International Social Science Journal*, Furlong (2000) observes that, with rising levels of youth unemployment combined with a contraction of the youth labour market and protraction of school-to-work transitions, there have been increasing fears about the economic and social marginalisation of young people (p. 130). This has led to the emergence of a ‘new way of life’ approach to research focusing on the ‘increased length and complexity of youth’ (p. 130). As Furlong (2000) explains it, this ‘new commonality’ and ‘hollowing out’ of the labour market has resulted in major ‘discontinuities, uncertainties and backtracking’ in young people’s lives (p. 132). In the same edition, Soares (2000) pushes this argument a little further by suggesting that the notion of transitions is a sham for increasing numbers of young people. He contends that:

Transitions is often used as an excuse to justify situations of chaos and inequality which favour a small minority, stave off criticisms, and demand sacrifices for the sake of an age where transition will come to an end and peace will again reign over the earth (p. 209).

Thus, the orthodox view of transition being a time when young people acquire the necessary tools to become a part of the adult workforce is ‘falling apart’ (p. 35). Soares (2000) goes on to claim that the promise of the ‘trickle-down’ theory, which holds that young people only need to study hard and get a credential to guarantee a better future and stable employment, is a ruse. Wyn and Dwyer (2000) round out this line of argument by concluding that young people (and their parents) have been given ‘false certainty’ through a range of ‘ritualised mechanisms (league tables, exam results)’ which are ‘out of touch’ with the reality of most workplaces where there are ‘few “careers”, most work is short-term, and much of it is unskilled’

(p. 157). Drawing on this revitalised approach to transitions, we contend that there is still much work to be done in terms of not only understanding individual biographies in the context of neoliberalising times but also advancing some signposts and strategies for a different kind of school (Wrigley, 2006). That is the focus of the chapters to follow.

### 1.3 A Critical Ethnography

By now it may be apparent that we locate our research within the tradition of critical social inquiry, which is to say that we attempt to use our work as ‘a form of social or cultural criticism’ in order to confront injustices in a particular society or public sphere within the society (Kincheloe, McLaren & Steinberg, 2012, p. 16). Pursuing this kind of research, we draw on Kincheloe and McLaren’s (2005) definition of an ‘evolving criticality’ to describe the ways in which we conduct research in an attempt ‘to get behind the curtain, to move beyond assimilated experience, to expose the way ideology constrains the desire for self-direction, and to confront the way power reproduces itself in the construction of human consciousness’ (p. 324). Consistent with these broader theoretical orientations, we adopt the methodology of critical ethnography to investigate the lives of 32 young people attending schools in a ‘disadvantaged’ urban school community in Western Australia, details of which we shall elaborate shortly.

But first, Willis and Trondman (2000), the founding editors of *Ethnography*, identify four distinguishing features of ethnography that are pertinent to this book. First, they recognise the role of *theory* ‘as pre-cursor, medium and outcome of ethnographic study and writing’ (p. 7). In their view theory is, however, only useful to the extent that it helps ‘in understanding social phenomena in relation to ethnographic evidence’. In other words, they are not interested in “‘grand theory”, “pure” scholastic reason or “abstracted” empiricism’ but rather “‘theoretical informedness”, “sensitizing concepts,” “analytic points,” all means of teasing out patterns from the texture of everyday life’ (p. 7). Second, they cite the centrality of *culture* to explain ‘the always existing mode of indeterminacy in human life – that it can’t be reduced to economic and social conditions’ alone. Nonetheless, they argue that this relative “‘autonomy” must be understood in *relation* to the conditions of existence within which humans act, work, and create. Cultural change cannot be entirely free floating’ (p. 8, emphasis added). Third, they identify a *critical* focus in terms of ‘recording and understanding lived social relations ... from the point of view of how they embody, mediate and enact the operations and results of unequal power’ (p. 10). Finally, they point to *cultural policy and cultural politics* as significant facets of ethnographic work. By this, they mean

the politics, interventions, institutional practices, writing and other cultural productions within ‘public spheres’ ... that bear on the possibilities of ordinary meaning-making especially in relation to emergent cultures and to human practices involved in making sense of, as creatively living through, profound structural and cultural change. (p. 10)

Madison (2005) helps us to unpack these ideas a little further when she argues that critical ethnography ‘begins with an ethical responsibility to address processes of unfairness or injustice within a particular lived domain’ (p. 5). She goes on to explain how the critical ethnographer ‘takes us beneath surface appearances, disrupts the status quo, and unsettles both neutrality and taken-for-granted assumptions by bringing to light underlying and obscure operations of power and control’ (p. 5). The intent is, according to Brown and Dobrin (2004), to enable research that ‘is theoretically informed, methodologically dialectical, and politically and ethically orientated given its concerns for transformative cultural action’ (p. 3). Smyth, Angus, Down and McInerney (2006) describe some of the key elements of critical ethnography which make it compelling:

- It accesses viewpoints from groups who have been historically excluded and marginalised.
- It starts from the position that insiders have interesting things of value to say.
- It provides a way of re-framing the geography of perplexing social and policy issues.
- It theorises issues in ways that move beyond victim-blaming approaches.
- It enables an excavation of meaning from within the interstices and spaces of personal relationships.
- It interrupts and unsettles taken-for-granted naturalised explanations of why things are the way they are.
- It moves outside of the quaint but damaging view that it is possible to view the world in detached, uncontaminated, neutral and value-free ways.
- To invoke Willis (1980), ‘there is no truly untheoretical way in which to see an object’ (p. 90).
- It proffers explanations that go beyond conventional categories and that embrace more extensive and robust explanatory frameworks.
- It has an avowedly and unapologetic political agenda of knowledge production for informants that equips them to gain ownership of the change process (Smyth et al. 2006, p. 130).

Building on these elements, Smyth (2016) advances what he describes as ‘next generation critical ethnography’ focused on pursuing research into young lives in the context of precarity, a major theme of this book (p. 137). In essence, he argues that we need research that is capable of illuminating the workings of global capitalism on young people, most notably ‘the demonstrable shift of risk’ (p. 129). Like Mills (1971/1959), Smyth (2016) is cautious about the usefulness of abstract theorising in the midst of the damaging fall-out of neoliberal policies on young people. In his words:

As educational researchers, we have been worrying ourselves too much with elegant theoretical turns, while studiously avoiding the real elephant in the room which is the bankruptcy of the neoliberal agenda and its continuing rampage through education and young lives, despite its having being rendered naked by the 2008 global financial crisis (p. 138).

Smyth's (2016) intervention is timely because it requires us to frame research in a manner that is sensitive to the daily realities of young lives in the context of the broader neoliberal project, a theme we shall pick up throughout the book. In short, it demands research approaches capable of 'puncturing notions of precarity' by asking questions like:

1. How are young people being portrayed and positioned with educational and other discourses?
2. What is the animating agenda driving those who are insisting on representing young people and their lives in particular ways?
3. Where are the spaces within the everyday precariousness of young lives, in which they can push back in ways that enable them to re-shape their existence?
4. How are the contexts of young peoples' lives packaged so as to render invisible how power works, especially in schools?
5. How can young people be helped to understand the conditions and limitations that present as precarity in their lives?
6. How are young people exercising power within the limits of the precarity of their everyday lives, not of their own making?
7. Why are young people acting the way they are? Who or what is framing this option? And, how might young people act differently?
8. What alternatives might young people be engaged in? How might these improve their lives and life chances? What impediments/obstacles need to be confronted and overcome? (Smyth, 2016, pp. 137–139).

Addressing these kinds of questions, we adopted a three-phase interview process with our informants over an eighteen-month period. Down and Smyth (2012) summarise the interview process as follows:

1. *An Aspirational Interview Phase.* We started a conversation with 32 young people aged between 14 and 17 years of age by inviting them to describe what interests them in their lives and what part that will play in their decisions in relation to getting a job. As we describe it, this phase was 'around getting to know these young people, seeing how they are positioning themselves, and what resources they are drawing upon in making a pathway for themselves towards developing an identity that includes (or not) the notion of "getting a job"'.
2. *A Following-up Developments Interview Phase.* We picked up the conversation in light of the young people's experiences and identified intervening events and factors impacting on their lives and decision making.
3. *A Life Events and Outcomes Interview.* In this final interview we asked these young people 'to describe where they have arrived at, and to reflect back on the courses of events and their meaning since we began interviewing them over twelve months previously' (pp. 211–212).

Based on these interviews we then constructed a narrative portrait of each student around a dominant theme, sixteen in all (see Fig. 1.1). In this task, we adopted Lawrence-Lightfoot's (2005) notion of portraiture as 'a form of textual representation' and 'method of documentation, analysis, and narrative develop-



Fig. 1.1 Conditions that support young people in getting a job

ment’ (p. 3; see also Smyth & McInerney, 2013). This approach allowed us to hear the voices of young people in ways that ‘capture both the complexity as well as the aesthetic nature of human experience’ (Smyth, Angus, Down, & McInerney, 2008, p. 8; see Chap. 2).

### 1.4 The Research Site and Informants

The empirical research informing this book was conducted in a rapidly growing outer metropolitan region in Western Australia. We have called this region Bountiful Bay. Like similar suburban areas around Australia, Bountiful Bay is struggling with poor school retention and participation rates, large numbers of disengaged students and escalating youth unemployment and poverty (Smyth et al. 2008). This may



seem to be somewhat incongruent in a resource-rich region with a strong economic foundation based on tourism, agriculture, fishing, mining, steel fabrication, chemical production and a large number of manufacturing and service industries. In many respects, Bountiful Bay reflects the widening social inequalities characteristic of Australian society in which affluence and plenty exist amidst pockets of poverty with intergenerational unemployment, ill health and family stress ( Greig, Lewins & White, 2003; Peel, 2003).

Tony Vinson's (2007) report *Dropping off the edge: The distribution of disadvantage in Australia* methodically maps these patterns of social and economic inequality to show the powerful 'links that exist between such factors as early school leaving, low job skills, long term unemployment, court convictions and eventual imprisonment' (p. vii). The data, according to Vinson (2007), highlights 'the enduring story of the disadvantaging consequences of limited education and associated lack of information retrieval and exchange skills, deficient labour market credentials, poor health and disabilities, low individual and family income and engagement in crime' (p. 96).

The evidence regarding educational opportunities clearly debunks the myth that Australia is an egalitarian society. Lamb, Jackson, Walstab and Huo (2015) show that, in fact, 26% of young people do not attain a Year 12 or Certificate III equivalent by age 19; remote and very remote communities have high rates of non-completion – 56.6% and 43.6% respectively; and about 40% of young people from the lowest socio-economic status (SES) backgrounds do not complete Year 12 or its equivalent by age 19 (p. vi). As Vinson (2007) argues, these patterns of educational inequality are translated into a range of other indicators related to unemployment, poor health and crime. The Brotherhood of St Laurence (2015) reports that there has been a steady rise in the overall unemployment of Australia's youth since the GFC with more than 290,000 young people aged 15–24 categorised as unemployed. The worst hit were the 15–19 year olds, with the unemployment rate hitting 20% in March 2015. Ken Henry (2014), the former Secretary of the Department of Treasury, observes that the number of young unemployed people has grown by more than 60% in less than six years. Council of Australian Governments (COAG, 2008) figures also confirm a 'worrying picture' nationally where 27.3% of 17–24 year olds are not engaged in full-time work or study. Also, 41.6% of poorer students and 60% of Indigenous students are 'falling through the cracks' (Maiolo, 2013). These figures support an International Labour Organization warning that the world's richest nations face a shortfall of 40 million jobs by the end of 2011 (Wright, 2011, p. 17).

Against this backdrop, the 32 young people who participated in the study comprised 14 males and 18 females ranging in age from 14 to 19 years. They came from a range of ethnic backgrounds including two Indigenous, one Sudanese, one Portuguese, five English and one El Salvadorian student. The majority of students came from low socioeconomic backgrounds. Eight of the 32 students first interviewed in 2011 now attend university, four of whom had attended private schools. Six of the thirteen Year 12 students in 2013 aspired to attend university (four students from private schools, two from public schools). Seven students planned to study at a Technical and Further Education (TAFE) college (some of which may

lead to university) and/or pre-apprenticeships. With one exception, they were all public school students. Most university-bound students came from middle-class and/or well-educated families and attended private schools.

These patterns, as we shall explain in subsequent chapters, reinforce the process of residualisation and segregation occurring in Australian schools, with wealthier students moving to private schools and more prestigious government schools. Public high schools in the region have placed a lot of emphasis on streaming students into vocational education and training (VET) pathways with an almost exclusive focus on competency-based certificates and employability skills. The gendered dimension of employment and career preferences is clearly evident among the participants, with a high proportion of girls choosing the 'caring' professions such as nursing, teaching, childcare and health promotion. Other careers identified included fashion design, sports event management, performing arts, clinical psychology, environmental science and travel. Many boys opted for the trades, among them panel beating, electrical, plumbing, and carpentry and joinery. A few of the boys nominated a fall-back position, mostly working in family businesses or gaining employment with minimal training (e.g. scaffolding).

Of the 32 students interviewed in 2011, half were engaged in part-time work or had recent experience of part-time work. Most of the jobs were in supermarkets, delicatessens and fast-food outlets (e.g. Kentucky Fried Chicken, Hungry Jack's and McDonald's). Others included babysitting and library shelving. Some were looking for work and at least one did voluntary work in the community. Their hours of work ranged from 4 to 40 h. Some had long shifts on weekends. A few spoke of the difficulties of balancing school commitments, sport and work. Some had cut back on work in Year 12 to focus on study. However, others still committed long hours to work, family businesses and sport. Most appreciated the cash but said they did not want to do that kind of work for the rest of their lives.

Notwithstanding the benefits, part-time employment cuts into study time and can further disadvantage kids who are already struggling to cope with school. Only a few of the students' parents have undertaken higher education although some had brothers or sisters attending university or who had graduated. We do not have complete details of the parents' careers or occupations but many fathers, it seems, have working-class jobs (e.g., mechanics, builders and roof tilers) and mothers (if they have paid work) are involved in family businesses, nursing, retail and caring for others. There are a few middle-class parents with jobs in teaching, IT, real estate and business management. Some families are doing it tough with family members on a disability pension. We also heard from students whose fathers are unemployed or underemployed. Almost universally, students said their parents were very supportive of their education and career aspirations. They talked up the value of education and wanted their kids to take advantage of opportunities they missed out on themselves. Parents did a good deal of the legwork in checking out career information and seeking apprenticeships for their children. In some cases, they eased students' financial burdens during their TAFE courses by providing accommodation, and paying fees and living allowances.

## 1.5 Major Themes and Assumptions Informing This Book

Searching through hundreds of pages of transcripts and 32 student portraits, we distilled a list of sixteen dominant conditions that support young people to get a job. Figure 1.1 shows a range of emergent themes based on the lived experiences of our informants. These themes, patterns or orientations provide us with a way of accessing what students are saying about a range of key pedagogical, cultural, economic and social conditions that need to be brought into existence to support their aspirations for education and work.

We believe that qualitative data of this kind can play a crucial role in improving the policy-making process because it helps us to better describe the dimensions of the problem under investigation, paying particular attention to the manner in which the participants define the issue. Furthermore, these insider accounts not only provide an awareness of the multiple realities of the education system but also a ‘validity check’ on the current obsession with statistical data (Rist, 1981). However, in developing this profile of conditions we are not suggesting that it will be a definitive template, nor will it provide a set of ‘quick-fix’ solutions to be applied to all schools and communities. Rather, the set of conditions identified alludes to the major elements of whole-school and community policies and practices that underpin any serious engagement with career aspirations, identity formation and education. Each of these conditions will be addressed in the chapters to follow.

Besides these conditions, we also want to say something about the assumptions informing the major arguments being mounted in this book. For purposes of clarity we want to identify these assumptions upfront because they underpin the way in which we interact with the data and interpret the theory. In the tradition of critical inquiry, we do not pretend to take a neutral, impartial or atheoretical position in these matters. As Horton and Freire (1991) argue, researchers ‘must know in favour of whom and in favour of what he or she wants. That means to know against whom and against what we are working as educators’ (p. 100). Howard Zinn (2002), the American revisionist historian, explains exactly why this kind of research is necessary at this moment: ‘events are already moving in certain deadly directions, and to be neutral means to accept that’ (p. 100).

Consequently, our research approach is unashamedly political in the sense that it is informed by a set of key approaches which we can summarise as follows:

- conceptualising young people’s lives in relationship to wider economic, political and social conditions (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2006, p. xvi);
- speaking back to the dominant neoliberal discourses shaping young people’s lives (Smyth, 2010);
- ceasing to blame young people for the problems of the economy, especially unemployment;
- challenging deficits, pathologies and stereotypes that serve to demean those most marginalised and excluded from society (Valencia, 2010);
- interrupting the artificial division between ‘academic’ and ‘non-academic’ students (Oakes & Saunders, 2008);

- challenging the myth that it is acceptable for large numbers of young people to ‘work with their hands *not* their minds’ (Kincheloe, 1999, p. 139);
- interrupting the myths surrounding the notions of meritocracy, intelligence, ability, equal opportunity and aspirations (Harris, 1982);
- ‘remaking the link’ between education and social class (Smyth & Wrigley, 2013, p. 11);
- recognising that young people are agents of change, not simply passive objects (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2006, p. xviii);
- building a ‘different kind of politics’ with a range of community groups to guarantee a smooth school-to-work transition (Boyte & Gust, 2003); and
- generating more well-paid, secure and meaningful jobs for young people
- creating socially just alternatives to support all young people, not only the privileged few (Wrigley, 2006; Smyth, Down & McInerney, 2014).

These approaches guide our writing both methodologically and theoretically. We attempt to use these ideas in the tradition of what Lather (1986) describes as ‘dialectical theory-building’ whereby ‘data constructed in context are used to clarify and reconstruct theory’ (Smyth & Hattam, 2004, p. 28). In Lather’s (1986) words, building empirically grounded theory requires ‘a reciprocal relationship between data and theory’ (p. 267). This means that theory ‘grows out of context-embedded data, not in a way that automatically reflects a priori theory, but in a way that keeps preconceptions from distorting the logic of evidence’ (p. 267).

## 1.6 The Broader Neoliberal Landscape

At the time of interviewing our informants (2011–2014), we collated an extensive list of local newspaper headlines highlighting the broader neoliberal landscape in which our research was located. A cursory glance at these headlines is a stark reminder of the harsh reality these young people face in an increasingly volatile and precarious labour market compounded by the Global Financial Crisis of 2008 and the pursuit of free-market policies. Whilst these headlines reflect particular local conditions, the themes are applicable to most Western economies. By way of example:

- ‘AMWU [Australian Manufacturing Workers Union] attacks Chevron’s plan to employ foreign welders’ (*The Australian*, 7 August 2014)
- ‘Toughing it out in Rockingham – WA’s unemployment youth capital’ (*Sunday Times*, 25 May 2014)
- ‘Youth unemployed triple since GFC’ (*The Age*, 14 April 2014)
- ‘Youth unemployed need tough love, says Tony Abbott’ (*The Australian*, 17 April 2014)
- ‘Denying help to young jobseekers would be harsh’ (*The Australian*, 15 May 2014)
- ‘More than 100,000 young unemployed to go without benefits’ (*The Age*, 21 May 2014)

- ‘Apprentice fall-off fuels skills fears’ (*The Western Australian*, 30 May 2014)
- ‘30 per cent of university graduates to be out of work after finishing degree’ (*The Age*, 4 June 2014)
- ‘Jobseekers must change to find work’ (*The Weekend Australian*, 31 May–1 June 2014)
- ‘Decline in jobless as people give up looking for work’ (*The Australian*, 7 September 2012)
- ‘Job fears for kids at poorer schools’ (*The Australian*, 2 October 2012)
- ‘Where are the boom jobs?’ (*Sound Telegraph*, 20 June 2012)
- ‘Drug slur aimed at jobless’ (*Sound Telegraph*, 6 June 2012)
- ‘Tradie shortfall to worsen’ (*The West Australian*, 26 March 2012)
- ‘Young jobseekers missing out in boom’ (*The West Australian*, 30 January 2012).

Headlines such as these illustrate the profoundly damaging impact that the ‘globalisation of capitalism’ (McLaren & Farahmandpur, 2005, p. 39) and associated neoliberal policies are having on education and the ways in which young people’s identities and subjectivities are being formed. In this context, Bauman (2005) contends that the main ‘exhortations/conjurations’ of ‘get to work’ and ‘get people to work’ are seen as means of simultaneously remedying ‘personal troubles and shared social ills’ (pp. 16–17). His argument, especially as it relates to young people, is that work is ‘simultaneously the pivot of individual life, social order and survival capacity (“systematic reproduction”) of society as a whole’ (p. 17).

For these reasons, we want to allude to the broader neoliberal landscape in which the school-to-work transition is being framed. To begin, Pauline Lipman (2011) provides a helpful definition of neoliberalism that is worth quoting at some length:

Put simply, neoliberalism is an ensemble of economic and social policies, forms of governance, and discourses and ideologies that promote individual self-interests, unrestricted flows of capital, deep reductions in the cost of labor, and sharp retrenchment of the public sphere. Neoliberals champion privatization of social goods and withdrawal of government provision for social welfare on the premise that competitive markets are more effective and efficient. Neoliberalism is not just out there as a set of policies and explicit ideologies. It has developed as a new social imaginary, a common sense about how we think about society and our place in it (p. 6).

Lipman (2004) goes on to describe the implications of the neoliberal project for education:

[The neoliberal project] has succeeded in redefining education as job preparation, learning as standardized skills and information, educational quality as measurable by test scores, and teaching as the technical delivery of that which is centrally mandated and tested. By defining the problem of education as standards and accountability they have made simply irrelevant any talk about humanity, difference, democracy, culture, thinking, personal meaning, ethical deliberation, intellectual rigor, social responsibility, and joy in education. Challenging the dominant discourse and posing alternative frameworks are strategic aspects of reversing the present direction (p. 181).

A central argument in this book is that what is happening to young lives cannot be divorced from these broader contextual developments. Thus, we draw on what Côté (2014) calls a ‘political-economy-of-youth’ approach to school-to-work tran-

sitions, one capable of explaining how: ‘workplace proletarianisation and exploitation are imposed on young people as a cohort in certain ways’; ‘neoliberal capitalist economies create conditions that on average delay the ability of younger people to earn a living wage’; and ‘neoliberal conditions have produced employment conditions that need to be rectified, rather than accepted as a “new normal” to which recent generations have happily and successfully adapted’ (p. 538; see also Sukariah & Tannock, 2015).

Putting it bluntly, what we are witnessing, according to Sasson (2014), is ‘the new logics of expulsion’, whereby increasing numbers of ‘people, enterprises, and places’ are being ‘expelled from the core social and economic orders of our times’ (p. 1). Similarly, Bauman (2004) invokes the language of ‘wasted lives’ to describe the ways in which neoliberalism casts aside those people deemed to be ‘excessive’, ‘redundant’, ‘out of place’, ‘unfit’ or ‘undesirable’ (p. 5). Elsewhere, he (2011) describes these causalities as ‘collateral damage’ because they are ‘dismissed as not important enough to justify the costs of prevention’ (p. 5). In the same vein, Evans and Giroux (2015) adopt the term disability rather than waste not because they disagree with Bauman’s argument but to avoid ‘absolving regimes of power of intentionality’ (p. 48). In their words,

the verb *to dispose* [moves] ... us beyond the unavoidable production of excess waste to take into account the activity (who and what is being disposed), the experience (the subjective stakes), and the state of relations (the machinery of disability) that permit particular forms of wastefulness (p. 48, original emphasis).

In this context, the role and function of education is undergoing dramatic changes as schools are increasingly aligned to the needs of the economy (see Chap. 3). In the Australian context, and most Western countries, this neoliberalising project has been underway since the mid-1970s with a plethora of reports laying the groundwork for a greater emphasis in schools on vocational education, careers guidance, work experience programs, links with technical and further education (TAFE), school and industry partnerships, and curriculum differentiation. For example, the Commonwealth Schools Commission report *In the national interest* (1987) reflected these wider concerns and identified three main ways in which schools might achieve a tighter correspondence between schooling and the economy: first, through the knowledge, skills and attitudes which education develops and industry utilises; second, through the qualifications or credentials that education gives students and which employers use as the basis for selection; and finally, through the labour market itself (pp. 4–5; see also Bowles & Gintis, 1976).

What we have then is ‘a policy convergence’ around a dominant version of vocationalism in schools (mainly public high schools) characterised by: (i) ‘VET in Schools’ programs (any vocational course/subject/module or competency provided through schools that complies with the National Training Framework); and (ii) School-Based New Apprenticeships (requiring a contract of training with an employer and attendance at school on either a part-time or full-time basis) (Malley & Keating, 2000, p. 643). Consequently, schools and what goes on inside them are largely seen through the prism of a narrowly conceived and instrumentalist version

of competency-based vocational education and training. Locally, the *South West Corridor workplace report, 2009–2014* (South West Group, 2009), which encompasses Bountiful Bay, actively promotes VET in Schools programs to allow secondary school students to undertake nationally recognised training courses while attending high school. These training courses are ‘designed to reflect employers’ needs and provide pathways to employment and further training, including apprenticeships’ (p. 57). The report notes that since 2006 there has been a significant increase in the number of students enrolled in VET in Schools programs in Perth’s South-West Corridor and the numbers are highest in areas of relative economic disadvantage (p. 58).

We are in agreement with Apple (1998), however, when he expresses scepticism about ‘the overly romantic picture painted by the neoliberals who urge us to trust the market and to more closely connect schools to the “world of work”’ (p. 45). According to Dwyer and Wyn (2001), there ‘is a growing mismatch between the types of jobs available, the rhetoric of the highly skilled workforce and the future aspirations of young people’ (p. 54). Growing numbers of young people are now experiencing what McMurtry (2002) describes as the ‘dispossessing effects’ of ‘those extra-market prescriptions’ including ‘mass losses of secure jobs, systematic reduction of livelihood and pay, insecurity of employment, de-unionization, decline of benefits, deterioration of working conditions and unenforced safety-health standards, and the loss of social service and security benefits’ (p. 54; see also Down, 2009).

Nonetheless, Apple (1998) argues that the pressure to vocationalise ‘could not have grown as rapidly if it was only an imposition on schools by economically powerful forces’ (p. 349; see Chap. 4). In his words, the push to vocationalise is also the result of

more broad based worries and demands from local working class communities, ... who have historically been mistrustful of an education that seems consistently to privilege those with economic and cultural capital at the expense of working-class children and children of color (p. 349).

Apple (1998) rightly believes that the demand to vocationalise is based on parents’ fears and concerns for their children’s future as well as a desire to see some economic benefits from education (p. 349). We shall see how some of these ideas unfold as we explore the lives of our informants in the following chapters.

## 1.7 Organisation of the Book

The remainder of the book is organised around eight chapters.

### *Chapter 2: Doing Critical Ethnography*

This chapter describes in greater detail the research methodology underpinning the research on which this book is based. Drawing on the tradition of critical ethnography, it advocates a form of research that acknowledges and respects the voices of young people and what they have to say about their lives and imagined futures.

Based on these narrative portraits the book seeks to create a new set of possibilities based on the needs, interests, dreams and aspirations of young people themselves. In this chapter we defend the importance of:

- listening to student voices
- gathering stories and making sense
- representing students' lives through portraiture
- speaking back to policy and practice.

### *Chapter 3: Growing Up in Neoliberal Times*

This chapter locates the lives of young people in the context of neoliberalism and the fall-out for young people in terms of education, employment and careers. A central argument is that individual biographies can only be properly comprehended in the context of the profoundly damaging impact of neoliberal policies: privatisation, deregulation, competition, choice, individualism and commodification. The chapter examines how these wider structural forces are played out in the lives of the participants around three main themes:

- understanding the complexity of the labour market
- going beyond menial, piece-rate and poorly paid jobs
- moving beyond the self-fulfilling prophecy of streaming.

### *Chapter 4: Rethinking Class and Deficit Thinking*

This chapter examines the relationship between class, schooling and jobs. We seek to unpack the demeaning and humiliating practices associated with deficit thinking based on class, gender and race. As a counter, we advocate a more powerful kind of learning generated by a strengths and capabilities approach (Sen, 1992). In pursuing this agenda, the chapter is organised around three main themes:

- confronting class and gender stereotypes
- building cultural capital
- developing skills, abilities and capabilities.

### *Chapter 5: Transitioning to Adulthood*

In this chapter we argue that mechanical ways of 'doing' school are not working for large numbers of young people nor are they preparing them for the adult world (Pope, 2001). The evidence is damning in terms of the escalating number of students dropping out of school and/or failing to negotiate a smooth transition to adulthood. We argue that schools are closed institutions and generally ineffective in preparing young people to be 'capable of exercising choice, making decisions and navigating their own learning from a very young age' (Wyn, 2009b, p. 55). In response, in this chapter we endeavour to map a number of alternative pedagogical possibilities to support young people in making a smooth transition to the adult world by:

- preparing students for life after school
- navigating and reading the world.



### *Chapter 6: Reinvigorating Pedagogy*

Throughout this research we heard time and time again that schooling was an alienating experience for many students. Haberman (1991) believes that ‘the pedagogy of poverty’, by which he means instructional techniques based on transmission models of teaching and learning (e.g., ‘chalk and talk’, ‘question and answer’ and ‘rote memorisation’), is to blame. This chapter sets out to advance an alternative vision of teaching based on Freire’s (1998) notion of a ‘pedagogy of hope’ that seeks to cultivate a more optimistic and humane form of collaborative and critically engaged learning that gives students a greater say over what and how they learn and with whom. In this chapter, we describe some ways in which schools might go about the task of reinvigorating pedagogy based on the needs and interests of students. From the point of view of students this involves:

- creating hospitable places for learning
- developing interests and passions
- engaging with big ideas.

### *Chapter 7: Giving All Students a Fair Go*

This chapter examines how schools might operate in ways that benefit the least advantaged (Connell, 1993). Drawing on the idea of ‘the socially just school’ (Smyth et al., 2014) the chapter considers how educational policies and practices might be reframed around an ethic of trust, respect and care for all students. This involves a commitment to:

- attending to lost, confused and meandering students
- including students with disabilities.

### *Chapter 8: Understanding Young Lives*

This chapter acknowledges the unequal starting points many young people have to overcome in their lives. It tackles the problem of complexity as it relates to financial, physical and mental health issues. Students experiencing adverse personal and family circumstances, through no fault of their own, face additional challenges as they endeavour to cope with the demands of abstract academic schoolwork. These students are often working part-time to support their families, assisting parents and siblings with drug and alcohol problems, and/or coping with personal life stresses. This chapter examines how schools can best support these students in a safe and nurturing environment by:

- working with the complexities of young lives
- acknowledging the wider context of young lives.

### *Chapter 9: Conclusion*

This final chapter draws together the key threads of the book while providing a foundation for action to support young people to get a job. Drawing on the individual biographies of participants, we endeavour to create a set of ideas and strategies to interrupt the status quo and create alternative possibilities. We advocate the idea of thoughtfulness through critical reflection to mobilise local action. The focus is on creating a radically different set of policies and practices. The chapter brings a

strong element of hope and possibility by raising awareness, mobilising communities, generating local knowledge and taking action. To this end the chapter will set about the task of identifying key themes, questions and actions.

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## Chapter 2

# Doing Critical Ethnography

### 2.1 Introduction

In this chapter, we explore the intellectual and creative processes involved in ‘doing’ critical ethnography. We endeavour to step back and reflect on the struggles, contradictions and dilemmas we encountered as we tried to make sense of what is happening in the lives of our young participants. In other words, we attempt to unpack what is involved – theoretically, methodologically and practically – in undertaking a critical ethnography of the kind we advocate in this book. As critical ethnographers, we openly position ourselves as advocates for the least powerful and most marginalised young people in society (Smyth & McInerney, 2013). We deliberately ask more probing kinds of questions capable of unsettling some deeply entrenched assumptions and practices underpinning the existing social order. Our intent is to make everyday categories, assumptions and practices problematic for the purpose of revealing unequal power relations, whether in schooling or the economy, whilst advancing socially just alternatives.

In Chap. 1, we explained how critical ethnography is concerned with the ethical responsibility of addressing processes of unfairness or injustice, no matter where it occurs. We referred to Madison’s (2005) definition of critical ethnography which takes us ‘beneath surface appearances, disrupts the status quo, and unsettles both neutrality and taken-for-granted assumptions by bringing to light underlying and obscure operations of power and control’ (p. 5). Taking this a step further, Levison (2001) draws our attention to the enacted and reflexive dimension of critical ethnography, a key focus of this chapter. In his words, critical ethnography is

a research method *informed* by a critical theory of some sort, *committed* to an analysis of domination and the search for an alternative project of social justice, and *enacted* through a constantly reflexive approach to the practice of gathering data and generating knowledge. (p. xvi, original emphasis)

Pursuing this reflexive turn, we are drawn to Alvesson and Skoldberg’s (2009) notion of ‘richness in points’, which refers ‘to research approaches capable of going

beyond what the empirical material (preliminary, first-order interpretations) is able to say' (p. 307) and instead, focus on the 'novelty value' of empirical data for the purpose of generating new insights and problematising established ways of thinking (p. 305). Alvesson and Skoldberg (2009) believe this kind of interpretative, creative process involves interrupting everyday explanations of how things are (common sense) and then saying something 'new or original' about the phenomenon under investigation (p. 306). In their words, 'point-rich research stirs up trouble' (p. 307) by moving between two kinds of reflexivity, first, what they call D-reflexivity (deconstruction, defensive, destabilising), which refers to the 'tearing down' or 'pointing to the weaknesses of the existing text and truth claims'; and second, R-reflexivity (reconstruction, re-presentation), which involves 'developing something new or different, where the anxieties of offering positive knowledge do not hold the researcher back' (p. 313). In the case of R-reflexivity, the emphasis is on creating 'alternative descriptions, interpretations, results, vocabularies, voices and points of departure ... [in order] to open up new avenues, paths and lines of interpretations to produce "better" research ethically, politically, empirically and theoretically' (p. 313).

At the outset, then, we want to identify a number of key principles, values and strategies underpinning our work. First, we believe qualitative data of the kind described in this book is far more useful than statistical information gleaned from labour force surveys and the like because it allows us to access the truly precarious nature of young peoples' lives (Smith, 2000). In the words of MacDonald (2009), qualitative evidence provides both a 'geography as well as a social demography' (p. 174) capable of illuminating the processes of schooling and the reproduction of social inequalities (Smith, 2000, p. 305).

Second, we consciously move outside of the quaint but damaging view that it is possible to see the world in detached, uncontaminated and value-free ways. Rather, we choose to work alongside young people to better understand the obstacles, barriers and interferences they face in getting a job and, based on their stories, identify the kinds of policies and practices that need to be brought into existence to enhance their life chances.

Third, we seek to provide dialogic spaces to engage interested stakeholders including classroom teachers, school leaders and representatives from industry, non-government agencies, local government and training providers in the process of investigating young peoples' stories in ways that would not normally occur. We have done this by facilitating workshops based on the principles of collaboration, mutual inquiry and critical self-reflection using young people's stories as provocations (Brookfield, 1995; Freire, 2000/1968).

Finally, we attempt to maintain a balance between confidentiality and doing no harm to participants and, at the same time, facilitating honest, robust and unsettling conversations. This is no easy feat! As Helen Garner (1996) explains, we need to find the space in between because 'as a non-fiction writer you have, as well, an implicit contract with your material and with the people you are writing about: you

have to figure out an honourable balance between tact and honesty' (p. 8). Clair (2003) suggests that we relish these complexities and ironies and recognise that ethnography is broader than the field work because we can also capture 'the expression of history, politics, culture, and the essence of being' (p. 19).

Against this backdrop, we want to explain how we actually conducted the research informing this book. As long-time research collaborators, Smyth, Down, McInerney, and Hattam (2014) have written extensively about the 'doing' of critical ethnography. On the back sleeve of their book *Doing critical educational research: A conversation with the research of John Smyth* they identify some key elements of this work including: (i) actively listening to the lives of teachers and students; (ii) taking an advocacy position with informants; (iii) displaying a commitment to praxis; (iv) celebrating local responses to global issues; and (v) interrupting 'bad' theory and supplanting it with more democratic alternatives.

Often there is a tendency amongst researchers to assume that you intuitively 'know' how this kind of critical methodology works *with* and *for* many young people. Hence our curiosity to return to these research processes in order to dig deeper and reveal something more about the workings of critical inquiry. For instance, during the production of this book we have shared ideas, engaged in robust theoretical and methodological discussions, drafted documents, drawings and musings, and participated in reading, writing and analysis workshops. These processes have involved both face-to-face and virtual meetings over the past two years. There is a musical term, 'fugue', that the writer Gabrielle Carey (2015) describes as 'the not so simple act of (collaborative) reading' (p. 138). We find this metaphor helpful in thinking through our own collaboration because voices and meanings are always interwoven simultaneously not only with each other, but also with those of our participants.

In this chapter, we want to capture the essence of 'doing' critical ethnography based on our own experience. It is our attempt to acknowledge the complex lives of young people, no matter how partial or incomplete, so that we might better understand their experience, dreams, desires and aspirations for the future. Along the way, we also want to create an audit trail of the processes involved for the benefit of apprentice ethnographers who may be interested in this level of detail (Lave, 2011). In other words, we want to say something about the 'nuts and bolts' of critical ethnography as we endeavour, in the words of Gibson (2011), 'to move from a vernacular commonsense problematic to a relational one, from one to another set of assumptions about the world and how we know it, and to different ways of exploring and investigating participation in social life' (p. 3). To this end, we have organised this chapter around the following themes:

- listening to student voices, and why it matters
- gathering stories and making sense
- representing students' lives through portraiture
- speaking back to policy and practice.



## 2.2 Listening to Student Voices, and Why It Matters

Barley and Russell (2016) explain that it is only through ‘engagement’ with the participants in ethnographic research that we can access the voices of young people. By listening deeply and respectfully to what young people have to say we can begin to appreciate what is going on in their lives and ascertain what works best for them in terms of school-to-work transitions. The irony is that students themselves are seldom asked about these things (Baroutsis, McGregor, & Mills, 2016). As Pasco (2000) explains it, we urgently need research approaches that allow us to ‘see and hear about educational structures and practices from the perspectives of those for whom these events were designed’ (p. 31). We believe research conducted from the ‘tellers’ perspective’ (Cortazzi, 2005, p. 385) is more likely to reveal social reality because it is based on lived experience. In the process, young people need to feel safe, they need to feel valued, and they need to establish trust and connection to others, both peers and significant other adults and mentors in their lives.

Furthermore, as Foley (2002) points out, ethnographic stories have the capacity to ‘change minds and hearts’ (p. 383), thus presenting a powerful counter-narrative to dominant deficit and pathologising discourses about young people. In this section, we want to expand on the notion of ‘student voice’ or ‘voiced research’ and why it matters in these uncertain times (Smyth & Hattam, 2001). But first, by way of definition, Shannon writes, ‘Voice is the tool by which we make ourselves known, name our experience, and participate in decisions that affect our lives’ (Shannon, 1993, p. 91, quoted in Nagle, 2001, p. 10).

Therefore, if we want to treat students as real people rather than objects to be manipulated by powerful business and institutional interests, then we need to find ways of listening to students’ voices and integrating their ‘successes, failures, routines, habits, rituals, novelties, thrills, threats, violations, gratifications, and frustrations into a coherent and evolving interpretation’ (Nakkula, 2003, p. 7). Only then can we begin to appreciate who they are and how their lives have been shaped. These everyday experiences of family, friends and schools carry significant weight in the ongoing cultural processes of identity formation (Nakkula, 2003, p. 15).

Unlike statistical data abstracted from survey instruments and testing apparatuses, voiced research provides young people with an opportunity to express themselves through storytelling (Shacklock, Smyth, & Wilson, 1998). As researchers, we find the idea of ‘speaking with rather than speaking for’ young people especially useful (Fielding, 2004, p. 305). As well, it helps us to see research as a two-way encounter between the researcher and researched. As Cook-Sather (2007) explains, researchers who engage in representing students’ experiences of school ‘not only translate what they gather but are also translated by it’ (p. 829).

Putting it another way, student voice research is interested in the formation of radical democratic relationships in education (Fielding & Moss, 2011) and, more broadly, social transformation (Fielding & Rudduck, 2002). Our argument is that if we want to truly understand the phenomenon of school-to-work transitions then it is crucial that we provide spaces for young people to be a part of the process (Kellock,

2007, p. 11). Of course, this kind of engaged research presents some unique challenges, especially in a climate dominated by a ‘re-emergent scientism’ in which pseudo-scientific studies appear to be the new gold standard (Denzin, Lincoln, & Giardina, 2006). In this context, Fielding and Moss (2011) provide a helpful set of guidelines to support what they describe as a ‘pedagogy of listening’, among them:

- ‘a genuine openness ... [and] a reciprocity that is interested and attentive’
- ‘a pattern of continuing dialogue in which understandings and meanings are always open to new perspectives and interpretations’
- ‘a willingness to be surprised, to welcome the unanticipated ... and deal with difference in ways that resist the silencing, homogenising tendencies of position and power’
- ‘a pervasive rather than a compartmentalised approach, in which all young people in the school have many opportunities during the day for the kinds of encounters ... mentioned above’
- being ‘concerned about getting things done, about tackling real issues of current concern’ (pp. 79–80).

To sum up, what we need, then, are more accomplished ways of recognising and harnessing young people’s capabilities and insights about complex social and educational matters. This can only be achieved by creating spaces where young people have opportunities to:

- talk about the things that enable and constrain their learning and aspirations;
- discuss what really matters to them in school and life;
- feel respected, trusted and valued for who they are;
- be heard and taken seriously;
- feel that they matter and belong; and
- ‘define their own autonomy, spheres of agency and types of action’ (Arnot & Swartz, 2012, p. 5; see also Rudduck & Flutter, 2004).

As Arnot and Swartz (2012) argue, ‘the observations of, and insights about, young people’s educational experiences and citizenship practice indicate the need to consider critically and in depth the political not just the economic role and impact of formal schooling’ (p. 3).

## 2.3 Gathering Stories and Making Sense

### 2.3.1 *Background to the Research*

One of the most serious issues confronting schools, communities and society in Australia is how to ensure young people, especially those from disadvantaged circumstances, have the skills and capabilities to make a smooth transition to a productive and rewarding career. The research evidence informing this book was gathered

under the umbrella of an Australian Research Council (ARC) Linkage Project entitled '*Getting a job*': *Identity formation and schooling in communities at disadvantage*. The aim was to investigate how young people make sense of 'getting a job' and, on the basis of their experience, identify the educational policy and practice context that needs to be created and more widely sustained to assist their career aspirations and life chances.

The Bountiful Bay region<sup>1</sup> in which this research took place is on the fringe of a large metropolitan city in Western Australia. It has a diverse industrial base including chemicals, petroleum, agricultural exports and manufacturing. As mentioned in Chap. 1, the region has significant levels of social, economic and educational disadvantage in the midst of pockets of wealth and prosperity. The figures are well rehearsed and stand as tangible testimony of a relationship between a specific set of regional conditions and how these are played out in terms of 'getting a job'. In this context, the research was both timely and relevant as stakeholders grappled with the fall-out from the Global Financial Crisis, rising youth unemployment and declining school retention and participation rates.

The research involved a diverse range of partners including: seven public high schools and two independent/private religious schools (one Catholic and the other Uniting Church); Bountiful Bay Industries Education Partnership – a partnership between the above schools and industry; The Link – a job training provider; Contender Institute of Technology – a Technical and Further Education College; City of Bountiful Bay and Town of Kwella – two local government authorities; Kwella Industries Council – a consortium of key industries; South West Group – an alliance of local government authorities; and the Western Australian Department of Education. The project was overseen by the administration of two universities, one in Perth, Western Australia and the other in regional Victoria.

In recruiting participants, we attempted to involve a wide cross-section of students from diverse backgrounds and circumstances. These included age, year level (10–12), gender, ethnicity, disability, career aspirations and programs of study to ensure a range of perspectives and experiences would be canvassed. The process of obtaining relevant ethics and contractual approval from such a large number of partner organisations was very time consuming and complicated. We also required approval from two different education systems (Catholic Education Office and Western Australian Department of Education), individual schools, parents/guardians and students. Letters were sent to the principals of participating schools seeking support and informing them of the field-work procedures. They were then asked to identify a staff member willing to liaise with the project, preferably someone involved in the coordination of vocational programs and prepared to commit time to the project, who had evidence of significant interest in the theme of 'getting a job', and who was also prepared to participate in a series of workshops to provide feedback on draft versions of student narratives and emergent thematic modules.

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<sup>1</sup>All city names, places and schools have a pseudonym to protect the privacy of participants and partners.

The next step was to ask each school to identify three students who would be willing to participate in an interview with us over the duration of the project (18 months). There would be three interviews of approximately one hour each. Advice was provided to the staff on the criteria for student selection and key documents and other relevant information relating to the school's vocational and academic programs were gathered. Finally, a draft schedule of interviews with students was sent in advance of the research team's arrival. Meanwhile, we commenced a literature review and established a data base for all 32 participants. We also confirmed a set of questions to guide the project, among them:

- How do young people's aspirations for the future mirror the realities of the global labour market?
- What are the social and economic conditions that limit opportunities for young people?
- How can public institutions and communities work creatively with young people to improve the quality of life for youth?
- What types of work do young people find desirable and undesirable? Why?
- What kinds of worker identities are valued or devalued by employers?
- What knowledge, skills and values are of most worth and for whom?
- To what extent do the school, its community and the wider educational system support young people in the process of becoming smart workers?
- What kind of education and training is desirable in these new times?
- How can schools, governments and communities work together to create sustainable and rewarding employment futures for all young people?

During this phase of the research, we reminded all stakeholders that student voice was the linchpin of our work. For a few school principals, this idea seemed rather peculiar as evidenced by the following questions: 'what if they don't like school?' 'how can they be objective?' and 'what if they say something bad about the school?' Despite some of these reservations from school principals, we persisted with the idea that students have something worthwhile to say, and our task was to listen and then map, describe and explain the educational policy and practice contexts that young people require as they navigate their way from school to work. From the outset, the emphasis was on gathering student stories as the cornerstone for the 'production of knowledge' capable of illuminating what it means to be a young person growing up in neoliberal times (Nairn, Higgins, & Sligo, 2012, p. 291; see also Chap. 3).

### 2.3.2 *Ethnographic Fieldwork: The Interview Process*

In conducting this research, we adopted a three-phase interview process: an *aspirational*, a *follow-up*, and a *life event and outcomes phase* (Down & Smyth, 2012, pp. 211–212). All three phases of interviews used what Smyth, Angus, Down, and McInerney (2006) describe as 'synchronous transcription' whereby a highly skilled typist in situ with a laptop computer keys in what they hear spoken, much like a

Hansard parliamentary reporter. A digital recorder was also used and downloaded at the end of the fieldwork session. The transcript was then cross-checked for accuracy and annotated notes and reflections added. This proved to be a very efficient method of data collection, one the research team has used now for over a decade (Smyth, Angus, et al., 2006). Let us now consider each of these phases in a little more detail.

*An Aspirational Interview Phase* The purpose of the first interview was to start a conversation by ‘getting to know each other’. We wanted to find out about the participants’ experiences of schooling and how they were thinking about careers and employment and the influence of their family, teachers and friends. We wanted to give them the space to feel comfortable about sharing their stories as key informants in generating knowledge. Two key questions animated the first round of interviews in August 2011:

- How do young people themselves talk about getting a job?
- How do young people find the spaces and resources with which to reinvent their identities as future workers and citizens?

In searching for answers, we asked our participants the following kinds of questions:

- Can you tell us something about yourself (age, year level, interests, subjects studied)?
- What keeps you at school/TAFE/The Link?
- What do you hope to do when you leave? When do you think that will be?
- Do you feel confident about getting the job you want?
- What would help you to get a job and what gets in the way of getting a job?
- Do you have a part-time job? Do you enjoy it?
- What about your family and home? Will that help you to get a job?
- What kind of future do you see for yourself?
- If you were asked to provide three pieces of advice to your school/TAFE/The Link about supporting young people to get a job what would you say?

This aspirational interview phase was focused on familiarising ourselves with our participants as well as seeing how they were navigating their way through schooling. We were interested in hearing about the kinds of resources they were drawing on in making decisions. Burgess (1988) refers to this approach as ‘purposeful conversations’ because it goes beyond a static, defined or detached view of participants to facilitate the co-construction of meaning and intent (p. 138).

This interview data was then stored in digital format and transcribed. During November and December 2011, the research team created the beginnings of a narrative portrait for each student. The project then employed a research assistant to work with the Chief Researchers as a project manager and a Postdoctoral Fellow who was employed for a 12-month period during 2012 to work on the literature review and to help plan a series of ‘dialogues’ (writing workshops) with our industry partners. An explanation of the content, nature and outcomes of these dialogues is elaborated in Sect. 3.3.

*A Following-Up Developments Interview Phase* This second round of interviews conducted in March 2012 allowed us to pick up on the initial conversation in light of the experiences the students had already identified. These themes and issues provided a segue into the next phase in which we pursued questions to help us identify any new events and factors impacting on their lives and decision making. Students often remarked on the novelty of someone, especially from universities, actually asking for their views, or taking an interest in their lives. Once these second-round interviews were complete we integrated the information into a more extensive and emergent narrative profile.

*A Life Events and Outcomes Interview* The third and final round of interviews was conducted exactly one year later in March 2013. In this final interview, we asked our participants to describe where they were at in terms of school and future career and employment prospects, and to reflect back on the course of their life events since we first met one and a half years ago. At this stage, we wanted to develop a sense of meaning from the participants' point of view based on 'the interstices and spaces of personal relationships' (Smyth, Angus et al., 2006, p. 130). Given some participants had left school and others had moved because of their precarious family situation, the task of maintaining contact was best achieved through the use of text messaging. This ongoing connection proved highly effective especially for those participants who were in the most vulnerable position.

Throughout the three interview phases we developed a summary table at the end of each round to ensure we had a clear and accurate record of our own reflections and notes. We documented various comments, reflections and events as the basis for developing participant portraits and the final set of conditions supporting young people in 'getting a job' (see Fig. 1.1; and Sect. 4 below).

### 2.3.3 *The Dialogues*

During this project, we endeavoured to engage our industry partners in the process of rethinking school-to-work transition through the use of portraits of young people. This was a deliberate philosophical and strategic decision, although not without its difficulties, given the large number of stakeholders and a host of competing interests which did not always align to our own thinking. Nonetheless, we felt it was important in terms of building community capacity (and thoughtfulness) around the persistent and protracted problem of youth unemployment in the region. The idea of engaging stakeholders in a series of writing workshops provided a platform for our young informants to be heard. We wanted these forums to be places open to new ways of seeing whereby key decision makers in the community could pause and reflect on major social problems in ways that would not normally occur. In addition, these workshops provided major stakeholders with an opportunity to give feedback on the student portraits and emergent themes. Three interactive

workshops were organised in between the more active phases of the interview process described above. Each of these workshops was designed with a theme and a particular focus of discussion.

- Workshop 1: *Youth transition to work and the place of student voice in research*
- Workshop 2: *Preparing young people for the future and the importance of macro, meso and micro analysis*
- Workshop 3: *Young people from disadvantaged communities in times of high youth unemployment/underemployment and job insecurity – conversations with the research team.*

At each workshop, narrative portraits and one-page provocations were developed and shared prior to the workshop. The third workshop was a mini-conference organised to table the emerging conditions supporting young people in getting a job. These conditions were based around a particular student portrait and relevant scholarly literature. The intent of these workshops was to develop a spirit of what Greene (2005) describes as a ‘possibility of wide-awaking’ whereby people begin to question the predictable and taken-for-granted everyday practices of neoliberal schooling (p. 80). Like Greene (1995), we wanted to reinsert ‘the faces and gestures of individuals, of actual living persons’ back into policy conversations (p. 11). The workshops were designed to challenge and shift the ways of seeing young people by introducing a more relational and socially critical perspective.

The outcomes of these workshops were rather mixed. Bringing together a diverse group of people from a host of different organisations and interests was always going to be a challenge both logistically and intellectually. Logistically, the difficulties involved individuals being able to stay the course especially those from schools where individuals had a range of roles and responsibilities which often precluded their regular attendance. School leaders were less visible, often devolving these kinds of events to other staff, usually deputy principals, heads of departments or careers counsellors. Indeed, schools are busy and complex institutions with a range of pressing day-to-day problems requiring urgent attention. Thus, finding the time for critical reflection was never going to be straightforward. Nonetheless, attendance at these workshops was always strong with a good spread of representatives from industry, local government, schools and training providers.

Intellectually, the workshop participants appreciated the emphasis on student portraits. Accessing portraits provided a rare opportunity to develop what Greene (2005) calls ‘new beginnings’ or a break from the status quo (p. 80). As participants listened to the narratives they felt a palpable connection to the lives of these young people. A range of emotions was evident including outrage, compassion, pragmatism, helplessness, defeatism and optimism. The capacity of individuals to respond to the emotional reality of students’ lives was encouraging for the research team as it opened up for conversation the connection between what Mills (1971/1959) describes as ‘personal troubles’ and ‘public issues’ (see Chap. 1). However, this approach was confronting for some participants who found it much easier to revert to the familiar and what they already knew about young people, employment and schooling. Therefore, it was hardly surprising that some individu-

als often jumped to solutions based on a set of preconceived views about young people, rather than listening deeply to what the portraits had to say. Such attitudes only served to reinforce traditional power relationships in which adults continued to speak 'about and for' young people within the constraints of existing discourses. Hence, there was a tendency by some (but not all) to recommend 'more of the same', although doing it more intensely (e.g., more careers counselling, more streaming, more skills training, more discipline, and so on), rather than thinking more expansively about what might be (Anderson & Herr, 2007). More optimistically though, there was another set of more thoughtful, compassionate and critical reactions by participants which were more attuned to the broader structural and institutional arrangements impacting on young people's lives, especially those 'living on the edge' (Smyth & Wrigley, 2013).

## 2.4 Representing Students' Lives Through Portraiture

Our presence in the world is not to adapt to it, but to work towards transforming it. (Farahmandpur, 2009, p. 113)

In this section, we examine the notion of portraiture in representing the lives of young people. Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997), pioneers of this approach to research and documentation in the social sciences, describe portraiture as combining

systematic, empirical description with aesthetic expression, blending art and science, humanistic sensibilities and scientific rigour. The portraits are designed to capture the richness, complexity, and dimensionality of human experience in social and cultural context, conveying the perspectives of the people who are negotiating those experiences. The portraits are shaped through dialogue between the portraitist and the subject, each one participating in the drawing of the image. The encounter between the two is rich with meaning and resonance and is crucial to the success and authenticity of the rendered piece (p. 3).

Drawing on Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis's (1997) insights we constructed a set of written portraits for each of our participants. After each interview, digital recordings were transcribed and together with *in situ* notes we composed a half-page portrait as a form of textual representation. These portraits comprised dominant themes, messages, ideas, issues, concerns and questions based on the lives of our participants, culminating in a rich set of 'raw data'. Working off this data we then proceeded to formulate a set of final conditions that support young people in getting a job. During this process, each portrait was tagged with a working caption or heading to encapsulate a dominant theme underpinning that portrait. At first glance, this kind of analytical process might appear to be relatively straightforward; however, as we continually discover, it is a far more challenging, complex and nuanced task than is often acknowledged in the literature. As Lawrence-Lightfoot (2005) argues, portraiture is a very sophisticated, demanding and highly skilled 'method of documentation, analysis, and narrative development' (p. 3).



By way of example, after an initial interview with Richard, one of our participants, we constructed the following portrait:

### **Portrait #15: Richard**

#### **‘I want to become a mechanical fitter’**

Although Richard could have chosen an Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR) pathway in Year 10 he elected to do a vocationally oriented course leading to TAFE studies and hopefully an apprenticeship in engineering. For Richard, the most important function of school is job preparation. He sees no particular merit in completing Year 12 just for the sake of it. When it comes to securing an apprenticeship, it is all about timing and taking advantage of opportunities as they arise. Richard’s family has a trades background and the fallback position for him is to work with his father on his roofing business. (This portrait was developed from a transcript of an interview with Richard conducted by R1 and transcribed in situ by R5 on 2 August 2011.)

*I want to become a mechanical fitter. Last year in our first work experience block I went out to the power station and worked with them and I enjoyed that sort of work. I would like to get an apprenticeship in this field either now or after Year 12. It didn’t really cross my mind before I got into this pathway. I tried this trade and liked it and now am ringing up companies. My dad is a roofer and has his own business. During the holidays I go to help him and I also do part-time work at a \$2 shop. This work has nothing to do with the trade that I want to do. It just keeps me busy. Finishing my schooling and my TAFE certificates should help me get a job. My family thinks that getting a trade is a good idea but they haven’t pushed it on me. It’s what I’ve gone on and done myself. I’ll be following my grandfather who was in the trades. I’m not sure how hard it’s going to be to get a job. I’ve been for an aptitude test and I’ve been applying where I can. I’ve done some interviews. I think the experience I’ve had in the job should help me. I won’t need as much supervision so I’ll be able to get to work straight away. I’ve been a school leader. I was head boy at Kwella College, voted by my peers. They trust me. I’ve been at Kwella College since Year 8. I have been very lucky and school has been very helpful. The TAFE course has also been very good. Gaining the certificates means that I’m more qualified than the other guys.*

*The ATAR course was a possibility for me. In Year 10 I really enjoyed science and if I didn’t get into this program I would have gone the academic stream. I know it might seem a shame that I could leave before the end of Year 12 but I’ve got all the certificates that I need. Staying on is not going to add anything to what I want to do. I got A’s and B’s for all my subjects. Now all the companies release their apprenticeships at the beginning of the new financial year so looking for an apprenticeship in December is no good. My dad said I could always fall back on the roofing business as a safety net but it’s not what I want to do for the rest of my life. But if that happened would go back to TAFE and do more certificates like forklift driving and heights certificate.*

As Cook-Sather (2013) points out, in the process of developing portraits we endeavour to give primacy to what students themselves have to say; it is their own words that set the tone. Whilst we do not deny having our own points of view, they are nevertheless situated in relation to students’ own ‘frames of reference’ (p. 359).

Cook-Sather (2013) describes this process as 'translation' because it 're-renders what already exists, as opposed to creating something entirely new' (p. 360). Like Cook-Sather (2013), we believe this form of representation can offer a powerful explanatory framework because it allows us to interrogate contemporary social problems from the point of view of those most marginalised and affected by current market-driven forces.

Drawing on these opening portraits we then included a set of reflections or commentary on things of theoretical and pedagogical interest to the research team. For example, in the following reflection we pick up on the effects of streaming young people far too early:

*Vocational education: Cutting off education/career pathways:* Public schools in the region attach a lot of emphasis to VET. But there are some major long-term employment and higher education problems for young people: (a) TAFE certificates (especially those at levels 1 and 2) lack rigour and status; (b) the exclusive focus on employability skills comes at the cost of social and academic learning. What do young people have to say about the value or otherwise of their education? Kids intuitively understand that education has some currency, especially when it comes to getting a decent job. This is often reinforced by the experience of part-time work in the fast food and retail area. Jackie, for example, told us she didn't want to finish up in a fish and chip shop all her life. What schools don't seem to understand is that many VET courses have poor employment outcomes. (Reflections #24: Jacki)

These anecdotal notes were crafted whilst interviewing and analysing what the students were telling us. They became part of the 'raw data' for further analysis and eventually the final portrait. In these textual representations, we attempted to recognise the primacy of the participant's 'own feelings, experiences, and history as a vehicle in understanding the research participant' (Krumer-Nevo & Sidi, 2012, p. 299).

In addition to these portraits, we maintained an ongoing dialogue about what we might usefully glean from the portraits. This reflexive approach, as suggested earlier in the chapter, provided clues for new lines of inquiry. This involved pursuing what Alvesson and Skoldberg (2009) describe as the 'novelty value' of data, which means generating new knowledge by moving beyond surface appearances (p. 305). The following extract from an email conversation between the research team illustrates this point nicely:

As I listened to the audio-recording of Jackie's interview (and others in the project) I was struck by the profound importance of the social interaction that occurs between researchers and participants in the kind of qualitative research that we do as a team. R1 and R4 adopted a conversational tone and offered words of encouragement and praise to a young woman who had taken some courageous steps to turn her schooling and life around. They affirmed her sense of agency, identity and self-worth. It seemed to me that Jackie was willing to share aspects of her life because of the trust engendered in the setting. As a result, we gained a much more nuanced understanding of her set-backs, hopes and aspirations. I'm sure Jackie left the room feeling that at last someone had listened respectfully to what she had to say. What would she be prepared to reveal in a questionnaire or highly structured/impersonal interview? All of this just confirms how utterly ridiculous it is to cling to the 'traditional' notion of the researcher as an objective, detached, disinterested being. As Peter

**Table 2.1** Summary record of one participant

Date	Name	Age	Yr	School	Course	Aspiration	Caption	Research team
4/8/11	Jackie	16	10	'The Link'	Mainstream	Year 11 non-tertiary course; university doubtful; Navy	'You need education or you finish up in the fish and chip shop'	R2, R5
1/5/12	Jackie	16	11	Roe Reef High; ex 'The Link'.	Cert 2 Tourism	Finish Year 12; air hostess; travel agent	'I decided that I didn't want to be left behind and have no money'	R1, R4
6/3/13	Jackie	17	12	Roe Reef TAFE	Cert 2 Tourism	Travel agent	'Life's pretty good now'	R2, R5

McLaren says, 'we can't cling to the guard rail of neutrality in social research'. We have to take a stand for people like Jackie. (Personal email exchange R3)

In these ways, we were able to construct the portraits by using Lather's (1986) notion of 'dialectic theory building' (see Chap. 1) whereby the data is used to confirm, adapt and/or modify existing theory. During the second and third round of interviews the portraits were gradually expanded to include new events, circumstances and decisions in the life of the participants as well as our own observations and reflections. This longitudinal approach meant that by the time the third and final interview was held, we already had a comprehensive picture of each participant's journey. At this point, we allocated a final identification number (e.g. #1) and pseudonym to each portrait, as well as a summary record of their age and year level, school/college, course, career aspirations and a caption to encapsulate their story. For example, 'Jackie's' record is outlined below (Table 2.1):

By way of conclusion, portraiture not only helps us to create a sense of being in the everyday, in the here and now, but also encapsulates the fluidity of life. As critical researchers, we endeavour to make sense of individual lives in the context of wider structural and institutional arrangements. In these ways, as Atkinson and Delamont (2006) suggest, 'the modalities of time and space are fundamental to the organization of collective activity' (p. 752). Furthermore, the use of portraiture allows us to see how 'the semiotic codes of mundane culture are represented visually' (p. 752).

## 2.5 Speaking Back to Policy and Practice

In a globalized world marked by the development of a new individualism, democracy must become 'dialogic' (Mouffe, 2000, p. 15).

### ***2.5.1 Introduction***

Once the portraits were complete, we proceeded to identify and explain a series of conditions that both hinder and/or enable young people's transition from school to work. In this context, we employed critical research approaches that allowed young people to 'speak back' to policy and practice (Smyth, 2010). By continually shuttling back and forth between the portraits, we gradually extracted a set of themes that resonated best with each of our portraits. This involved collecting 'threads', 'moments' and 'further insight' (Clandinin, Caine, & Steeves, 2013, p. 52) about how students experience school-to-work transitions. Again, the process of excavating the conditions that support young people to get a job was a lengthy and complex process. In the remainder of this section we describe in more detail what this involves.

Indeed, the process of pursuing the 'novelty value' of our empirical data was the most creative and rewarding part of our work (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2009, p. 305). At this stage, we started to move more deeply into the theoretical literature to help us better understand the lives of our participants. For instance, White and Wyn's (2013) observation that 'the vocationalist orientation of educational policies (that is, the domination of education-work links) has fallen short of actually exploring the workforce outcomes of education' (p. 154) provided a valuable insight into Jackie (#24) and Lucas's (#14) experiences because they both struggled to find work. In addition to this kind of scholarly activity, we were also able to deepen a set of personal and professional relationships based on a commitment to the values of critical inquiry, collaboration and social justice (Clandinin & Connelly, 1988). In the remainder of this section, we elaborate on how all of this intellectual activity occurred.

### ***2.5.2 The Complexity and Messiness of Sense Making***

Once the 32 portraits had been completed, we each read and annotated key ideas and themes whilst thinking about the task of creating a series of conditions (or modules) for systems, schools and communities on conditions supporting career aspirations and getting a job. This was part of our commitment to the industry partners to provide a set of professional development resources for schools and communities. The intent was to let the portraits speak back to policy and practice by mapping emergent issues and developing some reflective questions around each portrait that would encourage self-reflection among individuals and groups within partnering organisations.

We planned to meet a month later to share our findings. In the meantime, we corresponded by phone, email and Skype as we sifted through our allotted portraits;

finally leading to an intensive 2-day workshop where we mapped key themes, ideas, provocations and questions. Willis (2000) explains this iterative process as follows:

I take or invent ideas (while immersed in the data) and throw them, in a ‘what if?’ kind of way, at the ethnographic data – the real world of the nitty gritty, the messiness of the every-day – to see what analytic points bounce out on the other side, pick them up again, refine them and throw them again (p. xi).

Like Willis, we had a deep sense of curiosity about ‘what is happening here’. As we listened to the students’ stories we searched for patterns and commonalities as well as surprises, gaps and silences emerging from the fieldwork (Sultana, 1992, p. 21). As we worked our way into the data, the number of emergent themes expanded quickly thanks to the richness of the portraits, among them: ‘streaming’ (competency-based certification and ability grouping); ‘insecure labour market’; ‘inequality’; ‘victim blaming’ (deficit/individualising); and ‘community’ and so on. These emergent themes provided us with some ‘resonant threads to guide our thinking and writing’ (Clandinin et al., 2013, p. 52). At this early stage, it was apparent that we needed to radically rethink the conditions that support young people in getting a job. We continued to delve more deeply into these conditions during a concentrated workshop in John’s ‘tree house’ on the outskirts of Ballarat, Victoria. Here, we used rolls of butchers’ paper to annotate ideas and themes as we interrogated the portraits using a problem-posing approach to the stories. Here, we sketched and connected ideas which culminated in a visual representation of the narratives to help signpost and guide our individual and collective writing.

A glimpse into this creative process, progressing from the original analysis of an overarching condition (e.g., creating hospitable places for learning) and then visualising how the emergent theme will be explained, is elaborated below.

### **Condition 1** **Creating hospitable places for learning**

Theorising  
 Developing our take  
 Unpacking student portraits  
 Providing explanation, it looks as if ...  
 Identifying supporting literature  
 Reflective questions  
 So what?  
 What can be done?

Over the 2 days we workshopped all portraits until we and the data were pretty much exhausted. The final set of 22 themes was:

1. Creating hospitable places for learning
2. Building networking skills

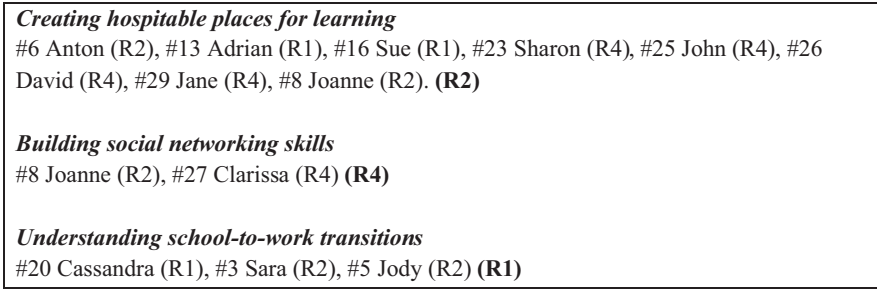
3. Understanding the (changing) world of work
4. Developing skills, abilities and capabilities
5. Understanding the complexity of the labour market
6. Moving beyond self-fulfilling tracks
7. Working with the complexities of young lives
8. Starting from what is best for young people
9. Going beyond menial, piece-rate and poorly paid jobs
10. Acknowledging the wider context of lives
11. Metrification, data collection, statistics
12. Developing interests, passions and desires instead of linear outputs
13. Confronting gender/class stereotypes
14. Engaging with big ideas
15. Schooling for all
16. Schooling is more
17. Having logistic support structures
18. Connecting/linking TV, popular culture and the mismatch with school subjects/curriculum
19. Reading the scripts of the school, navigating and reading the world
20. Beyond tokenistic rewards
21. Attending to lost, confused, drifting, meandering students
22. Warehousing and medicalising misfits.

During this sifting and sorting process we identified a common theme cutting across each participant's portrait: *Starting from what is best for young people* (#8). We also identified a key silence underpinning many of our participants' portraits, namely, *Metrification, data collection and statistics* (#11). All 20 themes echoed strongly in at least two of our participants' portraits. In general, each theme was reflected in at least four of the portraits. Theme 1, *Creating hospitable places for learning*, appeared in 8 of the 32 portraits. From this point on, we referred to our emergent themes as conditions supporting young people in getting a job.

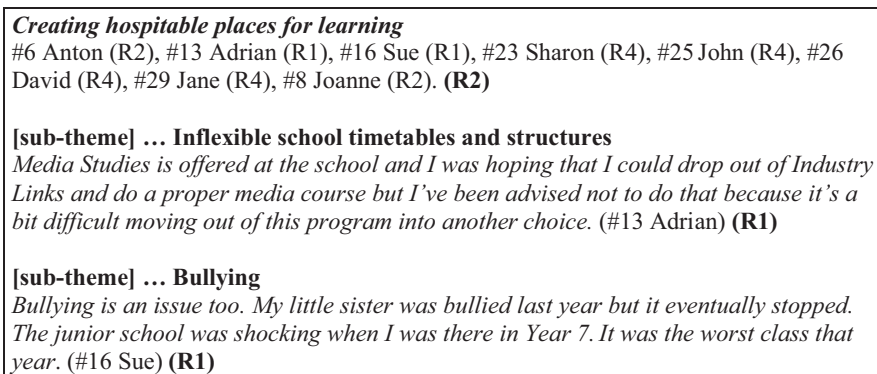
Hereafter, we identified which portrait(s) best fitted each condition and also coded them to include the researcher who spent most time reflecting on each portrait. This was a very important part of the process because it allowed us to feed into each other's thinking and build on the respective portraits that we were most familiar with (generally, because we had interviewed the student as well). This stage of collaborative writing was indeed rewarding but also very time consuming and 'messy'.

We started with a 'dumping' exercise which involved a number of layered moments. By way of example, we first identified the researcher responsible for writing up each portrait and coded them R1–4; second, we identified the student portraits most relevant to each condition; and third, we identified the researcher responsible for writing up each condition (bolded) (Fig. 2.1).

We then wrote up 2–3 page analyses or, as we like to call them, 'thought pieces'. We had 6–8 portraits each to complete. We revisited the portraits to extract ethnographic slices from the transcripts that 'spoke' to each condition. The next phase



**Fig. 2.1** Constructing the conditions for young people getting a job



**Fig. 2.2** Developing sub-themes

involved sharing with each other the outcome of this complex work via email. We also identified a number of sub-themes during this drafting stage. For example, R1's analysis of condition 1 *Creating hospitable places for learning* identified two sub-themes, 'inflexible school timetables and structures' and 'bullying', as shown in Fig. 2.2.

We then inserted sub-themes and relevant extracts from other portraits where appropriate to enhance the richness and depth of each condition. Again, using condition 1 *Creating hospitable places for learning* as an example, R4 added another four sub-themes from the narratives she had been allocated:

- *Leaving school early gave me more.* (#23 Sharon)
- *School kept me away from my granddad.* (#25 John)
- *School was not a good time for me.* (#26 David)
- *My biggest hurdle is getting out of school and getting into uni[versity].* (#28 Yasmin)

By way of example, the following extract from David's portrait (#26) was added to the evolving theme of *Creating hospitable places for learning*:

**School was not a good time for me**

**Table 2.2** Examples of conditions and participants

Condition	Author	Dominant portrait	Other student comments
1 <i>Creating hospitable places for learning</i>	R2	#13 Adrian	#28 Yasmin, #25 John #23, Sharon, #26 David
2 <i>Building social networkingskills</i>	R4	#8 Joanne	#17 Janet
7 <i>Working with the complexities of young lives</i>	R4	#27 Clarissa	#24 Jackie, #28 Yasmin, #20 Cassandra, #31 Anthony

*I didn't want to be there. In Years 8 and 9 I was at French Bay for a bit but I just couldn't handle it so I left. Mum enrolled me in City High but the same thing happened. Most of the people I knew didn't want to know me anymore. Because I was so far out of touch with school I felt like an outcast. I was persecuted for that. I did not feel like I was learning anything. School helped me with basic life skills but nothing else. I wasn't connecting with anything. (#26 David) (R4)*

The next phase involved developing a Table 2.2 summarising each condition, research author, dominant portrait and related student comments. The purpose of this table was to keep a running record of who was doing what in order to avoid repetition during the writing stage. Even though some narratives suited more than one condition, we also wanted to include complementary insights from a range of participants, for example:

As we commenced the writing process, we first developed an introduction to explain the condition using an extract from the student's portrait; second, theorised the condition by drawing out 4–5 key issues/ideas from the student's portrait and identified relevant theoretical literature in the field; third, incorporated extracts from one or more of the other students' portraits; fourth, identified 3–4 reflective questions to assist individuals and groups wishing to explore the portraits further within their own institutional settings; and finally, identified 4–5 potential policy and practice implications to support students in getting a job. Throughout this process, we continued to provide feedback to each other. This helped enormously in refining our writing as we filled gaps and expanded ideas where required.

For each of the final 16 conditions (see Fig. 1.1), which had been refined from the original 22 themes, we identified a range of key issues, reflective questions and policy and practice recommendations for action. As Kellock (2007) reminds us, 'feedback on the experience of young people as they progress from school to further education and employment should be a key input into the work of local collaborations aiming to improve school retention and transition arrangements' (p. 26).

In summary, we have endeavoured to provide some insight into the 'doing' of critical ethnography as we worked with the individual biographies of our participants to develop a profile of 16 carefully crafted conditions that support young people in getting a job (Down, Smyth, Robinson, & McInerney, 2014). These conditions have been constructed in a way that allows for a better understanding of the interplay between individual lives and the broader historical, social and institutional arrangements in which they are located.



## 2.6 Concluding Remarks

Throughout this chapter, we have shared something about the intellectual and creative processes involved in making sense of young people's lives as they transition from school to work. Whilst this level of detail about knowledge production is unusual for this kind of book, we feel it offers an opportunity for apprentice ethnographers to get a sense of what actually lies beneath the final piece of writing or 'the product'. We hope this more reflective turn draws attention to the realities of how a team of researchers engage in the process of investigating, interpreting and identifying key themes culminating in the production of a set of narrative portraits (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis 1997). We have explained in some detail the complexity and messiness not only of the young lives involved in the study but our own desire to make sense of what is happening in these uncertain times. Our intent has been, in the words of Weis and Fine (2001), to 'carve out spaces' and 'provoke ripples of resistance' (p. 520) in order to rethink policy and practice. Whilst policy makers, community leaders, educators and parents have much to contribute to these debates, we have made a deliberate decision to focus on what young people themselves have to say because these insider accounts can provide essential clues about how to create a more socially just future for all young people (Smyth & McInerney, 2012).

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# Chapter 3

## Growing Up in Neoliberal Times

### 3.1 Introduction

According to Peck and Tickell (2002), ‘neoliberalism seems to be everywhere’ (p. 380). The notion that the market will somehow magically fix all of our social problems is ubiquitous. The way Peck and Tickell portray it, neoliberalism has taken on the status of providing ‘a kind of operating framework or “ideological software” for competitive globalization, inspiring and imposing far-reaching programs of state restructuring and rescaling across a range of national and local contexts’ (p. 380). In some quarters, neoliberalism is regarded as a kind of ‘hegemonic story’, a kind of ‘global script’ (Larner, 2003, p. 509) that has been imposed mercilessly in a ‘top-down’ way on unsuspecting populations and that ‘somehow “forces” people to act in these ways’ (Larner, 2003, p. 511). It is a convincing story and one we would very much like to believe – but sadly, it is a tad too simplistic. The construction of people as willing ‘neoliberal subjects’ who have been converted into ‘entrepreneurial, self-responsible individuals’ being moved around by the invisible whims of market forces, in the end, is not that helpful. It does not explain how it is that people operate as ‘acting subjects’ (Larner, 2003, p. 511), or how it is that they take up the tenets of neoliberalism, and as a consequence how they think and act differently.

The lives of young people, especially their education, employment and career prospects, have been particularly affected by the advent of neoliberalism. Our central argument in this chapter is that individual biographies of young people can only be properly comprehended in the context of the profoundly damaging impact of neoliberal policies of privatisation, deregulation, competition, choice, individualism and commodification. In this chapter we examine how these wider structural forces play out in the lives of the participants around three stories:

- understanding the complexity of the labour market
- going beyond menial, piece-rate and poorly paid jobs
- moving beyond the self-fulfilling prophecy of streaming.

### 3.2 Understanding the Complexity of the Labour Market

In describing how neoliberalism is affecting young lives, Giroux (2015b) rather colourfully proclaims that ‘neoliberalism eats its own children’. What Giroux is referring to in this colourful depiction is the way in which ‘disposability is central to how neoliberalism functions’. As he puts it, neoliberalism tries to expunge ‘radical imagination’ by having us believe that there is no other way – that social disposability and collateral damage are a natural and unchallengeable state of affairs. On the contrary, Giroux says, it is only through collectively invoking radical alternatives together that it becomes possible to challenge the inherent pessimism in ideologies like neoliberalism, and supplant them with more hopeful and optimistic scenarios. As Giroux puts it, informing young people ‘about the world’s problems, opens up the possibility to address them and change them’. Making the broader political point, Giroux is arguing that ‘Pessimism of the intellect is the starting point for struggle. It’s not the end point ... You have to make something critical to make it meaningful, to make it transformative’. This is precisely our agenda here: to make the extant situation relating to young people and their school-to-work transitions more apparent, by examining them critically, in order to supplant what exists with something more meaningful and democratic.

The analogy of ‘Thatcher’s children’ has become an emblematic way into describing the kind of ruthless winner-take-all philosophy of neoliberalism ushered in and promulgated by Margaret Thatcher in Britain through her infamous proclamation that ‘There is no such thing as society’, only ‘men’, ‘women’ and ‘families’. As Pilcher and Wagg (1996) put it in describing the place of children at the time, the ‘assumed children’ of Thatcher’s neoliberal families ‘hover[ed] between Heaven and Hell’ (p. 2). ‘Heaven’, for Thatcher, was the situation in which ‘the male head of the ... nuclear family’ had been transformed into ‘an entrepreneur liberated from state control and trade union interference’, and in which the children flourished in a context of ‘love, discipline and selective education’ (p. 2). ‘Hell’, on the other hand, was the situation in which children were ‘menaced by a gallery of social demons: single mothers, absent fathers, muddle-headed social workers failing to detect abuse, drug pushers, paedophiles, [and] “dogooders” reluctant to punish young offenders’ (p. 2). Notwithstanding the simplicity of this portrayal, and the fact that it does not primarily pertain to education or work for young people, it does serve to remind us that ‘continued reverberations’ of this kind of thinking remain in the ‘unstable amalgam’ of ideas that persists as neoliberalism (p. 3), along with what Giroux (2015a) has dubbed its ‘authoritarianism’, its ‘class warfare’, its ‘austerity policies’, and its ‘politics of disposability’ (p. 1).

Nairn, Higgins, and Sligo (2012), from within a New Zealand context, provide one of the most informative and insightful accounts of what neoliberalism meant to a group of 93 young people making the transition from school to work. They deploy the organising heuristic of what they refer to as the ‘children of Rogernomics’ – a reference to Finance Minister Roger Douglas, the major architect of neoliberalism in New Zealand and one of the leading celebrants in the 1980s – as an entrée into

the lives of young people who endured this pioneering experiment. It is worth briefly rehearsing some of Nairn et al.'s (2012) main themes and arguments as an organising framework here. Their backdrop was the wider set of structural reforms, subsequently pursued by many other countries like Australia, that created 'an open internationalised economy capable of competing in the global marketplace' (p. 11). The research intent of Nairn et al.'s (2012) investigation is worth highlighting:

Our focus was the identity work of these young people. How did they craft identities as they navigated transitions into new forms of adulthood? What role, if any did the discourses of neoliberalism play in their identity work? What other discursive resources did they draw on to construct identities? How were their choices and aspirations shaped by the forms of inequality and social exclusion in their communities, schools and families? (p. 12).

The key indicator here, for us, is the notion of young people 'crafting an identity in neoliberal times' (p. 13) as they make their way from school to work.

One of the key features of the New Zealand situation was the construction of the school as a marketplace in which the defining hallmarks were 'parental choice', 'competition among schools', and the 'dezoning of schools' – all of which were designed 'to motivate schools to attract students through improved performance' (p. 14). This idea of schools as marketplaces seems to have somehow also permeated into how young people think about their lives and their transition from school to work. It is just a matter of shopping around amongst the range of choices available to them.

Higgins, Nairn, and Sligo (2010) talk about young people being encouraged to go 'job shopping', and to regard the labour market as a 'level playing field' that is 'wide and open and level' (pp. 22–23). They are told they will land their job of choice if only they work hard enough at school and gain a qualification. The problem is that this is a very naïve and misleading storyline because it conceals the 'wider structural constraints' and 'labour market realities' (p. 23).

Higgins et al. (2010) explain that young people growing up in 'neoliberal times' need to have 'labour market literacy' in order to exercise 'vocational imagination'. What this means is having an understanding of the complexity of the labour market, in a context where young people are being increasingly urged to 'discover and develop their abilities' so as to craft 'effective education–employment linkages' in 'making the transition from school to their post-school lives' (p. 13). Central to this, they argue, is the ability to be able to 'recognise relevant opportunities and constraints' (p. 13). This sounds like logical and very sage advice.

Where the neoliberal myth of hard work, effort and individual responsibility leading to jobs began to unravel for the young people in Nairn, Higgins and Sligo's study was when they began to exercise choice. The notion that they 'can achieve anything they desire, including taking on any identity they choose' (Higgins et al., 2010, p. 22) started to recede in the face of 'wider structural constraints', 'neighbourhoods' and 'labour markets' – in other words, in the harsh light of 'labour market realities' (p. 23).

Nairn and her colleagues found that the labour market literacy of the young people in their study was 'truncated' or only partly formed. What they meant by this

was that young people had a naïve and incomplete view of what was required to pursue their vocational dreams. There were some important connections missing from the way they were envisaging their futures. As Nairn et al. (2012) put it:

Most [young people] were not well equipped to talk about the labour market in terms of supply and demand, and their ability to read the labour market in terms of possibilities for career pathways was limited. Few had any detailed knowledge about job opportunities that might be available in the pathway they were taking (p. 43).

In addition to the belief that working hard and acquiring a qualification would advance them in the direction of a good job, the partially formed view that Nairn et al.'s young people carried with them was 'the belief that it was up to them to achieve a successful transition' (Nairn et al., 2012, p. 169). While they could see, in a generalised sense, that 'education held the key to success ... they often struggled to see how hard work and a qualification could be transformed into specific options within the labour market' (p. 169). The 'vocational imagination' was simply not there.

A major part of the problem here, Nairn et al. (2012) argued, is that 'without a language of structural opportunity and constraint' young people are forced to see themselves in terms of 'constructing their lives out of the choices that they made' (p. 46). In other words, the whole process of making a successful transition becomes a process of lucky choices or opportunistic decisions, rather than something achieved strategically. This kind of individualist thinking, and blaming, flowed through as well into the way they thought about matters of their classed background, gender, or other circumstances as enabling or limiting what they did. This lack of understanding of the 'structural landscape' of their lives meant that young people resorted instead to 'individualised' (p. 44) explanations around their good fortune or otherwise. To a large degree this is a severe indictment of the way the schooling system fails to engage young people in conversations involving complex forms of understandings of how the labour market works, and for whom.

From our own study we can further illustrate what is going on here.

### 3.2.1 Lucas's Story: 'Someone Always Just Beats Me'

*It's tough getting an interview. When I go for the interview normally I'm like the third or the second best. Someone always just beats me. So when they say 'Just not the best', I'm wondering what else they want. They don't really tell you what they were looking for. They say, 'Oh you were good, you had everything we needed but this guy is just better than you'. I don't know why. Someone always just beats me. (#14 Lucas)*

Lucas was a thoughtful and mature young person who had a clear idea about his future. He wanted to be an electrician. He was one of only sixteen students guaranteed a place in a pre-apprenticeship program at a specialist electrical course. Lucas attended the local high school in a community described as low socioeconomic

status (SES) or ‘disadvantaged’. Approximately half of the students undertake studies oriented towards vocational education and training (VET). Under the umbrella of Industry Links, the courses in Years 11 and 12 have components of Technical and Further Education (TAFE) certificate studies, work experience and school-based instruction in numeracy, literacy and job preparation. When we interviewed Lucas in 2011 he had commenced a pre-apprenticeship course in the electrical trades and was well on the way to realising his ambition of becoming a qualified electrician. Although the school supported him, it was clear that he had to find his own work experience placements in the field. In the process, he approached approximately two hundred potential employers before finding an employer willing to supervise his work experience.

Since finishing his pre-apprenticeship with TAFE in 2012 and graduating from high school, Lucas has struggled in vain to secure a full-time apprenticeship in the electrical trades. In his words:

*When I got my Cert 2 [Electro Technology] I thought I would be able to get a job but everyone else also has a Cert 2. The problem is you're trying to get ahead of everyone else but everyone else is also trying to get ahead. (#14 Lucas)*

This has been a very frustrating time for Lucas and his family. In what could be described as an example of ‘cruel optimism’ (Berlant, 2006), he was led to believe that there were plenty of opportunities for electricians in the job market, especially given the hype about skills shortages in the economy. Lucas assumed it would be relatively easy to gain an apprenticeship once he completed school. When we last met with Lucas in March 2013 he described how he spends much of his time searching online for vacant positions. When he does get an interview for a job, he invariably misses out. ‘*Someone always beats me*’, he says.

There are a number of very salient issues that arise out of Lucas’s predicament that further illustrate the kind of thinking in Nairn et al.’s (2012) research about what is going on with neoliberalism’s children.

### **3.2.1.1 The Burden of Joblessness Falls Heaviest on Young People**

Young people today face a precarious labour market as the forces of globalisation, technology and free market policies destroy jobs faster than they can be created (Aronowitz & DiFazio, 2010). Despite evidence to the contrary, young people are told that education is a magic formula for getting a job. Whilst it certainly may help, the power of schooling to fix social and economic problems such as unemployment is illusory for growing numbers of young people (Grubb & Lazerson, 2004). In Lucas’s school community for example, youth unemployment is about 20%, with official statistics showing that 37.3% of 15–19 year olds are neither ‘earning nor learning’ (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2006, p. 17).



### **3.2.1.2 Statistics Mask the Reality of Joblessness**

Worryingly, these figures exclude many school leavers including Lucas who do not register with Centrelink, the Commonwealth government agency responsible for managing the unemployed. Neither does it account for the manipulation of data that occurs to hide the real number of unemployed, particularly in times of crisis (Baker, 2013). Young people like Lucas find agencies such as Centrelink to be far too complex and alienating to be of much use to them.

### **3.2.1.3 The Lack of Job Training Opportunities Hinders Career Aspirations**

Contrary to what Lucas was told by his school counsellor, few apprenticeships or jobs actually exist in the electrical trades. Governments constantly talk up the importance of schools in skilling young Australians – making them ‘job ready’ – but the permanent full-time jobs simply do not exist and, if they do, there is intense competition for the few remaining positions available. This can be partly explained by the erosion of structured on-the-job training highlighted by a 33% fall in apprenticeship and trainee commencements in the first 3 months of 2013. This was compounded by a \$1.1 billion cut to Commonwealth schemes to encourage the take-up of apprenticeships and traineeships (O’Connor, 2016) and the withdrawal of state government subsidies for young electrical apprentices in Western Australia (Perpitch, 2012, p. 2).

### **3.2.1.4 Young People Require Post-School Transition Support**

There appear to be few employment support mechanisms for young people once they leave school. Whilst Lucas was able to avail himself of career counselling services at school, he now relies extensively on family networks and his own initiative. Aside from the largely inadequate Newstart Allowance, Centrelink renders little assistance to job seekers.

### **3.2.1.5 Moving to Independent Living is Difficult**

It is difficult to see how young people in these circumstances can cope financially without a good deal of family support. Lucas has very little spare cash but at least he has a roof over his head and a supportive family, so he is probably better off than some of his peers.

### 3.2.1.6 School Is Disconnected from the World of Work

Notwithstanding the skills he learnt in the VET course, Lucas views school as *'something you have to do'*. For him, school was largely irrelevant to his needs and interests. It was not until the senior years of school where he was able to enrol in a more practical vocational course that he saw some relevance of his schooling to getting a job, albeit he had a largely instrumentalist view of *'becoming educated'* (Smyth & McInerney, 2014).

### 3.2.1.7 Students Can Easily Become *'the Problem'* if They Can't Find a Job

It is a relatively short step to blame students who cannot find a job because of personal deficits (e.g. lazy, lack of ability, low aspirations, troublesome, *'at-risk'*) rather than focus on the collapse of job opportunities or the cumulative effects of social and economic disadvantage. It is important, we argue, to move beyond *'deficit'* and victim-blaming approaches (Valencia, 1997, 2010) to consider the broader economic, social and political forces shaping individual lives. Lucas puts this point very well when he says *'everyone else has a Cert 2. The problem is you're trying to get ahead of everyone else but everyone else is also trying to get ahead'*.

### 3.2.1.8 Young People Are Competing Globally for Jobs

As we noted in Chap. 1, the promise of the *'knowledge economy'* to create more high-skilled, high-wage jobs especially in the communications and information industries, for so long the cornerstone of the developed economies (and education systems), has been undermined by *'the global auction for cut-priced brainpower'* as workers from emerging economies such as China, India, Russia and Eastern Europe compete for a diminishing number of decent, well-paid middle-class jobs (Brown, Lauder, & Ashton, 2011, p. 5). Beck (2000) explains how *'every location in the world now potentially competes with all others for scarce capital investment and cheap labour supplies'* (p. 27).

Young people do indeed face an uphill battle when it comes to the *'discovery and development of abilities'* that will enable them *'to learn, and ... explore their particular interests'* (Higgins et al., 2010, p. 15) and the learning pathways that will lead them to satisfying and rewarding careers. Handing over and leaving it entirely to young people themselves to navigate these pathways seems to be an especially cruel way of adults to divest themselves of this responsibility, especially among non-family adults. At minimum, there is a moral adult obligation within educational institutions to actively help young people to match their interests with realistic career pathways. This would mean *'helping young people [to] map the landscapes through*

which they will craft education–employment pathways’ (Higgins et al., 2010, p. 15). It will necessitate identifying ‘opportunities and constraints’ as well as strategies for navigating their way around barriers to employment. The ‘it is over to you’ to ‘do what you love’ (DWYL) mantra (Tokumitsu, 2014) disguises the fact that ‘being able to choose a career primarily for personal reward is an unmerited privilege, a sign of that person’s socioeconomic status’ (p. 5). The DWYL philosophy – part of the neoliberal notion of self-responsibility – fails to reveal that exercising the kind of democratic choice being suggested is only possible when one has the appropriate resources such as knowledge about labour market opportunities, the right educational credentials, and the financial and networking resources required to enable the choice to happen. Anything less than this is cruel and delusional thinking.

The case of Paul, one from among countless ones we could have selected, serves to illustrate some of our points here.

### 3.2.2 *Paul’s Story: ‘I’m Not Working at the Moment’*

*I’ve been sending in resumes and letters to say I want to go into jobs – anything on the mechanical side of things. I’m not too sure about applying for an apprenticeship. I’m just going to get a job and if they let me do an apprenticeship I’ll do it there. I’ve put in 6 applications about three weeks ago, 5 around this area and then there’s one down in ‘Inji’. Two of the jobs were advertised and the others were not. I just went up and said ‘I’m interested in mechanics have you got any work?’ I’ve not heard back from them yet. I have to wait until tomorrow and see if I got it and if don’t I’ll go do another one. I haven’t seen any apprenticeships advertised at the moment. I would just like any job in any workshop. I look on the internet and sometimes in the paper for job advertisements. I got one of them from the local paper from the ‘Rayborn’ industry area. There was one at Mike’s Tyres. I went there and it didn’t happen ‘cos I didn’t have a forklift licence at the time. I have also applied to Domino’s Pizza Place down in ‘Rayborn’ but I haven’t heard back from them. (#32 Paul)*

School and assistance with gaining labour market literacy is nowhere to be seen in Paul’s case. He seems to simply have been cast adrift and abandoned by a school that saw him as not their problem. He is left to make what he can of himself on the margins of a confusing array of largely invisible, low-level, insecure and presumably poorly paid work options. Paul seems to have no overall goals, nor guidance on how to proceed strategically (even if he had them) in a fast-changing and complex labour market that seems to exploit his vulnerability by not even responding to his forays. There are not even the beginnings of any signs of how Paul might be helped to find a pathway into a decent job. Rather it is seen as acceptable that he is sacrificed as cheap, available and dispensable fodder, in a context where, if he is unsuccessful, he is blamed for what is really the fragmentation of work within the broader economy. One can only wonder where the work-relevant curriculum was for Paul, what the school knew (or cared) about his aspirations or ambitions, what it did to make him work ready in terms of understanding the landscape of work, and what kind of conscience it might have at all if it fails to wear some of the responsibility for Paul’s predicament. Indeed, our heads hurt when we think about hundreds of

thousands, even millions, of young Pauls that are being produced by our ruthless and uncaring educational and labour market polices. Little wonder that people like Paul, when they are old enough to vote, express their anger and frustration by electing people like Donald Trump in the US or Pauline Hanson in Australia because politicians like them seem to be offering people like Paul a false glimmer of hope, where otherwise there is none.

### 3.3 Going Beyond Menial, Piece-Rate and Poorly Paid Jobs

Young people like Lucas and Paul are, to borrow from the title of Dolby, Dimitriadis, and Willis's book (2004), being given a lesson in *Learning to labor in new times*. Although they have never experienced anything different in their short lives, what is being reinforced is the nature of work in the 'new work order' (Gee, Hull, & Lankshear, 1996), even though that work order feels like it has been around for a considerable time now.

At the outset, it is important that we make a crucial distinction between 'work' and a 'job' – and the difference goes considerably beyond mere semantics. According to Kincheloe (1999): 'A job is simply a way of making a living; work involves a sense of completion and fulfilment' (p. 64). But, as Kincheloe (1999) goes on to say, the nature of work brings with it some profound ethical, philosophical and moral questions. 'Good' work is socially worthwhile, ethically grounded, democratic, and fulfilling in the way it contributes to human betterment and growth. The way Kincheloe sees it, work can be 'good' in the way it contributes positively to these dispositions, or 'bad' in the way it detracts from them. Interestingly, Kincheloe (1999) says, 'Unfortunately, these questions are too often ignored in schools' (p. 64). That being the case, we will briefly rehearse Kincheloe's arguments as a precursor to this section of the chapter.

At the essence of Kincheloe's (1999) definition of 'good' work is the notion of 'worker dignity' (p. 65), or the way the worker is accorded fundamental respect and worth. This can take several forms. We see it displayed, for example, in the notion of '*self-direction*' in which 'good work is a labor of risk' (p. 65). In practical terms, this entails an absence of close surveillance, and trust that the worker is capable of being 'responsible for the success or failure of their work' (p. 65). The worker is conceived as being able to 'think analytically and to identify and solve problems by making use of skills, knowledge and aesthetic and pragmatic intuition' (p. 65). Concomitantly, the workplace is seen as a '*place of learning*' (p. 65) in which the worker is not merely a 'hired hand' but someone who is developing their 'intelligence, ingenuity and capacities' (p. 66) *in situ*, in circumstances where workers 'become researchers who produce knowledge' (p. 66) about the work they do. Good work is only possible where the tasks to be performed provide for '*work variety*' (p. 66), and where creativity is not expunged by repetitive and boring routinisation. Where there is work variety, workers get to understand the crucial inter-relationship between aspects of the work and the place in which it is performed.

‘Good’ work is also quintessentially a collaborative or cooperative rather than an individualist activity. Workers see this as a hallmark of the ethos of the work – the idea of assisting one another, rather than out-competing and extinguishing one another in some ruthless Darwinist competition. This emphasis on ‘*workmate cooperation*’ (p. 66) aims to counter the increasingly ‘fractured social relations of the workplace’ (p. 66). Workers engaged in good work also bring a social conscience to what they do by ensuring that they are making a ‘*contribution to social welfare*’ (p. 66). As Kincheloe notes, this means asking uncomfortable questions like whether what is being produced has a social benefit, whether it provides a ‘public good’, whether it is ecologically sustainable, and whether it advances health and ‘creative integrity’. If not, then workers ‘reconceptualize their work’ (p. 67) to remove exploitative relations both with the environment and in social contexts. In this regard, good work is an ‘*expression of the self*’ (p. 67) and, as such, the work cannot be artificially separated from the wellbeing of the worker. Work cannot be broken down into generic sets of skills to be performed unthinkingly, because to do that is a denial of ‘intrinsic satisfaction of work, the economic security of workers, and the role of work in the worker’s pursuit of happiness’ (p. 67). Good work is a ‘*democratic expression*’ of a ‘free and autonomous workplace’, where there is an absence of a ‘tyranny of authoritative power’ (p. 67). When workplaces are anti-democratic, and where managers hold the misguided view that efficiencies can be produced through oppression, then the challenge for the workers is to educate the managers about alternative means of producing efficiencies that ‘improve morale’ and ‘reduce conflict’ (p. 67). This is another way of saying that good work involves exposing and transforming the unjust use of power.

Providing genuine spaces within which workers participate in making decisions ‘*in the operation of the enterprise*’ (p. 68) is a primary condition of good work, and what follows is high motivation, committed workers, innovation and increased profitability. Good work also incorporates the ‘*spirit of play*’ in which there is an overt commitment to the ‘equality of the players’. Good work is a ‘form of play’ when the ‘workers labor together for a shared purpose’ (p. 68). The ultimate test of good work resides in how it conceives of and deals with the ‘*growing disparity*’ (p. 69) in pay between workers and managers, and how the tendency towards obscene profits are dealt with.

These may come across as a utopian and largely unattainable set of ideas, and in many respects that is true. They are a long way from what workers uniformly experience. That having been said, what remains paramount is that Kincheloe (1999) has alerted us to a set of principles against which to judge the quality of work. These are equally a set of conditions that ought to be solidly at the centre of educational practices in schools. As Kincheloe put it, ‘The path to school reform is inseparable from work reform’ (p. 69).

With these thoughts in mind, let us now turn to what some young people had to say both about their experience of schools as places of academic work, and the aspirations they had for engaging in good work beyond school.

### 3.3.1 Jackie's Story: 'You Need Education or You Finish Up in the Fish and Chip Shop'

*Joining the navy appeals to me because I want to get away from Roe Reef. I want to travel and it's good money. I have an uncle and another relative who enjoyed the navy life. I'm not sure what you have to do to get into the navy. I think you have to complete Year 10 and average C's. School is helping me because you need certificates and that. Jill has also helped me. Without her support I would probably still be wagging and swearing at teachers. What I don't like about school are the teachers, the uniforms and getting suspended. It makes me angry and upset when they say I am not going to make anything of myself. They don't have a right to say that. Jill has helped me get back on track. I now see that you need an education to get on in life. You need education or you finish up in the fish and chip shop. (#24 Jackie)*

Jackie comes from a traditional working-class background. Her father is the sole income earner and neither of her parents nor any other members of her family have participated in higher learning. Although she has had something of a chequered career at school, Jackie said that her time with Jill, a teacher in The Links program, opened her eyes to the importance of education. The choice was quite a stark one for her: 'You need education or you finish up in the fish and chip shop', she said. Jackie harboured an aspiration to go to university but conceded that it would be a struggle given her relatively poor academic record. In the second interview with Jackie she was no longer at The Link and instead of planning for a career in the navy had opted to do a Certificate 2 in Tourism in the hope that this would lead to work as an air hostess or travel agent. Jackie provided some insight into her unhappy school experience and gradually revealed much more about the disruptive impact of family trauma on her life and schooling. She has shown a great deal of resolve and courage in trying to make something of her life, often with little outside support. Importantly, Jackie recognised the changes within herself. 'I am still the same person', she said, and added 'but I have quietened down a bit'. Despite the chaos in her life, shortcomings in the way in which the school dealt with her problems and the lack of a supportive family, Jackie shows a remarkable degree of fortitude, determination and hope. More than most young people, Jackie has had to navigate some difficult times whilst exploring opportunities to help her transition from school to further education and a decent job. Her sense of agency and determination to make something of her life is quite inspirational.

A number of issues arise from Jackie's story.

#### 3.3.1.1 Students Are Acutely Aware of the Link Between School and Future Jobs

Jackie is a good example of what Brown (1987) describes as 'the ordinary kids' – the students who intend to leave school as soon as possible in the hope of 'finding a "tidy" (good) working-class job' (p. 39). These students understand the link between school and becoming an adult, which becomes a powerful reason for 'making an effort' and hanging in at school. With the collapse of the youth labour market,

however, there is a real danger that ordinary kids ‘no longer believe that school certificates will help them to get jobs they want’ (p. 61). Because they see little relevance in the formal curriculum of school there are insufficient reasons to maintain their commitment to school.

### 3.3.1.2 The Problem Is Not a Lack of Aspirations But the Knowledge and Means to Achieve Them

Jackie is typical of many students who aspire to get a good job. She dreamt of going to university, joining the navy and becoming an air hostess. Unfortunately, the harsh realities of life including family trauma, negative experiences of school and lack of family support conspired against her at crucial times in her young life. Research indicates

that the problem is not, in fact, a lack of aspiration by either young people or their parents, nor is it a need to make them more aspirational, but rather there is insufficient knowledge and means to make goals achievable (Smyth & Wrigley, 2013, p. 120; see also Goodman & Gregg, 2010; Carter-Wall & Whitfield, 2012).

As Carter and Whitfield (2012) express it: ‘What might look like “low aspirations” may often be high aspirations that have been eroded by negative experience’ (p. 4).

### 3.3.1.3 Good Work Versus Bad Work

Young people want to move beyond menial, piece-rate and poorly paid jobs. Jackie’s story raises an important question about what kinds of jobs are realistically available to young people these days. Jackie was adamant that she did not want to ‘*finish up in the fish and chip shop*’. Nonetheless, young people today are being told in no uncertain terms that they must be ‘flexible and not particularly choosy, not to expect too much from jobs’ (Bauman, 2004, p. 10). One of the most common exhortations from politicians is for young people to ‘take any job’ (Ireland, 2014) including ‘casual, insecure, seasonal work such as fruit picking’ in Tasmania (ACTU, 2014). In other words, young people are required to *labour* as a means of making a living (‘bad work’), rather than seeing *work* more broadly as ‘a sense of completion and fulfilment’ (‘good work’) (Kincheloe, 1995, p. 66). The key issue here is the extent to which young people have an opportunity to develop a ‘life project’ involving ‘self-esteem’, ‘self-definition’ and ‘long-term security’ (Bauman, 2004, p. 151).

### 3.3.1.4 Good Jobs Are Disappearing Faster Than They Can Be Created

Increasingly, the rhetoric of the knowledge economy with its promise of high-skilled, high-tech and well-paid jobs is proving to be an illusion for greater numbers of young people. The reality is that the global economy requires less high-skilled,

creative and analytic knowledge workers and a growing number of people working in part-time, casualised and marginal jobs in the service sector (Aronowitz & DiFazio, 2010; Brown, Green, & Lauder, 2001; Furlong & Cartmel, 2004). As Sweet (cited in Eckersley, 1988) observed in the 1980s, there is a rapidly growing number of ‘marginal, deskilled, dead-end, casual, part-time jobs that are not linked to training or career paths’ (p. 30).

### **3.4 Moving Beyond the Self-Fulfilling Prophecy of Streaming**

In this part of the chapter we move into discussing the third aspect of neoliberalism’s children: the enforced separation of young people into two artificially constructed groups, the purpose of which is to better serve the interests of capitalism.

The divide between the so-called academic and vocational in high schools is not a new phenomenon: it has been around for well over a century and is well ensconced in the secondary school curriculum around the world. The longevity of this binary thinking makes it all the more difficult to challenge or dislodge. If we step back and reduce it to its fundamentals, the separation of the academic from vocational strands in secondary schools rests on a cruel hoax and a mischievous construction. At the centre of this constructed binary is a monstrous myth about the inferiority of the intellect – something we take up in more detail in Chap. 4 where we uncover the sinister part played by the eugenics movement in sustaining this kind of separation.

The constructed view about the inherent and irreconcilable difference between the head and the hand is used to sustain a social hierarchy: there are some people who because of their breeding are more suited than others to enact certain types of activities, while others are grossly ill-suited and need to be relegated to another category. This flows through into the way secondary schools are organised: there are students from some backgrounds that are deemed more worthy than others, and these are the ones who will be allowed admission to high-paying and rewarding kinds of work, and the others, because of their inferiority, will be relegated to kinds of work deemed less worthy. The tragedy in this kind of mythical thinking, which has its roots in deep forms of racism, classism and misogyny, is that it is used to sustain and maintain barriers and obstacles, while making them appear to be natural, common sense, universally accepted, and therefore unchallengeable. So the argument goes that of course we all know that people from backgrounds that do not fit that of the dominant group are less capable and ill-suited to elite forms of work that involve complex and abstract forms of thinking and decision making, and that these people are better equipped for work requiring low levels of intellect and only the unthinking use of their hands.

The argument we want to advance in this part of the chapter effectively punctures this kind of elitism, and exposes it as self-interested thinking. The separation between so-called academic and practical forms of knowledge is nothing more than an artifice with which to construct, sustain and maintain a false and misleading educational hierarchy that limits access to valued futures to some students, while



denying others. The individual effect of this kind of educational separation, a kind of educational apartheid, is to truncate educational futures, especially those of students from poor or minority backgrounds. It is a form of class-based sorting or stigmatisation, based on history; it has no foundation in truth. The collective effect is to corral, stratify and residualise those deemed ‘unfit’, or not fitting the dominant academic storyline, into a kind of residual category deemed to have limited potential and suited only for manual or unskilled work. At the base of this ‘vocational’ categorisation is the grossly insulting view that somehow practical work is devoid of the use of the intellect (for a robust debunking of this view see for example: Crawford, 2009; Mishler, 1999; Sennett, 2008; Steinberg, 1998).

We turn now to what some students have to say – and we will take one as a detailed illustration – followed by some discussion of what emerges from this example.

### ***3.4.1 Joe’s Story: ‘After Seeing What My Life Would Be Like in a Trade I Think I Can Do Better Than That’***

*School is better for me now because I’ve changed from a VET course to doing ATAR [Australian Tertiary Admissions Rank, the Year 12 academic achievement score used to determine entry to university] subjects. In Year 10 I started an ATAR course with some of the hardest subjects. Then I got tired of study I guess and went into the VET program. It was so easy but I should have just gone into mainstream. I was doing 6 subjects in Year 11 but this year I am doing four Level 2 and 3 so I can get into uni. I decided to make the shift after doing work experience in the VET area. It was labour work and I decided I didn’t want to do that. Now I want to study psychology at uni but whether my scores will let me do that or not I don’t know. What interests me about psychology is the study of human behaviour. I found that subject just so fascinating. (#1 Joe)*

Joe’s career aspirations have changed during the course of his senior secondary years. In Year 10 he was locked into a VET course but decided to move into the academic stream in Year 11 where he found it very difficult to cope with the demands. Joe explained how a decision to specialise in VET studies in Year 10 had left him poorly prepared for academic learning when he changed to an ATAR course in Years 11 and 12. In his words, ‘*It was a waste of a year*’. Having decided that the trades were not for him, Joe was keen to study psychology at university but his ATAR score fell well short of what was required to gain entry. Joe said his ‘*ATAR scores were quite bad and not enough to get into uni at all*’. Joe explained some of the hurdles he faced:

*I hope to become a psychologist. I must admit I haven’t met any psychologists. I became interested in the subject last year. When I got into it I wanted to do it so much more. It’s a 1A subject so we don’t have exams for it but I’m riding on 82% which is good. But for a 1A subject I get more work. I’m doing well in Career and Computing but Maths and English are a bit difficult because of last year. Now I have a tutor for maths and that is helping a lot. My family is under the impression that my future is my choice and I’m not being pressured at all. They support me and think it’s all a good idea that I want to study psychology. I don’t think it will be easy to get into uni. Going into ATAR Maths was very difficult. I was on 40% after semester one so I had to pick up my game. If there were 3C levels required it would be*

*easier but because I am doing 2C it will be harder. That's one of the main reasons I won't get into uni after high school straight away, but then I'll take another path until I get in. I really regret doing the VET course. ... If I don't get into uni I will do a year at TAFE and then do behavioural science at uni or something like that. I don't know what career I would go for after that but I am determined to do psychology though. (#1 Joe)*

Despite gaining a poor ATAR score, Joe displayed considerable determination and persistence as he tried to make something of his schooling. Undeterred, he explored alternative pathways to university, initially through the portfolio entry systems that operate at two universities and then, following a friend's advice, enrolling in another university's pre-enabling program known as UniPath. If he satisfies all the UniPath assessment requirements he will be able to embark on his psychology course at university in the second semester of 2012.

*I was in the process of constructing my portfolio for one university when my friend, who is a student at another university, said that they have an alternative entry called UniPath. It's only 14 weeks in length. There are several steps: an application form, an interview and after that if they want you to come back they will ask you to come back for a workshop. I thought I would have to write an essay but it was just answering questions. Once you are in you start the program. I've just finished module 1 and finished week 4. If you are in the UniPath program you automatically get into the course of your choice – in my case psychology – although I would have preferred to finish high school and go straight to uni. I didn't want to do TAFE because that is a year in time. UniPath is great. I just love it. After seeing what my life would be like in a trade I think I can do better than that. (#1 Joe)*

Despite a rather patchy school record, Joe has shown a great deal of persistence and initiative in pursuing alternative pathways to become a clinical psychologist. When we interviewed him in March 2012 he had commenced a 14-week pre-university enabling program known as UniPath. Joe satisfied the assessment requirements and commenced a psychology course at university in the second semester of 2012. He has struggled with some aspects of the course and has reduced his study load but he continues to persevere with university. When asked to reflect on his experience of schooling, Joe talked about the low expectations some teachers had of his ability, the support he received from others, the motivating forces behind his career aspirations and what he has learnt about clinical psychology from recent work experience with autistic children.

*Looking back over my schooling I would say to other students that it's important to follow your passion and do what you really believe in. My brother, for example, left school in Year 11 to do a linesman apprentice and he has been doing that for four years. He did it because it is what my Dad did. He has only just finished and he is bored and says sometimes that he does not really like what he is doing. I say to him sometimes, well why don't you just change? I think it is quite sad, as he is stuck in it. Students have to find what they are passionate about and follow that course. I was lucky to find that out in Year 11 before I started in Year 12. And not give up because it does get really hard. My Year 12 results were horrible and it looked like I would not be able to follow that plan. I had some teachers in Year 12 who were not very encouraging. A couple of them suggested that I should not do psychology because they thought I couldn't manage it. To hear that from your own teachers feels pretty horrible as they should encourage their students. But there were teachers who helped me as well. Ms Jones [the careers officer] stood out because she took time with me. It is easy for teachers to say 'why don't you just do this and then that leads to that ... but*

*she got resources together and explained the options to me. She got me contacts and people to talk to which most kids don't do in their spare time. So to have someone like that just say 'give them a call' it is not going to hurt and you might find out what you want to do. It is so hard to find teachers that are passionate. (#1 Joe)*

Joe's story raises important issues about student agency, teacher expectations, vocational counselling and the impact of streaming students too early. Joe was determined to make a success of his career and urged other students to follow their passion and do what they really believe in. When we approached Joe again in March 2014 he indicated there had been a major shift in his career direction:

*As for what I'm doing with myself, I had a major change in career pathway! Finished my first year of psychology and decided it wasn't right for me. I deferred for a semester and begun studying a diploma of interior design at central TAFE in the city, hoping to go from that to interior architecture at uni. (#1 Joe)*

A number of issues become apparent on hearing Joe's story.

### **3.4.1.1 Students Need a Well-Rounded Education That Combines Academic and Manual Learning**

Oakes and Saunders (2008) argue that traditional high schools shut off education and employment pathways for young people far too early by forcing them to choose between academically oriented and vocationally oriented courses in the middle years of schooling. This often leads to students dropping out of school or, in Joe's case, being seriously disadvantaged when he tried to change courses. The challenge as they see it is to 'go beyond' the 'tired debate between academic and vocational education' and the traditional practice of streaming students into different high school courses. Instead, the focus should be on developing multiple pathways 'that provide both the academic and real-world foundations students need for advanced learning, training and preparation for responsible civic participation' (p. 6). Such approaches, according to Oakes and Saunders (2008), would require a 'radical reworking of the traditional high school', like:

- non-traditional structures, for example career academies, small autonomous schools, magnet programs, small learning communities and occupational training centres;
- integrated curricula, for example project-based learning and other engaging instructional strategies;
- innovative teaching and assessment practices, for example expert mentors, realistic workplace simulations, authentic learning tasks and exhibitions;
- different placement strategies, for example internships;
- quite different assumptions about what students can accomplish in high school and beyond as well as alternative admission to post-compulsory institutions (pp. 7–9).

### 3.4.1.2 The Social Practice of Streaming May Not Always Be in the Best Interests of Students

Joe's experiences highlight how streaming works in schools in ways that may not always be in students' best interests. At the end of Year 10 students receive official recommendations based on their subject marks. There appears to be little room for negotiation. Some students choose to leave school, whilst others feel they have no right to challenge subject selection. For some students, studying Stage 2 ATAR courses is not possible because these subjects are not offered and, instead, students are encouraged to study Stage 1 courses with implications for future career pathways. Irrespective of school decisions around subject selection and streaming, many students flourish because they are willing to pursue their passions and interests and make the system work for them. Thus, schools exert a powerful influence on students' imagined futures as they construct educational pathways and career options based on the artificial division between academic and non-academic students. A century ago, John Dewey (1944/1916) warned about the dangers of an education that leads to 'direct' trade training and a narrowing of the curriculum: 'To predetermine some future occupation for which education is to be a strict preparation is to injure the possibilities of present development and thereby to reduce the adequacy of preparation for a future right employment' (p. 310).

### 3.4.1.3 Opening Up Opportunities for the Least Advantaged

The division between academic and vocational education and training is premised on the assumption that schools should develop a practical and job-orientated curriculum for 'non-academic' students because of their perceived intellectual inferiority. According to Bessant (1989), a vocationally oriented curriculum has historically been used to restrict the numbers of students climbing the educational ladder previously reserved for the upper and middle classes, on the grounds that 'the masses would "lower standards", "threaten excellence", and impede the progress of the academic elite' (p. 70). As Connell (1993) puts it, schools are very 'busy institutions' involved in the 'production of social hierarchies [by] steering ... young people towards different educational and economic fates' (p. 27). Thus, schools are caught up in a process of 'rationing education' and producing 'ever widening inequalities associated with gender, ethnic origin and social class' (Gillborn & Youdell, 2000, p. 1). As the critics argue, vocational education and training has some major shortcomings:

- It has segregated poor and minority youth into a curriculum that reduces their access to high-skill, high-status, high-pay careers.
- It teaches skills that are obsolete in a rapidly changing economy.
- Its instruction is narrow.
- It is based on an image of students working with their hands and not their minds.
- It leads too often to non-prestigious jobs (Kincheloe, 1999, pp. 138–139).

As Australian schools become increasingly stratified in response to the neoliberal agenda requiring schools to sort students, there is a danger that public schools in poorer neighbourhoods will be confined to offering vocational programs as a means of encouraging working-class children not to drop out of school while keeping them from receiving an academic education (Oakes, 1985, p. 153).

### 3.5 Concluding Remarks

The challenge ahead is to find ways of integrating academic and vocational learning so that *all* students can learn to use material and conceptual tools in authentic activities. Kincheloe (1995) believes that vocational education approached in this way is not only more respectful of the intellectual and creative potential of *all* learners but recognises that crafts and trades involve higher orders of intellect. Importantly, it refuses 'to validate the common assumption within the culture of formal education that the theoretical ways of knowing of the academic disciplines are innately superior to the practical ways of knowing of the vocations' (p. 270).

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# Chapter 4

## Rethinking Class and Deficit Thinking

### 4.1 Introduction

Far from class being dead (Pakulski & Waters, 1996), it is back in vogue, for good reason and with a vengeance. The simple explanation is that the past denial of class has come back to bite us. The ‘forgotten middle’ that has been hollowed out by globalisation is making its feelings known. It has lost jobs, has increasingly precarious employment, has experienced significant relative income decline, is excluded from home ownership, is wearing an increasing share of the tax burden with little return, and is seeing its children increasingly worse off. We are seeing the manifestations of this in support for populist, nativist and minority political parties like Pauline Hanson’s One Nation Party in Australia, Nigel Farage’s UK Independence Party (UKIP) and the successful Brexit campaign, and the support for Donald Trump in the US election. In Australia, they are referred to as the ‘forgotten people’ (Menzies, 1942), in the UK the ‘forgotten middle class’ (Perkin, 1978), and in the US the ‘working poor’ (Ehrenreich, 2001; Shipler, 2004). Whatever they are called, they are a growing cadre that is being squeezed out or left out in the unwinding (Packer, 2014) and reconfiguration underway in affluent Western democracies.

In this chapter we want to take William Julius Wilson’s (1997) rhetorical proposition ‘when work disappears’, and use it as a starting point from which to provide a new set of inflections. Like Wilson, we are distressed by the tone of the public debate that has occurred around this issue because of the way it ‘seeks to assign blame rather than recognizing and dealing with the complex and changing realities that have led to economic distress’ for so many people around the world, along with the proposed solutions that ‘are often ideologically driven’ (p. xiii).

Our central argument here is that the disappearance of work has been accompanied by a general ‘dis-identification’ with the notion of ‘social class’ (Bottero, 2004, p. 989; Skeggs, 1997, p. 77). That is to say, the process of missing out on securing work, or failing to get a job, is rarely seen by people as residing in their social class origins, or the way this shapes job prospects or opportunities. There has been a



decay in the notion of a collective or solidarity-based classed identity, which has been replaced instead with what Shildrick and MacDonald (2013), invoking Skeggs (1997), refer to as an ‘individualised classed consciousness’ (p. 299). Shildrick and MacDonald (2013) argue that, when questioned, people struggle to ‘articulate their stories in class terms’, preferring instead to ‘stress their “ordinariness”’, effectively denying the existence of ‘social status hierarchies’ (p. 299) that shape the trajectories of their lives. This self-inflicted obfuscation causes problems.

With this as background, we want to pose a number of questions and make a number of framing propositions for this chapter:

- What do we mean by class?
- What has class got to do with getting a job?
- How could we develop aspirations differently?
- What kinds of skills, abilities and capabilities are required?
- How do we move beyond deficit ways of thinking?

The line taken in this chapter is that work is a ‘classed’ activity. That is to say, young people have to struggle against the invisible vicissitudes of how work, its nature and availability, is deeply, intimately and inextricably etched with notions of social class. Work is classed in the sense that it comes already preformed in terms of its implicit dispositions, inclinations, orientations, tendencies towards organisation, as well as what are often invisible qualities of mind and character. These propensities are deeply buried in the psyche and only become apparent when those of a particular classed disposition are seeking others with attributes that resonate with their own. Often these qualities are only consciously known and revealed post-factum, once the match-making exercise is complete and legitimated.

## 4.2 What Do We Mean by Class?

Despite many attempts to define it in classificatory or categorical terms, the most recent attempts to explain social class have resorted to ‘affective responses’. As Skeggs (1997) put it, class is something that is ‘lived as a structure of feeling’ (p. 95). The perspective we adopt here is that class is a ‘relational’ concept. What this means, following Byrne (2005), is that class is not a fixed set of attributes or characteristics of individuals or social groups, but rather, as he puts it, class is a disposition that inheres in ‘individual experiences and personal response to that experience’ (p. 808). Building upon this view, we want to argue that work, along with the process of transitioning to it, amounts to a ‘classed’ way of ‘fitting into place’ (Taylor, 2012), or as Rogaly and Taylor (2009) put it, ‘learning your place’ (p. 43). Envisaged in this way, work and the process of transiting to it as well as experiencing it, is a site for ‘navigating a classed identity’ (Smyth, 2016). The notion that work is a way of navigating a ‘classed identity’ is consistent with Lawler’s (2005) idea that class is not simply ‘a set of “empty” signifiers

(employment, housing, etc.) waiting to be filled by interchangeable social actors' (p. 797). Rather, class has a 'dynamic' character – it is 'something we *are*' (Lawler, 2005, p. 797, original emphasis).

The way Zweig (2000) put it is that 'class is about the power some people have over the lives of others, and the powerlessness most people experience as a result' (p. 11). His argument is that 'classes are groups of people connected to one another, and made different from one another, by the ways they interact when producing goods and services' (p. 11). In other words, class is 'not a box that we "fit" into, but rather it is something reflected in the role we play, as it relates to what others do' (p. 11). Envisaged in this way, some people have the 'power to determine which goods and services will be made and by whom' (p. 11), albeit exactly who is doing the determining can be difficult to see.

Zweig (2000) argues that what the so-called 'working class' shares in common is 'vulnerability – on the job, in the [job] market, in politics and culture' (p. 13). As he put it, 'On the job, most workers have little control over the pace and content of their work' (p. 13). This absence of power transcends job types whether they be unskilled, skilled or professional: 'most jobs share a basic powerlessness in relation to the authority [that determines the work]' (p. 13). In this respect, Zweig (2000) argues that we are all working class.

Referring to what he calls the 'missing middle', Byrne (2005) says that in his position as a head of an academic department in a university – one that he has only recently escaped from – he is 'only a charge hand' in the same way as his foundry-working uncle, who described his situation as being 'located between the buggers above and the buggers below and if one lot does not get you, the other will' (p. 815).

But the nature of work and how it connects to class is only part of the story. How education is historically constructed is also a crucial part of the story.

### 4.3 How, Then, Does Class Work Educationally? A Dip into Some History

The starting point in addressing the question of how class works in education involves tracing who has power and how it is exercised, keeping in mind that power always has to be kept invisible and made to seem as if the state of affairs it creates is natural, common sense and hence unassailable, which makes it extremely difficult to contest or dislodge. For the purposes of this chapter, therefore, we need to look briefly into the history of vocational education and its purposes in Australia, where this study was conducted. The beginnings of this lie in an extremely dark and hidden period of Australian history (Nash, 2013), described emblematically in this comment:

On the only occasion on which I paid a visit to a well-known pottery, I found in one corner of the yard a large spoil heap. This consisted of numerous rejects – pots and plates, cups and saucers, of all shapes and sizes rejected by the Master Potter – pots which were ill shapen, cracked or crazed, showing where the potter's thumb had slipped, or the process of firing

had been defective so that for the sake of the reputation of the potter, these articles were rejected for the market. The same thing may be found in life ... particularly with human beings ... (W. E. Jones, 1930, cited in R. L. Jones, 1999, p. 324).

William Ernest Jones was the ‘inspector-general for the insane’ in the State of Victoria, Australia in the 1930s, at a time when Victoria was one of the world’s leading proponents of the eugenics movement – the “science” of the breeding of a better race’ (Jones, 2009, p. 63). It was no coincidence either that William Ernest Jones was a close associate of Professor Richard Berry, anatomist, anthropologist and dean of the Medical School, University of Melbourne, who was the ‘intellectual driving force’ behind this movement (Jones, 1999, p. 325) and who had a university and teachers college laboratory that measured mental deficiency. Mental deficiency was a ‘catch-all’ phrase ‘that included many criminals, most of the poorer classes, homosexuals, alcoholics ... all of those considered to be socially “inefficient”’ (Jones, 2009, p. 65). William Ernest Jones undertook a national survey for the Australian government in 1928 into the ‘prevalence of mental deficiency in the school population’ (Jones, 2009, p. 65), the results of which were used to inform teachers that ‘irregular attendance, a lack of interest in work, any sensory defects, weaknesses in a subject or behavioural problems were all indicative of mental defectiveness’ (Jones, 1999, p. 333). The guidelines went on to say that ‘On the whole mental deficiency is accompanied by slightly less than average ability with the hands, but marked manual ability in which the demands are muscular rather than intellectual’ (Education Gazette and Teachers’ Aid, 23 August 1928, p. 190, cited in Jones, 1999, p. 333).

Frank Tate was the first Director of Education and designer of post-primary education in Victoria, and also the architect of vocational educational streaming in that state. He had close associations with many influential figures in the eugenics movement which in Victoria in the early twentieth century constituted ‘Melbourne’s elite’ (Jones, 2011) with a ‘membership list ... [that included] radicals, reformers, scientists, politicians, [early] feminists’ and even the ‘chief justice of the Supreme Court of Victoria’ (ABC Radio National, 2016). Tate later became a life member of the Eugenics Society of Victoria. The eugenics movement was seen at the time as a ‘progressive’ movement in the sense that it was trying to improve human evolution, firstly by removing those who were ‘unfit’ physically into various institutions including those for the mentally defective – and it even countenanced sterilisation – and secondly, by making other groups ‘fitter’ including through expanded forms of education. The second, improvement, aspect of eugenics, while less sinister, was nonetheless exclusionary in its effects, ‘loud echoes of which can still be heard in today’s vexed debates over school testing, funding and education equity in Australia’ (ABC Radio National, 2016).

There is little doubt that Tate, Berry and William Ernest Jones were also closely associated with Kenneth Cunningham, the first director of the Australian Council for Educational Research, the body that remains Australia’s major educational testing organisation. This group were all key figures supporting the development of three ‘Mental Deficiency Bills’ in the 1920s and 30s, the last of which was unani-

mously passed into legislation but not enacted because of the outbreak of World War 2 (Nash, 2013). Similar bills were also before the Western Australian and other state parliaments (Jones, 2009, p. 66). These eugenics apologists were also associated with one of the most prominent psychologists of the time, Chris McRae, who purported to replicate the research of British psychologist Cyril Burt. McRae claimed that his research 'show[ed] that working class children were unfit for secondary education' (Nash, 2013).

Jones (2011) argues that, 'As a consequence, in this period the Victorian Education Department set up technical schools in the poorer suburbs of Melbourne with just a few academic high schools'. While this sharp educational distinction has now been officially abandoned, there can be little doubt that these developments continue to have tangible residual effects today in the way vocational education is still thought about as the destination track for working-class children. We get a glimpse of Tate's thinking about the pragmatic possibilities in vocationally training those from 'deficient' backgrounds in his comment upon

seeing the masses in the slums in Britain: 'Why should we not take thousands of these people and train them so as to fill up our waste spaces. We want population ... Surely there is one way out in utilizing the best of them' (Tate, quoted in Jones, 2009, p. 78).

In Australia there is therefore a long legacy of the working class being closely associated with notions of educational deficiency and, if educable at all, then at best only through pathways of vocational training. While nobody today would dare voice Richard Berry's view expressed in the 1920s that only one in twenty children at age twelve was worth educating (ABC Radio National, 2016), there can be little doubt that some residues of this deficiency thinking still prevail.

While the eugenics movement in Australia may have disappeared, it has left traces in the way the academic–vocational divide is still very much alive in schools and the way it works on young lives, often in invisible ways as young people make their way from school to the world of work. The following case is illustrative.

#### **4.4 Mark's Story: Class Stereotypes and the Attempt to Confront Personal History**

This is a story about how a young person's interests intersect with where he has been placed in terms of his 'track' in school, his experience of school, and how these interact with his family background. We interviewed Mark over a three-year period, and here are some excerpts from those discussions.

Background:

*Mum is a nurse at this school and dad works in the mines. I definitely don't want to work there unless I really have to. I plan to finish Year 12 but I am not really sure after that. (#7 Mark)*

### Early aspirations:

*I enjoy computing and graphic design and that sort of thing. I'm not sure where my interest in IT came from. My family is dumb on computers. I have to teach them. I'm basically self-taught. We don't have a lot of computer stuff at home but we have our own laptops at school so we can do Photoshop and that sort of thing. There's a lot of satisfaction in making something yourself ... The course I'm doing will give me a good IT background. You can do IT studies at TAFE and university but I've not done a lot of research yet ... My real interest is graphic design. (#7 Mark)*

### Lack of careers advice:

*I'm not sure about getting a job in the IT industry. I know the industry is growing but it may be a bit harder in future to get work ... I don't get a huge amount of support for my interest in graphic design at school although my IT teacher is really good and takes us for excursions to places where we see IT in action. (#7 Mark)*

### Parental influence and change of direction:

*This year I'm studying Media, IT, PE, English, Human Biology and Maths. This gives you the chance to go to uni. At this stage I have to decide whether to start the TAFE units next year or stay on at school ... I still like the idea of graphic design but I'm thinking about getting an apprenticeship in mining. I thought about it over the holidays and decided to change. My dad has encouraged me to get into the oil and gas industry. That's where the money is. So far I haven't really had any career advice at school ... I've started looking at some of the courses I can do. There's a Diploma in Oil and Gas which is a two-year course but I'm not sure how difficult it is to get into. In Year 10 you have to receive at least Cs. When it comes to getting a job I could rely on dad a bit as well as applying for positions myself. The kind of job I could go for with the diploma is site management working at places in the north-west ... I'm interested in off-shore work. There are pros and cons with the 'fly in fly out' lifestyle but we are used to it as a family because that's what my dad does ... but I could also consider getting a trade. I haven't explored these ideas very well. (#7 Mark)*

### Part-time work and IT as a hobby:

*I still have the job at the pizza shop. It's okay I guess. I'm making dough [a few laughs all round] which is boring but easy. I do about 8–12 hours a week and get 10 bucks an hour which gives me about \$100 a week. Most of the kids working there are about my age. You don't learn a lot by mixing dough – just follow the instructions. I still have some interest in graphic design and IT but more as a hobby. (#7 Mark)*

### Reality bites:

*My parents were pretty proud of my decision to do this course because they knew I wasn't doing fantastically well at school. I applied for a pre-apprenticeship in plumbing in August last year ... I was thinking about work in the oil and gas fields but I changed my mind. I don't know why exactly. It was just something different, like no-one really in our family knows how to do that. I don't think much about computing and design as a career now. I think it will just be more of a hobby for me. I'm still working at the pizza place ... I'm not overly academic and what I'm doing now is more hands on ... My family have given me a lot of support. (#7 Mark)*

Mark told an interesting story of a young person whose career interests have cascaded. What we see here is a mismatch between aspiration and a feasible career option in IT. We can see his struggle to try to work his way through his interest and passion, where the industry was going in terms of labour market conditions, and the

difficulty he had in accessing the resources to fulfil his aspiration, including a deficit of career advice from the school. While there was no lack of family support in the form of parental influence, in the end this did not translate into the kind of transition that was necessary. Finally, we finish up with a case of 'reality bites' – a working-class young person ends up in a trade. To borrow from Wilkinson and Pickett (2009) in *The spirit level: Why more equal societies almost always do better*, this is a case of how class operates 'under the skin' (p. 31).

Another way of regarding what has happened to Mark is that it is an instance of a young person being given a lesson in what Willis (1977) referred to in his seminal study as *Learning to labor: How working-class kids get working-class jobs*. While it was not quite the case that Mark was predestined to finish up in a working-class job, nevertheless his options appear to have been quite constrained by the resources he had access to – particularly of an informational and networking kind – that would have been necessary for him to translate his passion for IT into a feasible career pathway.

Mark admits, probably as a way of rationalising his career decisions, that he is not sure why he has changed his mind several times, but 'not doing well' at school and being 'more hands on' is probably a convenient way of explaining away his inability to pursue a more professionally oriented job. His reference to his family giving him support in his plumbing pre-apprenticeship is probably code for the fact that they can understand work of this kind, whereas the field of IT is much more murky for them, and as a consequence will have to remain a hobby for Mark. At a variety of crucial points Mark was missing some important elements that would have been necessary for him to transcend what is a difficult class divide – made in part by the school, but subliminally interpreted as well by his family.

There are a number of key issues that emerge from Mark's story. First, this case is an instance where social class was not something people felt comfortable talking about explicitly – yet it is implicit in Mark's story. There is a myth in Australia that we are a classless society, that Jack is as good as his master. As a consequence, we hide the issue behind other labels, like family background, in order not to confront it and talk about it. Second, developing a career path requires access to significant social and cultural resources, and when the problem is individualised, as it is here, what is made invisible is the broader context. Getting a job cannot be attributed solely to individual effort and application. Third, 'hands on' is a term often used to explain away the difficulties some young people have at school: Mark uses the code '*there is a lot of satisfaction in making something yourself*'. This is often a way of shifting the problem from what the school does, or does not do, onto young people themselves. Young people are to a degree complicit as well in presenting themselves as 'hands-on' people, which is probably more accurately a reflection of their family background and history. Finally, what we see through Mark's case is that, regardless of class background, most parents have aspirations for their children, but aspirations are always framed and constrained by histories. Some people have histories that position them better than others to assist their children.

## 4.5 Anton's Story: A 'Likeable Nuisance' Tamed by the School for the Military

We met Anton when he was in Year 12 and was having trouble fitting into the conventional structure of the classroom. His teachers quite liked him, but he continually pushed the boundaries. He admitted to trying to get expelled from school, but he never quite got there because his teachers would not allow it. The teachers whom Anton respected the most were the ones that pushed him the hardest, and a number of them helped him think about his future. When we met him he had an infatuation with things adventurous.

### Background:

*Grandad was in RAF in England during the war. Our family came from Birmingham in northern England. Mum is a hairdresser. Dad was recently laid off as a railway manager. He's done just about everything in his life. He was a roofer, bricklayer, carpenter and he's run three shops – a jack-of-all trades. (#6 Anton)*

### Early aspirations for adventures beyond the classroom:

*Once I've finished here I want to have a bit of a break from everything and then I'm joining the army. I've made the decision and my parents said 'Go for it'. I'm not sure what drew me to the army. I watch a lot of TV shows, like Bear Grylls [TV adventurer], and the outdoor life appeals. The army lifestyle is unpredictable. It's never going to be routine. You get to travel to different places and meet people. It's hands-on work as well – not just sitting in an office. I'm going to do a week's work experience at the naval base shortly. (#6 Anton)*

### Working-class persona meets the confines of the school:

*I've never enjoyed school. My teachers say I am a likeable nuisance. They like me as a person but I never wanted to come to this school. I found it hard to adjust to the different schools I've attended in England and [here]. I always argued the toss with teachers. I never been really good at sitting there writing for hours on end. I get my work done in my own time but I want to move about in class. I can't stay still. From day one [here] I've tried to get kicked out but I wasn't allowed to leave. I left [previous school] because the teachers didn't care about me. (#6 Anton)*

### What changed?

*School is important to me now. Before, I wanted to do a trade, like bricklaying or something and I just wanted to leave school. Now that my goal is to get into the army I want to complete Year 12. I'll graduate this year. I was a rebel without a cause but I can see some purpose in school now. You have to follow orders in the army but I'm good with orders when I consider it's important. Joining the army is a chance for me to do a mechanics apprenticeship. I've mentioned it to a few teachers and they think it is right for me, being the sort of person that I am. The things that will help me get into the army are a good fitness level, a good school report and the outdoors stuff that I do. I go camping with friends a lot. The main thing is to stay healthy and don't do stupid things like drinking and smoking. (#6 Anton)*

### Not the result he wanted ... but an unexpected way of getting a job:

*When I left [school] I applied to join the army but got rejected because I wasn't a citizen at the time. I didn't know about the citizenship rule. There was nothing about it on the website. I got told to re-apply when I meet the requirements in October this year. So this year is a bit*

*of a gap year and I've some work building patios. How I got the job is interesting. I was walking through a shopping centre with a friend and this guy pulls me up and said 'Do one of you boys want a job?' and I said 'Yeah'. I'd never seen the bloke before in my life. I've been working full time on a casual basis for 6 months now ... The boss loves me but this work is just a stopgap. I want to join the army. They told me to come back when I turn 18. I reckon I've met most of the requirements ... There were no hassles leaving school. I did all the graduation things and left on a good note. It was a setback not knowing about the citizenship rules ... The thought of going to fight in a war is not great but I made that choice didn't I so I have to face the music. What keeps me going in my present job is the money and saving for a car. (#6 Anton)*

Anton presents as a classic case of a young person for whom school had very little to offer. He simply did not fit the strictures, and the school showed no real desire to try to fit around him. The result was two parallel universes: the school doing its irrelevant thing, and Anton just waiting out his time to be 'released'. There are strong resonances here of what Brown (1987) refers to as working-class students 'who appear ... to accept school' (p. 2) because of the minimalist qualification they can gain from it to get some kind of paying job. Brown (1987) refers to them, invoking Kahl (1953) and Jenkins (1983), as the 'invisible majority' of 'ordinary' working-class students who will leave school having never had their names engraved on the honour boards 'nor gouged them into the top of classroom desks' (p. 2). Working-class students like Anton seem to make a kind of invisible social class pact with the school to present as reasonably likeable human beings, in return for the middle-class institution of the school not demanding too much of them academically and allowing them to survive the experience of schooling, and to exit with a minimalist qualification to gain a modest foothold in the economy. It is a deal that works tolerably for both sides. In Anton's case, he did not even have to cash in the currency of his qualification, given the serendipitous way he landed a job while waiting for his preferred option. Anton and his classed peers represent a kind of cadre of repressed revolutionaries who would have the power to cause massive havoc in schools, if they want to, but they prefer not to.

The other interesting but not unrelated aspect here is the way Anton seemed to tolerate the school because of what it offered him in terms of the discipline necessary to gain entry to the army, which is the conduit to his desire for a life of boys' own adventure – a portrait no doubt carefully sculpted and constructed by the marketing arm of the military to attract working-class candidates like Anton, notwithstanding that he has no real desire 'to fight'.

#### **4.6 Richard's Story: The Cruel Hoax of a Working-Class Student Who was 'Dudded'**

Not all working-class students' experiences of schooling work out as amicably as Anton's, as the following case of Richard attests. Australians often have interesting and colourful idioms with which to describe things, and we invoke the word



‘duded’ here to refer to the process of being ‘conned or ripped off’, which was precisely what happened to Richard. Doing all the right things can leave young people stranded when schools and the education system are unable to deliver on promises that are beyond their remit, which is really what is happening when schools purport to be able to provide a pathway to work for young people when work does not exist – something that is becoming far too prevalent.

In this chapter we invoke Berlant’s (2011) notion of ‘cruel optimism’ to capture the way schools are making implied promises to young people they simply cannot keep – and young people feel justifiably betrayed because of the ‘disposable’ (Giroux, 2012) way in which they are ultimately treated.

Here we revisit Richard’s story (see Chap. 2) based largely on one interview when he was in Year 12 following the vocational strand in his school. Richard was optimistic about his prospects having worked part-time with his dad who was a ‘roofer’. He wanted to get an apprenticeship as a mechanical fitter. Richard was a conscious student who completed Year 12 with TAFE certificates which he thought would help him get an apprenticeship. The follow-up interview was extremely curt because Richard displayed deep hurt regarding what had been done to him.

*My family thinks that getting a trade is a good idea but they haven’t pushed it on me. It’s what I’ve gone on and done myself. I’ll be following my grandfather who was in the trades. I’m not sure how hard it’s going to be to get a job. I’ve been for an aptitude test and I’ve been applying where I can. I’ve done some interviews. I think the experience I’ve had in the job should help me. I won’t need as much supervision so I’ll be able to get to work straight away. I’ve been a school leader. I was head boy at Kwella College, voted by my peers. They trust me. I’ve been at Kwella College since Year 8. I have been very lucky and school has been very helpful. The TAFE course has also been very good. Gaining the certificates means that I’m more qualified than the other guys. (#15 Richard)*

*No, I don’t want another interview. I have nothing to say that helps with your research. My schooling was a waste of time. All those resumes and interview practice. I applied for heaps of jobs and prepared myself really well but it is the guys in t-shirts and thongs that get them so why bother? No-one ever gets back to me so I might as well give up. (#15 Richard)*

In a way, Richard’s story reveals much about how the working-class vocational pact with the school breaks down with tragic consequences – because the ‘promisor’, the school, is not the ultimate ‘deliverer’ of the promise. ‘It’s the economy stupid’ (a phrase used by political commentator James Carville in Bill Clinton’s 1992 election campaign), and the economy as construed in its contemporary marketised configuration is a very fickle and unforgiving master. Richard’s case is all the more tragic because of the way he clearly enacted all the right moves: he had a vision of what he wanted to do post-school, it was within his class grasp, he had work experience, he had completed certificates, he had good grades, and he left school before the end of the year to better position himself in the queue he knew existed for apprenticeships – but all to no avail. He was made ‘collateral damage’ (Bauman, 2011) by a neoliberal system of globalisation that has a cruel process of selection that is not made transparent to young people. The irony is that the guys who beat Richard to the jobs were often the ones who looked like Anton, the ones in ‘t-shirts and thongs’, despite the fact that Richard deported himself well, had all

of the educational and attitudinal requisites, and had operated strategically. Disposability is the only way of accurately describing what is going on here, along with its connotations of a reserve army of labour. The 'neoliberal juggernaut' (Doherty, 2015) with its 'lean production process' (Smith, 2000) has no space for surplus inventories of labour, even of the forward kind embodied in apprenticeships. Instead, young people like Richard are consigned to the hyper-competitive process of out-competing one another in the ungainly scramble for what Aronowitz and DiFazio (2010) called 'the jobless future'.

Each of these cases throws up a number of wider implications about how policy and practice need to be re-thought. In all three instances we see evidence of what Saltman (2014) has called the increasing tendency in austere times to resort to what is coming to be known as 'grit', 'grit pedagogy' or 'grit ... [as] a pedagogy of control' (p. 43). Grit is the new vogue term being used to refer to the way working-class children need to learn qualities of 'resilience' (p. 52), 'self-control' (p. 43), 'delayed gratification', 'goal-setting' (p. 50) and 'submission to authority with the school' (p. 43). In essence, grit is about teaching students that they are personally responsible for making their own way in school, which includes successfully crossing the school-work boundary and, if they are unsuccessful in either, that it is because they have not learnt enough self-discipline and the quality of character necessary to succeed. Part of this is the requirement that they acquire the strength of character, determination, resolve, perseverance and doggedness to find something that does not exist, or that is put beyond their control. The other aspect of grit is the requirement to 'learn to endure drudgery [so] they can compete with rich children for scarce economic resources [meaning jobs]' (p. 43). The notion of grit, Saltman (2014) notes, is derivative of '19th century American exceptionalism, westward expansion, and [the] romanticization of brutal survivalism' exemplified in Western movies (p. 49).

Thus envisaged, grit therefore fits with the notion of the 'austerity school' (Saltman, 2014) and the 'enterprising self' (Rose, 1992) that have been cut loose from equitable provision by the central state. In the state of Western Australia, where the research participants referred to earlier came from, autonomous state schools are called 'independent public schools' (Western Australian Legislative Assembly, 2016). The defining character of both these schools and the individual students is being 'responsible for academic and work "success" defined by sustained motivation toward the end of task completion' (Saltman, 2014, p. 49).

At the classroom level – which is not our primary focus here, but is nevertheless worth noting because it exists in the background – grit pedagogy is characterised by 'rule following' and 'rapid-fire shallow exchanges between teachers and students' (Saltman, 2014, p. 49). At a broader level this constitutes an emphasis on ensuring that the student is 'filled up with the right knowledge' (p. 50) to get themselves a job. Seen in this way, grit pedagogy is 'a strictly economic self-regulating ideal understood through personal efficiency and productivity' (p. 50). It is the means through which students come to equip themselves both 'for individual competition for increasingly scarce economic mobility' as well as the means by which schools directly contribute to 'national business competition on a global scale' (p. 50).

What grit pedagogy teaches students above all is that poverty, disadvantage and inequality are a natural state of affairs, and that escaping these inequitable conditions is indicative of the successful workings of ‘social Darwin[ism]’ (p. 51). That is to say, if students are unable to pull this off in the sense of succeeding in school or getting a job, then it will have been because they have not learnt to be good competitors, which is their fault, because as we all know competition is the ultimate game of fairness! Unlike their better-off peers, working-class kids who fail in this game do so because they have not learnt the ‘executive function’ (p. 51), that is to say, how to ‘voluntarily regulate their behavior’ (p. 51), which is the ultimate hallmark of educational achievement, and its flow on into getting a job. ‘Resilience’ is important, the grit proponents argue, because it promotes exceptionalism though ‘success against all [the] odds’ (p. 52). In doing this, grit pedagogy focuses exclusively on the process of schools exporting the responsibility of finding a job onto young people, rather than equipping them with ‘learning to comprehend and confront the forces that produce’ the unavailability of work (p. 52). The grit approach is thus committed to ‘docility and submission to authority’ (p. 54), rather than questioning it or a radical explanation of the way things are. Grit fosters an orientation toward compliant consumerism – which in this instance means fitting in with the status quo – rather than a radical production of any other explanation. In the end, Saltman (2014) says, grit pedagogy collapses down to an ‘utter failure of the promise of school for work’ and ‘the conditions for youth to imagine different futures of collective self-control that do not involve the pillage of nature and people’ (p. 55).

As a working-class student, Richard in particular is being given a lesson in ‘rule following and submission to authority’ (Saltman, 2014, p. 52), even when the nature of those rules is wilfully concealed from him. His schooling failed to equip him with the skills for ‘questioning authority and the relationship between knowledge and relations of power’ (p. 52). In the absence of that, Richard was left in a situation of ‘docility and submission to authority’ in a context that deemed that he was surplus to requirements.

#### **4.7 What Does It Take to Rethink Class Beyond Deficit Forms of Thinking in a Context of Young People Getting a Job?**

As Ingram (2009) has noted, ‘working-class children have often been found to have a problematic relationship with academic success. Many studies have focussed on the problems that influence [their] educational failure’ (p. 421). What follows from this is the argument that working-class children therefore present as not being ‘work ready’, and this is proffered as an explanation for why they are unable to secure a job. We want to robustly challenge that misrepresentation here, and in doing so we concur with Ingram that ‘little research exists that examines the ways in which working class boys [in particular] can negotiate educational success’ (p. 421), and by extension navigate a transition from school to work.

In the contemporary context, working-class young people, like the ones referred to in this chapter, are also regarded as part of an allegedly growing ‘precariat’ (Standing, 2011) – a new, dangerous underclass who are destined to lives of insecure, low-skill, poorly paid, under/unemployment. The problem with this kind of analysis is that it has a misplaced focus. As Frase (2013) argues, while there is some truth to the claim that work has become more precarious, and this has a good deal of intuitive appeal, this kind of thinking plays into ‘the old description of the working-class “proletariat”’ (p. 11), and has the effect of taking the focus off the structural changes that are producing the changing conditions of work, by categorising the people who are the most affected. Jorgensen (2016) is helpful here because of the way he speaks about ‘precarity as a condition’ (p. 970) rather than as a ‘class’, thus providing us with a space within which to see ‘the conditions, identity and process as well as the social spaces where agency takes place’ (p. 966). This notion of a working-class identity is a useful point from which to begin to re-envision what is occurring to the young lives we are describing here and the three themes that emerged from the interviews with them: confronting working-class stereotypes; the way in which working-class students become complicit in being tamed; and contesting the vocational hoax.

The starting point for this re-working of what is meant by the notion of working-class identity, especially as it applies to white working-class boys, involves recognising, as Stahl (2016) argues, that ‘The neoliberal ideology inherently carries with it a class-based expectation’ (p. 669). That is to say, neoliberalism requires adopting a decidedly middle-class persona, one that is ‘commonly conceptualized as upwardly mobile, economically comfortable, and able to navigate different discourse communities through adopting new selves, to understand what counts within certain fields ... [so as to be] able to marshal resources accordingly’ (Stahl, 2016, p. 669). The New London Group (1996) refer to this as ‘representational resources’ (p. 64), or the capacity to garner the skills, language and understandings that enable them to read the world (see Smyth et al., 2004, p. 75). For middle-class students, equipping them with these capacities is the function of schooling – it acts as a ‘gatekeeper’ in supporting and reinforcing family background, in reproducing the language and skills necessary for them to navigate successful economic futures (p. 75).

In none of the three instances described earlier do we get any sense that this kind of neoliberal thinking courses through the way these boys think about their lives or futures. What occurs is much more inchoate and serendipitous. Because they do not have the familial resources, networks and connections, these boys find themselves relying much more on their own wits, or else drawing off the backgrounds and experiences of immediate family members. Mark, who was interested in a career in IT, but who admitted that his family is ‘dumb when it comes to computers’ and got little in the way of careers advice from his school, was quite constrained in the resources he had available to draw upon. In Stahl’s (2015) terminology, Mark had to ‘construct value within the constraints and wider societal depictions and expectations’ (p. 3). In the end he was resigned to consigning his interest in IT to the status of ‘a hobby’ when he embarked upon a career as a tradesperson because no-one in his family or at his school was able to advise him differently. Anton similarly had little

in the way of familial resources to draw upon and, in the absence of that, he relied instead on TV adventure programs to reinforce his outdoors adventure interests – albeit the career option through which he could pursue that, the army, fell over because of a lack of eligibility information. Indicative of the happenchance way opportunities are presented to and picked up by working-class boys like Anton, he was quite unexpectedly offered a labouring job by a stranger while frequenting a shopping centre with a mate. Richard’s story, on the other hand, is a tragic case when, despite apparently having all of the wherewithal and the right resources to enter a trade, his chances were dashed because of the invisible ways in which the inequitable recruitment process worked.

None of these boys were seriously pursuing work that was ‘above their station’ in life (Stahl, 2016, p. 669). What they displayed was a ‘loyalty to self’ (Stahl, 2016, p. 671) that amounted to an understanding by them of where they sat in the social hierarchy and what this positioning enabled them to realistically pursue in terms of work interests. They had all interpreted the realistic aspirations they held in terms of their class location. They were all illustrative of what Kuhn (2002), in her book ironically titled *Family secrets*, depicts as the way class works: ‘beneath your clothes, under your skin, in your reflexes, in your psyche, at the very core of your being’ (p. 117). The way Lawler (1999) put it is that what is going on here demonstrates ‘how class inequality, inhere[s] within people’s subjectivities’ (p. 5).

In each case, although it was not explicitly put this way in the interviews, each of the boys were subtly being told that they were not quite worthy of anything more than they had managed to make of themselves. There were shades of them having been ‘pathologised’ (Stahl, 2015, p. 2), and thus categorised, by their respective schools. In other words, what these boys were negotiating, given their class baggage, was a kind of delicate ‘balancing act’, notwithstanding Stahl’s (2015) argument about the ‘fluid’ nature of identity work. In this case, however, their identity positioning, at least in terms of work options, took on all of the appearances of being fairly firmly ‘fixed’ (p. 2).

## 4.8 Concluding Remarks

We started this chapter by challenging the view that class was somehow dead, and through the course of the chapter, in light of the voices of some young people who were seeking to navigate a pathway for themselves from school to work, we have shown that class is very much alive. We concur with Richard Hoggart who, in the introduction to George Orwell’s 1989 seminal book on class titled *The road to Wigan Pier* (originally published in 1937), put it delightfully when he said: ‘Class distinctions do not die; they merely learn new ways of expressing themselves ... Each decade we shiftily declare we have buried class; each decade the coffin stays empty’ (p. vii).

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# Chapter 5

## Transitioning to Adulthood

### 5.1 Introduction

High schools can be alienating places for many students, especially those from working-class backgrounds who struggle with the mechanical and impersonal ways of ‘doing’ school (see Chap. 4). Put simply, school is not working for large numbers of young people nor is it preparing them well for the adult world. As Wyn (2009a) points out, schools are closed institutions which are generally ineffective in developing the capabilities young people require for ‘exercising choice, making decisions and navigating their own learning from a very young age’ (p. 55). The evidence of the escalating number of students dropping out of school and struggling with the transition to adulthood is damning. In this chapter, we endeavour to understand the barriers, obstacles and interferences young people face as they navigate their way into the adult world and, based on their experience, advance a set of policies that will assist them to identify the kinds of lives they want to lead and develop the knowledge, skills and capabilities necessary to achieve their goals (Sen, 1992, 1999).

Of course, these aspirations for young people are historically and economically located. Aronowitz (1997) argues that, with the exception of a small number of students linked to traditional professions like teaching and social work, there is no evidence that occupational programs significantly improve employment chances (p. 190). In the words of Aronowitz (1997), ‘school knowledge has little or nothing to do with their lives, either present or future ... [therefore] buying into the curriculum has little or no point, especially since the outcomes are indeterminate’ (pp. 190–191).

Herein lies the problem for what Brown (1987) refers to as ‘the ordinary’ or ‘invisible majority’ of working-class kids who do not conform with the ethos of the school but nonetheless make an effort in the hope of finding a ‘tidy’ working-class job (p. 39). These ‘ordinary kids’, he argues (1987), are in ‘a double bind, for not only do they confront the possibility of not finding a “tidy” job, but a growing doubt about their chances of getting “any job”’ (p. 100; see Chap. 4). In response, we want



to examine the narratives of two young people, Janet and Stephanie, both of whom held high expectations of moving from school to university to pursue their interests and careers. Drawing on Janet and Stephanie's narratives we can begin to appreciate how schools and families work differently for different classes of students and what might be done to better support them along the way. We shall organise this discussion around two key themes:

- preparing students for life after school
- navigating and reading the world.

## 5.2 Preparing Students for Life After School

Despite having a very supportive family and a strong desire to pursue environmental studies at university, Janet struggled with the reality of modern universities. After 12 years of schooling, she felt underprepared to deal with more autonomous approaches to teaching and learning and to rely on laptop computers and mobile devices which she could not afford. These problems were further compounded by financial pressure, part-time work commitments, travel time and apprehension about the depth of learning needed. In her words, '*we need more preparation*'.

### 5.2.1 Janet's Story: '*We Need More Preparation*'

*It is now week 3 and I need a holiday already! It is so different from high school. The university has taken independence to a whole new level and they never warn you about it. Last year in high school they kept saying 'come to our uni'. It looked like I would only have 2 days at uni but now I am doing 20 contact hours and that does not include all the study and travel time. They had said '10 hours max' and I am doing 50 hours a week. (#17 Janet)*

Janet wanted to attend university from a young age. When we first met Janet in Year 11 she said, '*I am interested in environmental science and I plan to go to university. It's an interest I've had ever since primary school.*' She attended a public high school where not many students studied the ATAR pathway to university and yet Janet was confident about studying six ATAR subjects and achieving '*all A's & B's*':

*I want to learn more about endangered species of animals. A little goal of mine is to save the world. Everything that has an impact on the earth needs environmental science and at the moment there are not enough people with these degrees. There are going to be hundreds of jobs in my field of study. The mining companies have to employ environmental scientists or they don't get permission to mine. (#17 Janet)*

By Year 12, Janet was still achieving good grades but she noted that '*there is a lot of homework*'. Nonetheless, she was finding school enjoyable because she

sensed she was being counselled well and that her subject choices were the right ones to lead into her university degree:

*school is helping me to get to where I want to go. The course overlaps with first year uni[versity] subjects so it won't be so hard next year, plus the teachers just hand you the work and don't remind you until the day its due so we are ready for uni. (#17 Janet)*

The support mechanisms in place during these final years of study enabled Janet to complete her schooling and achieve her dream of entering university. These included her family, her friends and having a decent part-time job in her local community working at the public library where she was ‘*learning teamwork and responsibility*’. Even though both her parents left school when they were in Year 9, the encouragement they provided to Janet was very important, as she explained:

*My family will support me in whatever I choose and are happy with my decision ... but it's me who wants to do this environmental science course. My older sister just got a normal job and she didn't go to uni. I feel my future is pretty much set. I will continue to live at home. My friends all like uni and I think I will love it too. I went to one uni with a friend and sat in lectures for a couple of months and it was like a big classroom. (#17 Janet)*

Whilst upbeat about her final year of school, Janet described the stress she was under during the final year of school where she was preparing for university entrance exams:

*They were okay but I got really sick during the last three. According to my friends I even fell asleep during the last one. But the exam supervisors didn't really care. They wouldn't let me take butter menthols to help me breathe and when I finished my bottle of water they would not let me go and fill it up because I did not have a doctor's certificate. However, I still got 84.9% points – enough to get into my first [university] preference. (#17 Janet)*

On entering university in 2013, Janet's initial enthusiasm soon waned. She was not prepared for the long hours required to meet her study commitments and the long commute to university. She also had to forgo her part-time job, but continued to live at home to save the cost of student accommodation.

The university enrolment procedure was a major hurdle for Janet. In her words:

*trying to self-enrol is the worst thing. There were 7 steps involved in the process and yet they make it look simple. However, for each step you have 10 different things, then you have to press 'save' at the end of each step otherwise you lose everything. Then I only had a day after acceptance to choose the course units. My choices then clashed so I had to come into the uni to sort it out. Then I found out I could not do a double degree because there were too many clashes – even though that is what I was offered. (#17 Janet)*

Janet went on to explain some of the difficulties she encountered in making a smooth transition from school to university:

*School taught me some independence but here it is like 'here is all the stuff, now just go and do it'. There is nothing set. You have to figure out what you are meant to be learning. We have the lectures and tutorials but that is only the overview. Then you have to learn everything in depth and you don't know how far to go. You are just meant to understand it. My best friend was doing the same course, but she has just had to defer because she got very sick. Last Friday she collapsed because of all the stress. She just couldn't handle it. I have met a few people but it is really hard. There are about 400 people in lectures and they all seem to know each other. At the moment I do not have any clear plans for the future. I am*

*thinking of working for local councils but at the moment I'm just trying to keep up with everything. My parents do support me but they left school in Year 9 so do not really understand what is involved. My two sisters are still in middle school. At school they say uni is going to be 'the best years of your life' but it would be a lot better if they warned you what was coming. (#17 Janet)*

Janet's story highlights the importance of having appropriate support (e.g., family, income, transport, encouragement, mentoring, skills and knowledge) to help students make a smooth transition from school to university. Janet relied on her parents to provide financial assistance, accommodation, transport and spending money. Many students in low SES families simply cannot afford the costs of sending their children to university. Many university students are living in the family home and travelling to and from university using public transport. It is a struggle to hold down a part-time job, which otherwise would provide them with some independence.

Even though Janet comes from a technologically savvy generation, she struggled in the environment of online teaching and learning at university. When we interviewed her in the first weeks at university she did not have a mobile phone or a personal computer. She was very disgruntled about the university's reliance on resources that she did not have. Furthermore, Janet travelled a long way each day by bus and train to attend university and did not meet many like-minded science students. She was also unsure about her lecturers' expectations and how 'deep' her learning should be, something she thought her schooling should have prepared her for. Janet's experience presents another side to the reality of making a smooth transition from school to university. As far as Janet was concerned, the glossy TV and radio advertisements, brochures, and online services and resources promoting universities as 'a breeze' for first-year students fell short of the mark.

Some important issues arise from Janet's narrative.

### **5.2.1.1 Students Need to Be Better Prepared for Life After School**

If students succeed at school (or more accurately pass exams) it does not necessarily mean they are well prepared for post-school life. Labaree's (1997) book *How to succeed in school without really learning* captures the essence of this dilemma nicely. He argues that education is seen more as a private good (rather than a public good) to gain competitive advantage and, as a consequence, credentials 'count more than knowledge in the struggle to get ahead and stay ahead' (p. 4). Furthermore, teaching and learning is tightly scripted around compartmentalised subjects detached from the lifeworlds of students. Students sit passively day after day waiting for the next set of instructions from their teacher. As Wyn (2009a) explains it, these 'transmission approaches to learning are relatively ineffective and have a poor fit with the ways in which young people today need to learn in and out of school' (p. 55). She argues that young people need to be autonomous learners capable of making choices and navigating their own way much earlier in life (p. 55). Washor and Mojkowski's (2013) work with Big Picture Education Learning leads the way

in this regard by advocating the idea of ‘leaving [school] to learn’ so that young people are given far more opportunities to explore their passions and interests in the community guided by expert mentors.

### 5.2.1.2 Students Require Logistical Support

If students are going to make a smooth transition into the adult world whether it is for study and/or work they require logistical support including family, financial assistance, transportation, accommodation and career guidance. Janet’s story reveals a great deal about the burden of travelling long distances especially for those young people who depend on public transport and part-time jobs. As Kellock (2007) argues,

A significant number of students combine study and part-time employment and while this may be considered a positive mix of learning and earning, in many cases, it also results in time-management pressures for young people who have to juggle the demands of study and work (p. 4).

### 5.2.1.3 Students Require Access to Frequent, Efficient and Cheap Public Transport

Janet found travelling to and from university time consuming, expensive and difficult given the lack of accessible public transport in her community. Mark, another of our participants, shared similar concerns: ‘*It takes me about an hour and twenty minutes [to get to school] ... I’m pretty tired.*’ He went on to explain:

*I go to ‘Baysi’ on Fridays. That takes me about an hour and 20 minutes. Monday’s my easiest day but on Friday I have all my subjects in a row so that’s probably the hardest. I’m pretty tired by then because I have to get up at 5 in the morning on Thursday. I miss English on Thursday but I can catch up with it on Friday. The teachers are pretty relaxed about it and supportive. (#7 Mark)*

Issues around transport are more problematic for poorer students than their wealthier counterparts. Skattebol, Saunders, Redmond, Bedford, and Cass (2012) observe that it is mainly in areas where labour markets are weak and unemployment high that we witness ‘poor transport infrastructure and deep patterns of social exclusion of low-income families offering fewer labour market opportunities’ (p. 167). The turn to spatial theories (Scott & Soja, 1998; Soja, 2000) and ‘geographies of exclusion’ (Sibley, 1995) is helpful here because it highlights the ways in which ‘power is expressed in the monopolization of space and the relegation of weaker groups in society to less desirable environments’ (p. ix). What is required in this context is, therefore, a greater emphasis on the ‘barriers, prohibitions and constraints on activities from the point of view of the excluded’ (Sibley, 1995 p. x). Moreover, Thomson (2007) argues, ‘it offers some possibilities for action – changing place and creating counter-publics – which begin to trouble the power-saturated and inequitable practices of schooling’ (p. 126).

### 5.3 Navigating and Reading the World

In this section, we focus on Stephanie’s narrative to help explain the importance of navigating and reading the world. The argument being mounted here is that different classes of students have different resources and assets to call upon as they transition into the adult world. This problem has two dimensions: first, there are the cultural processes of advantaging and disadvantaging that occur in schools and universities which serve to favour children from middle-class families compared to working-class students; and second, the compounding effect of the irrelevance of the school curriculum in developing the kinds of identities, capabilities and agency required to succeed in education, careers and life. The intent is to advance an alternative vision of schooling better suited to the complex lives of students in a rapidly changing economy. What we want is a schooling system that includes *all* young people and prepares them extraordinarily well for the transition to adulthood and their imagined futures. Stephanie, by most counts, would be deemed a ‘good’ student in terms of fitting in with the mission of schooling given the encouragement of her family and the resources available to her. What we are able to extract from Stephanie’s narratives are some key lessons around the importance of helping all students, especially those from the least advantaged communities, to read the script, build capabilities and connect to their interests and passions.

#### 5.3.1 Stephanie’s Story: ‘My Course Path Is to University’

*I like to think I am doing well in my subjects. My predicted score is 76.2 and the Broadway scheme<sup>1</sup> will give me 5 additional points for entry to university. That will give me 81.2. I’ve looked at creative writing at university, which is part of a double major in sociology, anthropology and communication. At another university I am looking at a primary teaching course and some of the editing units. Teaching would be second or third down the list. It’s something I could do after I’ve got a degree. When I finish uni I’ll look for work anywhere. I can read and write. (#19 Stephanie)*

It is clear from Stephanie’s narrative that she is an accomplished student capable of navigating and reading the world and the script of school. She knows how it works and what she is expected to do if she wants to get into university. Stephanie could be described as a ‘good’ student, one who knows the game and how to play it (Thompson, 2011). At our first meeting with Stephanie, she described in great detail her passions and interests and how she might pursue them:

*I like writing and in the long-term I would like to write a book. I read a lot and I’m especially interested in anthropology and sociology. I like creative writing and I’m also*

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<sup>1</sup>The Broadway scheme allows students with an ATAR of 75 or above from a Broadway-identified Western Australian school to receive an offer into one of the university’s 3-year undergraduate degrees (Bachelor of Arts, Bachelor of Commerce, Bachelor of Design and Bachelor of Science). <http://www.studyat.uwa.edu.au/undergraduate/admission/alternative-entry/broadway>

*interested in primary teaching. So my interests are pretty varied I guess. My passion for reading and writing come from my family. Mum and dad read a lot to me when I was young. Then I started reading myself and I've always had books around me. I like fantasy stuff. I'm a big fan of Harry Potter. I didn't have a lot of friends when I was young so I read a lot. I've been told I'm good at English. I find when I'm reading you can see how society interacts within stories and that mirrors what happens in the real world. I have studied about sociology/anthropology courses and I like history and the classics. It adds up to understanding how the world works. I was thinking about doing a Classics course at UWA. It is really interesting. (#19 Stephanie)*

When we interviewed Stephanie in her final year of school she identified the subjects she had chosen to provide her with the optimum university entrance score. 'I'm studying Stage 3 History, Stage 3 English, and Stage 2 Maths (I'm not so good at Maths), Stage 3 Biology and Stage 3 Chemistry', she said. Stephanie was a very intelligent and articulate young woman who had her sights firmly set on going to university. Her real passion was creative writing and she wanted to pursue her interests in anthropology, sociology and history with the ultimate aim of working in a museum and/or writing books. Stephanie was well informed about the entry requirements for courses in Western Australian universities and she knew how the Broadway scheme operates. She had even calculated the ATAR points that she was likely to obtain. With well-educated and supportive parents, Stephanie had access to social capital and networks that were not readily available to many of her peers. She liked school and her teachers but acknowledged that she and her friends were in a minority when it came to having a clear idea of what they wanted to do after leaving school. In spite of her talents, Stephanie said she lacked confidence in her own ability at times.

Stephanie was very astute about what was required to succeed in careers and life:

*The things that I think will help me get a job are having a good work ethic, English competency, dedication to studies and a good ATAR score. To be a creative writer you have to have a passion for writing. I get ideas from the internet. You get constructive criticism from others. A lot of ideas I get from experience outside of school. (#19 Stephanie)*

In 2014, Stephanie reported that all her planning and hard work at school was now paying off. Whilst doing very well at university, she still kept an eye on the future just in case:

*Everything's going well. I've just started my third year at uni while still working casual hours. I'm currently looking into the honour courses for my course and postgraduate courses for primary school education. (#19 Stephanie)*

Stephanie and Janet shared similar ambitions. They wanted to go to university, pursue their passions and get ahead. Yet, their experience was markedly different in terms of the kinds of resources available to them. Stephanie was able to draw on a range of family assets, knowledge and dispositions or what Bourdieu (1971) called cultural capital. Her parents are more well educated, financially secure and socially connected than Janet's. This allowed Stephanie to read the script more effectively than Janet and, at the same time, not have to worry too much about money. From Stephanie's narrative, we can further illustrate what is going on here.

### **5.3.1.1 Some Students Do Well at School Because They Know How to ‘Read the Script’**

Students like Stephanie usually have a supportive and secure family and they know where to go and who to see when they need advice on navigating their future career pathways. According to Cuervo and Wyn (2014), there are ‘overlapping structures and sets of relationships which create meaning for young people and that play a crucial role in their decision-making about education and work’ (p. 905). A study by Snee and Devine (2014) shows significant ‘classed differences between the children of parents who had experienced some upward mobility and those who had remained in working-class positions’ (p. 1010). They found that middle-class parents were more likely to directly influence the career choices of their children and be more critical of the role of the school (p. 1010). In a similar way, Lareau (2000) describes the ‘cultural logic of child rearing’ in which particular ways of raising children correspond better with the middle-class institution of schooling than others (p. 237). Lareau (2003) refers to these cultural logics as ‘concerted cultivation’ whereby ‘middle-class families are able to call on child-rearing practices which actively foster their ‘children’s talents, opinions, and skills’ (p. 238). In contrast, working-class parents were more inclined to hand over responsibility to professionals and when they did try to intervene they felt far less comfortable and capable (p. 239).

### **5.3.1.2 Students Require an Education Suited to Their Interests and Needs**

When students feel as though school is meeting their interests and needs they are more likely to remain at school (Lamb & McKenzie, 2001, p. ix). Khoo and Ainley (2005) found that a young person’s intentions to complete school and continue with further education, or not, expressed at 14 or 15 years of age, are important indicators of actually doing so. Education can be a tool to ensure that young people gain a livelihood or it can be a threat to belonging by taking them away from important relationships (Cuervo & Wyn, 2012, p. 6).

### **5.3.1.3 Being Positively Oriented to School Is Important**

Both Stephanie and Janet illustrate the importance of being positively oriented to school. They believed that if you study hard you will get ahead. Hillman (2010) argues that:

Students who are positively orientated to their school and are actively engaged in its academic work and other extracurricular activities are more likely to develop an intention to continue through school and beyond, and then go on to fulfil that intention (p. 5).

In contrast, according to Curtis and McMillan (2008), ‘student–teacher relations, student behaviour and teacher morale, have been identified as factors associated with early school leaving. Moreover, the quality of student–teacher relations appears to have a residual effect beyond school’ (p. 47).

## 5.4 Rethinking Policies and Practices

Janet and Stephanie’s experiences provide a starting point to rethink the kinds of policies and practices that will better assist young people in the transition to adulthood. While both had ambitions to attend university, we can see how they were differently advantaged and disadvantaged in terms of family circumstances and the kinds of resources available to them. Clearly, Stephanie had a far better chance of success given her family’s background. She seemed to understand and read the game better than Janet. No doubt, her parent’s educational credentials and financial security were a great help. Reflecting on these narratives the key questions then become:

1. How can school communities assist *all* students to access employment opportunities and make connections to their chosen career pathways, not only those who have learnt to ‘read the script’?
2. What conditions need to be created to encourage students to remain positively orientated to school?
3. What kinds of pathways can be offered to satisfy a diverse range of student needs and interests?

In addressing these kinds of questions, we can identify a number of key policy and practice implications in terms of better preparing young people for the transition from school to university and/or work.

### 5.4.1 *Provide Students with Opportunities to Pursue Their Passions and Interests in Real-World Settings*

Throughout this research project we repeatedly heard about the importance of students’ interests. Janet and Stephanie were passionate about sustainability and writing/literature, respectively. These interests animated their willingness to engage with school and pursue university studies. What we take from their narratives is the need to listen deeply to students’ aspirations, interests, needs and desires as the basis for planning, decision making and involvement in education, work and life. The question becomes, then, how do we organise schools in ways that allow these passions to flourish? How do we redesign school – curriculum, organisation,



timetables, pedagogy and relationships – in ways that provide students with the flexibility and opportunities to gain real-world knowledge, skills and experience in order to build confidence and a sense of purpose for the future? These questions have been at the heart of school reform debates for a very long time.

As we have argued throughout this book, such questions have largely been sidelined under the neoliberalising assault on public education as the mantra of standardisation, testing, accountability, competition and prescribed curriculum seizes the imagination of policy makers (Gatto, 2009). What young people themselves are saying, however, is that they want a different kind of education, one capable of accommodating their interests and passions. As all of the participants in this project corroborate, it is not that students do not want to learn but rather, in the words of Erickson (1987), they do not want to learn ‘what school authorities, teachers and administrators intend for them to learn ... [therefore] not learning can be seen as a form of political resistance’ (pp. 343–344) or ‘creative maladjustment’ (Kohl, 1994).

The real issue, then, is how to change the day-to-day high school experience of students so that ‘they are connected to the academic and social agenda of the school’ (Wood, 2005, p. 8). George Wood, principal of Federal Hocking High School, Ohio, believes we must rethink the structure, culture and pedagogy of high school so that young people ‘can develop the habits of heart and mind that are required of citizens in a democracy, or, to put it another way, moving from the institutions we have to the communities we want and need’ (p. 8).

Drawing on Postman and Weingartner’s (1971) notion of the ‘soft revolution’, Smyth, Down, and McInerney (2014) explain that the politics of school change must be negotiated in ways that are not perceived to be a threat to established institutional power and interests, ‘even though that is probably required’ (pp. 176–178). Rather, the focus is on making available alternatives for those wishing to be a part of an ‘experiment’ (Postman & Weingartner, 1971, p. 13) based on the following lines:

- (1) that learning takes place best, *not* when it is conceived as a preparation for life, but when it occurs in the context of real daily life, (2) that each learner, ultimately, must organize their own learning in their own way, (3) that ‘problems’ and personal interests are a more realistic structure than “subjects” for organising learning experiences, (4) that students are capable of directly and authentically participating in the intellectual and social life of their community, and (5) that the community badly needs them to do this (p. 9).

These kinds of productive pedagogies open up new possibilities for transforming schooling in ways that connect to students’ lives (Smyth & McInerney, 2012, 2014). Based on these connections it then becomes possible to generate ‘really useful knowledge’ informed by transformative learning approaches in which students develop an understanding of social structures and ideologies in relation to personal experience (Johnson, 1979).

### ***5.4.2 Broaden Assessment to Include Real-World Performances and Contexts in Which Students Demonstrate Their Skills, Understanding and Knowledge, Like ‘Craftspeople’***

Expanding on students’ interests as the cornerstone of high school design, there also needs to be a greater emphasis on the value of out-of-school learning and the implications of this for assessment practices. We know that assessment drives the kinds of learning that are possible. If we want to engage students in deep learning then it is necessary to provide them with authentic tasks requiring robust standards of performance demanded by the professions and occupations. In this sense, we draw on Sennett’s (2008) notion of *The Craftsman* to explain how young people can develop ‘skill, commitment and judgement’ in making something well ‘for its own sake’ (pp. 8–9). The idea of ‘experience understood as craft’ (p. 288) involves a twin move between the technique of making physical things and our ‘relations with one another’ (p. 289). This more authentic approach to learning acknowledges ‘the special human condition of being engaged ... practically but not necessarily instrumentally’ (p. 20). The point is that young people require learning experiences in which they can develop a sense of accomplishment in authentic contexts in relation with others. Such approaches, according to Sennett (2008), move beyond the myths surrounding the notions of ability, intelligence and ‘invidious comparison’ and instead focus on how people can ‘govern themselves and so become good citizens’ (p. 269).

By way of practical example, schools need to develop more opportunities to assess students’ learning based on their out-of-school interests and accomplishments such as sport, arts, dance, music, language and employment. This means challenging narrowly conceived measures of ‘academic’ success (e.g., ATAR, and National Assessment Program Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN)) to include a wider range of competencies required for success in life and careers, for example autonomy, curiosity, innovation, creativity, problem solving, inquiry, reasoning, initiative, citizenship, perseverance, leadership and mastery.

### ***5.4.3 Develop Integrated Funding and Support Mechanisms Including Counselling and Career Planning to Assist Students in the Transition from School to Work and/or Further Study***

Students require comprehensive career services and support mechanisms to assist them in planning the transition from school to work and/or further education and training. Many students are underprepared for post-school life in terms of expectations and the logistics of financial costs, part-time work and transport. Positively, students like Janet and Stephanie completed school and wanted to pursue their

ambitions at university, unlike so many of their peers who had simply dropped out or given up on the promises of education. What is required, therefore, are educational policies which not only provide more authentic learning opportunities but also integrate support mechanisms around counselling, career planning and assistance in the transition to post-school life. There is a view that the responsibility of schools is limited to what happens behind the school gate (e.g., attendance, behaviour, orderliness, classroom interaction, test results, credentials and so on). We have argued, however, that schools need to take a more expansive view of their role in preparing students extraordinarily well for life after school and not simply providing a set of credentials and grades that may or may not be useful.

Towards this end, re-imagining schools as sites of community capacity building to support young people offers a way forward both conceptually and practically. Smyth, Angus, Down, and McInerney (2009) explain the importance of bringing together two disparate bodies of knowledge around school reform and community renewal if we are going to achieve any significant improvements in education of young people in low socioeconomic communities. This kind of capacity-building approach means that education policy, in the words of Anyon (2005), ‘cannot remain closeted in school classrooms and educational bureaucracies. It must join the world of communities, families and students; it must advocate for them and emerge from their urgent realities’ (p. 199).

We can put some flesh around Anyon’s observation by considering Jackie’s personal struggle with schooling and her imagined future.

*I’m not hanging out with ‘the crowd’ anymore. I am still the same person though but I have quietened down a bit. I don’t go out and get in trouble with the cops. I decided that I didn’t want to be left behind and have no money. I wanted a good job. I didn’t want to be a drug-gie/loser on the dole. My friends have helped me to work through some issues. I deleted my Facebook account because of the bullying. I don’t want to end up like the rest of my family. There was no routine or anything. It wasn’t very good – just violence and all sorts of things. When I moved out to my friend’s house it’s like really quiet and I have a routine. I feel I can get my life on track kind of thing. I really want to get away from ‘Roe Reef’. There are quite a few travel agencies here and the other day I was thinking about offering my services. Life’s pretty good now; sometimes I am surprised how well I pulled myself away from the trouble I was in. I wanted to give up but I got out of it so why give up now? In two years’ time I can see myself working in a travel agency, having my licence and a car. I’ve got my L’s. The people I live with are going to get me driving lessons. (#24 Jackie)*

In the Australian context, Lynch’s (2002) work on the Victorian ‘Myer Full-Service School Project’ perhaps comes closest to offering a school and community engagement approach to support young people like Jackie. Clearly, the emphasis needs to be on creating a schooling system which includes everybody and actively work against the forces of exclusion. Lynch (2002) summarises some key elements of this integrated school and community renewal approach:

- building relationships that are inclusive, engaging and enabling with young people;
- pursuing personal and community development in ways that enable all young people to remake the conditions of their lives;

- creating schools and communities that actively research their own circumstances and practices;
- considering individual development to be part of a wider process of active community development for young people;
- integrating cooperative collaborative approaches between schools and other agencies/professionals aimed at ensuring school completion;
- regarding schools as only one part of a wider community/agency commitment to making a difference in the lives of all young people (p. 6).

In short, if we are going to support young people in the process of transitioning to adulthood then we need to radically rethink the role of schools and communities. Only then can we begin to identify appropriate educational responses of the kind we have outlined here, and the practical assistance required by students including counselling, career planning, transport and financial assistance.

## 5.5 Concluding Remarks

In his chapter, we examined the narratives of Janet and Stephanie to unpack some of the key issues facing young people in the transition to adulthood. Unlike many of their peers, both of these students had a clear sense of purpose and commitment to education and what their post-school life might look like at university. Nonetheless, there were some key differences in terms of their family circumstances which created cultural advantage and disadvantage and affected their likelihood of coping with university life. We can see how some students like Stephanie are far better placed to succeed in the education system due to the resources and assets of their family. In both stories, however, there is a consistent disquiet about the effectiveness of schooling in preparing them for adulthood. We touched on a range of issues related to the irrelevance of the curriculum and its disconnect with the lives of students. We also highlighted the ways in which schools fail to assist young people in the transition to the adult world by focusing on examinations, grades, test scores and credentialing at the expense of developing capabilities required to succeed in life such as autonomy, curiosity, innovation, creativity, problem solving, inquiry, reasoning, initiative, citizenship, perseverance, leadership and mastery. Practically, young people face a number of more immediate transition problems related to career advice, counselling, financial assistance, work and transport. In addressing these problems, we have advanced a number of key priorities for policy and practice especially the need to radically rethink the design of schools around students' interests and passions, broadening the basis of assessment to include real-world experiences and standards, and pursuing a more integrated school and community renewal approach to student transitions.

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# Chapter 6

## Reinvigorating Pedagogy

### 6.1 Introduction

Throughout this research, we heard time and time again that schooling was an alienating experience for many students. Not only are large numbers of students failing to complete 12 years of schooling (up to 40% by the age of 19) but many more students are ‘tired’, ‘stressed’ and ‘bored’ with the traditional curriculum and instruction. This is largely because high schools are based on a hundred-year-old model of education that is ‘depressingly archaic, reminiscent of giant factories or prisons with block scheduling and teachers still lecturing to students in time-chunks’ (Cook-Deegan, 2016, p. 1). Therefore, it is hardly surprising that many students are dropping out and switching off school physically, intellectually and creatively. Haberman (1991) describes the problem as ‘the pedagogy of poverty’, by which he means instructional techniques based on transmission models of teaching and learning (e.g., ‘chalk and talk’, ‘question and answer’ and ‘rote memorisation’) in which students are treated as ‘depositories’ or ‘receptacles to be filled’ with the officially prescribed curriculum (Freire, 2000, p. 72).

In this chapter we set out to advance an alternative vision and practice of education based on Freire’s (1998) notion of a ‘pedagogy of hope’. We seek to cultivate a more optimistic and humane form of collaborative and critically engaged learning that gives students a greater say over what and how they learn and with whom. In this chapter, we describe some ways in which schools might go about the task of reinvigorating pedagogy based on the needs and interests of students organised around three stories:

- creating hospitable places for learning
- developing interests and passions
- engaging with big ideas.

## 6.2 Creating Hospitable Places for Learning

As the key informants about what is happening in their schools, students are fairly clear about what they require. In a nutshell, they want their schools to be hospitable places for learning rather than places of incarceration. This means a willingness to put the needs and interests of students first, being flexible and responsive, building relationships based on trust, care and respect, and providing opportunities to engage with the adult world. It requires a different way of doing school and a more imaginative response to curriculum, assessment and pedagogy which provides students with intellectually challenging and worthwhile tasks.

### 6.2.1 *Adrian's Story: 'I was Told That Timetable and Course Issues Don't Allow Me This Choice'*

*Media Studies is offered at the school and I was hoping that I could drop out of Industry Links and do a proper media course but I've been advised not to do that because it's a bit difficult moving out of this program into another one. I was told that timetable and course issues don't allow me to make this choice. (#13 Adrian)*

Adrian was far from a model student, and he was less than clear about what he wanted to get out of school. We only interviewed him once, but on this occasion we obtained a clear sense that he was not that different in many respects from a lot of other young people. Because of his fairly relaxed attitude – ‘*if I do the course a job will follow*’ – problems were bound to follow, and they did.

After commencing a TAFE construction course at his high school because he saw getting a job in the trades as preferable to pursuing academic studies, he thought ‘*it would be easy to get work in that field*’. Work experience quickly changed his mind on that, and upon returning to school he decided to try his hand at media studies, largely because he had a mate doing that course. Here things became much more difficult than Adrian expected. He thought it would be a simple process to ‘*drop out of the construction program*’ and into the media program but was advised that ‘*timetable and course issues don't allow me to make that choice*’.

He informed us that he ‘*has a few more hurdles to overcome before I get into this course*’ including poor grades that year and the fact that ‘*I'm a bit lazy and I haven't handed my work in on time*’. He was prepared to admit that ‘*I've been mucking about this semester. I have quarrelled with the head of department over a few issues and also run into trouble with my teacher – mostly about not doing the work.*’

What Adrian's school had not taken into account in his new choice of program was that Adrian, possibly somewhat belatedly, had found a way to connect what he wanted to study with his interests out of school, and was even stacking shelves in a supermarket from 4.00 p.m. to 9.00 p.m. to save the money to purchase photographic equipment. He told us ‘*I would like to travel overseas. I reckon there's bound to be something in the media that will open up some possibilities here – taking photographs of various locations etc.*’



At first glance, Adrian can easily be seen as yet another student who lacks interest, motivation or aspirations to study and work hard at school, and this is true. However, we want to suggest an alternative explanation that enables us to shift the focus from seeing Adrian as ‘the problem’ and instead consider a number of alternative interpretations.

### **6.2.1.1 ‘Bottom Feeders’ Are Easily Pushed Around**

Lack of clarity, even at the fairly tender of age 16 years, does make some young people in particular much easier to manoeuvre in terms of career programs. It is much harder to do this in schools where middle-class parents have strong views of where they want their children to go and pursue the ‘concerted cultivation’ (Lareau, 2003) to make this happen (see Chap. 5).

### **6.2.1.2 It Is All Up to You, and You Wear the Blame If It Does Not Work Out**

One of the lessons from Adrian’s experiences is that schools pursue their own institutional interests, not solely the interests of the students. A standout example of this is students being told they have to find their own work placements, because if they do not the school will, with no guarantee of the placement’s appropriateness. This can be a fraught process because negotiating these arrangements with employers requires a set of skills that are often beyond many teenagers – especially their understanding of the complex conditions of the labour market.

### **6.2.1.3 It Is the Student Who Has to Flex, Not the School**

Where the desires of students and those of the school are severely out of sync, what inevitably follows are relationship problems between students and teachers. Students become distracted, they become argumentative with teachers, and they end up wearing the blame for what is a really a scheduling problem.

### **6.2.1.4 The Students’ Interests Are Secondary**

Students like Adrian are still trying to work out who they are and where they want to go with their lives. The fact that they have a passion or an interest ought to be a signal to the school that this is something to be captured and built upon, rather than ignored. Adrian was clearly committed to making something of himself in the field of photography, even to the point of working long hours stacking shelves in a supermarket to earn money to purchase equipment. The obvious question here is why his school was seemingly unaware of this.

### 6.3 Developing Interests and Passions

When schools work well for students, they inevitably start from where the students are at. In other words, teachers are deeply aware of what students are doing and being outside of school in order to make connections to the school curriculum. In other words, education is not something that is ‘done to students’ (Shor, 1992, p. 20) but rather begins with students’ culture, experience, language and interests and then goes places. Schools become more hospitable places for learning when teachers take seriously students’ everyday lives as the starting point for collaborative inquiry in order to expand their horizons and move them towards more powerful forms of knowledge capable of transforming their learner and worker identities.

The case of Noreen illustrates a great deal about how schools might better respond to students’ interests and passions for the future.

#### 6.3.1 Noreen’s Story: ‘I Hope to Be a Singer or Musician’

*I hope to be a singer or musician. I like to do sport as well, especially basketball, but music is the most important thing. I find singing and playing an instrument is a good way to show emotions. It’s a way of expressing myself. Music has not always been part of my life. It’s really just came out since I came here to [high school]. The school encouraged and helped me a lot. We have a band here at school. I like pop music that makes me dance. The school gives you the freedom to sing what you want at performances. We haven’t had any musical performances yet. The music teacher chooses the senior students to do that. School is helping me to get where I want to go but I could do with a few more performances because I’m not very confident and that would be good. I have singing lessons at school but no private lessons outside of school. (#4 Noreen)*

Noreen is an Indigenous student with a passion for singing. When we first interviewed her in August 2011 she was 14 years old and involved in a specialist music program at her local high school. She spoke enthusiastically about the encouragement she received from her Year 10 music teachers and her dreams of a singing career. ‘School is helping me get to where I want to go’, she said, although she added that she needed more opportunities to perform and did not have the benefit of out-of-school singing tuition, which was available to other students. Noreen was aware of a performing arts program at university but said she had not thought too deeply about job prospects at this stage. She explained that her father wanted her to go to university but questioned whether the school believed in her ability. In her words, ‘I guess the biggest problem I may face [is] if people don’t think I am as talented as I think I am then it could be a bit upsetting but if that is what I have to go through then I have to’.

When we caught up with Noreen in March 2012 she had a part-time job in a pizza bar. Working 12 h a week put pressure on her studies and social life but she was still keen to find work in the contemporary music industry. Influenced partly by her teachers, who doubted her ability to cope with academic subjects, she now had a plan B. She said, ‘Singing doesn’t always work out ... so I’m doing hospitality and

*tourism which is a two-year vocational education course. If I don't follow through with my singing I will have something else to fall back on, or do something else.'*

However, this course of action was likely to make it more difficult for her to gain entry to university, as she acknowledged: *'I would like to do performing arts at uni ... but because I'm doing hospitality it will be pretty difficult to make the swap'*. Noreen tossed around the idea of studying drama but this was not offered as a subject at her school. She canvassed the possibility of appearing in live TV programs and contacting talent agents in Perth but none of these strategies came to pass. Despite the setbacks, she said that she was gaining a good deal of experience through her school productions and performances in local community venues.

Our third interview with Noreen took place in March 2013. Now in Year 12, she was fully engaged in the hospitality courses and contemplating employment in the field, possibly as a hospitality teacher, although she doubted her ability to handle the theory. A career in the music field seemed less likely now but she had recently found out from her Year 10 music teacher that it might be possible to enroll in the performing arts program at university through an alternative entry process. A school counsellor explained that she had encouraged Noreen to take advantage of her Aboriginality to further her singing ambitions and to seek out the possibility of scholarships for Indigenous students at university. Despite some setbacks, Noreen had not given up on her dream. She said, *'In twelve months' time I could be working in the hospitality industry ... but I expect I'll still be researching what I need to do to get into the music industry'*.

Contrary to a lot of misconceptions about young people not having aspirations, Noreen's story shows that young people have dreams, desires and ambitions which are either enabled or constrained by the social practices of schooling. In the remainder of this section we draw on Noreen's experience to identify a number of emergent issues.

### **6.3.1.1 Becoming Somebody: Young People Have Dreams, Desires and Aspirations for the Future**

In the current policy environment young people, especially those living in low socioeconomic and welfare-dependent communities, are often stigmatised and demonised by the mainstream media, conservative politicians and ideologues of the right. All too frequently, they are portrayed as having little drive, ambition or willingness to contribute to the betterment of themselves or society. Furthermore, these victim-blaming discourses persist largely unchallenged as the primary explanation for educational inequality (Smyth & McInerney, 2014). However, as Noreen's story illustrates, these pathologising descriptions of young people are not only ill-informed but also demeaning and damaging. The young people involved in this study all had dreams, desires and aspirations for their imagined futures. Noreen's passion for music and dance, her willingness to put her social life on hold, and her determination to succeed at school, despite the setbacks, reveal how much faith she has in education and the possibilities of a rewarding post-school pathway.

### **6.3.1.2 We Know What Is Best for You: Schools Can Encourage, Inhibit or Support the Learning Identities and Life Choices of Young People**

Although Noreen harbours the dream of a musical career, her current VET studies and part-time work history suggest that she is being drawn more towards work in the hospitality industry. Without performance experience and considerable school support, gaining entry to a performing arts course at university will be very difficult. This does not mean that she will not be able to gain experience and enjoyment from singing but there are likely to be barriers to higher education studies. The message she receives from her teachers is that she is a 'non-academic' student best suited to vocational education courses rather than teaching or higher education music studies (see Chap. 3). Coming from an Indigenous and working-class background, it is difficult for her to contest the learner identity being constructed by the school. In contrast, the financial resources and social networks available to middle-class families allow them to fund out-of-school musical tuition for their children, access appropriate counselling services and participate in a broader range of musical experiences. te Riele (2002) argues that many students have ideas about what they would like to do with their lives but lack the means of getting to where they want to go. She emphasises the crucial role of schools in demonstrating the relevance of the official school curriculum to the most marginalised students:

Students want to see how the knowledge [contained in the school curriculum] is useful, or is linked with real life or with their own personal interests, needs, expectations and abilities. When students do not necessarily know what is best for them in these circumstances, it is up to educators to demonstrate usefulness and actively seek to connect knowledge with students' lives (p. 261).

### **6.3.1.3 Reality Bites: Young People Have to Make Difficult Decisions About a Desire to Follow Their Passion in Life and the Necessity of Earning a Crust**

Like many young people, Noreen reached a point in her schooling where she had to make some compromises about her courses of study and post-school pathways. Though her main desire was to carve out a career in music she accepted the need for a plan B: VET studies leading to the possibility of employment in the hospitality area. Several factors were playing out here, not the least being: (a) low teacher expectations of her academic ability; (b) lack of self-confidence on her part; and (c) realisation of the poor employment prospects in the music industry. Noreen has had to negotiate a difficult pathway in striving to maintain an interest in music whilst ensuring a productive school-to-work transition. She has done so with some advice from her teachers but minimal career counselling and a glaring lack of opportunities to gain practical experience and work placement in the field of music. According to Billett et al. (2010) many of the goals of schooling emphasise the autonomy of students, who are expected to take control of their own transition from school to higher education, training or employment; yet the 'requirement to exercise such agency is likely to be unevenly acquired by school students' (p. 472). Paradoxically,

the very students who lack access to appropriate cultural capital (e.g. young people at risk) are likely to be required to exercise the most personal agency in negotiating effective transitions, yet may well be the least equipped to do so (p. 472).

Although schools may not be able to compensate for students' lack of cultural capital, they do have a responsibility to engage students in a curriculum which matches where possible their interests and capabilities whilst providing opportunities to extend their knowledge and understandings of other aspects of their lives and post-school options.

## 6.4 Engaging with Big Ideas

Finally, students desire a curriculum which is challenging and rigorous and connected to the big ideas of the twenty-first century. If we really want to help students make sense of their world, then we need to reclaim the emancipatory intent of education by invoking what Johnson (1979) describes as 'really useful knowledge'. This means assisting young people not only to read the world but to act in ways that empower them to lead the kinds of lives they choose. In this task, schools need to engage students in thinking about the big questions facing the world today, issues related to politics, justice, war, peace, climate change, sustainability, inequality, work, health, racism and poverty to name a few (Hutchinson, 1996). In this section, we listen to the story of Janine to gain a sense of what this means in terms of better preparing young people for their imagined futures.

### 6.4.1 Janine's Story: 'I Want to Make the World a Better Place'

*When I leave school, I want to go to university and I would like to travel and teach. I want to make this world a better place. I want to make people happy and help others. When I was younger I wanted to be everything – a doctor, a lawyer and so on. My family also wanted me to do these things but recently I started to think about teaching. Lawyers get paid better money than teachers but my parents want me to be happy because it's my life. So, they are okay with the idea now. (#2 Janine)*

Making a new life in a foreign country can be a daunting experience for young people. Seventeen-year-old Janine and her family migrated to Australia from Portugal. She has three younger sisters and three stepbrothers and her father is a mechanic who works offshore in East Timor. Janine said her mother came from a very poor background and attaches a great deal of importance to education. She acknowledged that her mother had been a big influence on her life. 'She always believes that you should go after your passion', she explained. When we first interviewed Janine in March 2011 we were struck by her zest for learning, her willingness to engage with big ideas and her altruistic intentions in seeking to make the world a better place. Her decision at the time to pursue a teaching career rather than the better-paid pathway of the legal profession seemed somewhat indicative of her

sense of idealism and her moral conviction that work should contribute to the betterment of society not just the financial gain of individuals.

Janine had a strong sense of purpose about her schooling. It was evident in the goals she set, her meticulous approach to planning, and her understanding of what she needed to do to get into university. She combined her studies with work experiences that, in her words, took her out of a ‘comfort zone’.

*I've got a plan from where I want to go with my studies. I like to live by a plan. I am doing five ATAR subjects. You need at least 4 to get into uni. If I have that extra subject then I don't need to stress as much. My grades are okay. I'm getting mostly A's and B's. I've been into a couple of primary schools to do work experience and am trying to get into a court as well. You need to do something out of your comfort zone. I am going to the Magistrates Court in Perth and that will test me a little. I will see what happens there. I loved the experience at the primary school. The teachers were really nice but I really want to do high school teaching. I am going to the University of Western Australia Open Day in August. (#2 Janine)*

Janine was especially interested in Australian history and politics and was fortunate enough to be selected to travel on a Rotary-sponsored visit to Canberra. When interviewed again in March 2012 her intention to become a teacher was unchanged but she had fine-tuned her area of specialisation to teaching history in a secondary school or university. On completion of her senior secondary schooling Janine chose to have a 6-month break from studies before commencing a 3-year degree in literary and cultural studies at university. She explained that she had decided on a broad area of study because she did not want to lock herself into a career pathway. However, she was looking at the possibilities of work in health science and health promotion, a field where she felt she could improve the lives of people. She explained:

*You probably don't know that the World Health Organization has eight Millennium Development Goals where they try and stop AIDS and things like that. Health promotion has very good connections with the actual industry itself. You can work with the WHO, Cancer Council, Heart Foundation and so on. (#2 Janine)*

We can glean a number of issues from Janine's story.

#### **6.4.1.1 Given the Opportunities Young People Have a Sense of Altruism and a Willingness to Engage with Big Ideas**

The rewards of schooling are often viewed through an economic lens but Janine's narrative reveals that students can be motivated by altruistic factors. From her perspective, the purpose of schooling and the value of work is not just financial gain but the possibility of making a difference to peoples' lives. She is willing to step out of her comfort zone to explore challenging work experience placements and grapple with big ideas that are not always part of the school curriculum.

### **6.4.1.2 Student Engagement with Big Ideas Is Restricted in Traditional High Schools**

High schools are hesitant to deviate from the officially sanctioned curriculum for a range of reasons, among them: the persistence of didactic pedagogy; standardised curriculum, testing and national benchmarks; high-stakes testing; and an emphasis on memorising facts rather than dialogic forms of learning connected to big issues confronting young people and society. According to Flinders (2005), a tendency to limit conversations in classrooms to ‘safe’ topics rather than controversial issues constitutes a ‘null curriculum’ – that which school do not teach. With reference to the teaching of history in American secondary schools, Bruce (2010) argues that nationally imposed testing regimes thwart engagement of students with big ideas: ‘this type of micromanaged accountability can cause some teachers to focus on direct instruction as a means of achieving test results rather than a deeper understanding of history’ (p. 145).

### **6.4.1.3 Schools Need to Engage Students in Learning That ‘Challenges Them to Build a Critical Understanding of Their Presence in the World’ (Freire, 2004, p. 74)**

Given the precarious state of the planet, the increasing likelihood of global conflict, environmental degradation and threats to human rights and livelihood, young people should have the freedom and opportunity to discuss and debate big ideas rather than passively responding to a scripted syllabus. There are many fine examples of pedagogies of engagement with big ideas including:

- youth participatory action research (YPAR), where young people explore social problems affecting their lives and then decide on social action to remedy the situation (Cammarota & Fine, 2008)
- critical service learning, where young people work collectively with marginalised groups and communities to address injustices such as unemployment, racism, poverty and child labour (Porfilio & Hickman, 2011)
- developing curricula around (a) ‘generative’ themes from everyday life; (b) ‘topical’ themes of local, national or global significance; (c) academic themes within subject disciplines (Shor, 1992)
- a curriculum in which students’ experiences and understanding of oppression become an entry point into discussions about global issues (Bigelow & Peterson, 2002)
- encouraging students to be active agents of social change (de los Reyes & Gozemba, 2002).

Against this backdrop, we now want to consider what can be done differently.

## 6.5 Rethinking Policy and Practice

Pulling together the threads of these stories, we can begin to identify the kinds of pedagogical conditions that students actually require to support their learning and transition into the adult world. The question is: how do we change the day-to-day experience of students so that they feel connected to the life of school? According to Wood (2005), it means ‘creating, nurturing and sustaining a school community where every young person feels valued’ (p. 8). In the tradition of John Dewey, Ted Sizer, Deborah Meier and other democratic school reformers, Wood (2005) believes the culture of high schools requires rethinking in ways that put students at the centre of everything the school does. This involves confronting key issues around student dis-engagement, an incoherent curriculum, and kids who feel anonymous (p. 8). He argues that high schools need to be restructured and re-cultured as places ‘where young people are challenged and engaged; where young people understand what they study and why, and where they have a sense that they belong and can make a difference’ (p. 9). Our young informants – Adrian, Noreen and Janine – from different perspectives all share a sense of how this might look.

### 6.5.1 *Schools Need to Be Flexible and Responsive to Student Needs If They Wish to Encourage Learning, Not Prevent It*

Adrian’s experience is a prime example of what happens when institutional requirements are placed ahead of the needs of individuals. The school was totally unaware of his interest in photography and how it might underlie his wish to move into media studies. What this tells us is that high schools are largely organised around the needs of the institution rather than the people who inhabit them. Schools need to run smoothly and efficiently, therefore control is essential. In the words of John Gatto (2001), a former New York City Teacher of the Year, schools are psychopathic to the extent that ‘successful, pragmatic solutions [are used] to control institutional chaos’ (p. 205). Gatto (2001) argues that, once the ‘institutional machinery of size and complexity is built, a logical movement commences internally aimed at the subordination of all ethical mandates and eventual elimination of them’ (p. 307).

Following this line of argument, we can see how Adrian’s experience is reminiscent of a scene in the BBC TV series *Yes, Prime Minister* when the prime minister is informed about a new hospital which has no patients but still maintains a large contingent of managers and cleaners. It seems the hospital (like schools) worked extremely well without patients (or students). Herein lies the motivation of school leaders like Wood (2005), who poignantly asks: ‘does organizing a school around clocks, bells, credit hours, and grades really prepare young people to become citizens, employees, and neighbors?’ (p. 10). His contention is that, if we want to seriously attend to the needs of students like Adrian, ‘we will have to challenge every



single one of our assumptions about school. How we use time and staff, how we organize kids, what and how we teach, how we know what kids know, absolutely everything must be questioned' (p. 43). Based on what students are telling us, schools must be flexible in terms of timetabling, classroom layout and curriculum organisation in order to put the student at the centre of learning. In short, 'students come first', not national and international school performance on league tables, or other extraneous considerations (Smyth, Down, & McInerney, 2010, p. 202).

In addressing these structural and organisational issues, schools need to be asking some more troubling kinds of questions, like:

- Why should students be manoeuvred into courses they do not want to do, especially vocational ones?
- Why should students have to invest large amounts of emotional energy proving to schools that they are right and schools are wrong in terms of subject choices?
- Where students do have vocational aptitudes, why is it that schools sometimes fail to recognise this and capture it to produce a relevant set of learning experiences for the student?
- Why do transitions between education sectors have to be so difficult, especially for students who make (or are forced to make) inappropriate early choices?
- How much responsibility should schools be required to wear for wasted young lives, when young people get lost in what they see as the inappropriateness of schooling?

Adrian is not alone in expressing frustration with the inflexibility of school timetables and the countless rules and regulations which work against the best interests of many students. High schools are organised around subjects, teachers, lessons, age-based classes and rigid behaviour management regimes. Yasmin, another of our young informants, shared similar concerns about the rule-driven nature of schools and the ways in which they constrain student autonomy and choice:

*My grades at the moment are 1 A's, 4 B's and 2 C's. I think the school should make more options available to students. They should also offer more help, like special classes, to support students who struggle. The rules and regulations put some people off. Who cares about the rules? (#28 Yasmin)*

*My science teacher said that I wouldn't be able to cope with Stage 2 Biology this year but I'm doing it and it's good. My feeling is that if you are not coping you can always change but you have to give it a try. (#28 Yasmin)*

What young people like Yasmin and Adrian are alluding to here is the desire to have greater control and autonomy over what they learn, when and with whom. Furthermore, they want to have more flexibility in terms of accommodating what is happening outside of school, including part-time work, family responsibilities and interests. Rather than allowing structures to drive curriculum decisions, schools need to put the welfare, care and interests of students first.

### 6.5.2 *Schools Need to Put Students' Interests at the Heart of Curriculum Decisions*

In this section, we want to expand on the absolute importance of putting students' interests at the heart of the curriculum (see Chap. 5). Noreen's narrative is a powerful reminder of why we should see 'young people as partners' rather than 'objects' of school reform (Brennan, 2001, p. 16). She was passionate and enthusiastic about music and wanted to pursue a career in the industry. Yet the school shunted her towards a VET program in hospitality based on the school's misperception about her talents and ability. The school was either unwilling or unable to connect her interests to the school curriculum. There appeared to be a lack of imagination on the part of teachers to find ways of working alongside Noreen to explore her musical interests and career aspirations. Dewey (1997/1938) provides some insight into this issue in terms of 'the pattern of organization' of schools in which 'time-schedules, schemes of classification, of examination and promotion, of rules of order' function to exclude the needs, interests and culture of young people themselves (p. 18). Dewey (1997/1938) explains it this way:

There is, I think, no point in the philosophy of progressive education which is sounder than its emphasis upon the importance of the participation of the learner in the formation of the purposes which direct his activities in the learning process, just as there is no defect in traditional education greater than its failure to secure the active co-operation of the pupil in construction of the purposes involved in his studying (p. 67).

In the tradition of Dewey, Garth Boomer (1992), a former Director-General of Education in South Australia, advanced the idea of the negotiated curriculum to address the problem of language and learning in classrooms. In what appeared to be a radical departure from the usual bureaucratic response to children's learning, Boomer held the view that teachers who simply set out to teach the official or planned curriculum without engaging the interests of students were doomed to fail. Whilst this point appears to be self-evident, many teachers carry on as though it does not really matter. According to Boomer (1992), teachers must deliberately plan to invite students to contribute and modify the curriculum if they are going to have any 'real investment in both the learning journey and the outcomes' (p. 13). Essential to this task, Boomer (1992) argues, is the importance of creating spaces for teachers to engage in the process of critical reflection to demystify the exercise of power and knowledge in the classroom through collaborative forms of inquiry and action (p. 8).

As we have noted previously (see Chap. 1), the act of asking questions is pivotal to this task because it makes change possible. In Noreen's case, the following kinds of questions provide the basis for ongoing teacher reflection and action:

- How can schools encourage and support students like Noreen in their identity formation and career aspirations?
- To what extent are ambitions to pursue a particular career constrained or enabled by institutional structures, teacher expectations and curriculum organisation?

- Why did Noreen not investigate the possibility of special entry provisions for Indigenous students at university? Was she uninformed about the provisions, unsure whom to turn to for advice or, as the school counsellor speculated, ‘unwilling to play the Aboriginal card’?
- How did Noreen arrive at her plan B? How much say did she really have in the choice of school subjects? To what extent were her parents involved in this decision?
- How does learning and teaching in schools connect to students’ life experiences, expectations and interests?

Noreen’s narrative highlights something about the talents, passions and interests that young people bring to school. Many other participants also spoke enthusiastically about their interests and hopes for the future. In some instances, they were framed in terms of vocational/employment aspirations, but students also talked about the value they attached to recreational, cultural, social and aesthetic interests too, for example:

*I’ve always been interested in sewing and I do dancing full time out of school. I came to this [TAFE] course because I discovered how interested I am in design and making clothing as well. I’m studying a Certificate IV in Clothing Production. I chose clothing rather than dance because you have to go to university to do dance and drama and I wanted to get my career started early so I decided to do a TAFE course. There’s a bit of family history of sewing. My grandparents did patchwork and quilting and I learnt a lot from home. I enjoy the end result. I feel good about what I can make. I was in a textile class at school but I knew most of what we were doing so I wasn’t really challenged. (#23 Sharon)*

Some schools and teachers do a better job than others in fostering and developing students’ interests, knowledge and experience. The challenge is to find ways of connecting to the resources students bring to the classroom rather than ignoring them. What we take from the above stories is the importance of providing all students with opportunities to explore and expand their interests and connections to post-school pathways. Learning opportunities need to be personalised in ways that foster the development of students’ innate interests whilst encouraging, exploring and deepening career choices. Putting it another way, teaching and learning has to start from the position that students have something worthwhile to contribute to their learning. To this end, schools, families and community agencies need to work cooperatively to foster students’ talents and interests and assist them in pursuing a rewarding post-school pathway.

### **6.5.3 Students Need to Have Opportunities to Explore Big Ideas**

Finally, we want to draw on Janine’s story to illustrate the spirit of optimism and hope that young people can contribute to making the world a better place. We want to move beyond the purely instrumentalist logic of schooling to encompass a more educative vision of VET built around notions of active citizenship, democracy, critical inquiry, community and social justice. Janine was really interested in literature

and cultural studies as well as health science where she felt she could improve the lives of people. This story runs counter to the ways in which young people today are constructed as ‘trouble’, ‘at risk’ or ‘lacking motivation’. Marie Brennan (2001) tackles this problem by calling for a ‘systematic re-formation of the project of schooling to recapture its educativeness’ (p. 16) around three key questions:

1. What if we took seriously the educational task of building community through schooling?
2. What if we took seriously the educational task of helping to construct knowledge about the changing world with students as our partners – providing truly intellectually challenging schooling for all students?
3. What if we took seriously the educational task of being future- and action-orientated in our curriculum, especially in the secondary years to resource hope in practical ways? (p. 16).

These kinds of questions open up new ways of thinking about school-to-work transitions by moving beyond the limitations of a narrowly conceived instrumentalist approach to VET and instead, as Brennan (2001) argues, promoting the idea of schooling as:

1. a resource for the community with students taking on active roles ‘in doing worthwhile and valued activities in building community’ (e.g., as community archive and record keepers, a skills exchange, real-life research services, community newsletters, English language class providers and so on);
2. challenging students intellectually by engaging with big ideas and enabling them to be part of creating a better future (e.g., Why is there conflict in the world? How have people settled conflict in other times and places? What are the comparative costs between fossil fuels and solar powered equipment? What is illness?); and
3. forging an ‘activist approach to knowledge’ which allows students to act as agents of change within their communities (e.g., commissioned projects, community-based research and media production) (pp. 16–17).

Such approaches draw on a rich tradition of place-based education which, in the words of Gruenewald (2003), aims ‘to enlist teachers and students in the firsthand experience of local life and in the political process of understanding and shaping what happens there’ (p. 620; see also Theobald and Curtiss, 2000). McInerney, Smyth, and Down (2011) advance a series of questions to help frame a critical pedagogy of place-based education:

- What are the best features of our community? What could be done to make it a better place for all?
- What do monuments and public architecture tell us about the heritage that is most highly valued in this community? What groups are under-represented or rendered invisible?
- What might we do to ensure a more inclusive and accurate record of community heritage in our school and community?

- What is the quality of our local environment: the air, water, soil, native flora and fauna? What might we do to conserve our environment and resources to achieve a more sustainable future?
- To what extent does our school model and promote good environmental practices?
- What are the social, economic and cultural assets of our community? How fairly are they distributed? What can we do to work for a more just community?
- Who gets to make the decisions in our community? Whose voices are largely unheard? What might we do to achieve a more democratic society? (p. 12)

Returning to Janine's story for a moment, we can begin to see how her interest in making the world a better place translates into a broader curriculum project. In Janine's case, there are a number of questions to address, including: To what degree did her school encourage the expression and development of these ideas? How much of her learning and engagement with these ideas happened as a result of her personal initiatives? How did the academic subjects she studied in Years 11 and 12 contribute to her engagement with and understanding of big ideas? How did she develop a sense of altruism and how did this influence her views about the purpose of education and work? Addressing these kinds of questions makes change possible because it challenges the relationship between school knowledge, students' interests and community building.

In light of these stories, schools need to be far more imaginative in reinvigorating pedagogy to include students' interests linked to the broader moral, ethical and political purposes of education. Young people need spaces where they can explore and craft their own big ideas as knowledge producers as they grapple with the environmental, economic, cultural and social issues confronting the world today (Steinberg & Kincheloe, 1998).

## 6.6 Concluding Remarks

By way of conclusion, we have drawn on the stories of Adrian, Noreen and Janine and others to highlight the pivotal importance of re-imagining pedagogy in more productive and engaging ways to support young people as they make their way from school to the adult world. What we hear from these young people is a desire to learn in places that are flexible and responsive to their needs and interests and capable of engaging them with the big ideas and questions facing society. They want to be in schools that treat them with trust, respect and care, acknowledge their experience, capabilities and interests and show a willingness to challenge them in new ways. This new imagery is full of excitement, possibilities and challenges. It moves beyond the limitations of a narrow instrumentalist approach to skills training, competencies and credentials which is the only game in town for most young people today. What these young people have shown us with remarkable clarity is that there is another alternative, one based on the principles and values of democratic education.

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# Chapter 7

## Giving All Students a Fair Go

### 7.1 Introduction

Throughout this book, we have attempted to illustrate how schools might be refashioned to better support young people making school-to-work transitions, especially the least advantaged (Connell, 1993). Drawing on the idea of ‘the socially just school’ (Smyth, Down, & McInerney, 2014) we have endeavoured to map an alternative set of pedagogical, organisational and relational conditions based around an ethic of trust, respect and care for *all* students, not only the privileged few. In this chapter, we focus on what this might look like from the point of view of those students deemed to be ‘lost, confused and meandering’ and those classified with mental and physical disabilities.

Ross Gittins (2013), an Australian economist, argues that, whilst Australia has long prided itself on being the ‘lucky country’ galvanised around a spirit of egalitarianism where ‘Jack is as good as his master’, where first names are commonly used and men are more likely to address each other as ‘mate’ than ‘sir’, it is nothing more than a ‘facade’. In Chap. 3, we described in some detail how young people, especially in regard to education, employment and careers, have been savaged by the advent of neoliberalism. Here, we turned to the work of Nairn, Higgins, and Sligo (2012) to describe what it is like growing up in neoliberalising times with a focus on the kinds of opportunities and constraints young people face in an increasingly precarious labour market. We also endeavoured to highlight how the shift to individualistic and victim-blaming discourses serves to conceal the underlying structural and institutional arrangements holding these practices in place. In this chapter, we pursue these issues a little further by focusing on two key themes:

- attending to lost, confused and meandering students
- including students with disabilities.



## 7.2 Attending to Lost, Confused and Meandering Students

We begin with David's story because it is a salutary reminder of the role of education in helping young people to address two essential questions: who am I? and where do I fit in the world? As young people are increasingly left to the whims of market forces to determine their fate in life and work, David's experience highlights the pivotal importance of rediscovering the relational dimensions of education in order to help young people navigate their way in the world.

### 7.2.1 *David's Story: 'I Can't Really Think of Anything I Want to Do'*

*I don't know what skills I have ... I've never been for an interview. Life is up and down for me at the moment. I don't know what I will be doing in 12 months' time – whatever happens I suppose. I don't have any particular ambitions. I don't have a job but I have done volunteer work. (#26 David)*

David appears to have few aspirations. He is lost, confused and meandering with no clear idea about what he wants to do with his life both present and future. When we first spoke with David he had just entered The Link<sup>1</sup> program because he could no longer cope with the bullying at school. He had attended three other schools and two different technical colleges. Things were not working out well for David:

*[The Link] has given me an opportunity to do a course in something – I think it was Cert 2 in Business – and the chance to further my education or something. Today I'm doing some group thing. We have to go to Centrelink and pick up a Health Care Card so I can go to the chemist and fill out a prescription. It's not really a busy day but in comparison to other days it's a big day. Mostly we don't have much to do at all. (#26 David)*

David is being directed from program to program. He is not sure why or where it will lead him. He seems to have little control over decisions and simply wanders between programs, continually bored, lost and confused:

*Recently I got into the Early Engagement Project (EEP) as part of The Link. There are 7 others. I am not really sure of the details of how it works but I'm hoping to get a job out of it. (#26 David)*

Unfortunately, David did not get a job on this occasion, which only served to reinforce his negative experience of school:

*School helped me with basic life skills but nothing else because mostly we don't have much to do. School was not a good time for me. I wasn't connecting or learning anything. Most of the people I knew didn't want to know me anymore and because I was so far out of touch with school I felt like an outcast. (#26 David)*

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<sup>1</sup>The Link is a pseudonym for a government-funded program established in the 1980s in Australia with the 'vision to empower people and build communities through self-sufficiency, social inclusion, practical training and enhanced employment opportunities'.

Young people like David do not lack aspirations, as is commonly assumed. Rather, it is a matter of finding the appropriate cultural and educational settings in which he can achieve his dreams, goals and aspirations for a better life. David himself describes how this important identity work gets done at The Link:

*I've done some work experience in the past year. I spent about a month working as a volunteer at the Salvation Army store and then worked at a local environment centre where I did odd jobs like weeding, pruning and cutting trees. I have just come back from a one-week camp residential which was part of the EEP. We did team building, getting to meet new people, leadership type skills and had a trek. Now I have a clearer view of what I want to do. I want to do something in the field of law. The Link helped me work that out. We did an aptitude test to figure out what kind of job I would be best at. I've been researching the duties of a paralegal and I would like to have something to do with the government, civil law, power legal, small claims court – something where I'm helping the community. I have always had an interest in video games and TV series to do with law like Judge Judy. I'm not entirely sure what I have to do to get there but I know I have to attend law school and then pass the bar exam. (#26 David)*

David is very committed to improving his circumstances but lacks the knowledge and skills required to negotiate the complex procedures to gain entry into university. He has no idea about alternative entry programs or enrolment processes. He is a student who needs appropriate support, counselling and mentoring to help him realise his desire to become a paralegal. Meanwhile, he continues living at home and fills in time watching television or playing video games and has no idea of where to go to get help. Whilst they are important, he needs much more than volunteer work, camps and bonding activities if he is to navigate an educational pathway that will prepare him academically for university and a career in the paralegal area:

*In a few months' time the program will end and I will need to get a part-time job. Even if I get into law school I know I would like to get an easy part-time job so I can pay for things as the need arises. I don't really get any support for my plans from family and friends. I don't really talk to my Mum. I don't talk to anyone. Sometimes I ask Dad if he knows anyone who can get me a job. He would like to help but doesn't know anyone. Centrelink has helped me. I get some Youth Allowance which pays for my monthly phone bill. Next year when I turn 18, Mum will ask me to pay the rent which will be around \$50 a week. I should be able to manage that because I don't have much of a use for the money I get at the moment. (#26 David)*

David clearly has aspirations but is not sure how to achieve them. He is searching for ways to move off income support and into full-time work (Cruwys et al., 2013, p. 25):

*To achieve my goals, I definitely need encouragement from people and recommendations. I may have got a bit of motivation at school but it was never really enough. But I was overwhelmed then and not happy at that point in my life. Work would be good. I have never even had a real part-time job so anything would be good. I've applied at a lot of places like KFC, Hungry Jacks and supermarkets but they never get back. That would help. I did a Cert 4 in something at Perth TAFE. What it was I can't quite remember. (#26 David)*

In 2014, David told us that he still did not have a job, but he was enrolled in a TAFE course in music performance. He did not indicate, however, if he was enjoying the course and if it would lead to employment. He still appeared to be floundering; doing things to fill in time and overcome boredom and isolation. The world of work was elusive and he was excluded from it. Evidence indicates that David's failure to find a

first job or keep it for long can have negative long-term consequences in terms of his long-term career path and future earnings (OECD, 2010, p.1; OECD, 2014, p. 20).

Some important issues arise from David's narrative.

### **7.2.1.1 Neoliberal Policies and Institutional Changes Have Produced a Large and Growing Number of Young People Living and Working Precariously**

Growing numbers of young people are being confined to a series of short-term jobs, without recourse to stable occupational identities or careers, stable social protection or protective regulations relevant to them (Standing, 2011). Bauman (2004) argues that, because the notion of unemployment in the modern world is seen as an ailment, full employment for young people like David is the cure and ultimate destination. The contradiction, Bauman (2004) argues, is that young people are told they must be

flexible and not particularly choosy, not to expect too much from jobs, to take the jobs as they come without asking too many questions, and to treat them as an opportunity to be enjoyed on the spot as long as it lasts rather than as an introductory chapter of a 'life project' (pp. 10–11).

### **7.2.1.2 Those Unable to Find a Job Are at Risk of Remaining Unemployed for a Significant Time**

In her survey of the 2008–2010 economic downturn, Anlezark (2011) found that, although Australia experienced a relatively mild downturn, young people bore almost the entire weight of the full-time job decline (including apprenticeships), and a disproportionate share of the increase in unemployment. Increased unemployment drives young people out of full-time work and into inactivity or part-time work and discourages further education (Hérault, Kostenko, Marks, & Zakirova, 2010, p. 20). In David's case, a range of social and economic processes have conspired against him to the point where he is trapped in a cycle of disadvantage and excluded from the labour market with little hope for the future (White & Wyn, 2013, pp. 21–23).

### **7.2.1.3 Young People's Satisfaction or Happiness Relates to Their Education and Training Activities and Their Participation in the Labour Force**

Rothman and Hillman (2008, p. 40) conclude from three decades of Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth (LSAY) that young people's satisfaction and happiness is related to positive experiences of education and training and gainful employment. When social institutions (like schools) include or exclude particular individuals and classes of students (deciding who 'belongs' and who does not) then problems soon

arise. Cuervo and Wyn (2014) argue that the metaphor of belonging is very helpful in understanding how students need ‘to be connected to people, places and issues that matter to them’ (p. 903; see Chap. 6).

#### **7.2.1.4 Gaining a Certificate or Diploma Can Actually Reduce the Probability That an Individual May Exit Marginalisation**

Cruwys et al. (2013) argue that the practical challenges involved in obtaining qualifications might temporarily increase hardship because of the substantial investment of time, money and resilience from a group with limited resources. Ten years is a very long time to remain marginalised: education cannot be considered a ‘quick fix’ for marginalisation as proponents of human capital approaches to education would have us believe (p. 19).

#### **7.2.1.5 Access to Well-Informed and Appropriate Careers Advice Is Important**

Accessing appropriate and timely advice is absolutely crucial to effective transitions to economic participation (Kellock, 2007; Liu & Nguyen, 2011). Importantly, such advice needs to take account of ‘the wider circumstances surrounding the attitudes and behaviours of students and young people’ like David (Kellock, 2007, p. 3). This involves attending to issues ‘outside school’, because ‘the failure to address these external issues often resulted in behaviour which had a negative impact on student transitions’ (p. 3).

#### **7.2.1.6 Students Require Knowledge About the Availability of Local Services**

Students are generally unaware of the various options that are available to them in terms of transition support and services. This is exacerbated by the ways in which services are branded and identified by funding agencies. Young people are confused by the names given to programs and services. Young people also indicate that they would prefer ongoing support relationships to assist with their transition from school to paid employment. They would like a more personal form of assistance than that which is available from short-term, ‘outcome-focused’, government-funded services such as those experienced by David (Kellock, 2007, p. 3).

### **7.3 Including Students with Disabilities**

Listening to Paul, we are able to develop a different take on the problem of school-to-work transitions from the point of view of students with disabilities. Like Roger Slee (2004), we too share some ‘nervousness’ about the meanings and purposes

associated with the taken-for-granted language of ‘disabilities’, ‘special needs’ and ‘inclusive education’ given its history of ‘deficit bound psycho-medical paradigms of individual pathological defects’ (p. 47). We also share the conviction that if we are going to progress a more democratic conception and practice of inclusive schooling then the stories of people like Paul ‘need to be told’ (p. 55).

### 7.3.1 *Paul’s Story: ‘I Don’t Know Why I Got Moved’*

*When I was in the mainstream, I did English, Indonesian, Maths and Science. Mum said they did a test for autism and I was just above but I still went into the centre. I was ADHD for about 10 years – from primary school to Year 8 – but now I’m off the medication. I got a lot of C’s in the mainstream in Year 8 but halfway through Year 9 I got lots of D’s. My subjects were changing. I didn’t have a chance to study another language at school once they dropped Indonesian. I talk a lot with my dad about history and things that are happening in the world. (#32 Paul)*

Separating students like Paul out of mainstream high school presents significant dilemmas for educators both morally and educationally. As Paul’s story highlights, students with disabilities are often excluded from a broader range of subjects, opportunities and social interactions. Paul is motivated to learn foreign languages and has an interest in history. In his early years at a mainstream high school, he was coping, but when his subjects changed (due to streaming), he was no longer able to study foreign languages. In Year 9, his motivation for school waned and his grades suffered. Because of his primary school history and diagnosis of ADHD, he was placed in an education support centre for students with disabilities. Here, he had less distractions and more opportunity to do manual subjects. He continued studying foreign languages independently at home as these were not available at school. This would be quite a challenge for any 15 year old, as Paul explains:

*I really enjoy doing things with my hands and I am teaching myself Chinese and Japanese out of school. There are Filipinos working at the panelbeating place and they speak these languages. I learn in my own time and I like being in an individual room, not getting distracted by other kids. (#32 Paul)*

The selection process for students entering an education support centre is based on a formula using Intel IQ (69 or under) and Applied Behaviour Analysis (ABA)<sup>2</sup> is administered by a Department of Education psychologist. Many students enter the centres with mental health or co-morbidity issues such as autism spectrum disorder or ADHD. Paul was enrolled at the centre through a ‘grandfather clause’, meaning that he did not have to meet all the selection criteria; however, he was not considered emotionally ready to do full-time TAFE and his English language standard was not yet proficient enough to cope with mainstream high school.

<sup>2</sup>Applied Behaviour Analysis (ABA): According to the Western Australian Department of Education ‘the general principles of ABA are used in highly structured teaching techniques such as Discrete Trial Training and Direct Instruction programs. ABA programs are highly individualised. Complex tasks are broken into step-by-step actions. Continuous student data is used to inform instruction’ (DET, 2012).

When we first interviewed Paul in Year 10 and asked him what he wanted to do when he left school he mentioned panelbeating because his greatest interest was in painting car designs and airbrushing (something his grandfather had inspired him to do). He had also been encouraged during his school work experience program:

*I did a cycle of work there – one day cleaning, the next day painting and the third day panelbeating. I really liked this part because I enjoy sanding – doing things with my hands. There are Filipinos working at the panel beating place and they speak different languages. A Filipino guy who is really good at airbrushing taught me how to sand back car panels and apply coats of paint properly. After I tried it he said ‘you’re a natural’. My stepdad wants me to do something different but I like panelbeating. My real dad wants me to do roof tiling. I get along well with both of them. I have completed Horticulture Cert 1 and now I’m doing Business Cert 1. It’s all about how to run a business. (#32 Paul)*

In the beginning, even though Paul was hopeful about his future, he also had a realistic attitude about being able to find work in his chosen field. Nonetheless, he maintained a spirit of hope and started to actively seek worthwhile work, engaging the information and job-seeking skills acquired at the education support centre. In his words:

*From what I can see there are not too many opportunities for panelbeating apprenticeships around here. I have done some door knocking and handed in my resume to employers. I dress well to impress them. I don’t think it will be too difficult to get a job. They said they will take you straight from the apprenticeship. I pick up things quickly. I think I will be a good worker. I’m enthusiastic. I know I will need to have certificates and get all of my paperwork together. School has helped me to think about things and learn about the internet and computers so I can find things about jobs and training a lot quicker but they could show us what apprenticeships and traineeships are available and how we can get them. There are not too many openings in panelbeating. When jobs come up they go in two seconds flat. Painting jobs go quickly too. You have to be there to take advantage of them. (#32 Paul)*

Paul was feeling confident that the certificates that he was completing at school would help him find work in his chosen field and maybe eventually allow him to run his own business. During his Year 11 interview he told us that everything seemed to be falling into place and he had made some clear plans for the future:

*There are a lot of things that have happened since we last met. I’ve been looking at work in three different industries. One is panelbeating and I’ve almost got my Cert 3 with TAFE. I’m doing that so I can get an apprenticeship. Next door is a panel shop and I’ve been thinking of going there for the second half of the year for work experience. If I do well there it might turn into a job. I also like welding and spray-painting. I’ve completed certificates at level one in horticulture, business education and mechanics. I’ll have a Cert 2 in mechanics when I leave. That should help me get into panelbeating and spray-painting. I’ll probably do Cert 3 and 4 courses at TAFE over the next couple of years. (#32 Paul)*

When we interviewed Paul a year later, the situation was grim. He told us that, even though he had finished Year 12, graduated from school with a WACE certificate and completed a Certificate 2 in panel beating at TAFE, he still did not have an apprenticeship or any work:

*I did do a bit of the course in spray-painting but I dropped out because I had to do something for the family at the time. I’m not working at the moment but I’ve been sending in resumes and letters to say I want to go into jobs – anything on the mechanical side of things. I’m not*

*too sure about applying for an apprenticeship. I'm just going to get a job and if they let me do an apprenticeship I'll do it there. I've put in 6 applications about three weeks ago, 5 around this area and then there's one down in 'Inji'. Two of the jobs were advertised and the others were not. I just went up and said 'I'm interested in mechanics. Have you got any work?' I've not heard back from them yet. I have to wait until tomorrow and see if I got it and if don't I'll go do another one. I haven't seen any apprenticeships advertised at the moment. I would just like any job in any workshop. I look on the internet and sometimes in the paper for job advertisements. I got one of them from the local paper for a tyre place in the industrial area. I went there and it didn't happen 'cos I didn't have a forklift licence at the time. I have also applied to the Pizza Place but I haven't heard back from them. (#32 Paul)*

Despite Paul's determination and enthusiasm to gain certification, he remains unemployed, even unable to find part-time or casual work and unable to afford transport. He is, therefore, dependent on welfare and other agencies:

*It costs money to run the car and I don't have any part-time work. I'm on a Centrelink Youth Allowance. I'm not really sure how much I get but I know it's around \$200 a week and something to start off. I've had 2 weeks so far. When I went there we signed up and they said that I had to go and look for jobs and that. I went to go to Assist<sup>3</sup> for support but we eventually went to another place that helps with disabilities. So far have they been helpful. They sometimes drive me to places that are pretty far away. (#32 Paul)*

After 3 years of hard work to become suitably qualified and then actively seeking an apprenticeship or any kind of work, Paul's job prospects are not looking good. The only experience of work he has had was temporary and through the support of agencies.

*I was keen to do some airbrushing a while back but I pretty much cancelled it, yeah. I'd like to come back to it later down the track but not straight away, once I get more experience in that type of work and then do it. I really just want to be doing something – preferably panelbeating but I'm not sure if there are a lot of apprenticeships around. Sometimes they keep it a secret. I know there was one down at 'Rayborn' but when I went down there they said 'No, no, we don't have one', but I know that someone left there, 'cos one of my mates goes to work in there so he tells me everything. Panelbeating does get busy. One time I was doing work experience at a place and I had to work on 13 cars. At these places, they do almost 30 cars in a week and the last car I didn't get to do 'cos they took it off me and I was like 'why?' and it was really the easiest job as well. (#32 Paul)*

A number of crucial issues to do with getting a job emerge from Paul's experience.

### **7.3.1.1 *Despite the Best Efforts of Students with Disabilities Their Efforts Are Considered 'In-valid'* (Slee, 2011, p. 13)**

Paul's experience of school and his search for a job illustrate how students with disabilities are marginalised compared to their mainstream counterparts (Lamb, 2011, p. 337). Programs that 'segregate', 'stigmatize' and 'denigrate' students can serve to reinforce pathological identities that confine them to lower forms of occupational

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<sup>3</sup>The Assist (pseudonym) program's purpose is to enhance the lives of children affected by a rare disease or condition, by providing responsive financial and practical assistance and facilitating access to information, resources and services for their families and carers.

preparation (Polk, 1988, p. 124). With increasing emphasis on standardised test scores, competition and market choice, ‘liability students’, as Slee (1998) describes them, become a problem for the normal(ising) high school. Therefore, it is hardly surprising to find an escalating number of students being diagnosed with medical and intellectual conditions requiring ‘special attention’ (Pohl, 2013; Slee, 1998). Whilst Paul found it much easier to learn in the caring and supportive community at the support unit, the social stigma of being labelled ‘special’ or ‘disadvantaged’ has jeopardised his potential both in terms of choice of subjects and likelihood of secure work.

### **7.3.1.2 The Pressure for Credentials Leads to ‘Qualification Inflation’ and a ‘Devaluing of All Qualifications’ (Ainley & Allen, 2010, p. 4)**

The Council of Australian Governments (COAG) considers a Certificate III to be the minimum-level qualification for improving employment outcomes (2010). For students like Paul, the challenge of working their way up to higher levels of education is a long road (Griffin, 2014, p. 19). Paul began in Year 10, being enrolled in Certificate 1, and then moved through to Certificate 2. In upper high school, he travelled a long way from home to attend TAFE; however, he was repeating lower-level qualifications that most students now have. Participating in higher levels of education (or more accurately credentialing) is, therefore, ‘like running up and down an escalator’ (Ainley & Allen, 2010, p. 4).

### **7.3.1.3 People with Disabilities Are Being Marginalised in the Labour Market**

In his 2013 Australia Day address to the nation, Paralympic gold medal winner Kurt Fearnley highlighted the extent of disability inequality in Australia in the following words:

If you have a disability in our country, you’re more likely to be unemployed, more likely to be living in poverty and more likely to be less educated than if you didn’t have that disability. In comparison to other economically rich nations that are members of the Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development, the statistics for Australia are damning. In Australia, 45 percent of people with a disability live in, or near, poverty; more than double the OECD average of 22 percent. We rank 21st out of 29 OECD countries in employment participation rates for those with a disability. We rank 27th of the 27 in terms of the correlation between disability and poverty. Our system is broken, it isn’t doing enough (Fearnley, 2013).

In a feature story on the Australian Broadcasting Corporation’s (ABC) show *The Drum*, soon to be relieved Disability Discrimination Commissioner Graeme Innes spoke to Steve Cannane, painting a picture of where the sector stands upon his departure for people with disabilities (PWD).

- PWD are 30% less employed than people in the general population.



- The percentage of PWD in the public service has declined from 5.8 to 2.9% in the last 15 years.
- PWD make up 15% of the working population.
- 45% of PWD live in or near poverty – the highest rate in an OECD country.
- The Year 12 completion rate for PWD is half that of the general population (25%, as compared to 50%).
- 37% of complaints to the discrimination commission in 2012–2013 concerned disability.
- Organisations leading the way in employing people with disability are Westpac (13%), Department of Health and Ageing (10%), ANZ and Telstra (ABC, 2014).

### 7.3.1.4 The ‘Dangerous Rise of Therapeutic Education’ (Ecclestone & Hayes, 2009)

Like many vulnerable young people facing long-term unemployment (Furlong & Cartmel, 2004), Paul receives valuable short-term work opportunities through support agencies and other ‘therapeutically based’ interventions. Whilst such programs may provide important support, they are not without problems as Ecclestone and Hayes (2009) explain:

For us, the rapid, unchallenged rise of therapeutic education is evidence that the radical transformative aspect of ‘liberal’ education has been lost. Calling education ‘transformative’ is shorthand for the transformative power of human beings to try to change the world and, in doing so, to change themselves. In the present climate, the focus has shifted completely away from changing the world towards changing yourself in order to accept your vulnerability and human frailty and then to be coached to have ‘appropriate’ emotions associated with emotional well-being (p. 161).

## 7.4 Rethinking Policy and Practice

David and Paul’s stories provide some key pointers for creating a fair go for all students. David is a young man still searching for meaning and purpose in his life. He struggled with school and found himself being shunted between various short-term programs. Paul, on the other hand, was diagnosed with ADHD and spent his days in the education support centre where he received ‘special attention’ (Slee, 1998). He wants to be a panelbeater and is passionate about car paint design and airbrushing. From different perspectives, they both face obstacles and barriers in terms of education, employment and careers. In addressing these issues then we need to ask more critical kinds of questions, such as:

- How can schools promote positive educational experiences to ensure that *all* students engage meaningfully with school, have good relationships with their teachers, and broaden their social networks?

- How can schools, employers and government work together to break the ‘churning’ cycle of long-term economic marginality (MacDonald & Marsh, 2005) (i.e. moving in and out of employment and/or between unemployment and low-level jobs)?
- What pedagogical, relational and community-related conditions need to be created to meet the needs of a diverse student population?
- To what extent do Certificate 1 and 2 level qualifications assist students in a competitive labour market?
- Where are the apprenticeships for young people with disabilities?
- Why do young people with disabilities find it so difficult to get ‘real’ and permanent jobs?
- How can we prevent young people with disabilities from blaming themselves for failing to secure a job?

By addressing these kinds of questions, we begin to open up spaces for some different ways of thinking about the problem of student marginalisation, inequality and youth unemployment for example:

#### ***7.4.1 Interrupting the Status Quo Through ‘Community Accountability’ (Stovall, 2007)***

Stovall (2007) invokes the idea of ‘the politics of interruption’ to describe neighbourhood high schools in which community accountability challenges ‘the power of the status quo, while investigating racial, political, social, and economic forces that impact on schools’ (pp. 681–682). He adopts Beauboeuf-Lafontant’s (1999) term ‘politically relevant pedagogy’ to challenge common deficit views of marginalised young people. What we take from this approach is a renewed commitment to the core values of ‘democracy, community ownership, self-discipline, flexibility, life-long learning, innovation, accountability, leadership, development, cross-cultural respect, efficacy, teamwork, and empowerment’ as the cornerstones of community accountability and social justice for all students (Stovall, 2007, p. 684).

#### ***7.4.2 Developing a ‘Portfolio’ of Schools to Meet the Needs of All Students (Darling-Hammond, 2010, p. 267)***

Darling-Hammond (2010) makes the point that school districts should provide a variety of educational options including clusters of smaller schools to provide real choices based on different philosophies, structures, curriculum and pedagogy rather than insisting on ‘one size fits all’. The evidence shows that being open to different (not inferior) ways of ‘doing’ school is more likely to enhance ‘[a]ttitudes, engagement and intentions on educational achievement and participation’ (Hillman, 2010, p. 6).

### 7.4.3 *Legislating the Idea of ‘Occupational Citizenship’ (Standing, 2009)*

The idea of ‘occupational citizenship’ is founded on the principles of full freedom and basic income security for all young people (Standing, 2009). Such a strategy combines ‘occupational social protection schemes and democratic sharing of capital income’ (p. 302). For example, the Brotherhood of St Laurence (2014) advocates the establishment of a youth-specific wage subsidy program targeted at 19- to 24-year-olds that prepares young people for work and supports employers to develop the skills of young people. This could be achieved, they argue, by redesigning existing wage subsidy programs and sharing the Job Commitment Bonus between a young person and their employer (p. 5).

### 7.4.4 *Building Social Networks*

Evidence indicates that when individuals have access to social support and social contact regardless of their depth of disadvantage then they are more likely to overcome marginalisation. This speaks to the importance of personal social capital, community participation and the social cohesion it generates, providing tangible resources such as assistance in finding a job and, particularly, providing essential emotional resources, such as a sense of belonging (Cruwys et al., 2013, p. 26).

Stanton-Salazar (1997) draws on the notion of social capital to develop what he describes as ‘a network-analytic approach’ to social inequality. In his words, this refers

to the unequal distribution of opportunities for entering into different social and institutional contexts and for forming relationships with agents who exert various degrees of control over institutional resources, such as bureaucratic influence, career-related information, and opportunities for specialized training or mentorship (p. 4).

For marginalised students like David and Paul, Stanton-Salazar (1997) recommends six key forms of institutional support:

1. *the provision of various funds of knowledge* associated with ascension within the educational system (this form of support includes implicit and explicit socialisation into institutional discourses that regulate communication, interaction, and exchange within mainstream institutional spheres);
2. *bridging*, or the process of acting as a human bridge to gatekeepers, to social networks, and to opportunities for exploring various ‘mainstream’ institutions (e.g. university campuses);
3. *advocacy* and related forms of personalised intervention;
4. *role modelling*; and
5. the provision of *emotional* and *moral support* (p. 11, original emphasis).

### ***7.4.5 Developing Youth Participation and Agency***

Developing participatory approaches with young people allows them to participate as active citizens, endows them with rights and recognition, and enables them to focus on what they want and how they understand their role in the community (Black, Walsh, & Taylor, 2011, p. 45). According to Black et al. (2011), principles that have worked in youth participation include:

- a clear and conscious focus on young people's strengths and a commitment to fostering these strengths
- addressing issues in ways that respond to their own priorities, interests and needs while maintaining a safe environment for their efforts, particularly where the issues being addressed through these efforts are personally confronting or challenging
- providing opportunities for self-expression and creativity
- including activities that are both purposeful and enjoyable
- creating supportive relationships and connections
- ensuring appropriate and adequate support from skilled workers and effective role models (p. 47).

### ***7.4.6 Providing Inclusive Experiences for All Students***

Lamb (2011) believes that the best way to assist marginalised students is by ensuring that all school policies and programs 'provide a similar foundation of learning and deliver access to the full range of further education and work opportunities for all' (p. 337). In addition to 'a rich and varied school education' (Liu & Nguyen, 2011) students with disabilities also require specific strategies to enhance school-to-work transitions (Griffin, 2014, p. 19). Successful school-to-work transitions are more likely if employers are willing to offer 'high quality opportunities for work experience, training and progression' (Keep, 2012, p. 28).

## **7.5 Concluding Remarks**

We started this chapter by challenging the view that Australia is an egalitarian society especially for young people growing up in neoliberal times. Through the stories of David and Paul and what they had to say about school-to-work transitions, we have not only questioned the myth of a fair go but also mapped a range of issues, questions and concerns for critical reflection and action. On the basis of their narratives we have identified some new possibilities for rethinking the pedagogical and

relational dimensions of schooling in favour of the least advantaged (Connell, 1993). We agree with Lissovoy (2010) when he says that:

If “caring” means attending to the successful accommodation of individual students to the regime of the school, lovingness means insisting on the fact of social solidarity against the ways that schooling separates, assimilates, and expels (p. 432).

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# Chapter 8

## Understanding Young Lives

### 8.1 Introduction

To begin to understand young lives, Bauman and May (2001) advocate thinking sociologically because, ‘regardless of what we do, we are dependent upon others’ (p. 5). In other words, how ‘we see each other, ourselves and our knowledge, actions and their consequences’ are connected to the types of social relations and societies that we inhabit (p. 5). Nowhere is this point more relevant than in the way society treats its young people, especially the most vulnerable. In this chapter, we start from the point of view that all young people, irrespective of their backgrounds, have a right to a good education and the opportunity to ‘live with dignity, prosperity, and the promise of a better future’ (Giroux, 2011, p. 112).

In pursuing this more humane and optimistic vision we acknowledge the unequal starting points that many young people confront through no fault of their own. A complex array of issues around families, poverty, drug and alcohol abuse, and physical and mental illness can present enormous challenges for individual students. These students are typically ‘living on the edge’ (Smyth & Wrigley, 2013) whilst juggling competing demands around part-time work, assisting parents and siblings, or coping with their own personal anxieties. Like Caine, Lessard, Steeves, and Clandinin (2013), we too are ‘troubled’ by common-sense views of school-to-work transitions which tend to obscure the realities of what young people are actually ‘living in and through’ (p. 256).

For these reasons, we seek to shift the focus from seeing ‘youth as a problem’ (e.g. ‘deficit’, ‘at risk’, ‘lazy’ or ‘incompetent’) and instead locate their troubles in the context of escalating levels of precarity (see Chap. 3). As Giroux (2011) argues, young people today face an uncertain future as the ‘social state’ is increasingly ‘hollowed out and stripped of its welfare functions’ (p. 112). In this context, youth are too easily constructed as ‘trouble’ or a ‘threat to be contained’ through the ‘logic of punishment, surveillance and penal control’ (Giroux, 2011, p. 113). In response, we

want to ask questions, like: How did things get this way? What holds them in place? And what can be done to change it?

In addressing these questions, we endeavour to develop a critical understanding of the complexities of young peoples' lives in order to advance a more compassionate and intelligent way of thinking about the 'troubles' of young people. We hope these insights will be useful for a range of stakeholders (e.g. school leaders, teachers, nurses, social workers, youth workers, policy makers and community activists) interested in supporting students in a safe and nurturing environment. This chapter will examine how these personal and structural issues are played out in the lives of the participants around two key themes:

- working with the complexities of young lives
- acknowledging the wider context of young lives.

## 8.2 Working with the Complexities of Young Lives

There is no better place to begin to understand what we mean by the complexities of young lives than sharing extracts from the portrait of one of our participants, Michelle.

### 8.2.1 *Michelle's Story: 'It Was the Worst Year'*

*I was in Year 9 and I hated it. I dislocated my arm and then I broke my foot. I had glandular fever and was off school most of the year. My dad was in and out of jail and he used to bash my Mum. I tried out drugs then. I would only go to one or two lessons a day and then I would get screamed at. Now I am on tablets for ADHD but I think I've stuffed up my sleeping pattern. (#27 Michelle)*

It is evident from listening to Michelle that her daily life is complicated. Raised by her mother, a victim of domestic violence, she has been plagued by illnesses and injuries and carries the stigma and the repercussions of being diagnosed with ADHD. As du Bois-Reymond (2009) explains, 'in comparison with former generations, the future has become generally less predictable in personal life courses' for young people like Michelle (p. 36). Michelle had been interested in nursing from a young age and had lots of personal experience in the medical field because her mother had a kidney removed, and Michelle herself had recurring kidney infections. Her father had been in and out of jail and during that time Michelle experimented with illicit drugs. She only stopped doing so when she realised that her fitness was important in achieving her future career choice to be a paramedic or nurse.

Michelle was working part-time at a fast food store but it was not a job she was aspiring towards for the rest of her life. When we last interviewed Michelle, her goal was to pass her final year of high school and gain entry into university. Initially, she had aspirations to become an architect but later realised she would prefer a career



where she could ‘*help people*’ because, as she relayed in her interview, ‘*I want to be known. I want to be a hero.*’ In addition, Michelle admitted that ‘*I do have some problems to overcome if I’m going to achieve my goal*’.

Wyn’s (2009) longitudinal research in Australia on the participation of young people in education confirms that, for students like Michelle, the ‘changes in the way in which young people live their lives mean that many elements of education systems that are currently taken for granted are becoming outmoded’ (p. 102). Michelle’s story makes it blatantly clear that her schooling experience is indeed ‘outmoded’ and not flexible enough to meet her needs (ACEE & AYCRC, 2001).

We have chosen to shed light on four key issues arising from Michelle’s story as they relate to getting a job. These are: personal, family and health matters; identity formation; streaming of students within school; and attending to students’ strengths and needs. As Giroux (2011) argues, young people like Michelle are at ‘the heart-beat of politics’ because they ‘provide a powerful referent for not only the long-term consequences of social policies, if not the future itself, but also because they offer a crucial index to measure the moral and democratic values of a nation’ (Giroux, 2011, p. 140).

### **8.2.1.1 Personal, Family and Health Matters Impact on Schooling and Career Aspirations**

Michelle’s narrative reveals a great deal about the ways in which personal, family and health-related problems interfere with school completion and the likelihood of getting a job. As Smyth (2016, p. 211) explains, ‘how young people respond to schooling, is highly dependent on their family background and personal and circumstantial history ... [and] there is a complexity and messiness to them that may not fit well with middle-class sensibilities’ (p. 221). The complex circumstances surrounding Michelle’s life proved too much for her and, like many students, she was unable to cope with the rigidity and boredom of schooling. When students like Michelle view personal and educational difficulties as ‘their fault’ then they often have little expectation that schools can or will help them to succeed in achieving their dreams. As Fine, Burns, Torre, and Payne (2008) explain it, ‘low expectations from adults ultimately convert into self-defeating attitudes and reluctance by students to seek the help they need (p. 233). As a consequence, students are more likely to fail or drop out of school and blame themselves for circumstances beyond their control.

### **8.2.1.2 Establishing a Sense of Identity and Self-Worth Is Essential to Success in School, Careers and Life**

Taylor (cited in Smyth, 2016, p. 217) argues that schools are ‘emotional landscapes’ and as such are places of identification as much as they are of dis-identification because some students feel as though they belong whilst others do not. Students like Michelle are struggling to find their place in the world. School is one of the few

public places left where she can explore where she fits in. Importantly, schools should be places where young people can develop the kinds of attributes, knowledge and capabilities required to succeed in education, work and family life. As Shildrick and MacDonald explain it, young people like Michelle ‘now experience longer periods of dependency upon parents and have delayed access to the identities and activities which were previously regarded as signifying adult status (e.g. earning a wage, leaving the parental home, the establishment of long-term partnerships, parenthood)’ (p. 590).

Regardless of her performance and grades in lower school, Michelle did not gain entry into the university-bound Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR) course at school. Initially, she was placed in the ATAR course until she became ill again and, because of her reputation as an ‘underperforming’ student, she was advised that the subjects would be far too challenging for her. Michelle was angry and frustrated by this decision and unsurprisingly it soon escalated to the point where her reputation as a capable student deteriorated further. ‘*Someone would do something wrong but I got the blame*’, she told us.

Michelle was then placed on medication for ADHD that led to further complications because the tablets interfered with her sleeping pattern. In her words, ‘*I go to sleep at the wrong time ... I am always tossing and turning at 4 am*’. As a consequence, she was late for school most mornings. Given the school’s inability to deal with these issues, Michelle decided to make a fresh start at another school (at least 50 km from her home).

Michelle’s story is a timely reminder that schools must be concerned with much more than the ‘academics’. For students, the priority is to establish relationships and connections with peers and navigate the adult world with all its complexity. This is largely a relational activity in which students learn how to make sense of and negotiate the complex demands of their life both inside and outside of school. In short, students are ‘becoming somebody’ (Wexler, 1992) in ways that are ‘socially constructed, fluid and multifaceted’ (Nairn, Higgins, & Sligo, 2012, p. 19) and always in relationship with others. Therefore, it makes a great deal of sense to view schools as relational places rather than disciplinary sites churning out compliant and docile workers (Ainley & McKenzie, 2007; Bingham & Sidorkin, 2004).

### **8.2.1.3 Streaming Students Works Against the Best Interests of the Least Advantaged**

The social practice of streaming students on the basis of their grades in the competitive academic curriculum means that schools function more as sifting and sorting machines than places of education, especially for the least advantaged (Connell, 1993; Teese & Polesel, 2003; see Chap. 3). Tranter (2012, p. 909) explains how class and geographic location play out in situations like Michelle’s: ‘Early segregation into vocational as opposed to academic subject choices runs the risk of reintroducing streaming by stealth into a new dual sector system of technical versus academic schooling’ (p. 909).

Irrespective of students' circumstances, the desire of schools to improve their statistical performance on standardised test scores tends to override the personal needs of students like Michelle. If education is only concerned with academic grades and performance based on externally imposed standards designed for university entry then opportunities to engage students and expand their learning in creative, rigorous and meaningful ways is squeezed out. Silfver, Sjoberg, and Bagger (2016) draw on ethnographic data to highlight the impact of international assessment trends on children who are increasingly seen as pawns in the rankings and league tables game. They go on to describe the damaging effects of standardised testing within neo-liberal discourse:

where what counts are results (more than learning), and where children (as well as teachers and schools) are measured and made personally responsible for their performances without for example considering different family situations, backgrounds and other contextual actors that impact on learning and engaging in school (2016, p. 250).

During Year 9, Michelle told us that her grades '*were pretty bad because of my absences but my teacher comments were good*'. She also told us that she had health issues such as iron deficiency and a broken leg, thus requiring medical certificates to help her pass grades. By the time Michelle was transitioning from Year 10 into upper school she told us that '*teachers sorted us into two grades: people in the higher class and the lower class. I am in the higher class but I think it's still too easy.*' Michelle expressed her belief that major health problems and domestic issues were significant obstacles plaguing her and her family and that if only she could perform and improve her grades then she would be able to achieve her career goal. In their collection of papers focusing on issues of class and place in respect of students like Michelle, Shildrick, Blackman and McDonald (2009) explain that

regrets about lack of effort and achievement at school were common, with individual lack of progress in the labour market frequently theorized in terms of personal 'failure' at school (rather than in terms of the contingencies of class-based and closed-down opportunity structures) (p. 462).

By considering the complex lives of students as well as their particular needs, desires and aspirations, it is much harder to individualise them (as personal failures) or categorise them into academic and non-academic streams. Rather, the focus is on what is in the best interests of each student, emotionally, intellectually and socially at that time. In Michelle's case, the question becomes what does she need to realise her dream of becoming a paramedic and how can the school help?

### 8.2.1.4 Working with Students' Strengths

Michelle attended her new school for one semester during Year 11. However, the challenge of public transport (walking to the train station, a long train ride, and a bus from the station to school) and having to make new friends and adjust to teachers she did not know was overwhelming. She returned to her old school the following semester. Even though her former school experience was not ideal, at least she knew

‘which teachers to go to if I need help with studying and all that’. Unfortunately, Michelle turned to both illicit and prescription drugs and withdrew to the back of the classroom in order to cope with school. Michelle elaborates:

*Sitting still and studying can be hard if what I’m learning is boring or I already know it, or it’s too basic. Usually I just sit around staring and shaking my leg. But if it’s really interesting, then I’ll just keep my head down and listen to the teacher. I try to isolate myself from people in class so I can concentrate. I’ve changed. It used to be that I was the kid in the class who got blamed if someone did something wrong. Now I’m the last person to be blamed because I’m always in the back by myself doing my work. (#27 Michelle)*

Michelle’s story illustrates what school reformers have been arguing for a long time: genuine school reform must start with the needs of kids. The problem, according to school principals like Wood (2005), is that ‘the basic shape of the high school goes unquestioned’ [and] unchanged ... because we would rather blame the kids than take on the hard work of restructuring our schools’ (p. 33). He (2005) believes that schools must start from where students are at, for example, Michelle’s interest and experience around health care and first aid, and her determination to become a nurse or paramedic. In this way, Michelle has some ownership and commitment to school based on meaningful activities and relationships (Bottrell, 2011).

If we decide to work with and support the complexities of students’ lives then we can begin to ask questions about what could be thought about and done differently in engaging young people in their schooling. Slee (2011) argues that ‘inclusive education asks questions about the power relations of schooling, bears witness to injustice and seeks an educational settlement that will provide the knowledge, skills and dispositions necessary for a better world’ (p. 155). For example, by incorporating students’ strengths and assets in ‘classroom processes and teacher–student interactions’ (Smith & Smith, 2009, p. 349) we are more likely to re-engage students like Michelle, who has a keen interest and experience in nursing, paramedics and caring for her own and others’ health and safety.

### 8.3 Acknowledging the Wider Context of Young Lives

The second part of this chapter focuses on the wider context of young peoples’ lives in the context of ‘the neo-liberal ethos of competitive individualism’ (Slee, 2011, p. 143; see Chap. 3). We have chosen to focus on two narrative portraits – Warren’s and Sue’s – because they reveal two very different scenarios of how different classes of students are either included or excluded from the benefits of education. Warren, for example, is positively supported and recognised by his family and school, whereas Sue’s circumstances put her at a significant disadvantage.

### 8.3.1 Warren's Story: 'I'm Very Lucky When It Comes to My Family'

*When it comes to the future I'm not the type of person who looks ahead much. I live in the present – whatever happens, happens. My family doesn't put any pressure on me. They will support me with whatever decision I make. School is helping me along this track. Our Year 11 is good. My little plan is to take over the xxx business from dad ... I suppose I have a ready-made business to go into ... I think I'm pretty good at selling. (#11 Warren)*

*I'm not sure how I feel about my future. I don't see it sitting in an office. I would like to be out there doing something in the sporting area. A lot of people only focus on one thing and then when it doesn't go right they don't know what to do. They've got nothing but I have something to fall back on in the xxx business. I'm very lucky when it comes to my family stuff. (#11 Warren)*

### 8.3.2 Sue's Story: 'Finance Is a Bit of an Issue'

*Finance is a bit of an issue. My mum works as a carer but a couple of months ago my parents separated. It was and still is a messy breakup. Dad used to be at home with us but he's not now. There's been a lot of conflict around all this but we all pulled together around mum. I'm more careful now about how I spend money. My grades did drop off a little bit, but school was still a thing that was a big part of our lives really. I'm now working at Big W in Admiral about 10 hours a week. I get money and am not overloaded with work and still have time to do my study. My after-school music has stopped and I don't do martial arts either. I wanted to do both but just got too lazy. (#16 Sue)*

Clearly, young people have very different opportunity structures, and the broader contexts of their lives are writ large in the way they envisage their futures and how they go about bringing their plans to fruition. Young people like Warren have what might be considered a 'dream run' in terms of options and family circumstances, compared to others like Sue who have to navigate quite complex lives outside of school in dealing with messy family break-ups and the issues that come with them. Holding onto a long-held aspiration to become a nurse has been a challenge for Sue, while Warren, on the other hand, knows he has a much smoother ride through schooling because of his comfortable (and stable) family circumstances. He acknowledges that his educational journey is relaxed and much less stressful than others he knows.

In the final interview with Warren he revealed he was not stressed about Year 12 because his future was relatively secure. Nonetheless, he actually did well enough in his final exams to gain entry to university and was studying a physical education program. This was not something he had anticipated nor been actively pursuing. Sue's plans had shifted around quite a bit. She still had a passion for nursing, but was committed to completing schooling and then doing a program to become an

Enrolled Nurse at TAFE. She had abandoned the idea of entering a university nursing program and transferring to physiotherapy, and instead viewed the TAFE nursing program as a possible step into nursing in a university.

It seems that young people like Sue, who have to rely on their own personal resources (her mother was a disability carer), are much more susceptible to forming unrealistic plans, and therefore they need to spend a lot of time having to refocus them to make them attainable. Sue's journey was not as smooth as Warren's. Two key issues have been raised in Sue and Warren's narratives and circumstances in terms of acknowledging the wider context of their lives. These are resources and the inequity of their distribution, and the burden of life stresses and how they impact significantly and differently on young people's capacity to pursue their career aspirations.

### 8.3.2.1 The Resources Required to Access Job Opportunities Are Inequitably Distributed

Wyn (2011) makes the point that 'Education is too important to be left to market forces' (p. 63). Some young people's lives are cluttered with lots of out-of-school issues that impact seriously on their school lives. The effect is that resources these young people might otherwise have to pursue their aspirations for a job are diverted, meaning that they end up having to deal with matters that deflect one of the major reasons they are in school.

Like Sue, another one of our participants, Noreen, told of her experience of being caught between hanging on to one of the most important aspirations in her life (to be a professional singer) and having to let go because of work, family and school commitments (see Chap. 6).

*Singing is still an important part of my life. I was supposed to go to the X Factor auditions yesterday but it didn't happen. My mum decided at the last minute not to take me and I was pretty upset about it ... [and] after our interview last year I realized that I needed to have a back-up job. (#4 Noreen, 2012)*

*A big part of the music thing is to travel to America. That's where things happen. Most people who sign up to record labels are there. I need money to get into WAAPA so I have to save a lot of money for all the books and stuff like that. At least I have a plan now and I'm only 16 years old. I'm no longer working at the pizza place. I went from there to another restaurant in town. I got the job because I knew the owner but I'm going to be starting at a café soon ... I've graduated from being a runner on the tables. I'm on the till now, which is a bit easier. I do 6 hours there every Friday which gives me a bit more time for school. (#4 Noreen, 2013)*

*I am working at the café doing casual hours. I am 17 now and desperately saving money. (#4 Noreen, 2014)*

### 8.3.2.2 The Burden of Life Stresses Can Have a Significant Impact on Young People's Capacity to Pursue Career Aspirations

Creating a pathway to a job is not a straightforward or linear process. Many young people are forced to be mature beyond their years in handling hurdles and obstacles, usually in their lives outside of school. As confirmed by a number of reports (ACEE & AYRC, 2001; Kellock, 2007), young people often seek ongoing support to assist with their school-to-work transition. They are looking for a more personal, multi-dimensional form of assistance that provides opportunities to succeed rather than enrolling in short-term, 'outcome-focused', 'government-funded services' (Kellock, 2007, p. 26). In many respects, the contrast between Warren and Sue could not be starker, and we are left wondering where the place of schooling is in these cases. As Tsiolkas (2016) explains, 'in an economic system where access to social security and jobs is increasingly precarious, divisions are exacerbated and amplified' (p. 33). Students like Warren seemingly have to contend with fewer impediments, so how can schools possibly level up the uneven playing field? We suspect that this can only (and does on many occasions) occur through the sensitivity, awareness and humanity of individual teachers and schools that get up close to what is happening in young lives, and adjust the way they operate accordingly. If we had to choose a term for it we would call it a 'humanizing pedagogy' (Bartolome, 1994; Salazar, 2013).

## 8.4 Rethinking Policy and Practice

Michelle, Warren, Sue and Noreen from different perspectives shed light on the ways in which young people experience very different opportunities in terms of career pathways and family circumstances, all of which have broad policy and practice implications. As Klenowski (2009) argues, 'too often the effects of social class, race, gender, ethnicity and locality on students' participation rates in schooling, their school performance, and their subsequent life opportunities are not taken into account in the development of policy' (p. 13). This section will begin to pull together some ways in which we might begin to rethink school-to-work transition policies and practices based on the narratives of the students we have listened to in this chapter, like:

- enabling young people to reach their full potential
- developing a more humanising and democratic pedagogy
- knowing your students and building relationships
- working with students' needs, capacities and culture
- creating flexible and responsive school structures and procedures
- blurring the boundaries between academic and vocational learning.

### ***8.4.1 Enabling Young People to Reach Their Full Potential***

As mentioned in the first section of this chapter, if schools are going to attend to the complex lives of students then they will need to be radically restructured because anything less will lead to social waste and injustice for escalating numbers of young people who no longer believe in the promise of education. As Baroutis, McGregor, and Mills (2016) argue, these changes will hinge on the ability of schools to reinvent themselves in ways that give students ‘ownership of practices and decision-making’ about ‘curricular choice and the inclusion of personal interests and strengths within a school environment’ (p. 131). Furthermore, they will also need to accommodate in more compassionate ways the differential impact of family and life circumstances on school performance. Throughout this chapter we have heard that there is ‘a complex web of interrelated personal and school factors’ impacting on the ability of students to meet their full potential (Stevenson & Ellsworth, 1993, p. 264). As MacDonald, Shildrick, Webster, and Simpson (2005) put it, the social practices ‘that once helped working-class young adults “get on” now, at best, only help them to “get by”’ (p. 886).

Moreover, staying on at school is not easy for students in financially distressed households. They are under pressure to earn an income to support themselves and their family. As explained in the Commonwealth of Australia (2010) social inclusion report, when they are not employed, especially for long periods, these students and their families experience not only economic hardship, loss of self-esteem and important skills but also a loss of connection with community (p. 7). Furthermore, it is difficult for young people to appreciate the long-term benefits of education when they are experiencing the emotional fall-out from complicated family breakdowns. Schools, as social institutions, are thus a major source of cultural capital for young people wanting to succeed in life and careers. Whilst schools cannot be expected to resolve out-of-school problems, they are one of the few remaining public spaces where students can be supported in a safe and nurturing environment in the wider struggle for ‘democratic values, projects, and discourse’ (Saltman, 2012, p. 393).

### ***8.4.2 Developing a More Humanising and Democratic Pedagogy***

With this in mind, Bartolome (1994) argues the need for a more ‘humanizing pedagogy’ which ‘values the students’ background knowledge, culture, and life experiences’ (p. 190). Bartolome believes a ‘myopic’ focus on ‘finding the “right” teaching methods that will work with students who do not respond to “regular” instruction’ (p. 174) is unhelpful because it avoids ‘the real question – which is why in our society, subordinated students do not generally succeed academically in school’ (p. 176). Addressing this question, we believe, will provide policy makers with a more



realistic understanding of how the burden of life stresses impacts differentially on young people's capacity to follow their career aspirations.

Pursuing this argument a little further, Gordon (2016), drawing on John Dewey, advocates the need 'to continually reflect on how democracy can be reconfigured ... [and] reconstructed' in times of profound economic, social and political change (p. 1090). According to Baroutis et al. (2016) this means learning *about* and *doing* democracy (p. 135) by 'integrating' student voice into 'teaching, learning and curriculum matters' (p. 136). In these ways, democratic principles can support the pedagogies, structures and processes of the school as inquiry and democratic curriculum strengthen the school's processes of community building and inclusiveness (Klenowski, 2009, p. 20).

### ***8.4.3 Knowing Your Students and Building Relationships***

Michelle's story highlights once again just how important it is for schools to work *with* and *for* students who have fragile and complex life experiences. Wyn (2011) argues that 'poor relationships with teachers' is the 'most frequent reason for students' disengagement from school' (p. 62). Baroutis et al. (2016) conclude that students typically 'cite their "dislike for school", a lack of "being heard" and being treated unjustly as their main reasons for wanting to leave' (p. 126). Michelle made it clear that schools need to be more understanding about what is going on at home and in the community, and why these things matter in terms of identity formation and their ability to succeed in school, careers and life. This means really getting to know students and their life circumstances and how these factors impact on their schooling and their sense of who they are and where they fit in.

According to Wyn (2014), 'a new metaphor of education' is urgently required, one that takes us beyond 'instrumental' notions of 'transition' and 'credentials' and instead sees schools 'as a place of connection' (p. 11). If schools can be organised in ways that build relationships that support all students and take account of social context, then students' own experience can provide a starting point for re-engagement (Wyn, 2011, p. 61). One way to think about this is by seeing students as 'the new public intellectuals' (Smyth & McInerney, 2014) who are given the space and resources 'to confront, speak up and speak back ... in [terms of] what they learn, where they learn with whom and to what social ends' (p. 115).

### ***8.4.4 Working with Students' Needs, Capacities and Culture***

Smith and Smith (2009) argue that we should not only incorporate students' perspectives into both instructional processes and curriculum content but also consider their culture, as 'indeed it is the very basis of social life' (p. 350). Yasmin, another of our participants, described how she wanted to '*get out of school and get into*

*university*' because the school would not allow her to enrol in the subjects required to achieve her goals. Yasmin was a very confident and motivated young woman who had immigrated with her family to Australia from Sudan in 2003 and really wanted to do well at school.

Yet nobody at Yasmin's school had taken the time to appreciate that she was more than capable of doing the subjects she required. Instead, the school made the false assumption that she was not smart enough because she was a refugee from Sudan. Furthermore, Yasmin's father was suffering from a severe eyesight disability and her mother was a full-time carer for him. Again, the school was unwilling to acknowledge the impact of interpersonal and family relationships and the significant cultural barriers Yasmin faced as a recent migrant. As a consequence, her experience of school was not very positive.

As Drayton (2014) argues, culture affects how students like Yasmin engage with education, because it 'influences our worldviews, how we interpret our experiences, how we interact with others, and, to some extent, the choices we make' (p. 17). Mills, McGregor, Hayes, and te Riele (2015) elaborate by arguing that the pedagogy and curriculum of schools become irrelevant to young people like Yasmin if they feel discriminated against because of their 'difference ... and if they feel that there are no avenues through which to make claims about having been treated unjustly' (p. 164). In other words, schools become redundant to students like Yasmin because they are too rigid and fail to cater for diversity. What we take from Yasmin's story is the pivotal importance of getting to know students really well as a means of building relational trust and 'punctur[ing] notions of disadvantage' and deficit thinking (Smyth & McInerney, 2014, p. 61; see Chap. 4). Putting it another way, we are advocating the kind of education that helps students to think critically by 'interpret[ing] and criticiz[ing] truth claims, images, and representations in relation to broader structural forces, ideologies, and interests' (Saltman, 2012, p. 393).

#### ***8.4.5 Creating Flexible and Responsive School Structures and Procedures***

The Australian Centre for Equity through Education (ACEE) and Australian Youth Research Centre (AYRC) (2001) report *Building relationships, making education work: A report on the perspectives of young people* argues that support workers (e.g. teachers, program operators, community agencies) 'must be flexible in responding to changes, willing to suspend judgement and able to enhance (not take) control' (p. 13) when dealing with young people. As we have argued throughout this book, if schools are going to have any chance of working for young people then they must be flexible and courageous enough to allow students to have 'a pedagogical voice' whereby they can 'own' practices and decision making that relates to their own learning and curricular choices at school (Baroutis et al., 2016, p. 131).

Schools should also be flexible enough to accommodate the growing number of young people who move between periods of education and training and (un)employment in casual and part-time jobs and who do not necessarily follow a linear career trajectory. Inui (2009) explains that, because

precariousness spreads due to the fact that transition patterns are changing from traditional and predictable routes to plural, individualized pathways ... [then] a degree of work flexibility can serve as a tool to provide young people with the space to develop (p. 181).

What we are attempting here, according to Wyn (2011), is a blurring of ‘the boundaries between being student and worker, child and adult’ (p. 62). Framed in this way, schools are more likely to meet the multiple needs and interests of students at different times in their lives. Pedagogically this means giving young people opportunities to act in their world through a range of alternative strategies including internships in workplaces, participatory action research projects and creative performance-based activities.

## 8.5 Concluding Remarks

We commenced this chapter by referring to Bauman and May’s (2001) call to think sociologically about complex social problems because it ‘opens up the possibility for thinking about the same world in different ways’ (p. 5). Ironically, as Beck (2000) argues, there was no unemployment a hundred years ago; ‘it is an invention of the late nineteenth century’ (p. 92). The point is that ‘disadvantage is not a natural, given or inevitable state – people are “put at” a disadvantage through the operation of social, political and economic forces mostly beyond their control’ (Smyth & McInerney, 2014, p. 106). In this chapter, we have tried to understand how these broader structural dynamics play out in the personal narratives of students like Michelle, Warren, Sue, Noreen and Yasmin by looking more closely at the complexities of these young lives, how schools are implicated and what alternatives are available to assist young people to navigate the school-to-work transition.

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## Chapter 9

# Conclusion

At a time when opportunism is everything, when hope seems lost, when everything boils down to a cynical business deal, we must find the courage to dream. To reclaim romance. The romance of believing in justice, in freedom, and in dignity. For everybody. We have to make common cause, and to do this we need to understand how this big old machine works – who it works for and who it works against. Who pays, who profits (Roy, 2010, pp. 65–66).

When you work toward equality, you have to devise some kind of structure in which there can be justice, but in the meantime, you have to do the best you can in an unjust society (Horton, with Kohl, & Kohl, 1998, p. 7).

Finding inspiration in both Roy and Horton's calls for justice, in this final chapter we pull together the key threads of the book while providing a foundation for action to support young people in getting a job. Drawing on the individual biographies of our young participants, we endeavour to create a toolkit of ideas, strategies and questions to interrupt the status quo in order to generate alternative possibilities beyond the neoliberal framework (the 'big old machine'). In this task, we advocate the importance of thoughtfulness through critical self-reflection as a means of mobilising local action. The focus is on creating a radically different set of policies and practices by asking some problem-posing questions of key stakeholders including governments, schools, industry, NGOs and universities. The chapter is, therefore, focused on raising awareness, promoting dialogue, mobilising communities, generating local knowledge and taking action for the benefit of all young people in these precarious times.

In pursuing this agenda, we find Appadurai's (2006) idea of 'the right to research' helpful. Appadurai advocates the view that all citizens have the right 'to systematically increase that stock of knowledge which they consider most vital to their survival as human beings and to their claims as citizens' (p. 168). He attempts to 'deparochialise' the idea of research as something that only occurs in academia through institution-based knowledge production, and instead seeks to develop a 'deeper' sense of people's capacity to systematically increase their horizons in terms of 'current knowledge, in relation to some task, goal, or aspiration' (p. 176). In line

with Appadurai's empowering approach to knowledge production, we have endeavoured throughout this book to put young peoples' stories to the fore as we attempt to challenge and reimagine school-to-work transitions in more socially just ways.

Of course, this kind of criticality is not always welcome in a climate dominated by the seeming inevitability of the neoliberalising project (see Chaps. 1 and 3). Bourdieu (1998) explains:

Everywhere we hear it said, all day long – and this is what gives the dominant discourse its strength – that there is nothing to put forward in opposition to the neo-liberal view, that it has succeeded in presenting itself as self-evident, that there is no alternative ... A whole set of presuppositions is being imposed as self-evident: it is taken for granted that maximum growth, and therefore productivity and competitiveness, are the ultimate and sole goal of human actions; or that economic forces cannot be resisted ... Then there is a whole game with connotations and associations of words like flexibility, deregulation, which tends to imply that the neo-liberal message is a universalist message of liberation. (pp. 29–31)

In this context, neoliberal economic policies propagate the view that schools must be more tightly aligned to the imperatives of the economy in order to (re)produce 'work-ready' human capital. There is simply no choice because that is the way it is supposed to be, the natural order of things. From this world view, young people are treated as objects to be trained with the skills, dispositions and attitudes required by the market economy, or what Davies and Bansel (2007) describe as the 'new mentalities' in which 'people are reconfigured as productive economic entrepreneurs of their own lives' (p. 248). In the process, they are sold an overly romantic vision of the relationship between education and employability despite mounting evidence to the contrary. In other words, young people are given false hope at a time when the youth segment of the labour force is collapsing in many Western countries. Today, a predatory global capitalism increasingly relies on low-wage, part-time jobs occupied by a reserve army of temporary and disposable workers. This state of affairs, as Bourdieu explained so well above, is now seen as a normal and permanent condition of youth which is justified in the name of 'progress' and 'development', terms that have become interchangeable with economic 'reforms', deregulation and privatisation (Roy, 2010, p. 5).

Within neoliberalism's discourse, then, the fate of the vulnerable is seen as a personal issue and attributed to individual deficits such as a lack of motivation, aspirations, effort, ability, behaviour and/or bad choices. In contrast to these victim-blaming explanations, we have argued that young peoples' lives can only be properly comprehended in the context of 'public issues', by which we mean the broader structural and institutional arrangements of society (Mills, 1971/1959). In pursuing this line of argument, we draw on Bauman's (2004) notion of 'wasted lives' because, in the words of Evans and Giroux (2015), it offers

a provocative intervention and a precise meditation on the scripting of human life by exploitative regimes of contemporary power ... [and] a rallying cry both to expand the notion of critique and to recognize the urgency of rethinking politics beyond a neoliberal framework (p. 47).

What we also take from Evans and Giroux (2015) is the view that 'Pedagogy is, in part, always about both struggle and vision – struggles over identities, modes of

agency, values, desires, and visions of the possible’ (p. 8). Against this backdrop, we now want to advance a more optimistic and humane vision of education and training for young people.

## 9.1 Utopian Thinking

There are many possible ways to approach this task but we are especially attracted to Fielding and Moss’s (2011) idea of utopian thinking. For them, utopian thinking is ‘an expression of desire and imagination, an exploration of possibilities and potentialities, an affirmation of alternatives, and an attempt to anticipate the “not yet”’ (p. 139). We believe the kind of thinking advocated by Fielding and Moss provides an opportunity for key stakeholders to pause and critically reflect on their own normative assumptions, beliefs, values and interests as they relate to the persistent and complex problem of school-to-work transitions. Fielding and Moss (2011) believe this kind of ‘thought experiment’ can play a pivotal role in the struggle against ‘the dictatorship of no alternative’ as well as ‘a cause for hope’ (p. 139).

In a similar fashion, Teodoro and Torres (2007) draw on Wallerstein’s (1998) concept of ‘utopistics’ as a way to evaluate the historical choices of the twenty-first century. According to Wallerstein (1998):

Utopistics is the serious assessment of historical alternatives, the exercise of our judgement as to the substantive rationality of alternative possible historical systems. It is the sober, rational, and realistic evaluation of human systems, the constraints on what they can be, and the zones open to human creativity. Not the face of the perfect (and inevitable) future, but the face of an alternative, better, and historically possible (but far from certain) future (cited in Teodoro & Torres, 2007, p. 1).

Pursuing this idea a little further, Freire (2007) speaks about utopia

as a fundamental necessity for human beings ... [because] There is no tomorrow without a project, without a dream, without utopia, without hope, without creative work, and work toward the development of possibilities, which can make the concretization of that tomorrow viable (pp. 25–26).

Underpinning Freire’s (2000/1970) work is a sense of ‘incompleteness’ or ‘unfinishedness’ of the human condition because individuals are always in ‘the process of becoming’ (p. 84). It is this understanding, according to Freire, which creates ‘the very possibility of learning, of being educated’ (p. 66).

Within this broader philosophical positioning, we can begin to see how schools might be reimagined in more socially just ways. Central to our argument is the view that schools need to become more hospitable places for learning, places in which young people feel welcome, respected and trusted. Based on our participants’ stories we have been able to identify 16 conditions that need to be brought into existence if we are going to better support young people in school-to-work transitions (see Fig. 1.1). These conditions challenge existing school structures, pedagogies and cultures whilst advancing alternative ways of reinvigorating education more attuned to the needs of young people in the twenty-first century.



In the process, we have identified a number of anchor points to help (re)orient the ways in which schools and the broader community relate to young people. Foremost is the need to confront the demeaning and damaging repercussions of neoliberal ideologies which have redefined education around a ‘wider market-orientated culture of commodification, standardization, and conformity’ (Giroux, 2011, pp. 7–8). We question the economic view that education is primarily about job preparation, learning as skills training, and quality as measurable test scores and standardisation (Lipman, 2004, p. 181). We also challenge deficit discourses which serve to label, stream and disparage different classes of students. In short, we seek to interrupt those social practices which perpetuate the production of social hierarchies and injustices (Connell, 1993, p. 27).

In its place, we have endeavoured to advance an alternative vision and practice founded on the principles and values of a fair go, personal meaning, diversity, intellectual rigour, civic engagement, big ideas and joy in education. This alternative pedagogy would develop the capacities of young people by engaging them in meaningful activities based on their interests and passions and creating a learning environment which fosters relationships and personal regard for others in order to develop a spirit of ‘political agency, engaged citizenship, and critical intervention in the conditions in which they and others live’ (Goodman & Saltman, 2002, p. 154).

Mike Rose (2006) provides some helpful pointers on how this ‘revitalised talk’ (p. 431) can offer a more hopeful and educative vision of schools and young people. He elaborates:

Our talk about schools would include concerns about emotional as well as physical safety. It would consider the matter of respect ... This talk would be rich with imagery, from all sorts of classrooms, in a range of communities, reflecting a wide sweep of histories, cultural practices, languages and dialects, classrooms vibrant with achievement and thoughtfulness, play and hard work, characterized by what developmental psychologist Eleanor Duckworth nicely calls the having of wonderful ideas (p. 431).

What we like about Rose’s (2006) approach is the way in which he reaches into the lives of real students as he attempts to reclaim education from the narrow and destructive effects of vocational discourses and replace it with a more ‘expansive definition of intelligence – one befitting an egalitarian society – that resists single measures and segmentation of hand and brain’ (p. 431). In pursuing this more democratic and humane vision of teaching, Rose shows how we can begin to ‘talk of principles of decency and right and wrong, of commitment and connection’ (p. 432) and at the same time, engage in ‘frank and angry appraisal’ of the ways in which social and economic forces are currently deforming schools (p. 432).

## 9.2 Recapping the Key Arguments of the Book

In pursuing this agenda, we have covered a lot territory in this book. Recapping the key arguments, Chap. 1 set the scene by outlining the main ideas, social context, methodology and themes informing our work. In essence, we wanted to make a case

for rethinking the field of school-to-work transitions by drawing on the voices of young people themselves as key informants about their experience of school. We also located our research in the tradition of critical social inquiry which offered a set of theoretical tools with which to interrupt the way things are, and instead reimagine alternative possibilities.

In Chap. 2 we delved a little deeper into the ‘doing’ of critical ethnography. Our intention was to provide some insight into the nature, purpose and processes of this kind of research. We wanted to provide a better sense of what it means ethically, politically and educationally to engage in critical scholarship both personally and professionally. Here we identified the key touchstones of this kind of research including a commitment to unearthing oppressive structures and practices and advocating socially just alternatives for the benefit of all students. In this task, we used the idea of reflexivity to provide some insight into the realities and messiness of making sense of data and theory dialectically.

In Chap. 3 we focused on understanding what it is like growing up in neoliberal times. Our argument is that, if we are going to have any chance of improving the life chances of the least advantaged, then we need to grasp how young lives are determined in the context of broader economic and political forces shaping their identities, subjectivities and life chances. We shared our concern with the way in which young people, especially those living on the margins, become ‘collateral damage’ (Bauman, 2004) as global capital searches for ever-increasing levels of profit. Through the narratives of our informants we gained some insight into how these shifts in the global economy have disproportionately affected the opportunities for young people to gain meaningful, secure and well-paid jobs. In this context, we wanted to better understand how schools are implicated in the process of ‘steering of young people towards different [and unequal] educational and economic fates’ and, accordingly, to stop blaming them for problems in the economy (Connell, 1993, p. 27).

In Chap. 4 we argued that, whilst social class appears to have been erased from recent educational debates, it still remains one of the most relevant and useful means of understanding the cultural processes of advantaging and disadvantaging going on in schools and society today. We argued the value of rediscovering the theoretical and practical usefulness of social class in understanding how schools work in constraining and enabling different classes of students to aspire and succeed in education, careers and life. In this chapter, we also examined the historical legacy of the eugenics movement in sifting and sorting students according to preconceived middle-class notions of intelligence, ability and merit. We also sought to unpack how class plays out in terms of cultural capital and the need to build capabilities to enable all students to lead the kinds of lives they choose.

In Chap. 5 we identified some of the complexities of transitioning to adulthood and the ways in which schools might better prepare young people for life after school. A key message from young people is that schools, and what goes on inside them, are largely irrelevant to their lives and imagined futures. There is a strong sense in which young people feel betrayed by the false promises of education to prepare them for the transition to adulthood, whether that be for work and/or further

education and training. For many young people, especially those from working-class backgrounds, their families and schools seem to operate differently in terms of preparing and supporting them in the transition to post-school life.

In Chap. 6 we described a set of democratic and progressive educational values and practices to assist in the task of reinvigorating pedagogy. The stories we heard throughout this book reinforce a sense of alienation many students feel towards mainstream (conventional or traditional) schooling. In large part, the students we talked to were disengaged from the official curriculum and impersonal ways of doing school. They rejected what Haberman (1991) described as a ‘pedagogy of poverty’ based on transmission models of teaching and learning disconnected from the lives of young people. We found that young people want schools to be hospitable places of learning where they are given the opportunities, resources and structures to pursue their interests and passions in authentic contexts that allow them to undertake projects of social worth within the wider community.

In Chap. 7 we highlighted the pivotal importance of the principle of a fair go for all students. Central to this book is the argument that schools need to be radically transformed around the values of social justice based on an ethic of care, respect and trust. In particular, we looked at how this works from the point of view of those students who are ‘lost, confused and meandering’ and/or suffering from disabilities requiring ‘special attention’. We examined how the logic of schooling works against the best interests of these students and the kind of education they receive. In response, we sought to identify a set of orienting principles and values to create a more inclusive approach to support learning, careers and transitions.

In Chap. 8 we acknowledged the unequal starting points that many young people bring to school as they endeavour to juggle competing demands arising from adverse personal and family circumstances through no fault of their own. These young people are often dealing with part-time work and complex emotional issues related to personal relationships, families, work and schooling. These complexities can lead to a host of mental health and wellbeing issues which rapidly translate into trouble at school. What these young people require is a schooling system that is prepared to make them feel welcome and shows a willingness to go the extra yards to support them in times of difficulties. This involves listening deeply to what young people are saying, responding in an empathic manner, developing a spirit of generosity and acting ethically around what each student needs at that particular time.

### 9.3 Asking Questions Makes Change Possible

To conclude this chapter, we want to revisit Shannon’s (1992) observation that asking questions is important because it makes change possible (p. 3; see Chap. 1). We find this to be of strategic value as we attempt to avoid a sense of inevitability and fatalism associated with a lot of thinking around school-to-work transitions. Furthermore, we reject victim-blaming discourses in which young people are unfairly targeted, disparaged and denigrated as unproductive workers. Instead, we

want to use the stories and analysis in this book as a means of advancing a set of more robust conversations and strategic actions to better support young people. In this task, we draw on Freire's (2000/1970) notion of problem-posing education in which people act and reflect upon their world in order to transform it (p. 79). In the words of Freire (2000/1970), 'people develop their power to perceive critically *the way they exist* in the world *with which* and *in which* they find themselves; they come to see the world not as a static reality, but as a reality in process, in transformation' (p. 83). In this spirit of freedom, we pose a series of questions for deliberation by a range of key stakeholders in order to promote critical thinking capable of moving beyond that which we take for granted, and instead, release the imagination (Greene, 2005).

### 9.3.1 Schools

Schools are responsible for the education and care of young people until 17 years of age, legislatively, financially and ethically. Therefore, a lot hinges on the effectiveness of schools in meeting the needs and aspirations of young people in 'becoming somebody' (Wexler, 1992). Based on the stories of young people in this book, there appears to be a widening gap between the ways in which the institution of schooling functions and the needs of young people at the beginning of the twenty-first century. This should not be taken as a criticism of dedicated and hardworking teachers, students or parents who do remarkable work in difficult circumstances. Rather, it provides an opportunity to explore how school design and pedagogies might be reinvigorated to better prepare young people for learning and the world of work in rapidly changing times. This kind of rethinking, as we describe it, involves a preparedness to be open to new possibilities based on a spirit of critique, innovation, creativity and imagination. To get things started, schools might find the following kinds of questions useful:

- How are students' lives, experiences and aspirations incorporated into the school curriculum?
- How are the least advantaged students in the school treated?
- How relevant are curriculum activities for students?
- How well do you know your students?
- How flexible are school structures in meeting the needs of students?
- Who gets to decide what is taught, how and by whom?
- How is conflict and behaviour handled in your school?
- How are externally determined mandates and policies dealt with in the school?
- How relevant is the traditional 'one-size-fits-all' approach to schooling?
- How often do students experience the adult world in their learning?
- What opportunities exist for students to work alongside skilled craftspeople?
- How often are students given authentic tasks in real-world settings?
- What are the patterns of participation and retention in your school?

- What patterns of post-school educational, trade and career choice are evident?
- What are the patterns of subject availability and course offerings? Why?
- How are academic and non-academic students treated in your school?
- What are the effects of streaming on students' learning and post-school pathways?
- How successful are students in making the school-to-work transition?
- Where will your students be in 1, 2, 5 and 10 years' time?

### ***9.3.2 Industry and Business***

Industry and business have a keen interest in the kinds of skills, knowledge and dispositions young people have as future workers. There is considerable debate about whether schools are producing students with the right skills in terms of workforce planning. A recent survey indicates that more than a third of Australian workers believe their education failed to give them the skills needed for their job (Bita, 2014). These debates become especially acute in times of economic and social crises (e.g., the 1930s depression, 1970s recession and 2008 Global Financial Crisis). In response, official policy pronouncements have attempted to tighten the links between schools and the economy by adopting human capital approaches to education and training. These policies are based on the argument that what is in the national interest, broadly defined as improving Australia's global competitiveness and productivity, is also good for schools. No doubt, schools have a major role to play in preparing young people for careers and post-school life – a point skilfully made by our research participants. Equally, these same young people also desire an education connected to their interests, passions and dreams. Above all, they want a learning environment in which they are treated with trust, care and respect. On this basis, we can begin to identify a number of questions worthy of investigation such as:

- Does your industry/business have a commitment to youth employment?
- Does your industry/business have a youth employment strategy?
- How many traineeships and apprenticeships do you offer?
- What are some obstacles and barriers to employing youth? Why?
- How might you individually and collectively address these problems?
- How are young people perceived and treated in your workplace?
- How are young people mentored in your workplace?
- What opportunities exist for ongoing training and development?
- How might you become an advocate for young people?
- What kinds of workers do you most require?
- What skills, knowledge and attributes should they have?
- How might you work with schools in more innovative ways?
- How can you mitigate the impact of economic downturns on youth?
- How can you act politically to employ more young people?
- Whom do you need to talk to?
- What does success look like for your industry/business?

### 9.3.3 NGOs

Non-government organisations (NGOs) are citizen-based associations that operate independently of government to deliver resources and services for the benefit of local communities. As federal and state governments cut expenditure on welfare programs and students drop out of mainstream schooling at alarming rates, NGOs are asked to fill the void by offering a range of re-engagement or alternative educational programs, usually by with short-term contracts and inadequate funding. This has resulted in a proliferation of organisations competing against each other for scarce resources, leading to short-term planning, lack of coherence and ad-hoc program delivery. A recent study shows that 70,000 students a year avail themselves of alternative or ‘flexible’ education programs, with the majority of them coming from marginalised or disadvantaged backgrounds (Preiss, 2014). A number of participants in this research described the benefits of these alternative learning spaces (e.g. ‘The Link’) and the significant difference it made to their lives. Indeed, there is much to be learnt from these re-engagement programs in terms of how young people are treated and the kinds of approaches to teaching that are more inclusive of a diverse range of students (McGregor & Mills, 2012, p. 844; Smyth & Robinson, 2015). However, the broader question still remains: how do we ensure that these students are not simply ‘offloaded’ on a financial shoestring only to receive short-term remediation without access to higher-order knowledge which is so critical for success in careers and life? Against this backdrop, the questions to consider might include:

- Why are young people dropping out of school?
- What effect is it having on the capacity of NGOs to manage them?
- How do NGOs deal with the stigma of warehousing young people nobody else wants?
- How might NGOs become sustainable in a policy sense and financially?
- What needs to happen educationally to help young people access a rigorous education?
- Should NGOs become genuine alternative education providers with appropriate funding to provide access to further education and training?
- How might these alternative educational choices assist marginalised young people?
- What kinds of alternative learning spaces are possible in your community?
- What kinds of pedagogical, organisational and relational approaches are desirable in these learning spaces? How might this happen? With whom?
- How do we ensure that young people are not limited to low-level competency-based programs, and instead are connected to high-quality intellectual knowledge and skills?
- Where else can we find these alternative approaches to education and training working? What do they look like? What can we learn?
- Who are our allies? Who will advocate on our behalf?

### **9.3.4 Local Government**

As the third tier of government in Australia's federation, local government has increasingly found itself dealing with the fallout from a range of federal and state government funding cuts to schools, universities and vocational education and training programs. Additionally, there has been a dramatic shift towards user pays principles in education and training as well as a tightening of eligibility criteria for unemployment benefits that only serve to exclude those young people who can least afford it. In this policy environment, local government seeks to coordinate policy responses relevant to young people's particular circumstances such as youth services, mental health and wellbeing, transport, recreation and sport, job creation, and education and training. These issues are compounded in rapidly growing suburbs serving largely disadvantaged communities on the fringes of the city. Whilst largely outside the designated statutory responsibilities of local government, these issues become major priorities as local governments endeavour to build cohesive and prosperous communities in which young people can learn, work and thrive.

- What are the social, economic and cultural assets of the community? How fairly are they distributed within the community?
- How might schools be repositioned as a vehicle for community capacity building?
- How can local communities work with schools to promote civic engagement and strengthen the social and cultural resources available to young people?
- How can students be involved in community development projects and service learning to enhance their appreciation of the local economy, environment and heritage?
- How do local communities provide access to adult members of the community and build social networks that open up educational pathways and career opportunities for young people?
- How can schools and local communities work together to develop public policy responses sensitive to the needs of young people?
- What opportunities exist in the community for contextualised and applied learning that connects young people to workplaces, career pathways and mentors?
- How can local government work with community groups and residents to generate employment opportunities?
- How can communities move beyond deficit stereotypes – criminal activity, drug and alcohol abuse, teenage pregnancy and so on – to embrace a capacity-building alternative that recognises the assets, skills and resources of the community?
- Where does the creative and innovative thinking occur in your community around education and careers? How is it nurtured and supported? How is change effected? By whom?

### 9.3.5 *State Governments*

State governments are constitutionally responsible for the provision of school-based education and training in Australia. In Western Australia, this falls under the jurisdiction of the Department of Education. More broadly, the Department of Training and Workforce Development is responsible for the planning and coordination of training and workforce development. According to *Skilling WA: A workforce development plan for Western Australia*, ‘A key role for government is in the planning and coordination of workforce development efforts to maximise the availability of skilled labour’ (Department of Training and Workforce Development, 2014, p. 41). Given the pivotal role of state governments in the education and training of young people, we can identify a number of key questions worth considering:

- What are the patterns of education, training and employment for young people from different geographical regions? Why?
- What is the pattern of unemployment and underemployment of young people from low-SES school communities?
- What are the barriers and obstacles? What needs to change? How?
- How are funding cuts to TAFE impacting on the quality of training opportunities for young people?
- How might the status of TAFE be improved compared to universities?
- How can public education in low-SES communities be revitalised?
- What kinds of educational innovation are required? Why?
- How might the government better support young people to get jobs?
- How does the government think about these problems? How might it think differently? What are the alternatives?
- How might the government listen more deeply to students’ voices in policy development?
- Where are the sites of innovation around school-to-work transition? How are they nurtured and supported? What can we learn from them?
- How do existing policy regimes, rules and regulations inhibit innovation and risk taking?

### 9.3.6 *Federal Government*

Whilst it does not have constitutional responsibility for education and training, the federal government is responsible for the larger macro-economic settings impacting on youth, employment, education and training. It is a major source of funding for schools, universities and TAFE as well as specific-purpose grants. The federal government seeks to work collaboratively with the states to achieve reforms and outcomes through the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) intergovernmental forum. The outcomes are usually communicated as National Partnership Agreements, for example the Youth Attainment and Transitions Agreement, National Agreement



for Skills and Workforce Development, National Partnership Agreement on Skills Reform and National Partnership Agreement on Low Socio-Economic School Communities ([www.coag.gov.au/](http://www.coag.gov.au/)). With the election of the Howard government in 1996, the federal government began to take a more dominant role in formulating education policy directions including a significant increase in funding to private schools with diminished provision of resources for public education. This is not the place for a full analysis of these policies other than to say that we have seen a sharp shift towards a national agenda to make curricula more responsive to national economic goals. In addition, there is increased emphasis on vocational education and training and an ethos of corporate managerialism, marketing, individualism, competition, choice and commercialisation in schools. These wider travelling policies seem to fit comfortably with recent budgetary cuts especially to welfare benefits for unemployed youth and the government's use of language describing people as 'lifters' and 'leaners' (Garner, 2014). Arising out of these broader policy settings, the following questions are likely candidates for further investigation:

- How are broader shifts in the global economy impacting on the youth labour market in Australia?
- How does the commitment to free market policies impact on the nature, purpose and processes of education?
- How have government funding policies affected schools, TAFE and universities? Who benefits? Who loses?
- Are all students able to access educational programs and resources that meet their individual and collective needs?
- To what extent is social justice included as a guiding principle in government policy and how is this monitored?
- How does the competitive academic curriculum perpetuate inequalities in education?
- How does the divide between academic and non-academic curriculum reinforce exclusionary structures and pedagogies for working-class students?
- How can the government support more young people into alternative learning spaces to pursue their careers and training?
- What kinds of financial support do young people need to make a smooth transition from school to work?
- What are the specific policy initiatives to promote educational innovation, creativity and job creation for young people?

### **9.3.7 Universities**

Many students and their families value university-level qualifications because they are more likely to lead to decent, secure, well-paid jobs. Historically, access to universities was the preserve of the wealthy and the aspiring middle-classes whose sons and daughters attended the elite private religious schools. They monopolised the professions such as law, medicine, engineering, science and architecture, and in the process

built a strong educational market for those who could afford to pay for the privilege. Despite attempts to open up university education to more students and families from low-SES backgrounds, the pattern of inequality and social reproduction persists. Based on the stories of our participants there is clear evidence that the cultural knowledge valued by schools and required for success in Year 12 and entry to university can be an alienating experience for students from working-class families. Equally, the cultural capital of middle-class students is well suited to the expectations of schools and universities. With the rapid expansion of VET in School programs in low-SES school communities, these academic divisions reinforce an already stratified and class-differentiated education system (Teese, 2000; Teese & Polesel, 2003; Tranter, 2012). The complex cultural processes of advantaging and disadvantaging different classes of students raises a number of key questions for universities:

- How do the senior secondary curriculum and higher education selection processes work against the best interests of students from low-SES schools?
- How might a capabilities approach to portfolio entry address some of these concerns?
- How can universities work more closely with schools and TAFE to develop alternative entry pathways for students typically excluded from university?
- How do universities demonstrate their commitment to low-SES school communities?
- What are the patterns of course enrolment for students from low socioeconomic backgrounds? Is this a problem? What can be done about it?
- What kinds of pedagogies are needed to support university learning especially for first-year/first-generation university students?
- Who will be most disadvantaged by the introduction of full-fee-paying courses?
- What financial support is available to support students from low-SES communities?
- What kind of research is most useful to young people? Where is this happening? Who advocates for marginalised youth? How are their views incorporated into decision making?

## 9.4 A Final Word ...

We are under no illusion as to the enormity of the task ahead, but we believe that the ideas, strategies and questions outlined in this book offer some important clues. At heart, this book has endeavoured to offer a spirit of both critique and possibility. Specifically, we set out to do four things. First, we wanted to listen to what young people themselves have to say about school-to-work transitions and what works best for them. If the intent is to enhance the educational experience of young people to improve their life chances, then we believe it makes a great deal of sense to hear what they have to say. We believe these insider understandings can provide some crucial signposts about the kinds of conditions that need to be created and more widely sustained to improve the life chances of all young people (Smyth & McInerney, 2012).

Second, we created a series of portraits to represent the lived experience of our participants. We believe the use of portraiture is a powerful tool because it allows us to investigate contemporary social problems by honouring the reality of participants in ways that add authenticity, integrity and rigour to the research process. These individual biographies enabled us to develop a profile of conditions that support young people to get a job, 16 in total (see Fig. 1.1). These conditions allowed us to delve more deeply into the ways in which individual lives are shaped by broader historical, social and institutional arrangements. In the process, we identified a series of key issues arising from each condition as a provocation for rethinking policy and practice.

Third, we adopted the idea of the ‘sociological imagination’ (Mills, 1971/1959) to help us reimagine schools in more socially just ways. We wanted to move beyond narrowly conceived and technicist/vocational versions of education and training which continue to fail far too many young people. If we are going to make headway, then we must be willing to ask some critical questions in order to formulate more thoughtful and socially just responses. Throughout this book, we have provided a range of stories, ideas, issues and questions to assist local schools and organisations in raising awareness, gathering evidence, developing plans and taking action.

Finally, we wanted to acknowledge that schools, organisations and individuals acting alone cannot address or transform major economic problems like youth unemployment and social inequalities in society. Indeed, it requires a village to raise a child. If we are to make the radical changes required to enhance the employment prospects of young people, then it will take a whole-school and community approach and the active support and goodwill of the diverse groups and individuals that make up the community. Based on the evidence presented in this report, we can confidently say that listening to what young people have to say is a promising start.

We hope that this book and the stories of the young people on which it is based have provided some insight, no matter how modest, into the ongoing struggle for a more democratic and socially just future.

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